**Chroma Diamonds**

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**Chroma Diamonds**

by **Brick (themikeymonster)**

**Summary**

'There's no point in granting favors in the first place, since there's no way I can fulfill them,' *is what Tsunayoshi begins to think, and since he can't do anything to help others, Tsunayoshi begins to also think something like: 'what's the purpose of my existence?''

*(The pure flame in his heart begins to gutter and dim.)*

In which no mafia-hired tutors were sent when Tsunayoshi turned thirteen, the Decimo Vongola sees no reason to involve the CEDEF Head's brat if he can help it, and leaving a Sky at loose ends was probably not the best decision ever made.

X-Post from FFNet; 12133121

**Notes**

**Warnings:** The main reality is an alternate universe. This fic will feature self-cest between this Tsuna and Tsuna from a parallel world; furthermore a Reborn pairing - Reborn/Tsuna/Tsuna. There are some hints of Everyone/Tsuna because hormonal teenagers.
This is not really a darkfic, but Chroma!'Tsuna is much more suited for the mafia life than Canon!'Tsuna, which is ironic, considering. Themes like murder are handled from chapter one, but eventually even topics like sex trafficking will be touched on as Tsunayoshi grows into an adult and is introduced into the Dark Underworld of the Mafia. **no rape or sex trafficking will happen in the story,** although the latter is addressed.

Title from "Turn the Lights Off" by Tally Hall.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Bovino family understands better than anyone in the world: the theory of time travel, and the theory of the multiverse. They know better than anyone that time does not pass the same in every version of the universe, that even the 'Ten year Bazooka' would more accurately be called the 'Sidestepping Bazooka'. There are infinite number of universes. Their Bazooka merely plucks a copy from the ones that are nearby.

The future is hardly immutable. But to play with it? To act with that knowledge? They aren't so foolish as that. It's a secret that only that boss in charge of the Family knows, and she holds it close and never whispers word one to that precious child of hers when she hands their most dangerous weapon over.

On some level, the members of the Bovino family come to understand that the future is their important charge. They see again and again and again, how it can-might-will play out, and carry those burdens in silence.

After all, if it's true that a million versions of you exist, then naturally a million more die in a million terrible ways during a million different times of your lifetime. It's exponential, isn't it?

And if it's true that a million versions of you die in a million different ways, then the opposite must also be true. In a thousand million ways, that same person excels - or otherwise: doesn't.

In one world, through various circumstances, Sawada Tsunayoshi is selected to be the inheritor of a mafia throne at the young age of thirteen. In another world-

'Tsunayoshi has power' - in the versions of the world where Sawada Tsunayoshi flourishes, that truth remains a constant. This power sometimes differs, because sometimes the world doesn't have the Vongola in a shape that is recognizable, and sometimes Tsunayoshi isn't Iemitsu's child - which makes the donning of the Vongola-only ring somewhat awkward with Xanxas, but that has less to do with blood and everything to do with the Will inside their hearts - and sometimes Tsunayoshi is blood-related to much stranger things that usually seen on heaven or earth.

In this world, this Sawada Tsunayoshi is a largely standard version of himself - he has Vongola blood in his veins and Sky flames in his heart and he knows he's 'no good' because he gets told that all the time. This is a truth that Tsunayoshi acknowledges: the world does not give us what we want. It's unfair and ugly. Because it's unfair and ugly, and first hand, Tsunayoshi experiences this ugliness, he sees no problem in saying 'no way' when things are asked of him.

What is true is this: Tsunayoshi, shy as he is, has a hard time saying 'no' at first. But where the heart is willing, the mind and body fall short, and so he gets told 'there was no point in asking it of you in the first place.' The kids he goes to school with and his teachers start to say, 'don't bother to ask Sawada-kun, he'll say "yes" but it won't get done.'
'He's just no good.'

'Dame-Tsuna.'

(And ahh, **ahh**, but his heart starts to bruise, and darken, and grow callouses where the tender parts of it get damaged.)

'There's no point in granting favors in the first place, since there's no way I can fulfill them,' is what Tsunayoshi begins to think, and since he can't do anything to help others, Tsunayoshi begins to also think something like: 'what's the purpose of my existence?'

(The pure flame in his heart begins to gutter and dim.)

When the Tsunayoshi of this world with his dimming flames is thirteen, there is no flyer in the Sawada mailbox, and no tutor gets called for him and his failing grades. After all, what Iemitsu wants for his family is to keep them away from the seedy underbelly of the Mafia world, where the rule is to kill or be killed. He wants such a thing so much that he never said one word when Tsunayoshi's powerful flames are sealed.

Tsunayoshi is thirteen, and he tells people without hesitation 'no way,' and he learns fast when it looks as though others' frustrations will be taken out on him, so he learns to hide fast and run faster. He knows already 'I hate to fight' and 'I hate people being hurt' so he learns to avoid doing either in any manner with all his living will.

(There are no Sun flames to heal where bruises and callouses begin split and start to bleed.)

Despite the fact that there are certain people looking out for Nana and Tsunayoshi out of consideration of the people whose family they are-

Ahh, ahh, **well**. Bad things are bound to happen, right? Wouldn't it be handy to have the family of the head of the CEDEF? Especially since the Vongola family is-

If it were Tsunayoshi on his own, he wouldn't have gotten caught. He wasn't caught, first, actually - it's not until he finds out they have their hands on Nana, on his mother, that Tsunayoshi himself is captured because Nana is **all he has left** -

(’Tell him I became a star.’)

And then - and then - and then, well. It's three days, Tsunayoshi finds out later, but at the time it's just darkness and confusion and some water and not enough food, and his mom holding onto him so tight her fingernails leave red crescents, and her voice calmly singing him lullabies. And then comes the men, and Nana refuses to call Iemitsu's number.

One of the men holds Tsunayoshi back, and Nana is knocked to the floor. Nana cries. Nana says, "I refuse" and Nana says "Do whatever you like to me," and the man says, "What about your son?" She cries. She cries. She says, "leave Tsunayoshi out of this!" Some kind of ferocity comes over Nana when the man approaches Tsunayoshi with the phone in his hand, saying, "Call your old man, okay, kid?"

It spills out of Tsunayoshi's mouth on pure reflex: "No way."

Tsunayoshi sees white and red and black and tastes blood and he hears his mother make some kind of horrible wild-animal sound, and a crack, and a thud, and when he can see again: his mother is on the floor and shaking, shaking, shaking. There's blood on her lip and tear tracks down her face, and she's shaking and her eyes are wide and wild, and Tsunayoshi knows this: something terrible
happens inside his heart and inside his head.

Something terrible happens there. Some kind of snapping, crackling sound, like shattering ice or popping embers. The hiss and pop of firecrackers.

Inside, something ignites, and outside a terrible sort of calm descends upon him, and ahh, ahh, it's bad.

It's bad.

-0-

It's kind of good that the men in police uniforms come. Tsunayoshi is covered in blood, and so is Nana, but she holds him so, so, so tight and tells the men that a disagreement broke out between their captors. "I slipped in the blood," Nana says lightly, chuckling it off. "I accidentally got Tsukun dirty, too." She giggles, and giggles, and giggles and holds Tsunayoshi so very tight.

Tsunayoshi doesn't know if the men in the police uniforms believe it or not, but he holds onto his mother and they don't question him. There's so much blood. It's a good thing the men in the police uniforms came, because there's no way Tsunayoshi could have killed all the men in the building.

Five was tough enough as it was, and he's so, so, so very tired. His heart and his head hurt so much, and feel weirdly hollowed out, like they'd been burned and burned and burned until there was nothing left to feed the fire that ignited inside him.

A fire in his heart and the cool, clinical burn of his brain that laid out endless possibilities before him. In that moment where his thoughts flew by so much faster than the man standing over Nana could reach down to grab her - he realizes if he does not retaliate, only worse will come. His only option is 'Stop them' and since he doesn't have another option (isn't big enough, isn't strong enough, isn't enough), 'stop' means 'kill.'

How does one go from being a middle-schooler to killing people? The scary feeling that settles over Tsunayoshi tells him how. It starts with the man holding him, and the gun in his belt. After that is always blood.

If there is no blood, then no one will think twice about sending more: this is what the fire burning in Sawada Tsunayoshi knows. If more are sent, then that's another chance that Nana will be hurt. And it says: we do not tolerate harm falling upon the family.

Distantly, he remembers an adult saying, 'My, Tsuna, you're getting big. I guess with your father gone, that makes you man of the house. Look after your Mama, okay?' And at the time he'd just 'ah-ha'd because he still hadn't mastered telling adults 'no way' - but that's what he'd thought. He'd thought it. Part of him now cries that he's just a kid, still, that Nana has taken care of him this long and how is he supposed to match that?

(By taking responsibility and spilling blood. The part of him that is ignition and burn says: yes.)

Somehow their alibi never gets questioned. Of course it was a fight, the men in police uniforms say. Of course they slipped and fell in the blood (so much blood). They get sent back home, and there are broken dishes to clean up and the clothes to dispose of, and Tsunayoshi needs new shoes but -

(It turns out that his dad isn't dead after all. He shows up a few days later and hugs Nana tight and tousles Tsunayoshi's hair like he's a little kid, and tells him 'you did well, Tsuna.'
Ahh. Ahh.

Is that so.)

-0-

In any case, killing people has a way of changing the one doing the killing, unless they're a natural-born hitman. Tsunayoshi sits in his bed at night with his knees to his chest and tries to make sense of what happened. He tries, and tries, and tries.

If he'd waited twenty minutes - but no. The thought of the men setting another hand on Nana was -

And so the thought follows: those men had given up their right to live as human beings at that moment. At that moment. That was the time. That man had hit his mother and sent her crashing to the ground. His mother. Nana, who couldn't even raise a hand in her own defense -

And Iemitsu, voice warm, hand rough and heavy on his head: You did well, Tsuna.

Ahh, what is Tsunayoshi supposed to think?

(His bruised and calloused and bleeding heart cracks.)
Welcome Back

Chapter Summary

Nana and Tsunayoshi cope with what he's done - or don't - in their own way. Tsunayoshi gets a teacher, gets acknowledged by Yamamoto Takeshi, and gets bitten to death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two : Welcome Back

Iemitsu leaves one, two days later, and then it's just Nana and Tsunayoshi and this thing the two of them went through together that has made strangers of them both. Nana keeps dropping things and Tsunayoshi has to go back to school, and she keeps looking at him with her eyes wide like she's become the protagonist of some kind of horror movie.

He knows that something is wrong but he doesn't know how to broach the subject, how to ask, how to- if it was too terrible, what he- if he'd-

(How should he ask if what is wrong is him?)

It's just - all this time, he's been messing things up to clucking tongues and Nana doing things for him, saying *dame* just like everyone else has done. Because he's clumsy, and awkward, and forgets things and easily tires and gets sick. It's easier to just sit down and let things happen around him. He can't do it in the first place, so why bother trying?

Of course if they're kidnapped, he's going to stay put and let Nana sing him lullabies. Those men were adults, and Tsunayoshi can't even handle his own peers. Of course he's going to let an adult handle it.

Only, it hadn't worked out that way, and then the Tsunayoshi who isn't good for anything suddenly did something awful and scary. *He's just a kid, isn't he?* But he did that, so obviously something is wrong with him. How should he ask if Nana noticed it, too?

And because he doesn't know how to ask, the house stays silent and still, but for the occasional crash of a dish breaking. Nana wakes him up in the morning and then later she calls him down when breakfast is ready, but they don't talk to one another. The words jam up in his throat. He says 'I'm off' when it leaves for school and comes back home and says 'I'm back' but he doesn't often get a reply.

Meals are quiet and awkward, Nana's shaking hands and his own restless thoughts, twisting and turning uneasily over the soft silence in his head that lingers in the wake of Iemitsu coming back from the dead. The nights are worse that that: the silent darkness of his room. He keeps touching his hands together, keeps touching his clothing. He keeps expecting *wet* and *sticky*. He keeps thinking he *smells it*.
It's a week after Iemitsu left that Tsunayoshi's dark and restless thoughts begin to crowd up and make his head noisy - like fish or birds returning to feeding grounds after a stranger has passed. They shove up and chase each other and chase his other thoughts with snapping teeth and make his heart hammer and his breath short. He needs- he needs- he needs-

("Get caught?" Mochida asks with a long, sharp smile. "Tsk. Making trouble for your family, aren't you? At least take care of yourself without weighing them down, Dame-Tsuna."

The way his hands had been numb, the startling spatter, a wetness he hadn't really felt until it began to cool on his skin. His racing thoughts, his racing heart, his breathing- his breathing-)

"I'm home," Tsunayoshi calls out like he always does, and listens for the reply, and doesn't get one. Still doesn't get one. Still- still-

(I tried, he thinks. For three days, he'd been unable to do anything, playing the part of some stupid, scared kid while Nana did her best all on her own-

Did he try? Did he really? Could that really be called trying when- if it was possible all along, then-

\textit{Dame-Tsuna.})

He comes home but the house is quiet. Shucks his shoes off, and hears the sink going in the kitchen, a distance rush of water. Tsunayoshi goes because he has to see. He has to be able to see her again, to see that Nana isn't crying, to see that her lip has healed.

It's been thirteen days since Tsunayoshi's hands went numb from the kickback of a gun (five men, six bullets. How had he been able to do that? How? How? He'd never held one but there had been one bullet left in the chamber and two dead and three dying men) and there's something licking at his insides, at his heart, and he has to see her.

Nana is fine. Of course she's fine - or as fine as she can be, standing at the sink and washing a cup. She seems distracted, but she's \textit{home} and her bruises and lip have healed and she- and she-

(is he not welcome home anymore?)

The weight of Tsunayoshi's eyes must be heavy, standing there in the doorway and watching her to reassure himself that everything is fine \textit{(it's not fine)}, because she glances over. Nana glances over and she startles back a step and the cup in her hands falls to the floor and shatters like so many dishes before it.

"Ah!" he says, like he always does when this happens. "Don't move. I'll get the broom."

After all, Tsunayoshi is a clumsy child, so he's always dropping things and having to clean up after himself if he doesn't want Nana to fuss at him over it and call him \textit{dame} again. He brings both broom and dustpan, and Nana herself has already picked up the largest pieces, and Tsunayoshi goes to sweep the rest up.

As he bends, and ducks his head, he sees the way she jerks back, and the awful cracked things in his chest jar and squeeze the breath from his lungs. It seems like the worst kind of confirmation, that even when he's trying to do something helpful, he's something to flinch back from. Nana has been flinching ever since then, and despite what she told those men- despite her holding her tongue about it-

(\textit{Ahh. It's bad.})
His own mother, who hadn't turned away even once no matter how dame he was, has stepped back from him a lot further than is really called for.

"I see. I really am the worst."

It takes a second for the words to fall on Tsunayoshi's ears, and he realizes immediately that he hasn't just thought that: he's said it out loud, and the dustpan falls from his fingers, and he looks up in shock at Nana.

His mother stares back at him with wide eyes and her hands cupped to her mouth, like she's horrified.

(His heart beats: there it is. There it is. You're frightening. No-good Tsuna. Look at the expression you've put on your mother. No good. You're no good. Ahh, ahh, someone like you is fated to be alone. Not even the mother you protected with your own hands can stand to be near you.)

He says: "Ah!" He almost-brains himself with the broom he still has clutched in his hands, saying in a panic, "Sorry, that was- I mean- could-" Tsunayoshi fumbles for the dustpan and manages to send the ceramic shards on the floor flying in various directions. This is really dragging everything out unnecessarily. He's already- "F-forget I said anything-!"

Nana says, "Tsu-kun," and then her arms are closing around him, and they both stumble as he's brought to a sudden halt. She holds onto him, so, so tightly. "I'm sorry - I'm so sorry, Tsu-kun - I'm so, so sorry-"

(his cracking heart begins to -)

"I wasn't able to protect you!"

Tsunayoshi says, "What?"

His mother, holding onto him so hard and bent over his small frame, begins to cry. She's holding him too tightly, her fingernails digging into his skin again, and she cries in heaving, messy gasps; hot tears that sear the skin of his neck and make him feel branded. "I'm so sorry, Tsu-kun," she sobs, "your mama- your mama- she wasn't strong enough-!"

"Mom," he says, more a protest than anything else because he doesn't understand, Nana isn't making any sense at all.

"This is all my fault," she says, still sobbing like her heart is breaking, and "oh, honey, oh, baby, my Tsu-kun-" and "I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you!"

Tsunayoshi gives up on any of this making sense, and twists so that he can hug her back, at least. It's terrible and hateful listening to his mother sounding like that, and he thinks he'll do anything to make her stop. She sounds so awful. She holds him too tight, and smooths the hair at the back of his head down with a hard hand and presses her lips to the top of his head like he's just a kid when he-

"I'm going to protect you," Sawada Nana says, the oath hoarse with salt and fire.

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Nana's version of 'protecting' him seems to be to sign him up for various kinds of fighting classes? Or rather, the both of them. Over the next few weeks, they both test in and out of a few different classes of fighting - from basic self-defense to something more structured: kendo, and martial arts.
None of them really seem to stick, even though Nana finds a class of self-defense that is mostly 'escape' that works well for her. Tsunayoshi finds it acceptable, as well. He doesn't like how he feels in the wake of what happened. When all the blood spills. He hates it. He hates it.

He doesn't want to hurt people.

So he and Nana stick with the class that teaches them to be aware of their surroundings, to identify weak points and go for dirty hits, to twist and escape through any means necessary. And because Nana has that kind of way around her, as she's talking to the classes' teacher, she brings up that she wants something a little more defensive for her son. For him to have not just a way of escaping, but protecting himself.

"Is that so?" the teacher says, looking at Tsunayoshi thoughtfully. He flinches a bit under her searching gaze, touching his fingertips to his palms, and his palms to his pants leg - just to reassure himself that it's not tacky with blood, despite what he thinks sometimes- despite what he sees at night. "Huh," she says, then looks at Nana, and says, "For his temperament, have you considered kickboxing?"

They have not. It's not a naturally occurring thought, maybe, when people think of 'fighting' and 'defense'. Nana decides to give it a try anyway. Tsunayoshi isn't sure he likes it any better than any of the other forms of fighting that she's had him try, but it's better- easier, somehow, once they've covered the basics. Fighting hand-to-hand always involves so much eye contact.

Tsunayoshi finds that he's more comfortable letting his awareness open to the room, to his opponent's entire body. Somehow, when he's striking with his hands alone, it makes his focus too narrow -

(If his focus in that room with five men, a gun, and his mother had been narrow, then he would have-)

At first, it's overwhelming to try to track four limbs, any of which could strike at him, but by this time, he has some small background in fighting, so it's- not impossible? Still, he's not sure he likes it, he's not sure it's right for him. Hurting people is-

Yet, somehow, he doesn't quit the class, either.

-0-

One thing is certain: Tsunayoshi doesn't like fighting. If there was any question about that, the class confirms it. His teacher, a man this time by the name of Hayashi, seems tickled by Tsunayoshi's reluctance to go for a strike. Against someone with the pads meant for practice and warm-ups, Tsunayoshi feels no hesitation. That's what the pads are for, after all, right? It's safe.

In any of the careful, cautious spars that their teacher pits them against each other, Tsunayoshi tends to dodge about the ring, blocking attacks he can't dodge, and mostly trips and trips up his opponent until his opponent or his teacher give up. Sometimes they'll even listen to his 'I yield!' without trying to force the issue.

He doesn't like fighting, and he doesn't like hurting people, and he especially doesn't want to hurt someone bad enough that they bleed or anything. If he gets anymore blood on his hands-

It just seems like his instincts for fighting are uncommonly good. Just like when he'd gotten his hand on that gun. Probably the only reason the men in the police uniforms had decided to accept Nana's story about a disagreement was because- well. Who would believe a thirteen year old could
shoot five men dead? Tsunayoshi can hardly believe it himself, and he- well. He hadn't felt like himself at the time, but he'd been the one to do it.

His instincts for fighting are good, but they make his head hurt. No, his head hurts all the times these days, in a particular way. Well - no. Saying 'it hurts' isn't exactly correct. It feels like it should hurt; it feels bright and hot, licking around his ribs, up his throat and at the back of his tongue, curling up behind his ears to sit hot and sharp at the center of his forehead. It itches, and crackles. It should hurt, it should.

Sometimes, when he relaxes too much in a spar - especially when he spars against Hayashi-sensei - those instincts rear up their head and a dreadful calm comes over him, and Tsunayoshi always, always, always lets the next strike against him knock him to the ground and he always cries out 'I yield!'

Hayashi-sensei pats him on the head and says, "You've got to trust yourself, Sawada-kun. You have the basics down, but every time you get serious and go to strike, you freeze up. You have to let the muscle memory we've built up take over."

Tsunayoshi says, as always, "No way!"

There's no way to explain it or explain himself, not in a way that Hayashi-sensei or anyone else could understand. Tsunayoshi hates to fight, hates people getting hurt, but he watches: he watches the clubs and he watches people in the ring and he watches the TV-

("A natural-born hitman you're not," Iemitsu said then, right after 'you did well.' There had been a strange light in those unfamiliar eyes and that unfamiliar face: strange and wild, like some kind of mad animal, like the ghastly glow of light reflected off a cat's eyes; orange rather than yellow or green. He'd smiled, but to Tsunayoshi, there had been too many teeth that looked too sharp. "But going to any length is just as good.")

Whatever it is, Tsunayoshi doesn't want anything to do with it. He can't trust that calm. 'Going to any length' isn't fine at all.

-0-

The instincts, on the other hand-

His instincts have gotten uncommonly good, though where he notices them first is when it comes to his defense classes. But it's not just those parts of his life that he realizes that they're interfering with. First of all, he's gotten a sort of sixth sense where Kyoya Hibari is concerned- or, well, everyone has a bit of a sixth sense where Hibari is concerned; anyone who doesn't either quickly develops one or gets bitten to death until they transfer out of Nami Middle.

Hibari Kyoya is terrifying for all sorts of reasons, even if Tsunayoshi's newly honed instincts say that Hibari is no threat to him. Not that Hibari won't hurt him, as Tsunayoshi discovers when after venturing too close and ending up out of breath on the ground. Later, a magnificent bruise comes in across his belly.

However, if he mostly stays out of the way and gives Hibari his space, Hibari doesn't seem to care overly much about his presence. It's probably far beneath his notice, given the way Hibari seems to think. His crew - the Namimori Middle's Disciplinary Committee - on the other hand, seem to object to his presence on moral grounds, or something, because at the barest hint of his presence, they seem to start snarling. It's like his stupid fluffy brown hair is a red flag or something.
Tsunayoshi isn't entirely sure himself what he's doing, tailing along behind Hibari and attracting the hostile attention of his crew. It makes Hayashi-sensei ask him if he's being bullied, and - well, yeah, Tsunayoshi gets bullied. Mochida is far from the only person to draw a connection between Tsunayoshi missing school for three days and a branch of the local troublemakers getting shut down, even if the newspaper didn't say anything about hostages. Whether or not Hibari still beats him for missing so much school without a doctor's excuse, people still make the connection and-

Maybe there had been something about the way Tsunayoshi had looked, coming back? There had been various assumptions about the cause of it, even though no one had any concrete information. His classmates hadn't been able to leave him alone, and so yes, Tsunayoshi had gotten bullied. He's never gotten more bullied, honestly, like somehow he's gotten some kind of target tattooed all over his skin. Even Yamamoto, a popular guy who slept through most of his classes to the point that Tsunayoshi hadn't thought Yamamoto knew he existed, had patted him over the head and said 'welcome back,' as if that weren't strange enough.

But the bullying is never the kind that involves putting bruises on his skin. No, this is just his… instincts driving him to get himself in trouble with Hibari's thugs. Even when he tries his hardest to ignore it, there's something about Hibari and the people around Hibari that Tsunayoshi just can't leave alone, himself.

It's probably the way Hibari beats people to the ground but never breaks skulls - attacks with brutal efficiency and terrible intent, but never actually… well. Kills anyone.

'Trust your instincts,' Tsunayoshi's teacher said, so Tsunayoshi looks to the person he thinks trusts their instincts the most, and he tries to learn. After all, everything about Hibari is order and control. Tsunayoshi thinks that if he can figure that out - if he can bend that ignition and burn to his own order and purpose, then maybe he can do some good with it.

Because, instinctively, Tsunayoshi can tell that this is just the beginning of it.

-0-

Chapter End Notes

* Tsunayoshi fixates on Kyoya because Kyoya has proven to naturally have the knight-guardian disposition, and Tsunayoshi's family was attacked. There are other guardian candidates around, but he wants that one

* Regarding Flames: first) have the genetic predisposition for manifesting Will, second) be willing to die for it - or cheat and have an active Sky around.

Plenty of people have the ability to manifest their Will, but becoming conscious of it is a whole other feat not everyone is suited for. Regardless, people who can will exude a 'sway' that flame users can identify each other with, although not consciously unless they're trained for it.

Anything awful enough to make a Sky activate/come online/etc is likely bad enough to require that Sky to have guardians, which is why active Skies can naturally (benignly) activate guardians. Tsunayoshi is sealed, which basically renders him dormant, so he can't activate or harmonize with anyone, but that doesn't mean that the natural instincts
aren't there or that he isn't putting off sway and attracting way too much attention - thus the bullying.

* regardless of Omertà, hostage-taking is a privileged Namimori Cultural Practice. It’s pretty common, which is why Mochida taunts Tsunayoshi about it! Learning to avoid and escape these situations is a key life skill. Be aware that the people who practice this honored tradition are not recent immigrants to Namimori, as the Sawada family is.

* Hayashi-sensei is basically the same as an elliptical and so does not belong on the OC list.
No Survival Instincts

Chapter Summary

regarding hibari kyoya, the predatory adults on the streets, and Miura Haru.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Three : No Survival Instincts

The fact of the matter is that Tsunayoshi has been a sickly child for some time - only it's not the kind of illness that anyone takes a person to the doctor for. There's nothing brewing inside his lungs or growing in his bones or weakening his muscles… or at least there hadn't been, until Tsunayoshi had done That, but even those things aren't the sort that a doctor can fix, he's pretty sure.

He's been a sickly kid all this time, sitting in his room and being clumsy, with some kind of heavy, suffocating weight on him that he can't ever seem to shrug off. It's heavy. It's like being covered in a wet blanket, or encase in ice. His blood circulation must be poor, since his feet and fingers are always cold. Although his heart beats just fine in his chest, somehow something is wrong, probably.

So it doesn't come as a large surprise that Nana is pleased that Tsunayoshi is up and out of the house at all hours of the day after school. It starts when she takes him to the self-defense classes, and by the time he starts to get comfortable with Hayashi-sensei and the things that he's learning there, Nana his clasping her hands together with bright eyes and saying, "My, my, but Tsu-kun is so active now! Tsu-kun must really love his martial arts classes!"

Tsunayoshi's head feels stuffed full of cotton, somehow sluggish despite the way he's seen the world move so fast, but he tries to grimace a smile for Nana's sake.

The classes don't have anything to do with it at all. Tsunayoshi is under the lash of his own instincts.

Those instincts of his are annoying, tiresome things. They drive him to tail after Hibari and his thugs, the Disciplinary Committee. Those guys tend to object to an interloping outsider rather strenuously. He thinks that most of all, somehow they're trying to stand between Hibari and himself, and for Hibari's sake.

Isn't that a weird thought? What possible danger could Tsunayoshi ever present to the Demon of Nami Middle?

And in any case, it's not as if Hibari is grateful for it, either. He mostly ignores the antics of his underlings up until Tsunayoshi starts to be able to apply what he's learned in Hayashi's dojo despite not having any particular desire to hurt any of those underlings. When he starts to hold his own is
more or less when Hibari's temper seems to snap. Every, every, every time, he comes around and bites everyone to death, including his own men.

Well. It's pathetic when you can't even beat up Dame-Tsuna, probably, he thinks. Up until now, no one has really bothered to try after discovering that he either runs away and hides, or just ducks down and covers his head with his arms until it's all over no matter what. It must not be fun to bully a kid who passively accepts his fate.

But those beatings that Hibari gives to his own men don't ever seem to hinder their loyalty in the least. It's truly some bizarre pecking order. Has he brainwashed them so thoroughly that they'll accept any amount of abuse as their due? Honestly, Hibari barely seems to tolerate them on a good day nevermind when Tsunayoshi is around - he's always snapping about being crowded, and sneering about 'pretend-carnivores.' If you can't even handle one brazen herbivore, he says, and then sometimes: 'small animal.'

Talk like that lends the thought that Hibari Kyoya must fancy himself as some kind of apex predator. He's a little like a wolf, Tsunayoshi thinks, only no: wolves are pack animals after all, and Kyoya doesn't suffer the company of others willingly. So maybe Hibari is more like a tiger instead, with his tonfa playing the part of prosthetic fangs.

And like a tiger, his hunting range is much wider than just that place lair he guards the most diligently.

Out in the streets of Namimori, there people who are much less friendly than the average adult going about their life. Over the years of walking himself to his school campus since he was a little kid who first lost all his friends to his own clumsiness, Tsunayoshi has become well acquainted with this fact. None of them had ever tried to lay a hand on him until a month ago when they'd taken Nana first, but he's learned in his own way how to spot and avoid them, doing his best to blend into the background.

There's nothing particular that stands out about these people. They don't carry weapons, and they don't have a lot of tattoos, or jewelry, or wear any particular suits. It's not like in the movies, where they have a sort of uniform so the people watching can pick them out immediately. Tsunayoshi can't point out any one thing that makes him realize that he's dealing with one of these back alley thugs, but he gets good at it, and at avoiding them, or at least being beneath their notice. And being beneath their notice is a worthy endeavor, after all. They keep causing so many problems. It's because of them that kids drop out of school.

Tsunayoshi vaguely remembers Iemitsu visiting when he was a child. He'd been seven, at that time, and it was the first visit after Tsunayoshi's fifth birthday and that scary stranger that had come home with him, and it's after this visit that Iemitsu will tell Nana to say that he'd 'become a star.' Iemitsu had seemed distracted for that entire trip, and then he'd taken Tsunayoshi out for ice cream. He'd put Tsunayoshi up on his shoulders, and he can vaguely remember being a child and impressed with the mountain of strength that his father had seemed to be-

(although, part of him had been tight and anxious the entire time. Quiet and wary. Iemitsu has never- so why had he-)

And on their way to the ice cream shop, they'd met a woman. Tsunayoshi remembers that her hair had been beautiful: black as the darkest night, and with a slight wave. Her skin pale. Her eyes darker still. The look on her face had been kind, but something about her gaze had made Tsunayoshi grasp at Iemitsu's jaw and wish that his feet were properly on the ground so that he could duck behind his father's leg.
Iemitsu, his hands loose around Tsunayoshi's ankles, said something like: "I really love this peaceful town that's been created here."

"Of course," she'd replied. "Other than the occasional idiot, we all know to look after it well." And then she'd glanced up at Tsunayoshi and smiled, and Tsunayoshi's heart had thumped unpleasantly, and she'd said: "That one as well, one day. Perhaps."

Iemitsu laughed then, and though it sounded relaxed, something about it made Tsunayoshi glance down at him with concern. "No way," he'd said, "my little Tunafish takes after his papa's family too much for that."

But the woman had just tilted her head, her eyes hidden beneath a curtain of lashes, and said, "is that so? Well, I guess you never know."

It's such a small thing to remember so clearly. It isn't much. But just as they had that time, the adults keep talking over the heads of children without thinking about it, underestimating how much those kids will remember even if they don't understand it all at the time. Tsunayoshi remembers this particular incident now as he trails along behind Hibari and watches someone whose age is closer to his own than adulthood bare those metal fangs against the dodgy people who roam the streets.

More than just the individuals or two or three adults who would sometimes corner Tsunayoshi and tease him in strange, adult ways, there are plenty of small time operations running on the street, and Hibari Kyoya seems to hate these the most. It's not like they're hidden at all, but the men in the police uniforms don't lift a finger no matter what.

There's no way a teenager with a pair of tonfa should be able to wander into a building and cow the adults inside to the point that plenty of them are more interested in running away. Where are the guns? Where are the knives? Tsunayoshi lingers outside, out of reach of the small crew that Hibari brought with him to such an endeavor and left hidden in the streets, and wonders. Why won't these men fight back?

Tsunayoshi doesn't understand it at all. It's not funny to watch in the first place. For what reason did men like these take first Nana and them himself, and hold them for three days and tell them to call Iemitsu? For what reason is it that now they run away from a kid not that much older than Tsunayoshi without even firing back. It's not like the guns are fake, or the knives, or the chains or the bats.

It's not funny, but some part of him is satisfied to watch it anyway. Whatever their reason for not fighting back against Hibari Kyoya, they won't have time to hold anyone else hostage if they're too busy running and screaming with bruises and blood and broken teeth. Isn't it more fair this way? Scum like that should be running and screaming for their lives.

He just doesn't get why it has to be from a teenager when aren't there other adults who should be cleaning this mess up?

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"You're so easy to fool," his peers tell him when he falls for it again and again and again. Then Tsunayoshi starts telling people "No way," no matter if he believes them or not, and suddenly gets some kind of weird nickname - being 'no good' for anything, not even a laugh.

Despite being wary about, Tsunayoshi is still an idiot who comes to believe in the certainty that if Hibari is on the case, there's no way the small time scum can kidnap anyone. It's almost a relief to
think that. Although he already knows that Hibari is only a little older than him and just one person aside since he won't like the Committee get involved, and that the Namimori that Hibari seems passionate about is much too large for just one person to guard even if they are as crazy and as terrifying as Hibari. No, even if Hibari Kyoya was an adult, there's no way just one person could do it themselves.

There's no particular reason that Tsunayoshi decides to take the long way home from school. The one he already takes wanders quite a bit in respect to wanting to avoid the paths that students from other districts take home, and the weird adults who don't have tattoos. It's familiar enough to him that he could take it with a blindfolded and with headphones on.

There normally wouldn't be a lot of overlap from Nami Middle and the other nearby schools, but they've reached the age where instead of going straight home, the students want to hang out and have a snack and have a little fun. It's enough of an overlap that Tsunayoshi realized a long time ago that he gets enough harassment from his fellow students of Nami Middle, he doesn't need any additional hassle from the 'elite' school nearby. Bad enough that he gets teased about his grades by kids of average intelligence.

Still, that day, there's something appealing about taking the long way home. There are a few yen in his pocket, and for some reason it occurs to him that maybe bringing home some kind of sweet snack for Nana would be nice. Even if he's not sure what to make of the fact that she claims to want to protect him, she's been looking happier these days. For some reason, he thinks she doesn't usually look happy enough.

In either case, the urge comes upon him to go down by the sweets shop. He doesn't have much of a sweet tooth himself, but he's not against eating sweet things either. It feels more like a reward.

He doesn't have a lot of allowance money, so it's one of the cheaper shops he steps into for a treat. There's some girls from the nearby all-girls school - a few of them notice him and turn toward each other with voices turning a little clippy the way it does when they're saying unkind things. Words have long since lost their sting, honestly, but the reaction still manages to make Tsunayoshi feel a little heavy - a little cold, a little remote. The difference between himself and the people his own age seems to keep increasing.

Maybe he should have thought it through before he exposed himself to this kind of atmosphere. Tsunayoshi isn't cool or smart enough to show his face by himself in this kind of popular place without having his status rubbed in his face.

(Usually it'd feel a bit like staring at them through some kind of impenetrable wall of glass. Hearing a party going on next door through paper walls, but unable to join in. Ever since That though, something sits strange inside his chest. He touches his cold fingertips to the heel of his palm and keeps expecting the skin to stick.)

Ducking his head and rounding his shoulders, Tsunayoshi ignores it with the long skill of someone who is often greeted with this kind of reaction.

A bit later, he leaves the shop alone with a paper bag in hand, focusing instead on the slice of cake inside it and the expression that Nana will probably make when he gives it to her. It's not exactly a 'good mood' but that awful feeling from the sweet shop is falling behind him - and then, Tsunayoshi hears something off the main street. Coming to a halt, he looks down the sidestreet. It's not a residential neighborhood, and-

He has a bad feeling. It's the kind of bad feeling that won't leave him alone unless he goes and checks it out. He glances down at the paperbag dangling from his hands and after a second moves
to keep walking.

The sound is distant. Words. The high spike of a girl's voice over the flatter, rounder tones of grown men. They're too far for him to hear individual words, but the tones- the roll and clatter of a certain way of speaking that Tsunayoshi had listened to for three days. That's the sound that reaches his ears, like the party next door suddenly cut through with a terrified scream.

He's rounding the corner before the cold chill can fully go down his back.

It's clear that the girl, about Tsunayoshi's own age and dressed in one of those cute all-girl school's uniforms, hasn't gone with them entirely willingly. One of the three has her caught tightly by the shoulder, even as she leans away, pulling away from the car and its open door. Her cheeks are bright and her eyes sharp. She's by far not strong enough to struggle against three fully grown men, but with a twist, she manages to shake loose from her blazer.

It's not a senseless move, as her arm slithers free, because she lifts her hands up and there's a modest noise as paper confetti explodes from poppers in her hands. It's enough to startle the men that she manages to scoop her bag up and run-

All of two meters, and then the men catch her, and one raises his hand and-

It's not like Tsunayoshi had been standing around gaping at the scene. They really were that far from the main road. But the man raises his hand and Tsunayoshi's heart ignites, and his brain begins to burn. That burn surges down his back, down his thighs and into his calves and feet, and suddenly he's moving faster than the rest of the world, or at least it feels that way.

His fighting instincts are uncommonly good. Tsunayoshi scrambles up the hood of the car, climbs up without losing the speed of his dash, and jumps. No part of this is kickboxing, but Tsunayoshi drives both heels into the closest man's shoulders, just below his neck. The landing is messy, but he doesn't let that stop him from shifting into his next attack, staggering to a stop and bending while turning to the man that is letting go of the girl.

"Run! " Tsunayoshi snaps at her, then throws everything he has into the strike he aims up into the man's belly. It's a good, hard strike; he hears the man's breath go out with a grunt. Then the man's elbow crashes down on the back of his neck and he can't breathe himself.

A hand fists into his hair, shoving him slightly back, and he sees the knee coming at his face; it's all he can do to block, getting both of his arms in place so they catch most of the blow. The girl is shouting, and the men are yelling, and the leg next moves to kick Tsunayoshi in the gut.

The way he's bent over, for the kick to connect, Tsunayoshi will be practically laid over the leg. He doesn't precisely let it hit, but catches it, and digs his fingers into the tendons in the back of the man's leg and then savagely bites him.

In situations of life or death, no attack is 'dirty.' There are two grown men, and a thirteen year old boy, and a girl.

Tsunayoshi is tossed aside with a curse. He hits the road hard, rocks and broken glass and breathless. "You stupid kid," the man says, gravel crunching under his shoes, and Tsunayoshi scrambles.

"Let go of me!" the girl shouts, sounding less afraid and now a bit furious.

Right, Tsunayoshi has no time to be laying around trying to catch his breath. He heaves himself to his knees and palms, and then to his feet, and tries to open his awareness to the situation. The man
he first attacked is still down - he can see blood - but there's still two more, and he can't rely on the girl distracting the man. She'll just end up -

Tsunayoshi comes up swinging, because that ferocious burning is eating through his muscles and hollowing him out, clearing his nerves of pain and his brain of all the nasty cluttering things. Things like the blood on the man's forehead, and that bloodied room and his sticky clothes, and his mother's wide, bloodshot eyes and the way her lip split open. All of that is consumed to make the flames burn brighter, and what's left is calmness. Clarity of purpose.

What Tsunayoshi lacks in height, he makes up for in kicking the man's footing out from under him, then half-climbing him and grabbing him by the ears and kneeing him in the face. Much like the man had once tried to do to him.

Seeing his buddy go down, the man who has been trying to restrain the girl without getting entirely battered by her bookbag lets go of her. She stumbles back, clear, and Tsunayoshi sweeps into his next move: two steps forward, then duck and put his momentum into the heel that slams into the man's knee.

The man curses and goes down, and the girl winds up big time, and slams her book bag into his head with all her might. Tsunayoshi is caught enough by surprise by her finishing move that he just kind of stares at her for a second, during when she grabs his wrist and then begins to actively drag him away.

"Come on!" she shouts, "before they get back up!"

It's not a bad idea, so Tsunayoshi eventually gets his priorities rearranged and runs after her. She's clearly familiar with the area, a little bit more than Tsunayoshi himself, and after a few twists and turns down the smaller streets, they emerge back into a heavily trafficked mainstreet.

Only at that point does she stumble to a stop, bending in half with her hands on her knees and panting heavily. Tsunayoshi, slightly more athletic than her and also not scared for his life, isn't quite so bad off.

"That," she says, sucking for air, "was amazing!"

Tsunayoshi startles and stares at her. "What," he says.

With effort, she straightens. She's completely flushed and wet and sticky with sweat, but - it's kind of like she's glowing? And her eyes? Look a bit like? They're? Sparkling? "You just! Wham! And pow! You!" She launches herself into the air, coming down on her heels. "Bang!"

Tsunayoshi vaguely realizes he's watching a bastardization of the move he'd entered on. "Um," he says.

"I thought things like that only happened in movies!" she cries, energetically thrusting her arms to the sky, practically shouting into it. Her recovery period and stamina are frankly astounding.

If only. Tsunayoshi looks around and figures he's got his heading right, and will be able to make his way home. Glancing over at her, he says, "in real life, real people actually get hurt."

It's only after the girl freezes a bit and turns her head to stare at him that Tsunayoshi realizes that he's still speaking in that flat kind of way that happens when he's under total calm. It seems to drain the flushed excitement out of her, and she slowly lowers her arms to fold them against her chest.

After a second, she musters herself a bit, her smile coming back but a little twisted and uncertain. "I
"I know that," she says, and giggles a bit fictitiously. "That's not the first time I've been kidnapped, you know."

And even though it's a bit rude, Tsunayoshi stares at her and says, "Why?"

Self-consciously, she drops her gaze with that same insincere smile, and picks her bookbag up. She slings it over her shoulder and says, "because, Mom's no good at making friends."

It's a good, dramatic departure line, if this were a movie, Tsunayoshi thinks inanely. But the girl just stands there, fiddling with her book bag strap and smiling in a way that really makes him uncomfortable. It's the same as when Nana smiles because she's trying not to cry, honestly. He knows about how much to fix it in this situation as he does in any other, which is to say: no clue at all.

He's vaguely aware of being hollow - that the fire has consumed everything and burnt itself out - as he looks at her standing beside him, the flush of exertion still in her cheeks but the gleam of her eyes dimmed and her smile ... it's the worst kind of smile Tsunayoshi has ever seen.

"Um," he says, "Your leg is hurt. If it's okay with you, you can come to my house and we can bandage it?"

The smile drops off her face and she glances at him, following his gaze down. He doesn't think it happened during the altercation in the alley, but there's a sizable scrape on the outside of her leg, just above her knee. At least it hasn't bled too badly; Tsunayoshi isn't sure he could have handled that. The girl reaches down automatically to prod the edges of the wound, and winces.

Tsunayoshi understands the urge, but what did she really expect? "My house isn't far from here," he adds, somewhat absent-mindedly. He hates bothersome things, and the girl is weird and a bit scary with her reaction just after they escaped, but - but he'll feel better if he can at least see her in his home, with his mother. Nana will worry over her a bit and maybe they'll both smile a real smile, and his uneasy heart can rest.

Her head stays ducked for a moment, but then she lunges for him. It's not like he couldn't dodge it, but he doesn't out of some strange instinct. She's taller than him, but she bends over, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and squealing into his neck.

"You're so gallant!" she says excitedly, but the way her fingers press into his back feels much too much like the way his mother gripped him. She wiggles, which has the side effect of twisting him on his feet as well, and her ponytail hits him in the face a lot and he's getting a bit dizzy. "This is like a dream! I've surely met my prince charming!"

"No way!" Tsunayoshi yelps in something of a panic. "I'm no good for that kind of thing!"

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The girl's name, by the way, turns out to be Miura Haru. She tends towards loud and extravagant behavior, and she and Nana get along famously. They've also both decided that she's Tsunayoshi's girlfriend, which is plainly not true. It's not that Tsunayoshi doesn't like girls or even that he dislikes Haru - she's weird, putting it mildly, but it's not like it's bad, and besides: Tsunayoshi's gut feeling is that she's good to have around. It's just that he...

It's just no good when Tsunayoshi likes someone. It's not a good or kind feeling. It scares him, if he's being honest. He doesn't know how other people handle it the way that they do, although he guesses the fairy tale of of being soft and gentle about it has a certain charm. But for people like...
him? They don't have the right to be interested in anyone that way, it's just that he hadn't realized until his heart ignited and the fire hollowed him out and left him covered with sticky wetness.

Be someone's boyfriend? In the first place, Tsunayoshi is no good. He never has been. Now that he's actually done something with that part of him, there's no way he could ever even dream of looking Kyoko in the eye.

In either case, along with having decided that she's his girlfriend, Haru also takes to showing up at his house of her own accord and following him everywhere.

"This really isn't the kind of thing that you take your girlfriend to," Kusakabe Tetsuya says the first time Haru follows Tsunayoshi out on his normal 'following Hibari and the Committee' rounds.

"She's not my girlfriend," Tsunayoshi says plainly. He's been saying this to anyone who will listen once he realized that Haru seems completely unaffected by his protests. He actually had tried his hardest to shake her off before this weird need to see Hibari had driven him completely up a wall, but Haru is smarter than he is and scarcely determined.

Haru, for her part, is cutting the Committee a sharp look. Everyone knows about the Demon of Namimori Middle, since Hibari is driven as always to enforce order upon the entire town as he sees fit. "My, my," she says, clinging onto Tsunayoshi's arm, "What a scary bunch of thugs."

Sometimes, Tsunayoshi thinks that Haru has no self-preservation instinct whatsoever. He himself has only barely gotten to be on neutral ground with Hibari's Committee - largely because he can finally hold his own and because he's smart enough to hang back the twenty meters it takes not to get on Hibari's nerves. A distance he himself discovered, since the Committee themselves seem to be unable to hang far enough back to avoid Hibari's wrath completely.

Kusakabe looks flatly at Haru, but he largely seems resigned more than irritated. The fact that Kusakabe is even talking to him suggests there won't be a fight about it, but in his own twisted way, Tsunayoshi had thought that maybe this would convince Haru to give him some breathing space.

As it is, only during her own classes does Haru leave him be. She always immediately seeks him out after her school lets out, and even insists on doing homework with him. Tsunayoshi was perhaps a bit idealistic to think that mere thugs would drive Haru away when his own dense brain and weird mother hadn't been enough.

"Haru-chan," he says, "this is Nami Middle's Discipline Committee... please try to get along..."

"I know who they are," Haru says, placing her free hand on her hip. "One time, they stopped my kidnappers."

What the- "How many times are you getting kidnapped?" Tsunayoshi demands, a little aghast.

"I said Mom is bad at making friends," Haru says, still giving the Committee a narrow look. "And their leader gave me a black eye."

Kusakabe sighs lightly, crossing his arms, but he doesn't seem unmoved. Looking to Tsunayoshi, he says, "She touched Hibari."

Tsunayoshi's mouth hangs open in an appalled way, turning to look at Haru with wide eyes. "And you're alive," he says, "he didn't bite you to death?"

Haru flushes and then tries to mask her embarrassment with a snort and tilting her face away. "That
scruffy beast considers me too much of an herbivore to eat, apparently," she says crossly, as if this is something that would obviously make anyone unhappy.

Tsunayoshi looks helplessly toward Kusakabe, but the Committee Second in Command just shuts his eyes in a resigned way. Apparently Haru has a bit of a thing for white knight types, even if she can't really tell the difference between who is holding the shiny sword.

After all, a mad dog can keep just as nice of a sword as a prince type. Tsunayoshi probably should have realized that Haru is weak where it comes to understanding others when she declared him her 'prince charming' - Tsunayoshi isn't the same kind of mad dog that Hibari is, but his instincts still drive him to fight and kill people who put their hands on his family. Surely on some level, people should be able to tell these things about others?

Tsunayoshi can, or at least he thinks he's starting to be able to. He's certainly learned more and more just who in the kickboxing class he wants to spar with (or more precisely: who he doesn't want to spar with), and who he should stay away from on the streets. It's not entirely fair to use Hibari as a measuring stick or anything, seeing that Tsunayoshi knew that guy was crazy long before his heart had ever ignited.

"In either case," Kusakabe says, looking at Tsunayoshi, "this is Committee business. It's bad enough we tolerate you being around. A girl from some other school entirely has no business being here."

Haru snorts. "I have as much right as you have functionality off Nami Middle grounds," she points out. "Besides, my place is at Tsunayoshi-san's side! Where he goes, so do I." The fire in her eyes and the firmness of her chin suggests that she's not going to give up easily.

"Sawada himself has no right to be involved in Committee matters," Kusakabe points out, and Tsunayoshi grimaces; he can't rightfully explain why he wants to hang out with delinquents after school, but-

"Wrong," Haru says, her voice loud and clear like a ringing bell, one finger in the air, her poise that of a strict and disappointed teacher. Peering at Kusakabe with one narrow eye, she says, "Did you forget? It can't be Committee matters off school grounds." Kusakabe tsks, and when he doesn't argue, she smirks and sticks the pink tip of her tongue out.

She really has no kind of self-preservation instincts at all.

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But guts get you places with delinquents, even if the Committee is more like an organization than a gang - more yakuza than yankii, although truthfully they're something completely unique of their own. Hibari is cranky about the addition of Haru for three straight weeks and everyone feels his wrath - Tsunayoshi and Haru most of all - and yet this intimidates Haru not at all.

"I don't know what you're doing getting so close with thugs like them," Haru says with a huff, "but clearly we're going to need to keep up! That Hibari guy..." She pounds her fist into her palm. "If we can get as strong as him, there's no way he can turn us away!"

Tsunayoshi feels like he definitely bit off more than he could chew the day that he got involved with Miura Haru.

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Chapter End Notes

* Anyway I suck at fight scenes, so despite being a shonen manga... don't expect a lot of these, or if they happen, expect mostly Tsunayoshi's feelings and not a blow-by-blow description lmao

* I decided to go ahead and hint harder at future things, even though our limited POV narrator is kind of the oblivious sort.

* Spoilers: Tsunayoshi just got himself his first Guardian, not that their relationship is actually to that point yet. They aren't a pair and they won't be dating, no matter what Haru says lmao. She's just not well socialized to having male friends. Obviously if you like a boy, it's a romantic like, right?? He saved her! It's just like in the movies!
Chapter 4: Intragroup Politics

Tsunayoshi is probably some kind of disgrace, he thinks. He's never been a 'good kid' - that went out the window the time Nana told him that Iemitsu had ended up in the heavens with the rest of the stars. Maybe he had acted out in various bad kinds of ways. Suddenly, various things had stopped having urgency and weight.

If he can't understand the world around him, how is he supposed to do anything with it?

He's stupid and naive and clumsy and unlikable, and his father was dead and his mother didn't seem terribly bothered by it. He hadn't been able to understand any part of it, hadn't been able to connect his feelings with his mother's, and since he wasn't able to connect those feelings, he went through them alone.

Nothing seemed important after that. What was the point of putting out effort in something like school when his father wouldn't be around to tell him 'good job' and his mother was someone strange and mysterious and unfamiliar?

(-hadn't she loved him-? hadn't she-?)

And then even that turned out to be a lie. No wonder Nana hadn't cared: Iemitsu wasn't dead. And Tsunayoshi can't even be grateful for that because he's done That and somehow Iemitsu has become something terrifying, and his mother flinched from him and doesn't seem to grasp his reality.

He still can't connect his experiences to Nana's. He doesn't understand Haru's feelings. He doesn't even understand his own, which put him at Hibari's heels despite the fact that all it earns him is black and blue and green and yellow bruises.

Those feelings which catch fire and consume themselves and him until he's hollow and hallowed and char and smoke.

"A few months of training does not a combatant make," Hayashi-sensei tells Tsunayoshi - tells him and tells the rest of the class, and then boots out a boy caught using those fighting skills he'd learned outside the dojo.

"The things you learn in my classes could seriously hurt someone," he says grimly. "You are never to use these abilities against another person outside very controlled environments, such as my class, or officially organized tournaments. You are especially not to use them against someone else who
doesn't have training."

And a disgrace like Tsunayoshi gravely promises 'of course not' and then goes out into the streets and faces the Disciplinary Committee and does it anyway.

It's not that Tsunayoshi wants to be this kind of liar, but saying one thing to someone's face and then existing with a completely separate truth - it's in his blood, isn't it?

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What is the value of a promise given? What is the value of words? Only, why would Tsunayoshi lie about something like that? He hates to hurt people and he hates fighting.

But even someone like him is capable of taking a gun in hand and ending someone's life if he decides that it's necessary. Tsunayoshi remembers that. Whatever better intentions people have, it's different from what they might do when it comes down to it.

Tsunayoshi himself, who hates hurting people, can also kill them without hesitation and not even cry about it later. He reasons that those men forfeited their own lives, and is named 'capable of anything' and told 'good job' - and yet knows that it's not a good thing to be.

He knows it's not good. A loser like 'Dame-Tsuna' can't also be someone who without hesitation kills other people - but isn't he? Isn't he?

Hasn't he proven to be precisely that person? Ahh, it's not good.

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Everyone already knows that the Disciplinary Committee is only an official name for Hibari's crew of thugs and delinquent followers. Tsunayoshi supposes there could be worse things that they could be getting up to - follow the rules and stay out of Hibari's way and beneath the Committee's notice, and you'll never even have a reason to come to their attention. It's not precisely a bad situation. It could be worse, Tsunayoshi rationalizes, especially if the guys that were in it were allowed to do whatever they liked.

Hibari, after all, has no rule against beating some discipline into his own men and actually does so frequently if they seem to be becoming unruly. Saying that he 'rules them with an iron fist' is somewhat incorrect. Kusakabe rules them with an iron fist. He has a hand on some kind of intragroup politics; there are about five of the Committee members that Tsunayoshi tentatively labels as 'actually good people with behavioral problems.' The rest of them are held under tight leash by Kusakabe and his hand-picked support team, and made to fear it by the threat of Hibari's tonfa.

After spending so many months following Hibari and the Committee around, Tsunayoshi tentatively decides that calling Kusakabe the 'Second in Command' is actually a bit of a misnomer. Kusakabe is the one that makes the organization go round; the threat of Hibari is what enforces his claim.

Well, Tsunayoshi arrives at this conclusion but doesn't actually realize it or know how to explain it until one afternoon, when Haru starts poking and prodding at the structure of the Committee during a break from trying to help Tsunayoshi with his homework. Tsunayoshi feels like he's achieved something impressive in making Haru sweat and suggest a snack break, but it doesn't make him happy.

In either case, Haru starts poking at it. "I don't get it," she says, "it seems like the Committee
mostly operates outside of or around that shaggy beast."

"Of course they do," Tsunayoshi says. "Hibari doesn't have the patience to lead people. He doesn't even like people."

Haru blinks her big brown eyes at him. "But then how is he the leader?"

"Well, you certainly can't say that he's the follower type," he says dryly.

Haru considers that for a moment, then says, "Then are we going about this wrong? Should it be Kusakabe that we should be forcing to acknowledge us?"

It's Tsunayoshi's turn to blink at her as he processes that question and what she must be thinking that lead to it. "I don't think so," he says. "I think Kusakabe has already accepted us as much as he's going to. People other than Hibari don't really seem to matter much to him."

"How questionable," Haru says with a strangely dark expression as she bites sharply into a piece of apple that Nana had cut up for them. Tsunayoshi laughs a little dryly; he's not sure Kusakabe even likes Hibari, despite all the work he does for his sake. Maybe whatever hold Hibari has over him is something that it doesn't matter what his personal feelings are.

Saying that the Committee is 'for Hibari's sake' isn't precisely correct, either. That's not the feeling that Tsunayoshi gets. More, the Committee is a product or result of Hibari existing. Hibari is a force of his own that requires certain countermeasures and allowances to simply survive. That kind of thing...

Ahh, Tsunayoshi thinks; he doesn't like that. It's fine if it works for other people, but he's only interested in letting people he actually likes close, that will hopefully like him in return. That would be good.

'Anything' is already terrible enough without doing it for people he feels nothing for. Crossing that kind of line is-

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What is he thinking again? What is he thinking? Aren't the only people he cares about his own mother? It's only her. Ah, but he might do something terrible if Haru were in danger, that's true, and-

What, precisely, is he thinking regarding allowing people close and doing 'anything' for?

He rubs his knuckles against his breastbone, and thinks about Kusakabe and the Committee's intragroup politics, and Hibari and Haru and Nana and that hollowed, burnt out feeling and his fingers being so, so, so sticky.

Ahh. The space under his ribs feels like it needs to be filled up and he doesn't know why. What, precisely, is he-

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There's a certain amount of 'seeing Hibari' that Tsunayoshi has to do during the course of the average day, but that kind of quota isn't difficult to reach given that they attend the same school.

After school, Hibari meets up with the Committee for a certain amount of time in order to receive and distribute information, and most of the time, Hibari takes off on his own and leaves the
Committee to their own devices. The only time they stick together is if Hibari is being particularly cranky about some 'small fry' in a nearby neighborhood.

Hibari says 'small fry' and absolutely means adult thugs trying to set up some kind of operation. It takes Tsunayoshi a bit of thinking and Haru giving her time again before he can put his thoughts into words: civilian-type criminals like these are barely even worth the attention of the men in police uniforms. That's why some middle school kid and his middle school gang are the ones who have taken responsibility for stopping them.

When something like that isn't happening, though, mostly it's just the Disciplinary Committee patrolling the streets. They don't get along great with the men in police uniforms, but it's not like anything more than glaring happens. It's a bit odd, isn't it? Aren't a lot of those people in uniforms people with the Hibari clan name?

Most of the time, the various sub-groups of the Committee - usually lead by one of the members that Tsunayoshi thinks of as 'good' - wander the streets and glare at various people and stop in many of the local businesses. They're not always welcome, but considering the few times that Tsunayoshi has dared to step inside and saw money changing hands-

Well, it's not any of his business.

Two months after Haru joins Tsunayoshi on his usual Committee-stalking rounds, it kind of goes to hell.

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It just so happens that they're tagging along with Hoshino's group when it happens. Tsunayoshi likes Hoshino, in so much as he likes anyone who looks that scary- for a given value of scary: Hoshino is actually relatively good-looking for a boy, except for the fact that he has a big, ugly pair of scars that streak over his face from cheekbone to chin on the left side of his face. Kusakabe likes Hoshino, which is about as much of an endorsement as Tsunayoshi really needs; Kusakabe is actually a relatively trustworthy and good person.

Thanks to whatever it is that Kusakabe likes about him, Hoshino has the unfortunate duty of being the third in command of the Committee and being the one that gets left in charge when Kusakabe is off wrangling Hibari's other affairs - whatever that might be. It's part of the reason that Tsunayoshi had defaulted to following this particular part of the Committee.

Hoshino also has a dry sense of humor as it goes when their squad turns the corner into another group of delinquents. The Committee members bristle, but Hoshino just pauses momentarily and then sighs a little bit. "This is all Sawada's fault," he says with resignation.

Tsunayoshi and Haru, who had been trailing a respectful two meters behind the Committee, stare at the back of his head. "What did I do," Tsunayoshi wonders under his breath. He's pretty sure he'd remember making a group of delinquents angry, but-

"Aren't you lot getting a little overconfident," the boy that's clearly the leader of the delinquents says. Tsunayoshi doesn't recognize any of them, or even their uniform, actually, so he's pretty sure this can't be his fault.

Hoshino smiles. It's nice that Tsunayoshi is standing so far behind him; Hoshino doesn't smile a lot, but when he does, it stretches the scars on his face in an unpleasant way. "Look who's the one talking," he says pleasantly. "Sorry, but no matter the outcome of this meeting, things won't end well for you."
The leader grins at him, or more like: bares his teeth. "That's funny, I was thinking the same thing about you."

"If you think that Hibari is being a little restless now," Hoshino says with the tone of someone privately amused, tilting his head in an odd way, "you'll really be impressed with how he gets after the Committee is attacked. You'll be lucky if all that happens to you is being 'bitten to death.'" And then his voice drops, mocking: "I think he'll only be too happy to chew up your bones and spit out the splintered remains."

But those boys don't seem impressed, and their leader grins with too many white teeth. "Ah-ha. You sure are confident in a rabid dog. But sick mutts like that get drowned, you know?"

"You've got to be kidding me," Tsunayoshi says faintly, staring with wide eyes, and then the leader of the delinquents roars and his group surges forward and things get really violent and confusing really fast.

This is the kind of thing that Tsunayoshi has no interest in getting involved in, but Haru screeches something like 'die' and surges forward along with the rest of the Committee and, crazy or not, Tsunayoshi can't just leave her that easily. He's not even sure he believes that something like this could be planned out without Hibari's supernatural senses summoning him to the scene to bite everyone to death, and if that's the case, then probably ending it quickly is the best idea.

For all that Tsunayoshi has gotten into various scuffles with the Committee itself, he's never been in the middle of an actual street brawl. Compared to the Committee scuffling with him, which generally is two or three people beating up Tsunayoshi and Haru while the rest watch and comment, it's completely different. It's a lot harder to dodge, and the atmosphere is totally different; the delinquents they're fighting actually want to hurt them badly.

There's a precise moment where Tsunayoshi feels that awful feeling begin to lurk about just under his ribs at the back of his throat. For a split second, he freezes to let the next hit land, and nearly gets his head taken off by a metal pipe. In the next instant, Tsunayoshi has it twisted out of the boy's hands and rears back to swing and -

The pipe nearly tumbles loose of Tsunayoshi's slack grasp. What was he-

He catches a fist to the face as someone comes to the boy's defense. Tsunayoshi crashes back, then scrambles in the usual manner for a bit before he manages to get his feet under him and he tries to make a desperate escape from the fight.

"Get back here, you shrimp!" the boy who originally had the pipe shouts - like he's one to speak, he's not exactly any bigger than Tsunayoshi is in the first place.

"No way!"

"Tsunayoshi-san!" Haru exclaims, and Tsunayoshi is going to be very annoyed if what attracts her attention is someone shouting 'shrimp' threatening; granted, half of the Committee calls him that, but all the same. Tsunayoshi hears an unmanly yelp and a crash behind him and glances back to see that Haru has leapt upon the boy who had been pursuing him. She is, at that moment, wrapping rope around his arm and throat.

Far from an elegant hojōjutsu style, it reminds Tsunayoshi of that weird western thing he'd seen at some point on the TV, where someone threw down a small cow and tied them up. Given that neither of them had exactly expected to get into any fights today, Tsunayoshi isn't entirely sure where Haru even got that rope from, but he does know its sudden appearance and Haru's apparent
skill in quickly tying someone up is making him incredibly nervous.

Then he abruptly has to reverse his footsteps back toward the brawl because while Haru is busy with tying that kid up, some girl is approaching her from the back. "I'm your opponent!" the girl with strangely bleached and dyed hair declares, swinging a bokken. Haru is going to end up taking it directly to the head.

Tsunayoshi desperately stretches his legs, but Haru looks up quickly, and gripping the boy with her knees and the ropes wound around his limbs, she easily rolls out of the way, using the kid as a shield. Even as a ripple of relief goes through Tsunayoshi, he's already committed, and the bokken itself hits his shoulder and arm where he'd gone to block it.

Blunt pain bursts through his side, but he's at most bruised. "Tsunayoshi-san!" Haru says sharply with alarm, but he grasps the heavy weight of the bokken with his opposite hand and yanks the girl off balance. She's not even as good as Mochida, he thinks; she doesn't know anything about kendo. Mochida would have never allowed Tsunayoshi the opportunity to grab his bokken.

"Hurry up and finish," Tsunayoshi snaps as he and the girl engage in a game of tug-of-war. She's older than him and bigger and stronger, too, but as for training...?

"Oh! Tag team!" Haru realizes with excitement.

"No way!"

Of course, the Committee is built out of a bunch of kids who can survive being under Hibari's merciless care, so it doesn't take long at all for them to wipe the street with a bunch of loosely associated thugs from another school. Tsunayoshi comes out the other side of the brawl feeling a little like he spent too much time dodging random weapons and fists and kicks. A bit like he'd been used as a distraction somehow while the Committee and Haru did the actual work of putting the delinquents down.

Instead of complaining about that, Tsunayoshi counts over the kids actually tied up rather than beaten unconscious and then boggles at Haru. Where was she even hiding all those ropes?

Haru notices him looking and promptly approaches him sunnily, grasping onto his arm. She's a mess, with scrapes on her cheeks and a bruise on her temple, and there's blood on the side of her hand, but her eyes are gleaming. "Are you okay, Tsunayoshi-san?"

"Ah - forget me," he says with alarm, taking in more: red marks on skin, torn clothes, scrapped knees. "Are you okay, Haru?"

"Hmm?" Haru glances down at her own condition and seems unmoved. "This is nothing compared to the training I did to get into Midori Middle!"

What kind of scary thing is that, Tsunayoshi wonders in sudden alarm. He knew that Midori was considered one of the toughest elite schools in Namimori, but if the school work is that difficult-!

"E-excuse me," he says, glancing at the nearest Committee member. "We're going. Haru has wounds that need tending to."

"I guess that's fine," Hoshino says, not looking up from where he's delicately stepping on the leader of the delinquent's face, cellphone in hand. He seems to be taking pictures. "I can't really expect more than that."

Haru bristles, but seems to find it beneath her to do more than that. One of the rookie members, a boy named Nakamoto that Tsunayoshi has tentatively slotted into 'actually good person' and so had
helped when he saw him getting double-teamed, glances reproachfully toward Hoshino.

"That's probably for the best," Nakamoto says to the two of them, like he's trying to soften Hoshino's dismissal somehow.

It doesn't really bother Tsunayoshi to have been dismissed like that – for whatever reason, Hoshino holds him responsible for them getting attacked, and Tsunayoshi has long since decided it's not worth arguing with those sorts.

But then Nakamoto, in his soft-spoken way, adds offhandedly, "if it were you, that'd be one thing, but there's no way she can come back with us for medicine."

Haru, already bristling, grips Tsunayoshi's arm to the point of hurting. He pries ineffectually at her fingers. "Is that so," she asks, sugary sweet. "I wonder why that is."

Hoshino says, flatly, "You're kidding, right? If it's Sawada, Hibari might let him live."

Hibari let Haru live, and apparently she'd hugged him, or something, so Tsunayoshi doesn't really understand what the deal with that was, unless Hibari's feelings toward Haru had changed.

"B- besides that," Nakamoto says uneasily, "it's the reception room, and she's not even from Nami Middle, so it's impossible. You shouldn't be in there, not being on the Disciplinary Committee, but with your skill at surviving-"

"Undoubtedly. With Sawada's dodging skills..."

"He'll at least survive long enough to run away."

Gripping his arm tight enough that Tsunayoshi winces and hisses, Haru proclaims, "What kind of lies are those? Tsunayoshi-san would never run away! Especially not from that savage beast!"

"Haru!" Tsunayoshi yelps in horror, reaching up to clasp a hand over her mouth and stifle any other insults that she might feel like saying. "Please don't pick fights by insulting Hibari in this situation." Namely: right there in front of Hibari's underlings. Is it just him, or are Haru's self-preservation instincts becoming even worse?

Haru's sharp eyes narrow at him in a cutting glance, reaching up and dragging his hand down. She puffs up like an angry cat, hissing and spitting. "He's a beast!" she exclaims indignantly. "A shaggy, savage beast! An ogre! A total ogre! Bleh!" If the words weren't enough, she caps off her short tirade with sticking her tongue out at the Committee members in what could only be construed as a challenge.

More than one or two of them look a bit pissed off, which is kind of- they're standing over the fallen bodies of delinquents from another school, so- but on the other hand, Hoshino just spreads his hands. Looking at Haru plainly, he says easily, "no one here is really arguing with that."

"Senpai," Nakamoto says in shock, but Hoshino just glances at him like daring him to really argue about it. Momentarily, Nakamoto subsides; he's only a rookie after all.

"Eh." Haru stares at them, her arms dangling limply at her side and seemingly a little confused by the easy acceptance of her insults. Tsunayoshi takes this moment to take her by the wrist, hoping a little bit that they might be able to escape without much more trouble.

"Don't worry about it, Haru," he says a little nervously, "that's something only people who feel fear could understand. Um- everyone - we'll be on our way, thanks."
Hoshino steps on the leader again, his cellphone flashing, but he's watching him with a smile that stretches his scars really unpleasantly. "Well, this was annoying," he says cheerfully, "but at least you two helped out with the situation you caused in the first place... no, actually, the fight was pretty easy thanks to you and Haru-kun running interference. I guess it's fine, after all."

"Not that we needed the help," the especially gruff looking delinquent at his back says.

"No, but come play with us again, sometime," Nakamato says. The invitation is echoed by a few of the others, to the testy response of the others who were less than impressed with Haru's description of their leader.

As if we could! Tsunayoshi thinks, a bit flustered as he tries to hurry Haru away, but Haru responds brightly, laughing and waving goodbye. Her good spirits are explained momentarily when she says, "yes! We're one step closer to forcing that shaggy beast to acknowledge us, Tsunayoshi-san!"

"Why do you even want such a thing!" he demands in exasperation.

Blinking her big, slanted brown eyes at him, she says, "Ehh, but Tsunayoshi-san, I want that because you want that. That's why you're always chasing him around, right?"

"Please don't say weird things like that, Haru," he says with a sigh.

The entire idea that he wants to be acknowledged by Hibari is ludicrous - first of all, because the thought of Hibari acknowledging anyone is ludicrous, unless secretly at home his parents somehow beat him into submission. Seriously, the only way Tsunayoshi can see Hibari acknowledging anyone is if they're stronger than he is. Tsunayoshi is pretty sure that such a person doesn't exist.

No, Hibari is more than welcome to continue ignoring them as he usually does. The occasional attempts to crush them under the hateful force of his tonfa are one thing - Tsunayoshi accepts that because it's something that can't be fought against, like tsunami, and the way food goes bad. Hibari doesn't even actually talk to any of them, which is fine. If Hibari never directly acknowledges that Tsunayoshi exists ever again, then Tsunayoshi will call that a win.

It would be a double win he could just leave Hibari alone. None of this is of his own choice - he just gets this incredibly uneasy feeling if he doesn't keep an eye on Hibari. It's more and less desperate than it used to be; that awful feeling seems to be less of a threat these days with Haru always on the case, but strangely, since he's started hanging around with Haru, his ability to tolerate Hibari being off somewhere in the city with only the easily cowed Committee at his back takes a horrible sweeping nosedive. Like his grades had, ever since he was a kid.

'Tolerating Hibari being off somewhere in the city' - that's a weird way of putting it, isn't it? It's exactly that, somehow. Used to be, Tsunayoshi hadn't cared one whit what his mother go up to or where, but ever since then- ah!h, letting her do things like shopping in town when he isn't around has become impossible. What he feels regarding Hibari isn't that feeling, but it's very similar, after all.

It's almost like he- might like Hibari? Like he's? Worried about his well-being or something?

No way! Tsunayoshi acknowledges that he's a bit weird in the head, but liking Hibari Kyoya would be even too weird for him. And worrying for his well-being? Well, feeling something like that would be nothing short of delusional.
It's true that Tsunayoshi goes through his days constantly on edge. Sometimes he thinks that he'll develop ulcers, or otherwise go insane from the constant worry. Worry about what? Well, various things, naturally. First of all, while he was at school, Nana had been taken from her home. Tsunayoshi had no idea anything had been wrong before he was taken from the streets much the way that those men had been trying to take Haru. And he-

Naturally, Tsunayoshi worries about things like that happening again. He worries about Haru being kidnapped when he's not there, which is part of the reason he never tries to drive her away. He worries about delinquents attacking him, or just angry peers from school. He worries about getting hit by a car or choking on something or eating something bad or having something heavy fall on him or tripping and breaking something, maybe even his neck-

About the only time that Tsunayoshi really relaxes is when he's at home. Nothing awful ever happens to him when he's at home, even if Haru comes over to eat dinner with him. Even when he escorts Haru to the bus stop, nothing bad happens! It's like even the criminals are polite enough to keep their stupid activities to the day time.

Of course, if he's out and about too late at night, Tsunayoshi starts worrying if that's because there's something out there roaming the night. In other words, Tsunayoshi is an ace at being paranoid.

Besides that, being a homebody is Tsunayoshi's default state. It was like that before when he hadn't had the interest or energy to leave it, and it's like that now when he's enjoying the good food his mother cooks, and her happy smile, and having warm baths and a comfortable bed.

Which begs the question of why he's startling awake and rolling off that bed. There is a 'thwap' noise just before he hits the floor, and Tsunayoshi rears up to see what has startled him awake.

His window is wide open and a gentle night breeze is blowing in. The light of the moon outside excellently highlights what would otherwise be a pitch-black shadow. Narrow eyes glint, like animal eyes, in strange shades of purple. It's undoubtedly Hibari Kyoya, and that's his tonfa buried in the pillow Tsunayoshi's head had been resting on just seconds before.

What a fool he was. Of course the criminal element was avoiding Hibari. Hibari Kyoya is what goes 'bump' in the night.

Hibari shifts to pull the tonfa up, and Tsunayoshi dives under the bed, scrambling for the panic box that he'd built so many months ago, starting with on item that Nana bought for him. The box is definitely not meant to hold up under frantic fingers, so he has it open and the contents spilled out before a hand closes around his arm and jerks him out from other the bed on the completely opposite side.

Tsunayoshi bites his cheek instead of screeching, twisting onto his back as he fumbles the lid up and promptly squirts peppery spray in Hibari's face. Or - he tries to spray pepper in Hibari's face, but Hibari snorts and with a twist it's the loose arm of his uniform that catches the entire load. A tonfa bears down on Tsunayoshi's throat, and the canister tumbles from his grip as he reaches for it instead, setting the heels of his palm against the wood and struggling.

He pushes, but even with both hands, he can't get any leverage and Hibari has his weight behind the tonfa. It isn't restricting his breathing, but it's too much, it's too much. Tsunayoshi's legs kick in helpless alarm, though they do pitiful little where they're trapped under the bed. The last thing Tsunayoshi wants is for Nana to be woken up and come in on Hibari having bitten him to death, but at the same time-!
Hibari slides off the bed in a spill of limbs both reptilian and feline, settling over him in a crouch, their only point of contact the tonfa that presses against his throat and the heels of his palms. Hibari's eyes keep flickering and lensing purple in the moonlight, and it's freaking Tsunayoshi out. "You're crowding me," Hibari says, flat and low into Tsunayoshi's face. "Why."

'Tsunayoshi is crowding him!' Who exactly just broke into whose bedroom?!

Hibari's teeth look particularly white and sharp in the dim lighting of his bedroom, and Tsunayoshi can't help the distressed noise that claws out of his throat, high and nervous. Swallowing past his own quick, shallow breaths, Tsunayoshi says, "I don't know."

Hibari's eyes narrow, fire and steel and unforgiving. "Figure it out a better answer than that."

He's going to be bitten to death either way! Whether he can put it into words or not! Why else would Hibari break into his bedroom in the dead of night and try to put his skull in with his tonfa! Still, despite the futility of it, Tsunayoshi pushes for an answer. "I don't know," he still prefaces his explanation, because he doesn't, he's just- "following my gut feeling!"

Something as flimsy as that is going to spell his doom for sure, Tsunayoshi knows as soon as the words leave his mouth. He survived being held captive for three days and killing five men with their own weapons and even fighting common thugs on the street, only to be killed in his own bedroom by the guy he's been - well, stalking, a bit, if he's being truthful about it.

Hibari tilts his head slightly and doesn't, doesn't, doesn't shatter his throat just yet. Tsunayoshi pants in time to his hammering heart and can't look away from the strange flickering light in Hibari's eyes, feeling slightly mesmerized.

Isn't that- isn't that because they're nothing like the eyes of the men who'd-

Suddenly Tsunayoshi thinks: I'm in danger, but I'm not going to die. And his gut feeling has always been right. He's not dying tonight, not unless it's on accident.

He thinks that if Hibari has ever killed anyone, it's always been on accident - something that happened after the fact: that Hibari hit something and later they suffocated or their brain swelled, or something. As long as Tsunayoshi survives the beating, or getting 'bitten to death' - he's going to be fine.

Laying on his back and half under his bed with a tonfa to his throat and the leader of the most fearsome delinquent group in Namimori crouched over him, Tsunayoshi lets out his breath and relaxes.

It's no longer frightening, the strange light the moon strikes in Hibari's eyes. Tsunayoshi's curled fingers painfully unfold, settling loosely around the wooden tonfa pressed against his throat, nestled up under his chin. Hibari has broken into his bedroom and tried to bounce his tonfa off his head and has threatened him, but there's no intent behind it, other than frustration.

Of the two of them, it's not Hibari who has dreams of being sticky with blood with so many frightened adult eyes staring at him long after they bleed, bleed, bleed out, enough blood to drown all the world but it's being saved just for Tsunayoshi.

"Sorry," Tsunayoshi says quietly to the older boy bristling above him, feeling oddly comfortable in his skin for once. "I thought I could learn to control it, if- um. You're always in control, so I thought... "

A little less pressure bears down on his throat, and Hibari shifts, pulling back slightly even as he
plants his shoe into the empty space between Tsunayoshi's ribs and his arm. Tsunayoshi feels like at this angle, it's slightly more difficult to crush his throat, or at least do so as thoroughly. The strange light in Hibari's eyes is desolate, but - not exactly cold, or cruel; he moves the tonfa at Tsunayoshi's throat, planting the end in the floor and pushing back.

With one foot buried in Tsunayoshi's armpit, Hibari rests his remaining weight on the opposite heel; he's strikingly monochrome other than the strangeness in his eyes, the red band around his arm dull, washed out in shadow. "If it's discipline you want," he says plainly, and his neutral expression curls into a toothy thing that takes the form of a smile but isn't one at all, "I can beat it into your thick skull."

It's slightly worrisome, the way things are when you get the feeling someone else is going to enjoy something a lot more than you are. But Tsunayoshi has been doing a lot of things he doesn't like and doesn't find pleasant recently, so-

"Thank goodness," Tsunayoshi says, relieved, and tries for a smile. It doesn't feel like one at all, if in a completely different manner than Hibari's. Because this is - ahh, ahh, it's nothing to be happy about, but something is kindling inside him and it's not that terrible calmness, but something like letting go.

"Oh?" Hibari says archly, more an inquisitive noise than a word.

The last of the stress fading makes him laugh, soft and quiet because if they haven't woken Nana yet, then he doesn't want to now. "I just thought," he says, "that you'll bring order to me or kill me trying. That's great, right? I can trust myself in your hands." Tsunayoshi doesn't know what his face is doing, though he thinks it's still trying to smile.

Above him, Hibari's eyes glint violet over sharp, sharp teeth.

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'Thank goodness,' Tsunayoshi thought at that time, disoriented from being shocked awake and threatened within an inch of his life. It seemed perfectly logical at the time. After all, no part of Tsunayoshi is prepared to die, not after his mother hugged him so tightly and expressed her wish to protect him. For her sake, he has to keep living.

Not just for her sake, however. Tsunayoshi lives for himself on his own accord just fine. He also lives to protect his mother from having that kind of experience again, and also so that if it's necessarily, to rescue Haru if those men come for her again.

If his life is on the line, though, he thinks that he might be able to accomplish anything. He hates to fight, hates hurting people even more, but if the only other option is 'to die,' then he'll do anything to survive.

That doesn't mean he's going to enjoy being that kind of desperate, though.

Of course, where Tsunayoshi goes, so does Haru these days, and she insists on participating. Hibari seems to have no objections: he bites them both to death and seems pretty satisfied about it.

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* How long did you really think Kyoya was going to leave that unchallenged, huh.

* there will be plenty of OC's from here on out, but with the character guide, hopefully it won't be too confusing! I've included their full name, even if Tsunayoshi mostly refers to them as their surnames.

* Regarding flame eyeshine. There's two levels of it. We've seen it from Iemitsu, who is a fully active Sky, and now from Kyoya, who is still dormant. It happens in response to minor flares of Will, which reflect back off the tapetum lucidum as a kind of form of 'echolocation' - it's one person's Will measuring the Will of those around them, which is why the 'shine' is the color of that person's flames. For someone who is dormant, it takes a rather severe upsurge of emotions to manifest their Will like this. In both cases, Iemitsu and Kyoya were getting a sense of Tsunayoshi's Will. Iemitsu declares that Tsunayoshi is 'capable of anything' because that's the sense he got from Tsunayoshi's Will. Kyoya senses the same thing.

In some extreme cases of Will contamination, the contaminated person's eyes will shine the color of the Will influencing them.

The second type of flame eyeshine is when the iris shifts to match the color of that person's Will. This actually produces a slight 'glow' and results from an overload of Will, and indicates a state of extremely heighten emotions - it's more or less a threat display. We see a mild form of this in canon when Tsuna enters Hyper Dying Will Mode.

Chapter Four non-canon Character guide:
*Hoshino Yoshio - Kusakabe Tetsuya's favored underling in the Disciplinary Committee, more or less the Third in command; a 'scary looking' person with an unpleasant smile. Agrees that Hibari is an 'ogre' despite stepping on an enemy's face and collecting blackmail. Thinks Tsunayoshi is trouble but seems to like Haru.
*Nakamoto Kei - a rookie Committee member; 'actually a good person'; seems to have a tendency to smooth matters over. Acknowledges Tsunayoshi's good survival skills. Soft spoken and strangely well adjusted for one of Hibari's thugs. Invited Tsunayoshi and Haru back to 'play with' the Committee again.
Tsunayoshi can't connect his feelings to his own mother's, but he still thinks things like: *I don't want her to walk in and see my dead body.* He takes things like an oath from her sworn seriously, and thinks: *I don't want her to have it broken without even being able to try keeping it.* He doesn't *get it* and he can't even tell how serious she is about it - about any of it; Nana gripped him tight and swore to protect him, wakes him up every morning and makes breakfast and dinner, and pays for fighting classes that Tsunayoshi can't entirely bring himself to say he wants out of-

(does he want out of them? Only, he thinks it helps him shove that awful feeling back down)

… but on the off chance that she's serious, he wants her to have a chance at *trying* to keep it.

He feels separated from her, from Haru, from Hibari; he can't connect his feelings with their feelings. His hands are sticky, sometimes, although they're not. He thinks he has a bloody nose, sometimes, even though he doesn't. Something awful lurks in a hallowed place within his chest or bones, still and pragmatic.

(Tsunayoshi keeps looking for ways to shove it down - to kill it, but insolent and unconcerned, it waits inside him, nestled between heart and lungs. A dangerous ember cast down in arrogance that smolders with sullen resilience on a pine forest floor, refusing to snuff out and threatening *annihilation* of everything.)

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Hibari broke into his house that night and tried to kill him- but: no he didn't. It wasn't about that, *isn't* about that. Hibari, somehow, knows exactly how far to go without killing Tsunayoshi or getting killed himself-

Not that Tsunayoshi feels particularly inclined to kill Hibari or anything. Tsunayoshi doesn't want to hurt anyone, let alone *kill* them. It's just- *ahhh*-

There's a smoldering ember inside of Tsunayoshi, nestled into his chest where it's sheltered from the elements, and Hibari pinned him to the floor and fanned the flames until Tsunayoshi was choking on the smoke of it. Or would be choking but breathing ash and sulfur somehow comes naturally, so he wheezes expecting to suffocate when it's really just the smell that panics him because he doesn't believe it, doesn't trust it yet. Someone with Hibari's instincts should probably be running away from a forest fire, right?

(His palms are numb and sticky and there's iron and meat, like a butcher shop, sick with sweat and the *moans*, the little hurt and helpless and hopeless noises, desperate.

*A natural-born hitman you're not, but.*

But.
Five men. Six bullets. Ahhh, it's bad. Swinging a weapon again and again, the crack and shatter and sick *crunch* that would come if he just *takes it away and uses it in his own defense. Mama will cry if Tsu-kun dies. *We don't tolerate harm befalling the family.*)

Despite everything, Hibari leaves Tsunayoshi's house that night and neither of them are particularly harmed, although Tsunayoshi feels rattled to his bones. He wishes it felt like a bad dream in the morning, but instead he feels a bit hunted and a bit haunted by it; a feeling he should trust in, given that the moment he arrives at school, Hibari beats him into the ground.

Last night, Hibari promised with soft malevolence and sharp teeth to *beat discipline* into Tsunayoshi, and so he's beaten at every turn. If it seems one-sided, that's only because it is - Tsunayoshi belatedly kind of wonders if maybe Hibari isn't the kind to whom teaching comes naturally. He doesn't think he's learning much just from getting personal beatings from Hibari himself, rather than the Committee - even if he can dodge a lot of it.

Only because it's Hibari do the teachers tolerate the interrupted lessons, Tsunayoshi knows - the way Hibari comes barreling in and the way Tsunayoshi dashes out in a chaotic tumble of papers and backpacks. Still, Tsunayoshi's already bad grades suffer, and Haru grows desperate and wild-eyed over make-up work, swearing heated vengeance she's prohibited from taking by virtue of Tsunayoshi and Hibari attending a regular school.

It goes on like this for a while: Tsunayoshi becomes very good at dodging and running away, even though it makes Hibari hit him harder when he's caught. He doesn't make it easy. It's not reasonable to ask someone to stand still when they're getting attacked and when Hibari's too close, that ember in his chest ashes and smokes. When Haru catches up to them after school, she gets involved: sets her feet to the earth and becomes an immovable titan, takes the beatings and later bitterly plans her revenge.

"Revenge," Tsunayoshi echoes with reproach, though not exactly surprise. He's gotten a better grasp on Haru's personality now and the perverse turns it takes. He had an inkling she was like this from the beginning when she'd declared him her prince, but just because he more or less expects it from her doesn't mean he knows what to do with it.

"Revenge!" Haru affirms.

"I don't think it's right to want revenge for something you asked for in the first place," Tsunayoshi says uncertainly, scratching out a scribble on the edge of his homework. Although it had started out as a normal tutoring session, Haru had been too fired up to actually focus on trying to explain anything to him.

While Tsunayoshi had already been pretty convinced he wasn't learning anything during class, now that he barely manages to sit through *one* class without Hibari interrupting, the topics are even harder to understand. At one point, Tsunayoshi had shown up before anyone else and had been quietly having a nervous breakdown in his seat, scrubbing his fingers frantically through his hair and barely resisting the urge to pull it all out. Yamamoto Takeshi had paused beside him with a sympathetic chuckle. "He's like a dog with a new favorite chew toy, huh?" he'd said.

Tsunayoshi had made some kind of strangled noise, given Hibari's threat of *biting people to death*, and Yamamoto had laughed loudly, slapped his shoulder hard enough to bruise, and congratulated him on getting along with Hibari so well before taking his own seat and promptly going to sleep.

Tsunayoshi hasn't explained about Hibari's late night visit yet, not with Haru's lack of self-preservation, so Haru seems incredibly puzzled when she echoes softly, "asked for this?" Staring at him for a moment, she the reels back, astounded. "Tsunayoshi-san! Could it be? You actually like
getting hurt?"

If he were drinking, he'd have sprayed it everywhere. Instead, Tsunayoshi chokes on his own spit and bangs his knee against the bottom of his desk. The packets and papers go flying.

"No way!" he protests, loudly, emphasizing with his arms. There's some kind of implication there that he isn't quite getting, but the idea that he wants to get beaten by Hibari, rather than just dealing with it because it can't be avoided, is - no.

Haru stares at him for a moment longer before blinking and letting it go. "Hmm. I guess not," she says, shrugging it off. "It seemed a little too strange in the first place, even for you."

It's a bit weird for Haru to so quickly give up on something, but Tsunayoshi slumps in both exhaustion and relief all the same. "Whether it's strange or not, that's not what's going on, you know? I don't mind it a lot because I've always been clumsy, but there's nothing I like about it."

The opposite, in fact. There's nothing he likes about getting hurt. Even if he's clumsy and accustomed to always having aches and pains, the feeling of knotted bruising from tumbling down stairs or running into doors, of every movement aching and the unexpected sharp pain of an injury being pressed on - even if he's accustomed to it, pain still hurts. And getting beat by Hibari is its own kind of terror.

But the hurt of bruises and the flash of fear he feels before ducking Hibari's swings- if it's that or feeling that awful thing pushing up into his throat, like drowning in reverse: then it's less painful. Tsunayoshi is always very clever about how he goes with what will cause him the least amount of pain.

Being good for nothing to begin with is better than constantly showing what a disappointment he is to others, after all.

Haru makes a noise deep in her throat, low and unhappy. "I feel the same way, so I don't really get what's going on," she complains. "Someone should be enjoying it, at least! If Tsunayoshi could at least be an M, it would be easier to bare with it instead of holding out for being recognized."

… there's a very terrifying side to Haru's personality that Tsunayoshi doesn't know how to deal with.

"Hibari-senpai seems to having fun," Tsunayoshi says - uncertain over the 'fun' and resentful over remembering even Yamamoto recognizing him as a chewtoy. It's not a lie or an exaggeration that Hibari does seem to get something out of it, even though it's not something a person could really read from Hibari's face. It was something with claws and teeth, not quite bared in threat. Something strange that nonetheless, Tsunayoshi is almost certain he has seen.

Haru looks around sharply, her green eyes sharp and interrogative; it gives him a little alarmed jolt. "You think so?" she demands, sounding way too invested. Wordlessly, Tsunayoshi bobs his head, and then jumps when Haru brightens with a sudden violent energy.

Despite the bruises and scrapes and bandages, Haru bounces with renewed energy, beaming and clapping her hands. "Okay! Haru gets it now," she exclaims excitedly. "Tsunayoshi-san! Please continue to fight your hardest with Haru, okay?"

She's being way too enthusiastic about it, Tsunayoshi thinks with a nervous, pinched smile. "D-do whatever you like," he says weakly.

Haru, of course, takes no notice of any hesitance or reluctance on his part, but she seems pretty
happy so- that's okay? It's actually not, not any more than Hibari looking so satisfied after he's made it where neither of them could stand, but, well, it's easier to go along with it without complaining if someone is at least a little happy about it.

Because if it were an unhappy face that began showing, that- that wouldn't sit right with Tsunayoshi at all. Ahh. What would he do about that? He wonders that suddenly. It's difficult to know for sure. He wouldn't be able to let it stay that way, that's all he knows. It wouldn't be tolerable.

That scary feeling isn't staying at bay at all, no matter how hurt and tired he is. Ahh. Tsunayoshi hopes that Hibari quickly figures out the right way to discipline him. He hates it. He hates it a lot. It's scary.

Step one- Tsunayoshi and Haru join up after their schools let out; step two- they meet up with the Committee, because Hibari has heard about certain uppity herd animals; step three- it's an all out free-for-all, and eventually at some point, the men in police uniforms get restless and scatter them to the corners of Namimori; step four- Hibari's post-destroying-lives cooldown includes making up for the fact that Haru and Tsunayoshi are actually pretty good at dodging.

Everyone has been saying it for a while now, but Hibari Kyoya really is a demon. He's wild and unpredictable and mercurial, with a special set of rules that a person can play by and hope to survive if they have the misfortune of meeting him, but it's hard to say if the rules haven't changed that particular day. There's that, and something about the way he stands away from everyone else that means that Tsunayoshi, as scared as he is, wants to be looked at by Hibari. That's stupid. That's dangerous.

Who is a big enough idiot that they'd want to be looked at by something so sharp and mean? So awful and angry?

Oh.

That's right.

Hibari's angry, isn't he?

It's been so hard to tell this entire time because he hasn't wanted to kill Tsunayoshi, but that's at least part of it, right? Isn't that why Tsunayoshi keeps coming back around instead of running away as fast as he can? Tsunayoshi isn't angry but that awful feeling steals his breath and then it steals life in the name of protecting others - Hibari is angry and vengeful and even though he could, he never once hits hard enough to inflict anything permanent.

(Ahh - who is the demon here? Who is the monster? It's really not Hibari, is it? With all his teeth and the unsettling glimmer in his eyes like an animal's at night.

What do Tsunayoshi's look like? It must be frightening.)

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Accustomed to pain or not, that doesn't mean that Tsunayoshi as a habit goes looking for it of his own accord. At least one or two days must be given to healing up, and these days - as almost every other day - are spent with Haru. Haru has more or less become as familiar to Tsunayoshi as his own mother, no small thanks to the fact that Haru studies with him in his bedroom so often that he forgets to think it's weird to have a girl in there.

Isn't that a strange thought? It's only ever been Tsunayoshi and Nana, but he sees Haru so often -
becomes so accustomed to her standing right at his right side, to the point that when Haru has her own things to take care of, he gets disoriented for a moment when he turns and doesn't see her.

If not for how she always says that she's his girlfriend, he'd think this is what having a best friend is like. It's not like they even do anything that Tsunayoshi thinks only boyfriends and girlfriends do. Granted, he's not exactly well versed on the matter, since he hasn't even had an actual friend since he was learning to walk, but he and Haru don't even hold hands or anything.

(There's something weird about that. That someone could look at him and say with such sincerity: *let me help you achieve your goals* - that someone would think of him so much to assume on their own what his goals might be - that someone would be interested in him so much - it's weird. It's weird. He'll never get used to it.)

And on some days, rather than going home after stalking the Committee, they stop at one or another café that Haru has heard about at school and wants to try.

"Haru used to come alone sometimes," she says after a few such trips, "but it's a lot more fun with Tsunayoshi-san!"

There's always something about the set of her elbows, the corners of her eyes, or maybe something in her voice that Tsunayoshi carefully ignores. "I've never been at all, not without Mom," he says.

Though truthfully speaking, it wasn't like he and his mom used to be on good terms. Vaguely, he thinks he used to be a happy, if painfully shy, child. He doesn't smile a lot in his childhood photos, but he knows that it took until he started school before people started to say: *you're just no good*. Then he had lost his ability to connect his feelings to Nana's and they were more like strangers, and then recently Nana said: *I wasn't able to protect you*.

Their feelings might not connect, but Tsunayoshi acknowledges that he's done 'anything' for her and that's its own kind of bond.

Today, Haru's appetite matches his own; Tsunayoshi always seems to be hungry these days and so does Haru, though there were times when she skimps on food and depends instead on drinks.

"I had no idea how easy the other schools have it," she sighs, sitting across from him at the small table, fingers twined around her drink. "It must be nice to live in a world where when school ends, you don't have to think about it."

"I think that's the normal way of things," he says, with a small, uncertain smile. "Midori Middle seems a bit… ah, intense."

"Does it?" She blinks at him, gently poking her lip with her straw. It seems a bit insincere around the edges. "I never noticed. That's just how it's been. My mom really wants me to go to a lot of prestigious schools. It'll give me better prospects, she says."

Tsunayoshi's own mother hadn't seemed too troubled about anything like that, even with his barely-double-digit scores. *'As long as you're happy,'* she says, and seems to ignore the fact that without an education - how is he supposed to live? It's just that he's been too useless until Haru butted in to be able to fix it on his own. "Wow," he says, "she must love you a lot."

Haru laughs, startled and bright and with too many teeth. "Yeah, I guess so," she says, straw pressed to those teeth, her fingers jittering around her cup and her eyes over-bright. Or 'sharp', maybe.
Maybe Tsunayoshi has been lucky in various ways he hadn't fully realized yet. Ways that he still can't see the entire shape of, but which cast strange shadows that give him a vague idea of it.

"If it's causing problems, though," he says, "then we could always meet up later in the day, you know - Mom would be happy enough to have you for dinner, if you don't have to go home."

Haru's eyes widen - and then narrow into slits sharp enough that Tsunayoshi flinches, feeling as though his skin is being flayed. "Hmph! Haru has come this far under my own power for my own reasons already! Didn't you know? My gymnastics coach said I had to put an end to whatever it was that was getting me hurt," she says indignantly. "But Tsunayoshi is more important to Haru than gymnastics! I told him if he forced the matter, then I'd just quit!"

Ah - that hurts. He doesn't know what to do with that kind of thing.

"Haru," Tsunayoshi says, splaying his hands and taken aback. "No one is asking you to do that much! Aren't clubs - aren't clubs really important? Isn't it not just going to a prestigious school, but also doing clubs and activities? You shouldn't quit over something like this!"

Haru's temper seems to roil like a massive storm on the horizon, a loud, threatening rumble. "I only joined to make friends in the first place," she snaps, incised. Her fingers have separated, and her knuckles are white around the edges of her fists, trembling on the table top on either side of her drink. "And yet- and yet-! If I had anywhere else to be, I wouldn't be here!"

"Haru," Tsunayoshi says in stunned surprise, but it only seems to upset her further. Not angry, just-upset. She shoves up from the table roughly with a hurt expression, grabbing her bookbag and hurrying toward the cafe door. Tsunayoshi could have easily gotten to her and stopped her in time, but he's never seen her make that kind of face, or say those kind of things-

Ah. Shouldn't he be the one making a hurt expression, really? Being someone's last resort isn't a happy thing.

Haru always so happily called herself his girlfriend, and yet-

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That makes it seem like a big deal. Tsunayoshi knows that he should be upset about the way Haru ended their day together, but - the reality is even if he realizes that, the feeling isn't there. Haru says 'I wouldn't be here' and Tsunayoshi thinks: isn't that obvious?

It feels a bit like he's just surprised that she's gone to such lengths to hide how unhappy she is about it this long. Shouldn't he do something about that? It doesn't sit with him right that Haru isn't at least content to be by his side, since it seems like she thinks he has goals and she wants to help him achieve them.

(What kind of goals are those, anyway? He just doesn't want Nana to cry. She most definitely would do a lot of that if Tsunayoshi isn't careful about keeping this awful feeling down. He doesn't want to hurt anyone. Does he really need a lot of help for those kinds of things? Ahh, it's only that he'll be sad if Haru ventures far from his side. It's obvious, but - it'll hurt. His mom will make a sad face, too.)

Being someone's last resort shouldn't be a happy thing - and well, it isn't. But after all, for some time there, the only reason Tsunayoshi was even bothering to go to school was for a chance to see a smile on Mochida's girlfriend's face. Being a last resort is still being on someone's mind at some point, compared to that.
Despite everything, Tsunayoshi can still cringe to remember that. It's been a while since the last time he thought about Kyoko. Of course he's seen her: she attends the same school as him and he thinks about her every time Mochida takes a disliking to Tsunayoshi and mocks him about what a troublesome kid he's become, calling Hibari Kyoya down on his own head.

But Dame-Tsuna has graduated far beyond being 'no good to be around' - for so long, he'd dreamed of a world where Kyoko might acknowledge him, where he might touch her hand or arm and take some of that warmth of hers for himself -

But now? With the current Tsunayoshi? His feelings weren't gentle or kind to begin with, and now that he's become aware of it, it's better that she never figures out he even exists at all.

If Haru who tutors him and supports her own idea of his goals and calls him a Prince and claims to be his girlfriend can also turn around and say he's a last resort - then surely Kyoko would do the same. Then surely Kyoko, bright and smiling, already together with an athlete who is popular, would be kind enough to pat him on the head before saying: animals should stay outside. We can't have them tracking mud on the floor, you see.

Better she never see him for what he is than see him and with a smile, with kindness - thoughtfulness - lock him out.

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And what is he? Isn't that the question. Without someone else telling him, he's not sure he can figure it out. Is he still Dame-Tsuna? They tell him so at school, but he doesn't feel the same as he did when they first called him that.

Hibari says things like 'herbivore' and 'carnivore' and actually means something more like 'sheep that get fleeced' and 'the shepherds that do the fleecing' - but Haru either doesn't know or doesn't care about the meaning behind the phrase and treats it like Hibari means it more literally. It does weird things to Tsunayoshi's head, in that he's trying to understand and meet both Haru and Hibari on their own terms in the first place. Neither one of them see the world anything at all like Tsunayoshi does, and nothing like each other, and he doesn't know where that leaves him and them or anything else.

But Tsunayoshi is hardly anything that is worth being fleeced int he first place, and it's not as though he's skilled enough to do the fleecing, so what is he? Haru's Prince of Last Resort, or an unruly animal, or 'chewtoy.' If Haru would rather be elsewhere and Kyoko would lock him out - then he's left sleeping in the dog house, isn't he? With a guy they call a 'shaggy beast,' and that beast's sharp, sharp teeth.

-0-

Wait. What?

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So, Haru storms out on their day off outing with sharp words and leaves the entire cafe looking at Tsunayoshi like he's scum or worse, not even fit to be stepped on. It's a bit awkward, but Tsunayoshi always gets looked at like that at school, so it doesn't really make a big impact on him. They'll probably continue to give him bad looks if he comes back, but - that can't really be helped.

He's probably even more useless than he'd realized.

"I'm home," he announces himself, kicking his shoes off at the door.
"Welcome home, Tsu-kun!"

As is his habit - as has been his habit ever since his hands went numb and sticky - Tsunayoshi pads down the hallway to the kitchen where Nana is; in contrast to Haru's strange demeanor earlier, Nana looks entirely familiar: her smile and eyes are bright when she glances away from the sink. She's already finished cleaning up and is just wiping down the sink.

Even if he can't connect his feelings with her, seeing her being so relaxed and natural puts him at ease. Tsunayoshi sighs heavily, moving to fall solidly into a chair at the table. Crossing his arms on the table, he slumps over them, trying to disregard his concerns.

"My, my," Nana says, drying her hands. "Is something bothering you, I wonder?"

"Ah - no, not really," he says, sitting back and waving her off - for what good it does. Nana moves away from the sink toward the refrigerator, and despite his protests, quickly has set out some sweet cookies and tea. Tsunayoshi looks at the plate a bit dreadfully, considering he's just come from a cafe - but the gesture is… he sighs and picks up a cookie to nibble at it reluctantly.

"Now, Tsu-kun," his mother says, seating herself across from him, "why don't you tell Mama all about it?"

Tsunayoshi remembers again, because he's been thinking about it so much, that time when he thought Nana told him that Iemitsu was dead, and hadn't seemed concerned about it. Her fingernails cutting into his skin. If he's capable of (five men, six bullets) that, then why had he waited so long? Why had it taken tears and blood? If he'd just done it from the start, then all of that could have been avoided. Nana's hands wouldn't have had to shake.

Maybe why he can't connect his feelings to anyone else's because he doesn't understand the shape of them himself.

"Being alive is hard," Tsunayoshi says around a cookie, looking at the table to avoid seeing Nana's face. "Haru got mad at me today and left early, but I don't know what I did."

That's not what's really bothering him, but it's a lot easier to say than what's really bothering him - getting beaten by Hibari because he asked to be, and the tangled mess of 'Hibari is frightening but ultimately harmless' and 'Tsunayoshi is stepped upon but then kills men without hesitating once it occurs to him.'

The fight with Haru bothers him, of course it bothers him, but he thinks that probably factors into it. If he can't understand how Haru sees him - if he can't understand it beyond what she says to his face, because it's probably obvious by now that she's being dishonest - then how can he understand what he did wrong in the first place?

"Haru-chan," Nana echoes thoughtfully, and tilts her face upward in thought. "Well, a girl's heart is a lot more complicated than she pretends it is, after all. Especially a lonely girl like Haru-chan."

What part of her is lonely, a kid like Tsunayoshi wonders, who can't even get along with himself because he doesn't know just who or what he is; some kind of muddy animal, probably. If she's so bent on him achieving his own goals, then surely she should be able to understand her own well enough. She probably understands herself, if she can say with full confidence that her mom is bad at making friends.

"What does she even have to be lonely about?" he wonders sullenly. "She seemed happy enough to come over all the time."
"Well," Nana says with a smile, "girls like to be asked."


She hums pleasantly. "Oh, this and that," she answers with a smile. It's the least helpful possible answer, Tsunayoshi thinks with some exasperation. She sits back, brightening and clasping her hands together. "Tsu-kun," she says, "here's a thought, but why don't the two of us visit Haru-chan at her home?"

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, or stutters. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

He's actually pretty sure it isn't, even if Nana has been taking defense classes. No one has tried to take them hostage again since then, but Haru - well, the kidnappers, and Haru's mother being bad at making friends, apparently.

But judging from the look on Nana's face, she actually likes the idea: that's the kind of smile on her face, her brown eyes shining brightly. Tsunayoshi knows that he favors her in nearly every way, but he thinks he probably never looked as happy and excited about something as this.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," she says, clasping her hands together. "We have her over so often that now that I think about it, it's a bit strange that I've never spoken with her parents!"

"I don't think it's all that strange," he says, a bit weakly. He's being ignored, anyway. Although, come to think about it - what did his mom do all day, other than her self-defense classes? Nana always seems to get along with people well enough, and they seem to like her, but as far as Tsunayoshi knows, she's never had any friends. No one seeks her out.

Now he has Haru who won't leave him alone, just as he won't leave Hibari alone, and Hibari's broken into his room - well, Tsunayoshi had assumed that it was something like that. Something like him. That this was just another way in which they were alike - that adults never strictly picked on Nana because the Namimori Pecking Order didn't permit it, given their position, but that she was at most tolerated and felt awkward around others.

Why had he thought that in the first place? Nana has always been gentle and kind with him, easy and forgiving, calling him 'useless' in understanding tones and says 'it can't be helped' like there's no use in crying about spilled milk.

Instead of protesting about not bothering Haru's mother, the way he usually would have even if it were futile, Tsunayoshi just makes a wordless anxious noise, watching Nana almost leap up from the table to hurry to the hallway phone. She looks too delighted for him to feel entirely comfortable trying to put a stop to it, even though it makes his stomach heavy. He can't quite forget the terms on which Haru left him. He's not sure that she'll be happy about Nana's wishes.

Tsunayoshi picks up another cookie from the dish. As he's fitting it into his mouth, he blinks.

There's a boy at the table. It's a bit odd, like when Tsunayoshi had sat up to see Hibari crouched over his bed, tonfa buried in his pillow. The idea that there's something very wrong with the whole picture, and yet there's no immediately alarm or terror.

The boy blinks back at him. He has a whimsical kind of smile, and a spill of white hair like someone's tipped a carton of milk over his head. It tangles, frayed and jagged. Tsunayoshi somehow expects his strangely colored eyes to be violent and bright, but they're pale and misty and strangely sharp.

Tsunayoshi blinks.
"Is this where it started?" the boy asks him.

The cookie is getting soggy in Tsunayoshi's mouth. "Sorry," he says, garbled and muffled around it, "who?"

Tsunayoshi blinks a third time. Nana's excited voice echoes down the hallway, meaningless this and that which might just be her talking over whatever objections Haru's mother might be making. Haru must have given over her house number at some point… or otherwise Tsunayoshi's mother is inviting herself over to a stranger's house who merely shares a last name.

He's alone in the kitchen, staring a bit blankly at a beam of sunlight coming in the window just so. After a moment, he bites into the sodden cookie.

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Chapter End Notes

* from time to time, the word for how Tsunayoshi feels becomes 'hallowed' instead of 'hollowed'; this is the same as when the light in Hibari's eyes is described as 'violent' instead of 'violet.' On some level, though Tsunayoshi has a lot of negative associations with how he feels in the aftermath of a flood of Will, he intuits that it's a very important power with a lot of responsibility.

* Haru kinkshames masochists, and Tsunayoshi "\no kinkshaming allowed, we love and accept everyone in this backwards mafia-harboring port-town tonight"

* Haru's blowup in this chapter is basically her feeling frustrated for putting all the work into being friends with Tsunayoshi and having him not reciprocate. There's also various other pressures going on with her regarding her neglecting her own important schoolwork and extracurriculars for Tsunayoshi's sake, and him more or less blowing her efforts off and being ungrateful.

Tsunayoshi, who doubts his own self worth, can't accept or understand her logic or efforts, and doesn't understand why his attempts to resolve the matter feel like rejection to Haru. She rejects him in turn, as you do. Tsunayoshi ends up internalizing both Haru's rejection and how it came about.

Nana, for all her ditziness, has already recognized that Haru works harder at being friends than Tsunayoshi lmao. That's her useless kid, after all.

* that boy with the milkspill hair is 100% Byakuran lol. He's AU Byakuran (Chroma!Byakuran as opposed to Canon!Byakuran), but still. For a story with plots about parallel universes and selfcest with parallel selves, of course Byakuran would be there!

This scene and further Byakuran scenes are styled to resemble some scenes in the original Neon Genesis Evangelion series. This one specifically is meant to echo the scene in Ep1 where Shinji briefly sees Rei on the road right before the Angel attack.

I guess you could say that a lot of my writing has strong influences from that anime
lmao.
Chapter Summary

Sawada Tsunayoshi Wants To Live A Quiet Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6 : A Good Friend

With everything that's going on, it's only a matter of time before the fact that Tsunayoshi has some kind of kickboxing skills get out. After all, the Disciplinary Committee is noticeable, regardless of how far their duties take them from school grounds after classes let out. And well - now that Hibari has gotten it into his head that the kind of discipline that Tsunayoshi needs should be sprung at him from every available angle when he's least expecting it-

Well, it's something that probably will happen, but not as long as Tsunayoshi can help it, since even thinking about it threatens hives from the stress. The fact is: Tsunayoshi doesn't fight Hibari. He doesn't fight Hibari at all. Hibari springs his lessons on Tsunayoshi when Tsunayoshi least expects it, and Tsunayoshi shrieks and runs away as best he can.

He asked for this in the first place, after all. No part of that invites fighting back. Besides, fighting Hibari would be like trying to fight off a tsunami with a baseball bat. That's something to set aside for people like Yamamoto Takeshi to attempt and perhaps even succeed at. Tsunayoshi wouldn't put it past him.

Although sooner or later, he's going to need to repay the favor that Yamamoto has paid him a few times already, somehow managing to arrive back to the classroom a few times to warn Tsunayoshi of Hibari's impending arrival. At least once already, he's been carrying papers for another teacher and spilled them all over the hallway in his rush. Even if he'd just laughed off the teacher's irritation, Tsunayoshi can't leave it at that.

Even if it hasn't done Tsunayoshi any good. Hibari has some kind of awful chasing instinct that seems to trigger the moment someone tries to run away. Or as soon as Tsunayoshi tries to run away, anyway, since for the most part, it only seems to please him when he sends 'crowding herbivores' scattering.

Something like: the men in police uniforms scatter the Committee, and so the Committee scatters students and scum-not-worthy-of-being-stepped-on in return. It's some kind of cycle of life, or the Namimori Pecking Order in miniature.

Now that he's gotten it into his head, there's no stopping him from disrupting the entire order of the school in his pursuit of teaching Tsunayoshi some kind of lesson - it can't seriously be discipline, the only thing Tsunayoshi is learning at this rate is to hate his life even more than usual, and that without Haru there to help shoulder the punishment, it's even worse than before.
Maybe that's the lesson here: small animals like Tsunayoshi should take their safety in numbers, and do everything in their power to never be caught out alone.

It's a cruel lesson if that's so. Tsunayoshi isn't alone by choice, after all. Maybe he didn't do everything in his power to prevent it, but it's not like he can change other people's minds so easily.

'Ah, it's Dame-Tsuna' they say, only now with everything, the whispers are starting to sound a bit like: oh, that guy's a delinquent, after all.

Ahhh. That's not fair. It isn't fair. None of this has been by his choice.

(Hasn't it, though? Who was the useless one depending on their own mother, to the point where she was struck down with blood and tears? Who is the one that pointlessly depended on someone else until that burden became too heavy to carry? If they had anywhere else they could go, they wouldn't be with him, after all. Ahh. He's a pretty useless kid. The only thing he's good for is numb hands that are slick, that grow cold as it cools.

*You did well, Tsuna.*

Hibari most of all can't be expected to hang around if he keeps being useless. Ahh. What should he do?)

Now that Tsunayoshi has realized it, it's so clear that Hibari is *angry* that he can't understand how he's been missing that all along. Whether or not Hibari's face frowns or his fists clench, it radiates off him, doesn't it? Something in the corners of his mouth and the particular slant of his lashes. There's nothing tight or harassed in his shoulders, his feet set just so in confidence, but not *over* confidence.

It's not like something is hunting him, Tsunayoshi thinks: but more like a tiger with a sore tooth.

If that's all it is, he reasons, then running away or taking a beating, even during the middle of class, is something that he can handle. He thinks the weird things he sees around the corners of Hibari's face might be something like relief. Not as much as to be called 'happiness' or even really 'relief' in that his burden has been lightened or anything like that, but - calmness, maybe. And that's enough, he thinks.

Tsunayoshi can be good for at least this much.

-0-

Haru doesn't come the next day, either.

-0-

(It's just that if he's left alone, *he'll die.*)

-0-

His classmates look at him, but it's not so easy to change his spots. As far as they can see, he's still *Dame-Tsuna* and running away from Hibari isn't going to change that. If anything, they seem to think that Hibari is trying to clean the place up a bit- you know- *taking out the trash*. Ahh. Is that really alright? No, that's probably right, if his hands are anything to judge by.

There's absolutely no way that Tsunayoshi of all people could be a delinquent, but - ah, well. Maybe his grades are bad and he struggles to pay attention in class, and it's also true that he hangs
out with the Committee, which everyone knows is most populated by social disruptors that Kusakabe and Hibari have beaten into a thin disguised band of delinquents more interested in making things easier for Hibari than actually making the student body behave, and running some kind of protection racket Tsunayoshi thinks, and it's true that Tsunayoshi can often be found with them getting into street fights with groups of rowdy kids from other schools but-

*Tsunayoshi is absolutely a delinquent!* How could this possibly have happened?! He has spent so much of his life just trying to get along with the world that it seems absolutely absurd that things would turn out this way! All this time, he thought that maybe - that maybe things would be okay. The dreams of his deeds haven't left him, but they've gotten more manageable, anyway, since he started working with Hibari.

In any case, realizing that he's somehow managed to become a delinquent against his will baffles Tsunayoshi just as much - if not more - than his classmates.

Tsunayoshi just wants to live a quiet life and survive into happy adulthood without killing anyone else! Is that too much to ask?

"Sawada Tsunayoshi! Join the boxing club!"

It's apparently entirely too much to ask.

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Tsunayoshi finds himself hovering anxiously in the kitchen as Nana clips a lid onto the pretty floral container she's packed full of something spicy, filled with tomatoes and cheese. He wonders at it. While Nana favors the heavy flavors of western food - and those across Europe - she usually keeps their meals light and less complex. In Namimori, the ingredients for more local dishes are much easier to find.

"You seem excited, Tsu-kun," Nana observes, smiling down at him, even as she begins to fold the container into a thick cloth to keep it from losing much of its heat.

"Me," he says. He's not excited, he's tense. Nana is excited - she's been glowing and humming to herself all day. He's not familiar with the dish that she's packing up, but he's fairly certain that it's the kind that takes all day to cook. Tsunayoshi can't really see the dinner going well, but he kind of hopes it does, for her sake if nothing else.

Well, he hopes it for his own sake, too. Ahh, he feels like he might be capable of anything if it'll only bring Haru back around.

(It's not fine, being 'capable of anything' - but, ahh, it is a part of him anyway, like being no good for anything, and ignition, and burn. What should he do?)

"You shouldn't be nervous," Nana says, correcting herself effortlessly as she ties the cloth into a neat handle at the top. "Haru-chan is a good friend of yours, you know! I'm sure if you don't understand what you did wrong, then it's nothing that the two of you can't work through."

Tsunayoshi hopes so. He's pretty sure he's figured out what he did wrong, anyway. He's not sure there's anything he can really do about it after the fact, usually it's no good, but-

They don't take a bus or anything, given that the most popular mode of transportation in Namimori is just walking. The town itself is large enough, but there are plenty of shopping districts that few residents feel pressured to have a car of some sort. Haru lives a decent walking distance from the Sawada household, but nothing that makes Tsunayoshi feel guilty in retrospect for the times she's
joined him after school, spent afternoons in his room trying to get his school work to make sense to him. It's not even enough to put an ache in Tsunayoshi's legs and if anything, Nana looks a bit refreshed by the whole thing.

It makes Tsunayoshi remember not protesting about her calling in the first place. It's not like Nana has ever seemed faded or diminished, but ever since (three days, we slipped in the blood) then, something about her has - increased? Like oaths and self-defense classes might be good for Nana in some weird, twisted way.

Tsunayoshi thinks about all the bruises and scrapes he's covered with, and his rapidly ratcheting paranoia, and wishes he could say the same.

He takes up a position just a half-step behind Nana while she pushes the buzzer to the Miura residence. It feels a bit fancy. Although it's not like they want for anything, Tsunayoshi's own house certainly isn't protected like this is - there's no buzzer to get in. Pretty much anyone off the streets can easily make it to the front door if they try. Usually they don't, but salesmen come by from time to time.

In short order, Haru is rushing them in the door, smiling at Nana brightly and giving Tsunayoshi sharp edged unfriendly looks. It feels a bit like being back at school, and Tsunayoshi feels himself slouching, shoulders rounding and head ducking the way he usually does there. It's probably a good thing that Tsunayoshi never developed a nervous stomach, but maybe that's just because he's been constantly scared his entire life - first by dogs, which plenty of people in the neighborhood keep, or used to and then politely never got another, and then strangers, especially ones that smile at him, and then the other children. Then even the adults that don't smile.

"You must be the Sawadas," a woman says, or Tsunayoshi thinks she says; it takes him a few confused moments to figure it out as he slowly registers that she's speaking English.

Like pretty much every kid, Tsunayoshi has English language classes. It's actually one of his better subjects... in a manner of speaking, anyway. He's better at understanding it than speaking it. As for reading, it's better to just forget about it, and writing it will never happen.

"Sweetheart," the man with her says, gently, with a much more familiar endearment.

"It's no problem," Nana says brightly to him, and turns back to the woman. "Yes," she says, in English, and Tsunayoshi gets the gist that she's introducing him and herself and saying that they must be Haru's parents.

"Yes," the woman says with her lips pressed thin. "I am Yekaterina."

Yekaterina is an intimidatingly tall woman with a severe expression from whom Haru gets the reddish cast to her hair that Tsunayoshi has spent this entire time thinking was some kind of dye. Her Japanese is a little stilted, but Tsunayoshi thinks that has more to do with how infrequently she uses it rather than a lack of fluency.

To say that when she looks at him, it's like a cat looking at a mouse would be incorrect. Tsunayoshi would find that favorable. He would even prefer to face Hibari in the midst of a temper tantrum.

The way Yekaterina looks at Tsunayoshi is a lot more like the way a kid does before stepping on a bug.

"And I'm Miura Hideki," her husband says pleasantly.
Tsunayoshi kind of wants to latch onto his arm in relief of some normalcy around here. It should figure that anyone like Haru couldn't possibly have been raised by normal parents, but at least her dad seems normal. He's polite and mild and he looks like a middle aged dad should.

Or at least what Tsunayoshi thinks they should look like, anyway. He's not exactly an expert in the father department.

Then despite his looks, Haru's father says, brightly, "it's actually a relief to meet you, Sawada-san. We've been worried about Haru-chan making friends, but it looks like we can relax about it."

"Hmph. Sawada," Yekaterina says darkly under her breath while giving Tsunayoshi another one of those squashed bug looks. Tsunayoshi can't quite help making a thin, alarmed noise and trying to duck back behind his mother. It seems like Yekaterina might not be happy about Haru and Tsunayoshi being friends. Honestly, Tsunayoshi can't even blame her, regardless of whether she's heard about Haru's decision that he's her boyfriend.

"No, it's a relief for me, too," Nana says happily, not seeming to take notice of anything other than Hideki's pleasant expression. "Tsu-kun sucks at making friends himself."

Why had he thought for even one second that his mother would shield him from this, he doesn't know. Somehow he and Haru manage to share a look of tortured understanding, despite how their relationship stands at the moment.

(Three days of lullabies, and 'leave him out of this!' and a split lip and steely determination to find something that works for him.)

Nearly immediately, Hideki and Nana begin to bond over their useless children who can't figure out how to make friends on their own, and Tsunayoshi feels the urge to say but I've got Hibari-senpai, too - although he's not sure how he thinks he can say that. He really doesn't, but Hibari broke into his room and didn't kill him or even really do more than squish his throat a bit in a way that didn't even leave bruises, and somehow that means something, he's sure of that.

Tsunayoshi doesn't know what, though, and furthermore isn't sure how to explain it in a way that doesn't sound totally insane.

Hideki and Nana work on getting the food on the table while Yekaterina stalks around like an angry lioness. It leaves both Haru and Tsunayoshi at loose ends, but when he tentatively makes eye contact with her and offers a wobbly smile, she makes the exact same noise her mom did over 'Sawada' and turns her back.

Dinner ends up being incredibly awkward, not that you'd know it from Nana and Hideki.

"Sawada-kun," Yekaterina says at one point. "You come help with dessert."

Of everyone, Haru is the one that notices that exchange the most. Her father and Tsunayoshi's mother are too busy exchanging happy notes over the local shopping district's financial future, of all weird things.

"I'll help instead, матушка," Haru says, moving to get to her feet. Her mother gives her such a look that she immediately drops back down into it, blinking like she's startled herself with her own immediate obedience.

Tsunayoshi swallows nervously and allows himself to be glared into the kitchen.
There really is dessert, though - a kind of creamy cake that Yekaterina selects a pie spatula for, and picks out five small plates.

Then she turns and jams the spatula up under Tsunayoshi's chin. Not hard enough to hurt, and Tsunayoshi only barely manages to strangle back a terrorized squeal thanks to the fact that after Hibari, he had more or less expected something like this, and the fact that as scary as Yekaterina is, he doesn't think she'll kill him.

Ahh, it would be bad if she tried. Tsunayoshi doesn't want his mother to see his dead body, is all. He'd go to some lengths to prevent that from happening. He'd go to any lengths necessary, if the only other option is him dying anyway.

"My daughter," Yekaterina says, her eyes dark, not even bothering to go so far as to bare her teeth when she has metal dug into the soft part of Tsunayoshi, right between the ridge of his chin and his throat, "is not for playing with. You understand?"

Tsunayoshi doesn't dare to swallow, staring up at her, not quite frightened for all that she has a hundred pounds on him of pure muscle and vicious intent.

"I - I know that," Tsunayoshi says, and despite the stutter doesn't even sound scared to his own ears. "I'm not playing with Haru- I- I didn't know she was unhappy. I'm still trying to understand her, I think, is all."

None of those excuses seem to mean anything at all to Yekaterina. Her mouth slants, one sharp tooth showing. "I know your type, Sawada," she says, dropping the -kun with contempt. "You will chew her up and spit her out without even realizing it. As if you are owed it."

Tsunayoshi has no idea what she means. He doesn't feel like Haru owes him anything at all - the opposite, in fact. And he has no intent to or any interest in hurting her, but he doesn't know how to put it into words that Haru's mother will understand or accept.

And she might be right, he thinks, only it's a bit backwards. He wouldn't have chewed up Haru without realizing it, but: he thinks that Haru might have been chopping herself into pieces and feeding them to him without him noticing, just because she's so good at wearing one face while doing something scary or awful. Her personality is twisted. And more than that, she has zero self-preservation instincts.

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, blinking once, painfully. "It's not like I can tell her what to do, Yekaterina-san, but - if it comes to that, I don't want Haru-san to be sad so- I just have to do everything there is to keep that from happening."

After a long moment, Yekaterina's mouth closes over the sharp point of her tooth, and then she straightens to her full height, and she pulls the pie spatula away from the fragile skin of his chin. "You are a child," she says flatly. It's not quite contempt. Maybe disgust. It doesn't seem to really be aimed at him, exactly.

She cuts into the dessert and serves it onto the plates and shoves two into his hands. "Serve your mother and Haru," she says sharply, and stacks up the other three in her own hands.

It makes Tsunayoshi a little nervous to think of eating from a plate she's serves him, but he does anyway.

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"Come over again, sometime," Yekaterina tells them at the gate, facing Nana but looking at
Tsunayoshi with a flat gaze that weighs him.

"Yes! We'll be in touch," Nana says, either unaware or willing to overlook that weirdness. Tsunayoshi just awkwardly bends a bit, a bit more than just inclining his head. But well, Yekaterina is the kind of person that Tsunayoshi kind of feels he has to bow to, at least a little bit.

"I think that went well," Nana adds, even as she collects him and turns away from the Miura residence. The empty container swings from her fingertips by the cloth she's tied back around it. Like a young girl swinging a basket of flowers.

Tsunayoshi mumbles something agreeable, wondering if she's as happy as she looks. He's getting the idea that unlike him, people don't always wear their hearts on their sleeves. He thought that Hibari did, but the shapes that lurk there are strange and elusive. Hibari doesn't lie with his face, but showing one truth so another won't be is like a lie.

Nana fumbling at normalcy in the wake of the kidnapping was a lie. Flinching back when he'd stooped close to brush up the broken cup. Tsunayoshi looks at Nana and thinks that part hasn't gone away, exactly, but she's hiding it behind the fact that she loves him.

He wonders what she and Iemitsu talked about those nights, after Iemitsu put his heavy hand on Tsunayoshi's head, teeth too sharp and eyes flicking orange like an animal's, and said: you did well. Iemitsu had just finished hugging her, his arm still around her, his hand at her back. She must have heard. What had she thought of that?

What does she think of Haru, and Haru's mother, who is bad at making friends in the way that thugs try to kidnap her, like thugs had kidnapped them? He's going to have to know. It's not like Hibari is any better, not with money changing hands and the bruises he puts on Tsunayoshi's skin, and - and Hibari hates crowding anyway. He's not going to stand beside Tsunayoshi and believe in Tsunayoshi's goals and want to help him achieve them. Just because he held Tsunayoshi down and promised to teach him discipline, it's not the same thing.

And Tsunayoshi will die if he's left alone, he realizes that now. Ahh. Ahh. He's got to do everything there is to stop that from happening.

"You must have felt it start to happen," the boy with misty eyes and milk-spill hair says pleasantly, a little too young and too high to be silk-smooth. He blinks misty eyes at Tsunayoshi; little mothwing flutters over cheeks as childhood plump as Tsunayoshi's own.

"They stuffed you into a little box and thought it would all turn out fine. But people like us - well, if you keep us from fulfilling our purposes, then it all eventually turns inwards, and then it begins to twist. It twists and then it ties itself all up into a knot. It twists and knots until it turns upside-down and inside-out.

That thing's called 'inversion,' you know."

'Inversion' sounds like an ugly, desperate, sad thing. Tsunayoshi thinks, blinking back at him. People aren't like little bonsai trees that hold no grudge for being shoved into tight little spaces and being forced to grow in a certain way.

Of course a person would hold some serious kind of grudge over that, but the boy's expression is complicated when he says it. A little bitter. Almost yearning. "If I at least inverted," he says, "I could have taken my revenge for what she's done."

But what kind of thing would he have become in doing that, Tsunayoshi wonders. He's so pale and
distorted as it is that if this isn't inversion, then the real thing must be terrifying. He wants to say that he's glad he hasn't, but then the boy looks at him.

"Even without anyone helping you, you managed to save yourself anyway. Tsu-kun, your instincts are quite terrifying, you know?" He smiles, thin and sharp. Like clippers, wet with sap. "Isn't that great? The worlds were you don't - well. Everything considered, I guess having to live in this world isn't too bad, if it has this you in it, too."

He looks at Tsunayoshi with that twisted little whimsical smile, with pale eyes that are sharp enough to slice a person open on them, and a long spill of hair like it's been endlessly growing for years, and years, and years without care. Far from the attentive over trimming of a bonsai tree, Tsunayoshi thinks, and yet-

After a moment, Tsunayoshi wonders what he's doing, standing in the middle of the street and staring at a whole lot of nothing while Nana is walking away, headed back home. He hurries to catch up.

-0-

The weekend passes the way it does, and Tsunayoshi tries his best not to worry so much about the fact that there's no sign of Haru still. He doesn't think that her mom has warned her off or anything given that she invited them back and everything, but - well, he'll give it until next Friday, and then he'll try to meet with her again. In the meantime, Tsunayoshi soaks himself in hot water in the bath, trying to break up the nasty bruises that speckle his body - as if he won't have brand new ones come Monday when Hibari catches up to him again.

He gets more why Haru's expressions are sharp at weird moment. With a mother like Yekaterina, Tsunayoshi thinks even he would make those kinds of faces, sometimes. If she's bad at making friends, in various ways - if she isn't home all that often, and Haru's dad had his work cut out for him being a professor.

Of wanting to make friends to the point of committing herself to after school clubs - of still not managing to do that, and being so desperate she'll side with a useless kid like Tsunayoshi and do dangerous things.

Well, no. That isn't giving Haru the kind of credit she deserves. Even without him, she was being kidnapped already by adults. She already met Hibari and invited his wrath.

Her personality and way of doing things was already twisted before he met her, so he can't really credit himself with that. Even though he doesn't really get it, he thinks that's fine. He's used to it already. Regardless of why she's like that, he thinks there's nothing wrong with it, exactly. He can't leave her alone any more than he can leave Hibari alone, and he-

Tsunayoshi really doesn't want to be left alone, either. Won't someone look at him and feel like they can't leave him alone no matter what? Haru has come closest, he thinks, but in the end - that's for her own sake, rather than his.

Ahh. Isn't it bad? Isn't it greedy? He should be satisfied having a friend at all, since he's been without his entire life.

What a useless, selfish kid. He should hurry up and become someone no one would mind being associated with, or no matter what he does, at the end of the day: they'll all run away from him like Haru did.
Haru blows her cheeks out at him like an angry frog, her brows buckled and her eyes sharp enough that Tsunayoshi might cut himself on them if he steps too close. "Well?" she demands, "go ahead and say it!"

"U- um," Tsunayoshi stutters, staring with bewilderment. He thinks not so long ago, he would flinch back from the ambush, unexpectedly happening right outside the school gates. Maybe try running away. But the part of him that's figured out that Hibari is always angry thinks that Haru isn't actually attacking him now, either. This kind of proactive bristling is-

If Tsunayoshi had to describe it in a certain way, he'd think of a stray cat cornered by some kids with sticks and rocks. For a person who hates to hurt others, being forced into that kind of role is more than a little upsetting.

"Um," he says again, "I- what kind of thing- sorry, I don't know what you want me to say, but- I don't think I want to? M-more importantly, Haru, I'm sorry for taking you for granted in the first place. That's what I wanted to say. I didn't realize I was being that selfish. S-so. That was why - dinner at your place. I- I want to do it again, sometime. Ah!" He snaps upright, flailing a bit when Haru just continues to stare at him. "Your mom invited us back, too, so it's not a problem? I think? A-and Mama seemed to get along with your dad, s-so-

All at once, the fight seems to go out of Haru. She clasps her hands to her face, her eyes shut. "Haru forgot - Tsunayoshi-san is like Mama that way," she says, more to herself than to Tsunayoshi.

He laughs, anxious and uncertain. He'd more or less been thinking the same thing, after all. It's not entirely a bad thing, he thinks - if adults stop picking on one another eventually. No one dislikes Nana, so if he turns out like that, it might be okay.

"No one wants to be Haru's friend," she says, lowering her hands and not looking at him, "because of Haru's mom."

Tsunayoshi stares a bit, and then blinks. "Because she's scary?" he wonders.

Haru cuts a look at him. "Because she's not Japanese," she says, with a certain kind of edge to her words that Tsunayoshi mostly recognizes coming from teachers who don't yet understand what an idiot he is.

"Oh," Tsunayoshi says, startled. "Because you're mixed?" When Haru flinches and turns her face away, he realizes that might have been a little blunt for someone sensitive to it, but at the same time- "Haru," he says, and nearly startles himself with the gentle tone his voice has taken. "You- you realize, Iemitsu - my father - he's a lot more than half foreigner himself, right? My mom, too."

When Haru faces him again, she looks a bit startled, like she's spent all this time calling the sky blue-green without even thinking about it until someone pointed it out.

"My grandmother, on Iemitsu's side," he continues, "she was from Italy, you know? I don't think she ever even learned Japanese in the first place. Ah - not that I met her, but that's what I was told. And, um, don't ask me to say Mama's last name, from before, because I'm no good at it. We came by our appearance naturally."

Tension seems to ease out of her, and she blows out a breath. "I knew that," she says, but like she's scolding herself. "It's just - in school, it's different. Pretty much everyone at school is- well, they don't marry foreigners."
Midori Middle sucks, the way Haru tells it. Tsunayoshi isn't sure that getting into a prestigious school is worth what it's doing to Haru. He thinks he wants to visit it a little bit, just briefly, to - ahhhh, but what would he be doing, really? He can't think that way.

"Nami middle isn't like that at all," Tsunayoshi says. "It's the ones that don't that are rare." It's part of why Yamamoto is so popular, he thinks, although it's not like Yamamoto's personality is bad or anything. It's definitely why Mochida is popular, aside from being the kendo captain, because he does have a bad personality even if people act like he's owed it. It's why the Hibari family is treated like ancient royalty, too, even though they're definitely not related or descended from any gods.

On an island town like Namimori, where foreigners of all types come to have families and have been for generations, it's not at all weird to be mixed, but there are repercussions for that.

"I guess having a parent who is a newcomer is rough, though," Tsunayoshi allows, even though Nana herself is a newcomer. The way people keep saying 'Sawada' - he'd never thought of it much, but he thinks Nana doesn't get troubled mostly because of that.

"I love her," Haru snaps defiantly, balling her fists and setting her jaw like he might be Hibari and she's ready to take whatever hits necessary.

It must be hard to love the parent that keeps leaving you alone a lot, Tsunayoshi thinks, blinking at her. He wouldn't know what that's like.

"I think I was right," he says, while ghost impressions of a pie spatula caress the skin just behind his chin, where it's all soft and tender and indefensible. "I think she loves you a lot, too, even if she's not there all the time."

Haru scowls, but her shoulders sink again even though her fists stay clenched. "I'd rather she'd be at home sometimes," she says. "Even though she makes most of the money and it's why we can live so comfortably. I- I think I'd rather have it be like your home."

That's not possible, though. Haru is only looking at the parts she likes. Tsunayoshi thinks that's probably what she was doing with him, too - and then trying to change the parts of him that she doesn't.

(Maybe it'll be worth it, though. Tsunayoshi has to be someone people are willing to stick around for. Isn't it better if they show him who that person is?)

"You should come over more often, then," Tsunayoshi says, "and not just to tutor me in my classes. For dinner, like I said. Your mom and dad, too, if they'd like. An-and since Yekaterina-san offered, maybe we can spend time there, too."

Haru just looks at him for a moment, not like she's refusing, or like she can't believe him, but a bit like she doesn't know what to say in response to that.

"I meant it," Tsunayoshi says, uncomfortable. "Even if I didn't ask for it, you've done a lot for my sake, so - um. I'm - not very reliable, and I'm not good for anything, but. I'll try harder from now on. Okay?"

If anything, Haru looks a bit overwhelmed. Tsunayoshi hopes that's okay. He's never had a friend before, but from the way it sounds, neither has Haru, so maybe it's okay to sometimes be clumsy or say something weird and mess up every now and then. She probably doesn't know how to do this either.
"Okay," she says uncertainly, and then she straightens and firms as she gathers her normal, brazen, unshaken confidence. "Okay," she repeats, more firmly, "Haru was also to blame for not bringing it up before then. And - sorry for shouting at you, too. And saying things that weren't nice. Or true."

There's nothing to say to that, so Tsunayoshi laughs, though not out of humor or happiness. Then Haru latches onto his arm with both hands, eyes bright and smile wide, if tentative at the corners, and she says, "Now, we have a shaggy beast to hunt!"

And, not being able to help it, Tsunayoshi yelps: "No way!"

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But the words that Haru said that day weren't exactly false either, he thinks. No one picks Tsunayoshi. He's come to peace with that years ago. He's not good for anything, not even as a punching bag or the butt of a joke. Haru's parents might have chosen her, given the pie spatula the other night, but ah - if that's not good enough for Haru, then Tsunayoshi has no problem choosing her, if that's what she really wants.

He knows what it's like when no one does. People shouldn't have to feel that way, is what he thinks, and maybe he's not good for anything, and maybe it won't mean anything, but he can do that much.

Tsunayoshi used to be a kid who wanted to help others, to connect with them and make them happy. He only stopped when he realized that it's impossible for someone like him. If he's only going to fail when he tries, then he should reject them immediately so they can find someone better and more suited for the issue at hand.

But Haru has refused to accept his rejections, so - in that case - his fumbling attempts will just have to be good enough, until he can figure out how to appropriately be someone that people don't want to leave.

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Chapter End Notes

* **Haru, who is actually a sharp person:** holy fuck I forgot I was dealing with space cadets.

* **RIP Yamamoto Takeshi,** who is doing the whole body equivalent of 'hover hand.' 頑張って！武くん！

* Namimori's de facto language is Japanese, but as a compromise between her parents, Haru more or less grew up speaking English as a first language as it's the lowest common denominator in Yekaterina's line of work.

* **Inversion:** when one's Will turns on itself and begins to 'consume' one's spirit, thus corrupting it. While it's bad no matter who it is, it's exponentially worse when a Sky inverts. Inversion can actually be rehabilitated, although they'll always bare the
spiritual scars from it.

Canon examples of inverts are FutureArc!Byakuran, Xanxas, Bianchi, and Verde. Just because you don't behave in a stereotypical way for your flame alignment doesn't make you an invert, of course. Different Skies have different needs and respond to different stimulus differently.

Chapter Six NonCanon Character Guide:
* Yekaterina Miura - Haru's mother who is often absent on business overseas. Bad at making friends. She's very protective toward her daughter, and though she and Tsunayoshi start off on the wrong foot, she ends up accepting their friendship.
* Miura Hideki - Haru's father who works at Nami University regarding mathematics and finances. Mild mannered. Gets along well with Nana.
Chapter Summary

enter Sasagawa Ryohei

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7: Enter! The Golden Dragon!

It comes as no great surprise that Hibari Kyoya doesn't care for sharing. It's not something that Tsunayoshi gave any consideration to, given that he had no reason to consider it at all. Honestly, it's nothing that he would even wonder about. If he had, he might have thought that Hibari would be above the kind of thinking that lends itself to thinking of things as his. He's a demon, after all. What use do demons have for possessions?

Tsunayoshi may have forgotten that demons tend to be jealous, and greedy, and think first and foremost of themselves. Like Tsunayoshi, in a way. Just because Hibari only glances at his tonfa when it breaks with a considering look, and then strikes harder with the remaining one thereafter, doesn't mean that Hibari will carelessly cast aside all things that enter his sphere of influence.

During the time that Haru isn't coming around, Hibari doesn't seem extra annoyed that he doesn't have two punching bags. The day after Sasagawa-kun tries to shanghai Tsunayoshi into joining his club, though, Hibari frogmarches Tsunayoshi out of the tail end of his last class and up to the Disciplinary Committee's office and locks him in.

His eyes don't shine once with a strange light, even though they glitter oddly, and his fingers feel like steel bands around Tsunayoshi's wrists. They don't bruise, but after Tsunayoshi is released to follow the Committee's after school activities as he likes, he finds himself touching the bones of his wrist repeatedly. Like something lingers there.

(More than anything, Tsunayoshi doesn't want to be left alone. It's not quite what he wants, but - ahh, ahh, it's close. It's close, like Haru tailing him around and claiming to be his girlfriend.

It's bad. It's selfish. Ahh, but, but, but: look at him the most.

Who can Tsunayoshi become to best achieve that, he wonders?)

It becomes something of a habit, and not one Hibari is interested in changing even after Haru forgives Tsunayoshi for being so dense. In the end, it takes a few weeks of those two fighting, but they reach a compromise: since Hibari refuses to surrender his daily afternoons terrorizing Tsunayoshi in the Committee office, Haru might as well keep up her after school gymnastics club meetings.

It would be nice if anyone thought about asking Tsunayoshi's opinion on the whole thing, but - well, he's saved from making some kind of difficult decision. Maybe it's for the best to let others work those kinds of things out on their own, if they can.
There are worse things than being bullied into sitting still, or running pointless errands from classroom to club under Hibari's glittering eyes.

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Given the nature of things, Tsunayoshi probably should have expected strange kinds of rumors to be going around because of him. In the first place, Tsunayoshi has started to wonder at the fact that people seem to pay him an odd amount of attention. It's not like Nami Middle is a particularly large school in any way, so it's not as if he'd really thought anything of it when everyone seems to know his face and call him by that nickname.

But if they were going to go that far, wouldn't they pick on him, too? It's not like he really has any fun being laughed at and told he's useless, nor that after people give up on asking him for favors, they taunt him about the fact that he's no good for anything. But the thing about that is - no one destroys his things, or tries to goad him into killing himself, or even trips him even though they'll laugh and jeer if they see him do it himself. They seem to get kicks from making him join in on their games only to watch him struggle and they send the ball his way and then snort and snicker when it knocks him down.

Everyone always recognizes him on the spot even though he's not popular, or outstanding. He's not even outstanding in the way that his grades are the lowest in school or anything like that. And they start calling him a delinquent now that he's being looked after by Hibari, even though Tsunayoshi has never been rude or mean to anyone in any way other than refusing their requests and their favors.

Before That Time, Tsunayoshi hadn't really been able to tell the difference, but - now that he can tell when people want to kill him or not, he can tell that all the bullying that had so crushed his spirit months back is more like a pack of animals being noisy and unruly in begging for attention. Like that time so long ago that a dog had leapt up on him and knocked him down, being at least twice as big as him. What troublesome animals, he thinks.

… Hibari's way of thinking might be rubbing off on him a little bit.

Maybe that's what happens when a person tries their hardest to connect their feelings with another person. Tsunayoshi can only hope that none of the people he's trying his hardest to connect with have started dreaming about painful things. Hibari probably wouldn't be too troubled by them, but he already sleeps at school so much that Tsunayoshi worries about disrupting his naps all the same. And it's not like Nana needs more things to think about than she already does. After that night that Hibari broke into his room, Tsunayoshi hasn't entirely managed to rest at ease in his own home anymore - and it's thanks to that he's discovered that she peeks into his room fairly often at night. She never looks very tired, so he thinks she might nap while he's at school every day. It would be nice if Nana could rest easy about it. The last thing he wants is her dreaming about doing all of that herself instead of just seeing him do it.

So Tsunayoshi probably should have expected there to be weird stories going on around him, especially after even Mochida noticed that he'd been captured for a while. It's just - everyone has absences like that, even if Tsunayoshi usually doesn't, and it's not weird to follow Hibari, he has the whole entire Committee - and -

And yeah. Even though Hayashi-sensei doesn't train any other kids from his district, somehow the fact that he's a trained fighter must get out, because during the time that Haru isn't speaking with him, but before Hibari has shifted his approach from ambushing him to batting him around like a cat with a particularly entertaining mouse, Sasagawa Ryohei hears about him.
Somehow, Tsunayoshi feels like he should really know more about Sasagawa Ryohei, but the fact of the matter is that Tsunayoshi has never really taken much notice of him. It's true that he's just one year ahead of Tsunayoshi, and he's Kyoko's older brother, and ahh - it's true that Tsunayoshi used to… kind of stalk her, at least until he'd begun to fear her noticing him, rather than fantasizing about it, and turned his stalker tendencies on Hibari of all people. It's true that club captains are usually well known around school, especially those that went to competition, and even more so the ones that win.

But well - Ryohei is more of a force of nature the way Hibari is a force of nature: a thing to weather with grim determination or terrified awe and be relieved after it passes. That Ryohei is practically sweet compared to Hibari matters little in this.

Mostly, Tsunayoshi knows Ryohei as a footnote to Kyoko, the same way he knows Mochida, which is - well, a bit…

Well, it's regretful no matter what, because it means that he's completely unprepared for the day that Sasagawa Ryohei comes barreling into his classroom, looking for him. The door slams open so violently that the windows rattle, and the noise that's supposed to be Tsunayoshi's name is more or less a roar, if fourteen year old kids were capable of that kind of thing.

Tsunayoshi could believe it, if it's Ryohei.

His startled classmates likely believe it too, if the immediacy with which they surrendered Tsunayoshi's identity is to judge by - and then Ryohei approaches Tsunayoshi's desk and practically climbs atop it, just barely refraining. He leans so far over it though that Tsunayoshi instinctively leans back, almost ready to topple out of his seat. He might have, if Ryohei hadn't grasped his hand and loudly repeats: "Sawada Tsunayoshi!"

How he manages to make Tsunayoshi's ears ring that way without actually seeming to shout - like his volume is simply cranked to the max without even straining his throat in the least - is a mystery.

"Join the Boxing Club!" Ryohei says, both hands clasped tight around Tsunayoshi's. They're larger, and calloused despite the tape that's wrapped around his fingers, which is also rough, and hotter than just 'warm,' and strong like iron bars. The way that Ryohei's gray eyes stare intensely into Tsunayoshi's and practically sparkle like he has brilliant yellow stars in his eyes - well. It makes it feel weirdly like a marriage proposal.

Against his own inclinations, Tsunayoshi feels his face turn hot red like an iron, and he sputters. The lack of coherent reply hardly bothers Ryohei, who, not letting go of Tsunayoshi, turns back to the room at large. "I'll be borrowing Sawada for the time being!" he declares, drops into a short, shallow bow at the teacher, and then hauls Tsunayoshi to his feet. They're at the door before the teacher can do more than blink. For some reason, Tsunayoshi manages a desperate look at a stunned Yamamoto - of all times for the boy to fail to warn Tsunayoshi of danger! Yamamoto makes some kind of weird face and might even be shifting to his feet, but no one leaves the classroom after them.

Tsunayoshi stumbles in Ryohei's wake, staring lingeringly back at the doorway, and then - because Ryohei honestly seems to mean him no real harm - he sinks into black, despairing thoughts. It's not until Tsunayoshi's uniform top goes flying that he snaps back into awareness and realizes that they've arrived at the boxing club's locker rooms and Ryohei is forcibly stripping him despite Ryohei's underclassmen jumping into the fray.
"Ryohei-senpai! He's one of Hibari's!" a boy already dressed in boxing gear shouts over Tsunayoshi's embarrassed screeching. The boy is practically climbing Ryohei in his efforts to stop him. One particularly heavyset boy is hanging from Ryohei's waist. If Tsunayoshi wasn't so frantic to keep his clothes on, he'd be impressed by Ryohei's manic strength. "And besides! Hibari already told you not to abduct any more students or strip them!"

Tsunayoshi could almost imagine hearing it himself: no students are permitted on school grounds out of dress code. The only exception to that iron-clad rule enforced rigorously by Hibari was if it were required by their club, and even then a license that had been approved and issued by the Council - little more than a puppet of the Committee - had to be provided.

Or something like that. At the beginning of the year, when Tsunayoshi had still been holding out hope to join a club and maybe make some friends and stop being Dame-Tsuna, he'd taken a look at the application process. There were no two ways about it: the Namimori Disciplinary Committee had turned the entire club system into a nightmare of paperwork.

Tsunayoshi kind of sucks at paperwork; he doesn't understand what the questions want from him, or how to fill out the answers accurately or sufficiently. Nana somehow actually manages to be worse. Tsunayoshi had given up at that point and resigned himself to being Dame forever.

"Sawada! You must extremely fight!" Ryohei shouts.

"Let me go before Hibari bites you to death," Tsunayoshi squawks loudly. In all likelihood, he would then proceed to bite Tsunayoshi to death, but it's getting to the point that when doesn't he, so Tsunayoshi is actually surprisingly fine with that.

"Sawada!"

It takes a few more desperate moments before Ryohei's underclassmen manage to pry him off Tsunayoshi, and a few more shaky moments for Tsunayoshi to put himself to rights. By the time he has his tie in some semblance of order, the boxing club has soaked Ryohei to the skin and have an ice pack on his head. One of the underclassmen - or rather, Ryohei's peer outside the club - is wringing his hands at Tsunayoshi.

"Please don't tell Hibari about this," he says, then falls to his knees and prostrates himself, trembling.

"Ah - there's no need for that," Tsunayoshi says uncomfortably. His uniform is more wrinkled than usual, which may or may not invoke Hibari's wrath depending on his mood, but other than that - "this is hardly the worst that's ever happened to me."

The guy stays down for a moment longer before peering tentatively up at him. Whatever he sees on Tsunayoshi's face must reassure him, because he sits up and glances over to Ryohei, who looks to have tired himself out. "He always gets like this when he thinks he hears someone strong might be around," he says a little pathetically. "None of us can last longer than fifteen seconds in the ring with him."

What kind of monster is Ryohei? Tsunayoshi wonders to himself. "I see," he says. "I mean, I don't understand it myself, but... um." He glances down at himself and then over at Ryohei again. Ryohei is something like a head and a half taller than him and easily tops him by ten kilos, probably more. What would have even convinced that guy that Tsunayoshi could possibly stand up to him? "Why not Hibari?" he wonders aloud.

Ryohei must have amazing stamina, because it's actually the guy himself that answers,
straightening a bit with an indignant look on his face. "Hibari is an impressive warrior," he acknowledges loudly, "but a true man fights with his fists!"

After the string of self-defense classes Tsunayoshi's taken, plus his own teacher's words, Tsunayoshi knows that fists actually make for shitty weapons: they break too easily and for stupid reasons.

"I- I see," he says instead, wondering if that might be the point somehow. "That aside, Ryohei-senpai… I'm not really a boxer, you know. My teacher targets my feet and leg strength more."

Well, that and his regular fights with Hibari have gotten to the point that Tsunayoshi has started improvising. Tonfa were specifically designed to subdue people, after all, and even if he's more or less okay with being attacked, Tsunayoshi doesn't particularly care for bruises or broken bones.

"Oh! A man's body is his best weapon!" Ryohei proclaims, casually shoving his underclassmen aside and jumping to his feet. There's a fire burning in his eyes that's quite frankly terrifying, and Tsunayoshi anxiously averts his gaze, focusing instead on the edges of Ryohei's face and shoulders the way he would in a fight. Ryohei's soggy, bandaged hands grasp onto his hands again. "You must join the Boxing Club, Sawada! We'll extremely go to your teacher for permission right away!"

"No way!" Tsunayoshi yelps. "I refuse!"

Ryohei isn't the kind of guy that easily accepts 'no' for an answer, as if forcibly abducting Tsunayoshi and trying to make him change into the Boxing Club's gear wasn't evidence enough. Tsunayoshi's strident protests that he doesn't even enjoy fighting are summarily ignored.

Still dressed in his club gear, Ryohei wraps his mitt covered hand around Tsunayoshi's wrists, turns on his heel, and barrels out of the club room. They're already halfway across the courtyard before Tsunayoshi can even catch his breath out of surprise, and digging in his heels isn't doing anything but wearing away at the soles of his shoes. He could actually fight back, but - ahh, turning that thing against Ryohei seems kind of excessive, and he's not exactly certain of his ability to win even with it, and as much as he doesn't want to actually hurt Ryohei, ahh, ahh, if he doesn't win quickly, the feel of that thing is that it might become desperate.

Ryohei just seems really excited that Tsunayoshi exists, and he - well, he wants to fight Tsunayoshi, but in his own way, he's trying to earn Tsunayoshi's consent instead of just biting him to death, so-

_Tsunayoshi still objects to being dragged through the streets by a soaking wet guy in boxing gear!

"Ryohei-senpai! Ryohei!" Tsunayoshi does his best to shout over the heartening battlecry that Ryohei is giving, but someone with a voice as pathetic as his is doomed to be shouted over by anyone with a voice of substance, and Ryohei has more than that. Actually, Tsunayoshi thinks that that even if he blew an airhorn, Ryohei would be able to shout over it. That's the kind of guy he is. "Please don't drag me through town like this!"

"Oniisan!"

Where all of Tsunayoshi's caterwauling falls on deaf ears, that single voice slices through Ryohei's battlecry with ease. Tsunayoshi crashes into Ryohei's rock-hard back and tumbles to the ground, hanging limply by his arm from Ryohei's grip.

"Kyoko?" Ryohei questions, turning around.
Tsunayoshi looks up with something not unlike horror in his heart, although he probably should have predicted this the moment he realized that **Sasagawa Ryohei** had taken him. Everyone is more or less vaguely aware that the Sasagawa siblings look out for one another, so being around either one of them will eventually involve being around the other. Tsunayoshi vaguely remembers that this is more or less how Mochida had gotten past Kyoko's defenses.

If he had thought about it at all instead of being distracted by Yamamoto, he would have fought harder against his fate, he thinks.

As it is, the blossoming idol of Nami Middle comes to a panting stop on the other side of Tsunayoshi's sprawled body, a hand to her chest as she catches her breath. It should make her look like any normal mortal, but only brings out a flush of color to her face that strangely makes Tsunayoshi's already pounding heart skip a beat in his chest, if that's not weird enough.

"Oniisan," she says, still gulping air a bit, the softest frown on her face, "Saitoh-kun told me you were ditching class!"

Between the scene in the boxing club's room and the fact that one of Ryohei's classmates knew to come tattle on Ryohei to his sister immediately, Tsunayoshi thinks this must happen a lot more than he had suspected. More than *once* is too much in Tsunayoshi's honest opinion, but this might even be a bit routine for them; Tsunayoshi wouldn't know and couldn't have heard before now, given that before he'd only shown up to school for the sake of stalking Kyoko, and since then his activities regarding Hibari.

For his part, Ryohei looks a bit struck by his little sister's announcement, and then a bit like he expects to be able to argue against it. He can't. They're on the streets of Namimori, at least five minutes from school already. Only the fact that he wasn't actually running at the time let Kyoko catch up to him, Tsunayoshi thinks.

The laugh that Ryohei gives is loud and nervous. "Ditching class!" he echoes with a wide, white, *incredibly awkward* grin. "No way! I was - escorting Sawada to his teacher!"

"We're all going to get bitten to death," Tsunayoshi says under his breath in mortal terror. Hibari is almost assured to arrive and beat every last one of them for playing hooky, and Tsunayoshi *honestly can't decide how he feels about that.*

"Off campus?" Kyoko asks, folding her arms over her chest. It should look angry or frustrated, and instead only conveys a vast amount of concern and disappointment. There's a heavy kind of pressure to it that makes him want to squirm a bit.

Ryohei doesn't seem to feel it at all, or maybe he's used to it. He laughs like he's making fun of himself, saying, "you know your big bro has a terrible sense of direction!"

Without warning, Ryohei hefts Tsunayoshi off the ground with just the one hand wrapped around Tsunayoshi's wrist, which is slightly terrifying but perhaps ultimately not unexpected, given that Tsunayoshi is about forty-seven kilos soaking wet. The whole thing still startles Tsunayoshi enough that he wobbles unsteadily for a second before finding his feet.

That done, Tsunayoshi stares at Ryohei, frankly appalled. Tsunayoshi himself isn't a good liar and sucks at keeping secrets, so he doesn't make a habit of it, but Ryohei might actually be even *worse* of a liar despite the easy way it comes out. They're five minutes from Nami Middle! That goes far beyond a terrible sense of direction and into blatant curse territory! If such things as curses even existed!
On the other hand - well, that lie is a bit of a mixed bag, because: part of it is complete fabrication, but the other? Ryohei was absolutely escorting Tsunayoshi to his teacher - just not a Nami Middle school teacher. Although without asking, how is he supposed to know to go to Hayashi-sensei's dojo? Hayashi-sensei's dojo? Tsunayoshi has been to many around the town before settling on that one, after all.

Kyoko sighs, her brow pinching. "I know, but in that case you should have one of your friends take him," she says reproachfully. "When they call me out from class, it makes me worry, you know."

Ryohei wilts under her gaze. "Sorry, Kyoko," he says, rubbing his mitted hand on the back of his head. "You know I get worked up about things sometimes."

That only makes Kyoko frown a bit harder, and then she actually seems to notice Tsunayoshi. She starts to smile that stunning, sunny smile at him, only then she seems to actually see Tsunayoshi, and her face does something weird.

"Oh!" she says. She smiles. It's a perfectly beautiful, kind smile - but there's something weird at the corners of it. "Sorry for my brother, he means well, really."

Tsunayoshi remembers his thoughts that if Kyoko ever actually saw him that she'd pat him on the head and gently lock him out of some kind of metaphorical house, leaving him out in the rain and the mud with the other unruly beasts like Hibari. The weird sense of pressure hasn't let up - if anything, it's kind of increased.

"Ah - it's no problem, really!" Tsunayoshi says, even though honestly, being dragged out of class and then off the campus is a huge problem because - well, Hibari after all. Given that his classmates surrendered him to Ryohei just because Ryohei is loud and excitable and an upperclassman, they're definitely going to get the two of them in trouble the moment Hibari happens by to notice that Tsunayoshi has left school grounds without permission.

"Thank goodness," Kyoko says, still smiling relentlessly. "It was - Tsuna-kun, right?"

The thought that goes through Tsunayoshi's head is that he wonders if she heard it first as Dame-Tsuna or as one of Hibari's the way Ryohei's underclassmen said it. Either way is awful and uncomfortable, he decides, and that's disregarding that despite everything, she still calls him Tsuna.

Everyone calls him Tsuna. From the day number one, Nana and his teachers both said that 'Tsunayoshi' was too large of a name for someone as small as him, so that's what he gets called whether he likes it or not. Usually he doesn't think much of it, but for some reason it really stands out at this moment.

Because Kyoko is smiling at him, it only seems right to smile back. It feels a bit strange on his face. It's not the one that he gives when he's nervous or in trouble and hoping to somehow get out of it. He thinks it's some kind of wish to get along with everyone, but he can't be sure.

"Yes, that's me," he says easily. "And you're Sasagawa Kyoko-chan."

She hums a pleasant affirmative. "Since my brother's gotten you into trouble, I'll walk you back to school, okay?" she says.

Well, that's what she says, but when she steps forward and then in between Tsunayoshi and Ryohei, she takes her brother's elbow in both hands. Somehow, Tsunayoshi isn't disappointed by this, despite the fact that the blossoming idol of Nami Middle has delicately, politely just snubbed him. He actually feels a bit relieved, even if the normally lovely glow she exudes seems to be kind
of glaringly bright today.

"That's - that's not necessary," Tsunayoshi protests, waving his hands in the air between them like he can fend the blistering light.

"Hey. Are you saying you don't trust my little sister to guide you back to school," Ryohei says, and Ryohei's strangely energetic but ultimately harmless air has just become some kind of horrible aura, his gray eyes weirdly like the flat of sharpened steel blades as he stares down at Tsunayoshi from Kyoko's other side.

It's really not what Tsunayoshi is saying at all. If anything, Ryohei should take responsibility for himself, but Tsunayoshi would rather be escorted by Kyoko than be dragged even more places by him, even if it's back to school.

Kyoko tugs on his arm a little bit. "Of course he's not saying that, Oniisan," she says, pleasant and patient under Ryohei's attentive gaze. His brows are still furrowed like he hasn't let go of what he thinks Tsunayoshi said. "Tsuna-kun is the kind of person that doesn't like to trouble others, isn't that right?"

Tsunayoshi feels strangely like something bad would happen to him if he disagreed, despite this being a fairly accurate summary of his personality.

Kyoko returns his tight and nervous smile with a gentle look that only increases the way the hair on the back of his neck is standing on end. "But it's no problem," she promises him before turning to gaze back up at her brother with concern. "You should take the chance to change back into your uniform before Mom hears that you were skipping class, though."

Where the threat of Hibari does nothing, the threat of his own mother obviously terrorizes Ryohei. He still hesitates for several long moments, struggling back and forth with himself and looking uneasily between Kyoko and Tsunayoshi. This understandably only increases Tsunayoshi's stress, because while he knows that he's no threat to Kyoko and has no reason to draw Ryohei's ire, this entire situation feels incredibly dangerous anyway. Rather than walking alone with Kyoko, Tsunayoshi would most like to be dragged back onto campus by Ryohei, soaking wet and dressed in boxing gear or not.

Ryohei looks oddly like he might somehow sense that.

But then familial loyalty wins out, and he accepts his fate. "Alright! I will extremely run the entire way back to school!" He punches straight up into the air when Kyoko releases her grip on his arm and immediately takes off running back the way they came.

It's probably as fast as a guy like him can go, and it's - indeed - extremely fast.

Tsunayoshi would have left him eating dust. As much as he asks Hibari to teach him 'discipline,' there's only so much Tsunayoshi can do to fight his instincts, which always say to run away - and Hibari is some kind of savage beast when he gets it into his head to pursue.

Usually he likes to pretend it's not worth his time if Tsunayoshi manages to make enough headway though - Hibari is an ambush predator, not one that chases.

"Sorry about this, again," Kyoko says, drawing his attention. "My brother has the tendency to get worked up about things. It's been a long time since I've seen him this excited… actually, I think the last time was when he learned about Hibari-senpai."

"There- there are a lot of different reactions to have to Hibari-senpai," Tsunayoshi says awkwardly.
"It'll be good if Hibari-senpai were to have friends," she says easily, turning to him with bright eyes. "It'll help him calm down a bit, don't you think? You know, Hana was a bit like that, too, back then."

Tsunayoshi wouldn't know. This was the first time he'd attended a school with either of them and he was too dazzled by Kyoko to really take a lot of notice of the thundercloud lurking three inches to the left.

"I think it's good to make friends," Kyoko says, smiling without looking at him, "especially with the kind of people that need it a lot, like Hibari-san, and Hana. But it's not fair if you stretch yourself out too far, don't you think?"

"Ahh - no, probably," Tsunayoshi says, flailing just a bit, his palms out. "That's probably right, but - um, I don't feel stretched at all, so it's not a problem."

Kyoko looks at him then, just out of the corner of her eye. "Hmm," she says, and only that, at least about that subject, because she continues, "Oniisan was excited at first - about Hibari-senpai, you know? But somehow Hibari-senpai has maintained his title as the strongest person at school, and leader of the Discipline Committee. So it's only natural that when Oniisan heard the rumors about you, about having fought your way up the ranks of Hibari-senpai's friends, that he'd be a little enthusiastic."

"The enthusiasm isn't really the problem here," Tsunayoshi says, because as loud and extreme as Ryohei is, Tsunayoshi doesn't have a problem with that. Even if he's running roughshod over Tsunayoshi's wishes, it's not something he could really carry a grudge about. "The problem is the target, actually. I'm really not scary enough of a person to be interesting for those kinds of reasons, you know?"

Ahh - well, he says that, but.

Tsunayoshi says that, but isn't the kind of person he actually is even worse than Hibari? Isn't he the worst kind of person there is to be? Whatever kind of things that Hibari does, whatever kind of racket that his club is running, it's not as bad as what Tsunayoshi does that leaves him hollowed and charred with numbs hands and wet splatters of blood on them.

But in that case, the target is still the problem. There's no reason for Ryohei and Kyoko to get tangled up with something like him. Only because he can't tolerate Haru's unhappy face, and Hibari can beat him down, and he doesn't want to hurt either of them anyway is all of that okay. Dragging others into something this bad is unforgivable- that's what Tsunayoshi thinks about it.

"I think so, too," Kyoko agrees easily. "Looking after Hibari-senpai is probably hard enough work on it's own. So we agree, then, right? There's no way it's possible to look after both Hibari-senpai and Oniisan, so we'll keep things the way they are. Tsuna-kun, let's continue working together diligently to make sure Oniisan goes back to overlooking you!"

"N- no way! I'm not an offering you can tie to a pole outside the village in sacrifice to that demon!" Tsunayoshi blurts. He isn't even all that opposed to what Kyoko is suggesting here, it's just-!

It just feels really questionable in the first place, somehow, and he definitely feels like his muddy nose has been clipped by a door being shut in his face.

Kyoko laughs. It's gentle and lovely like chiming bells. "Don't be silly, Tsuna-kun," she says. "No one's tying you up against your will. The two of you are already friends, so there's nothing to worry about."
She can say that all she likes, but everything she's said requires a severe misunderstanding of the very basic nature of Hibari Kyoya, Sawada Tsunayoshi, and their overall relationship. In a few weeks, Tsunayoshi will make the not-so-startling discovery that Hibari doesn't like to share, but that aside, he doesn't have any interest in taking up all of Tsunayoshi's time.

And Sawada Tsunayoshi needs someone who will take up his time, or something awful will happen, he thinks.

He has nothing against respecting Kyoko's wishes if she'll do her part in preventing her brother from accosting him again, but the feeling of that door clipping shut is - depressing, a little bit. For a while there, the only interest Tsunayoshi had in coming out of his house and going to school was Kyoko. Something terrible had been going on inside him at that time, he thinks - but he's not really sure, because then That had happened and something had sparked to life inside of him and devoured so many things: charred it to ashes until his lungs were filled with sulfur and soot.

"I just don't think it's fair for me to make those kinds of decisions without consulting with the people who are affected by them," Tsunayoshi says, thinking first and foremost of Haru, who had waylaid herself for Tsunayoshi's sake without consideration for either of them. It wasn't really her fault, but it definitely hadn't worked out the way she thought it was going to.

Kyoko looks at him with something like concern pinching her mouth and brow, except that it's a bit less warm than that. "But both people make a decision when it comes to things like this, Tsunayoshi-kun. This is making a decision for yourself - and for my sake, too! If you don't like hanging around with my brother and you're already in a club as it is, then I don't see a problem with it. You shouldn't just passively allow others to do as they like when it affects you as well, you know."

A talk like this really would have done him some good before That happened. All Tsunayoshi knows is that the hair on the back of his neck won't lay down and his gut is being stubborn about it. Nothing Kyoko has said is wrong, really, except -

"I haven't actually joined the Disciplinary Committee," he says, which is true but also not really relevant to anything they're talking about.

"Oh," Kyoko says, "well. That's troublesome."

Tsunayoshi stares at her thoughtful little frown, while a feeling like unrelenting doom washes over him.

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The fact of the matter is, even if Tsunayoshi understood the first thing about how to fill out paperwork, he wouldn't join the Disciplinary Committee. He can be pretty stubborn about stupid things sometimes, and while he doesn't actually object to being known as 'one of Hibari's' if only for the protection of the people around him so that they know that Tsunayoshi in particular is the kind of person they should probably avoid, there's nothing about Kusakabe or his lot that Tsunayoshi is particularly concerned with.

He's gone from being useless to being something to shut outside and lock the doors against, so joining a club definitely isn't anything he's interested in, no matter how badly he doesn't want to be alone. Weighing that against the safety of the people involved, it's just better to stay out of it.

The problem is, even after getting scolded by his sister, Ryohei is weirdly dead set on getting Tsunayoshi to participate in some form in his club, and if not that, then to at least having a match against him. Both Tsunayoshi and Kyoko probably should have seen this coming after he already
went so far as to drag Tsunayoshi off campus in a furor.

Kyoko seems equally hellbent on getting Tsunayoshi signed up with the Disciplinary Committee.

All things in consideration, it should be an easy win for Kyoko, given that she's the number one top flowery idol of the school. Even level headed Kusakabe, who until now has only expressed interest and concern for Hibari's wants and needs, is a bit weak to her charms to judge by the flush that comes in on his cheeks when interacting with her.

It doesn't stop his answer to Kyoko turning in Tsunayoshi's application from being a resounding 'no.' No matter how many baked goods that Kyoko includes from her homemaking class. It does have the side benefit of softening Hoshino toward him somewhat, who even goes as far as to pat him on the back and tell him that of all the trouble he's caused them, this is probably the best kind, and won't he consider causing more?

The one time Tsunayoshi ventures to thank Kusakabe for his staunch denial, and to apologize for the obvious trouble being caused by rejecting so many applications, Kusakabe stares at him like he's thin air and flatly says, "A man's spirit should be steel even when the flesh is weak."

Tsunayoshi kind of gets that, considering the way he has to tamp down when his muscle memory gets the best of him, or otherwise his body acts without thought, but - that's not exactly like getting sweaty palms, he thinks. He wonders why Kusakabe can't just be the kind that accepts apologies like a normal person.

He gets the feeling it's something about honor or duty, which the present Tsunayoshi is still struggling hard to understand. It's a basic conflict of personalities.

For a few weeks, Tsunayoshi has something of a reprieve between the fact that Hibari and Haru have worked out something like an acceptable schedule, Haru doesn't attend his school, and ever since that day Ryohei dragged him from the school, Kyoko has been clinging to her brother's side like a total brocon. As weird as all of that is, Ryohei's kohai, Saitoh Itsuki, seems to be under some kind of delusion that Tsunayoshi is a demon on the same kind of level as Hibari - although a benevolent one.

"It's not that Kyoko-chan didn't support the team," Saitoh says, leaning heavily on the arm he'd slung around Tsunayoshi's shoulders, "but she's really been doting on him recently, and having her around really refreshes us!"

"I - I'm glad everything's going well," Tsunayoshi replies, trying to subtly pull away.

He suspects that as soon as Kyoko successfully signs him up for the Disciplinary Committee, she'll stop coming around the boxing club, and he wants to avoid any threats that the club members might be inclined to make to keep Tsunayoshi from being accepted.

He especially doesn't want some kind of weird club fight to break out over the whole entire matter, not for anything.

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Chapter End Notes
* both Nana and Tsunayoshi have some pretty serious PTSD. There are no therapists in Mafia Retirement Town.

* Ryohei's allegedly bad sense of direction 'going into blatant curse territory' is naturally a ranma1/2 joke about ryoga.

* it'll come up again, but Chroma!Tsunayoshi really hates the 'Tsuna' nickname since he associates it with the 'Dame-Tsuna' thing. Canon!Tsuna seems to prefer it, but expect Tsunayoshi to try correcting people from time to time.

* It sounds like Kyoko knows about flames, but she doesn't: her instincts are actually just really good, much like someone else we know.

* AU WARNING: Ages got shuffled around. While in canon, Ryohei is 15, Tsuna is 14, and Kyoko is 13... I changed it so Tsunayoshi and Kyoko are agemates (Kyoko is actually a few months older), and Ryohei is ten months older than Kyoko. This accounts to Ryohei's "everyone's Oniisan" behavior and their weird sibling complex.

So currently: most everyone is ~13-14 range, or a second year in the school, Ryohei is a third year at ~14-15, and Kyoya is a terrifying demon (15-16, which is actually his canon age)

* there will be shades of All27 from here on out just thanks to Tsunayoshi's Sky sway making trouble.
A Chewtoy Extraordinaire

Chapter Summary

in which some kind of weird club fight breaks out over Sawada Tsunayoshi

Chapter Notes

**Content Warning**: Suicidal Ideation. To avoid it, read up to Haru is silent and still on her knees in front of him, and he can't bring himself to look. and then skip to the line "I've only learned more about Ryohei recently,“. Haru will address his feelings at that point, but Tsunayoshi has mentally and emotionally shifted away from the subject.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8 : A Chewtoy Extraordinaire

By this stage in things, Tsunayoshi knows better than to assume that the precarious balance things fall into for a week or two is going to last, especially with tensions high as break approaches, bringing with it the a new school year.

If anyone wants to call three different people being obvious in their demands for his attentions while Kyoko and Kusakabe engage in some kind of weird face-off in the background, only exacerbated by the fact that Hoshino Yoshio and Saitoh Itsuki have found time to clash in the meanwhile, 'being in balance.' It's loud, is what it is, Tsunayoshi thinks - though he can't take any of it too seriously when even Hibari doesn't seem to feel particularly bloodthirsty about it.

 Mostly he thinks that Hibari is having a lot of fun repeatedly scattering everyone for unapproved crowding. He seems less angry these days.

Weirdly, the fact that there's so much going on actually goes far in allowing Tsunayoshi five minutes to breathe. Hibari is far too busy baring his teeth at Ryohei like a wild animal defending its food to keep up his weird campaign of trying to back Tsunayoshi into a corner; he's still jealous of Tsunayoshi's free time, though, even if he mostly uses it to abuse Tsunayoshi as the committee's gofer, delivering papers containing who knows what to grim faced students across the campus. So long as he's on Committee business, neither Kusakabe nor Hoshino are inclined to hinder his movements, and they keep the rest of the Committee in line. Kyoko and Saitoh find their new opponents far more fitting than Tsunayoshi, and so until the time when club activities cease for the day, Tsunayoshi actually has a fairly good time of it.

Everything is incredibly lively these days. It's not exactly what Tsunayoshi wants, but it's surprisingly pleasant all the same. He feels a lot less in danger of dying for being alone, anyway.
Maybe he feels a lot less like his hands are wet and sticky - or may become that way through some unfortunate circumstances beyond his control.

Sometimes he still smells iron, though.

("Say, Nayo-tan: living in a world this noisy seems nice," the boy with milk-spill hair says, hands clasped behind his back, his dangerous misty eyes shielded by the falling tangle of his hair. There are so many awful sharp edges for something so gentle. Cat's paws, and cat's nuzzling, though there are long, sharp claws and teeth to catch him with the moment he tries to escape. "Won't you let me live here, too?"

But isn't that the kind of thing a person chooses for themselves, Tsunayoshi wonders; by intentionally softening all those awful parts of them and becoming someone that others won't want to leave? At least, it seems that way to him.

Isn't it true?

The soft smile that shows through lanks of white hair is terrible.)

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That ember in his chest continues to smolder, and the world is so very flammable.

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"Did something good happen to you?" Haru asks suspiciously one day, as they're trailing along behind Hoshino's crew for the afternoon.

"Like what?" Tsunayoshi asks, blinking in bafflement before giving her an askance look.

Haru continues to frown at him in a narrow, suspicious way. "It's like after my mom invited you back," she says flatly.

What part of dealing with Yekaterina was supposed to make Tsunayoshi happy in any way shape or form?! She's a terrifying woman and Tsunayoshi is only more worried about what she'll think to do in the future when it's time for her to attend to her business personally again! At least he knows that she herself will relent from trying to kill him with a pie spatula if he's very honest with her! What if it falls to Hideki-san? Even if he's a university professor, or something like that, Tsunayoshi really hates the way he sounded when talking about the shopping district's financial future.

Tsunayoshi may be a little good at dodging knuckles or tonfa, but how should he protect himself from something like that?!

Ahh - but no, from the way things are looking, Hibari might get annoyed about that, too.

"I don't really get it," Tsunayoshi says to her, but he does it askance still, and therefore clearly spots the way the delinquents under Hoshino's rule exchange a quick look, and - oh. There it is, he realizes suddenly. They're definitely listening in. None of them will meet his eyes but they're acting way too shifty! No, obviously so! Their behavior around Tsunayoshi has changed somewhat recently.

Whether it's Tsunayoshi willingly being the Committee's gofer, Hibari actually defending his turf, or Hoshino thawing a bit thanks to Kyoko's baked goods, which Kusakabe has been sharing with the Committee's officers despite how he treasures them - they haven't given him a dirty look for
"Ah - well," Tsunayoshi stutters a bit frantically. More than anything, he wants them to keep their mouths shut so he can continue living somewhat in peace, which Haru getting involved will absolutely interfere with! The entire delicate balance that's given Tsunayoshi a break and some peace of mind will definitely be blown to smithereens! "That's to say-!"

"This Shrimp somehow got really popular in a lot of ways on campus a few weeks ago," Hoshino says flatly, without even pausing for them to catch up to him. What kind of ears does he have, anyway?! Like he can hear Tsunayoshi wondering that, Hoshino glances over his shoulder with an uncaring eye, his expression bored but a little pointed. "You wouldn't know since you went back to your clubs at your special school, but Tsuna recently attracted the attention of the Sasagawa siblings… somehow."

The way he looks at Tsunayoshi is the usual way - it's only because of Haru and Hibari and now Ryohei that Tsunayoshi starts to suspect that how people usually look at him is wrong. Still, in this case, he thinks he'd prefer to remain 'Dame-Tsuna' rather than someone worth causing a fuss about.

''Hahi? The Sasagawa siblings? The Sasagawa - Tsunayoshi-san," Haru says, pressing the tip of her finger into her bottom lip and blinking big brown eyes at him, "who are the Sasagawa siblings? Haru doesn't know them."

Tsunayoshi feels his stomach drop. "Ah - that is - that is… Um."

Hoshino really has stopped leading the way now, standing with his hands jammed into his pants pockets and looking sharp around the corners of his expression, his mouth a thin line.

"Um," Tsunayoshi says again, glancing sideways to avoid everyone's eyes and feeling pretty browbeaten. It's somehow more painful than being normally beaten. "That is- Sasagawa Ryohei is the captain of the Boxing Club," he admits. "He's been trying to get me to join, recently."

The surprise and excitement that Haru greets this information with is a bit troubling. She straightens and clasps her hands together and looks so delighted that Tsunayoshi feels even worse for trying to avoid telling her. "Tsunayoshi-san has been scouted?" she demands with a happy expression.

"You bet," Hoshino says, and now he's patting Tsunayoshi's head with a heavy hand, and it's nothing at all like Iemitsu had, although Tsunayoshi feels about the same about it. With some added resentment, actually, since Hoshino isn't actually congratulating Tsunayoshi on anything at all, even something so awful as killing people simply because they forfeited their lives by putting their hands on his mother.

Hoshino is definitely trying to cause problems in Tsunayoshi's household. Ahh, ahh. What should he do about that?

Just what exactly is Tsunayoshi calling a 'household'?! "Only, Kyoko-chan seems to have a good grasp on Dame-Tsuna's personality," Hoshino continues, leaning in toward Haru a bit. "So obviously it's to her preference that Dame-Tsuna gets lost."

It's more or less an accurate summation of the situation, so it's not like Tsunayoshi can argue with it, but despite his thoughts earlier on the matter about preferring to be seen as 'Dame-Tsuna,' there's something about the whole thing that sits badly with him. The 'truth of the matter' is fine, it's
obvious that it was going to come out sooner or later even though Tsunayoshi had been hoping for 'later,' but this?

Like he senses some of these thoughts, Hoshino's heavy hand twists a bit, snagging clumps of Tsunayoshi's hair. "Now, now," he says, "it's no good to keep secrets from people who care about you, right?"

As if that is why Hoshino is doing this! Tsunayoshi would feel bad about it if that was Hoshino's intent, but it's obviously just him taking revenge for some kind of slight. He grunts a bit as Hoshino's shoves his head down as if he's forcing Tsunayoshi to beg for forgiveness for this. Tsunayoshi honestly doesn't even remember slighting Hoshino, so it has to be-

"Nmm- Hoshino-san," he manages despite his forcibly bent head and compressed lungs, "I hadn't realized that the situation with Saitoh-kun was bothering you that badly. I'm sure if I explained things plainly to him-"

The hand in his hair tightens painfully, because Hoshino is the kind of guy that steps on another kid's face while taking pictures of it and doesn't even feeling anything about it at all. It's a serious kind of 'behavioral issue' to have for someone that Tsunayoshi had figured was probably an okay person, generally speaking.

Hoshino is far from the only one with behavioral issues around here, though, and in the next moment he's forced to step sideways or allow Haru to kick him in the groin. This is normally when Tsunayoshi would be panicking about Haru's lack of self-preservation, but, ahh, he caused the problem to begin with, intentionally even. And despite their leader getting attacked, the other members of the committee hang back, watching.

"Oi, oi. Can't you see I'm looking out for your sake," Hoshino says. There's an odd, flat quality to his voice. His eyes are probably pretty scary, but Tsunayoshi is bent over, and Haru doesn't know what fear even is.

"Haru isn't so stupid she can't tell when someone's just causing trouble," Haru says, so flat and sharp in return that something goes still inside of Tsunayoshi. Ahh. Of course she'd learn that kind of thing from the mother she loves so much. Her foot is still in the air, perfectly still and perfectly coiled to strike out with the full strength of her calf and thigh. It's the kind of thing that Tsunayoshi would hate to be hit with.

That school of hers is certainly terrifying.

"Hmph." Hoshino's hand unclenches, and he doesn't even shove Tsunayoshi when he lets go. "You kids aren't cute in the least. Try to get married and I'll firebomb the shrine."

Isn't that a bit ironic for someone with the name 'Hoshino,' Tsunayoshi wonders; he'd seen how it's spelled, after all.

It isn't until Hoshino has passed by the ring of committee members and they've peeled away to follow that Haru lowers her foot to the ground. She hadn't even wobbled once. Her eyes are oddly hazel as she looks to Tsunayoshi, the lingering frown she'd had about Hoshino only deepening. It abruptly transforms into a pinched pout, Haru crossing her arms across her chest and looking far more upset than angry.

Ah - Haru's troubled face. Tsunayoshi flinches in the face of it, anxiously grasping at the front of his shirt.
"If Tsunayoshi-san is getting bullied-" Haru says.

"It's not that!" Tsunayoshi yelps, interrupting her in an explosive flail. It's not entirely that, but the idea that Haru is still worried about him even though he - not entirely, at first, maybe, intentionally hid the fact that he'd gotten tangled up into something at his school… well, it makes his stomach hurt. "Hoshino-san wasn't entirely wrong in the first place? It's just that Kyoko-chan's way of showing it is to try signing me up for the Disciplinary Committee."

Come to think of it, Tsunayoshi doesn't think anyone can 'sign up' for the Disciplinary Committee, which really raises the question as to where Kyoko got the application forms. Did she make them herself? What a terrifying woman.

"Hahi? Some girl- 'Kyoko-chan'... she's trying to get you into the Disciplinary Committee run by that shaggy beast?"

Tsunayoshi startles, starting at Haru. No, he forgot. The most terrifying woman is standing right there in front of him. There's nothing scarier than a person capable of comprehending how badly they were outclassed and by exactly how much, but was still determined to throw themselves into the fray, anyway.

Kyoko at least has some ability to chose the path of least resistance.

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"It's just like in the movies," Haru exclaims, clearly completely over the moon with events as they're preceding.

"Why is this my life?" Tsunayoshi frets, ignoring the way his arm is being yanked about by the excited girl clinging to it. He should have realized that even more than just Haru finding out, things couldn't possibly continue this way. Whatever initial relief that the Boxing Club had found in their captain reliably being distracted with trying to recruit Tsunayoshi, and that mostly being kept under control by Kyoko and Saitoh, there was no way they were going to put up with their strongest member being permanently sidetracked.

"Lend us Sawada!" a sizable portion of the Boxing Club shouts loudly. At least there are no signs. The Disciplinary Committee are too well trained to shout back, but the idea of them handing over anything, even someone they don't even want, to someone else is obviously ludicrous in their eyes. A few make rude gestures back. There's a lot of sneering.

The fact that neither Hibari or Kusakabe are in attendance is probably the only reason why it's happening, honestly.

"I specifically didn't want a club fight breaking out over this," Tsunayoshi moans, tuning to hide his face in Haru's shoulder. She adjusts to the position easily, only bouncing a little bit and otherwise shaking a cheerleader's pom-pom with her other hand. He isn't sure where she got it from, and doesn't particularly care.

What appears to be a brewing gang war hadn't started out that way. Haru had skipped her clubs again to show up at the gates as Nami Middle let out, apparently, which wouldn't have done her any good since Tsunayoshi never made it that far these days anyway. Although he's never tried actually hiding from Hibari, given that he'd asked and entrusted himself to Hibari's 'tender' mercies, Tsunayoshi isn't above trying to take absurd routes to avoid Ryohei.

It's not Ryohei's fault, he's also decided. The level of persistence that Ryohei has is far above
normal, going way past 'understandable confusion' and into 'complete denial,' but Tsunayoshi is fairly certain that on some level, Ryōhei is lonely. It's an odd thought to have about a guy with such loyal kohai and an a doting younger sister, but all Tsunayoshi has to do is remember the way it took almost half of Ryōhei's club to hold him back, and the way Saitoh admitted unhappily that none of them could last against him.

If the only one able to present himself as peer to Ryōhei is Hibari, who hates to be around others and had his own club to preside over besides, then isn't it natural for Ryōhei to be lonely? He's not the kind of person who wants to sit as King of the Mountain.

That doesn't excuse him trying to get Tsunayoshi anywhere near that mountain, though. A *peaceful life!* If Tsunayoshi sets the first foot on that mountain - if he tries to attack someone for real - then it's going to quickly get to the point where someone will get hurt. Someone will die. It could be Tsunayoshi, because that thing inside him? Once it's provoked, he can't stand down.

He doesn't want to hurt anyone, let alone kill them, but: *ahh.* If there's no other way to stop them, then that's what he'll do. Again and again and again. Without hesitation, without thought. He won't even cry about it afterwards.

Someone like that isn't the kind of person that Ryōhei would want to stand beside, is the point he's making here. It's not Ryōhei's fault that he hasn't actually seen Tsunayoshi to understand that truth yet.

Only six people have *seen* Tsunayoshi, and the only one who is still alive is the one for whom he did it to begin with.

So, even though Tsunayoshi had taken the long way around in an attempt to avoid another round of trying to make excuses to an exuberant boxer, who was hardly so crass as to either attack him outside a ring or press his suit after almost three weeks of rejection - it had somehow ended up like this. Someone had clearly recognized Haru (not entirely a surprise) and directed her to the back courtyard where Tsunayoshi had ended up cornered. Initially by the boxing team, quickly backed up by the Disciplinary Committee, Tsunayoshi is feeling more like a stray cat caught in the middle of two dog packs fighting over who gets to chase him up a tree.

At least he has Haru, he thinks.

At the center of the conflict is Hoshino and Saitoh, predictably; Hoshino is Kusakabe's direct underling, after all, and Saitoh seems to take handling Ryōhei just about as seriously as Kyoko does. Though they all attend the same school, the Disciplinary Committee has a rather singular look which contrasts strictly with the appearance of the Boxing Club, and the two temporary leaders embody it themselves.

Hoshino has that worrying flatness to his eyes again which made the odd green of them even more apparent than normal, his face expressionless as if Saitoh were no more interesting than a strange bug where it shouldn't be. He had the awkward height and shoulder width that wasn't uncommon in Namimori, although the genes for it had obviously missed Tsunayoshi by miles, and stood above Saitoh's narrow and more compact build with the threat of being more than capable of withstanding any certified and regulation technique that his opponent might be able to throw at him.

Saitoh, opposite of him, meets his flat, emotionless regard with fire and fury. His teeth bared in less of a snarl and more of a grimace, gritted together, his brow buckled and his nose wrinkled with real, sincere antipathy. He would obviously like nothing better than to beat Hoshino into the ground, if it were possible without tainting his idea of honor. It's completely alien and uncomfortable on the face of someone that Tsunayoshi had become accustomed to thinking of as a
"The Disciplinary Committee has no right to decree the actions of someone who isn't even a member," Saitoh says, enunciating clearly despite his nearly-frothing fury.

"The Disciplinary Committee presides over all students in that we seek as always to uplift every student to a higher standard of both conduct and social responsibility," Hoshino points out tonelessly. "Do you disagree?"

Even without his empty stare, it's obvious that disagreement would equate death.

"Do you disagree that it would be to Sawada's benefit and enrichment to join the Boxing Club?" Saitoh demands right back. His teeth aren't actually unusually sharp, but he certainly gives the impression of a snarling, snapping wolf.

"In accordance to Club Regulations, sections C, part 4.b, the Boxing Club is already at maximum capacity for a sports club competing at district levels," Hoshino drawls. "Before you can add more members to your ranks, you'll have to move on to national levels."

Saitoh clenches his hands so tight that his knuckles turn white. "By Namimori law, no school teams are allowed to participate outside of district!"

"A pity." His flat green eyes might have been a cat's considering a particularly resilient mouse. "Even if you were to kick someone out, Sawada would still have to complete and turn in an application form."

"As if we'll have to," Saitoh says only.

"Oh," Haru says in an aside. "Sasagawa-kun will be moving schools next year, and probably other club members, too."

"Ah," Tsunayoshi says, a bit surprised. That was right - Ryohei and Hibari in particular, but a few other members of both clubs were all upperclassmen, and after the break, would be moving on to high school. On second thought, won't that leave Kusakabe in a lurch? He only runs the Disciplinary Committee for Hibari's sake, after all. Would that leave Hoshino in charge, then?

Stepping on people's faces aside, Hoshino isn't awful, he supposes. And while he's made his opinion of Tsunayoshi hanging around the Disciplinary Committee clear enough, that won't be a problem with Hibari at another school.

Suddenly, Tsunayoshi's stomach drops out from his ribcage and onto his feet. *Wait, how is Tsunayoshi supposed to handle Hibari being at another school?!*

He's more or less known he's had this weird attachment to being in Hibari's general vicinity, as frequently as possible as if to make up for the fact that the only time they actually interact is when Hibari tries to bite him to death. That's not going to be possible if they're going to separate schools! What kind of lengths will that force him to go to if he can't respect Hibari's wishes to not be crowded?!

_Tsunayoshi doesn't want to become the kind of scum that can't even listen to what other people want!_

"How is senpai going to beat discipline into my head if he's at another school?" he demands, looking desperately to Haru.
Although she looks a bit caught off guard at first, she quickly takes to looking at him like something small and dirty. "You really are dense, Tsunayoshi-san," she sighs wearily.

What does struggling to understand his homework have to do with staying in contact with Hibari? *Doesn't Haru understand he's in danger of becoming some kind of creepy offender?!*

About the time Tsunayoshi really started clutching at his hair in despair, regardless of the grip that Haru had on his arm, is when Hibari and Ryohei find the standoff going on behind their backs.

Predictably, they arrive from different directions. This isn't a day for the Boxing Club, so Ryohei isn't dressed for that, and additionally, he has Kyoko at his side. As for Hibari, having arrived via *leaping out the second story window of the school building*, he's come looking for Tsunayoshi, who flinches as the cold shadow of Hibari falls upon him, even though Hibari's sharp eyes are narrowed at the spectacle before them.

Crap. He'd gotten distracted by the sudden standoff and then Haru! He'd meant to dodge out and faithfully attend his gofer duties since it kept the worst of the students off his case! Not even the Boxing Club would interfere with Tsunayoshi while he was carrying out DC duties!

"Oi! What's going on here?" Ryohei says. Well, 'says' for Ryohei, which is for a normal person a very loud shout.

Saitoh and the entire Boxing Club look very much like cats that have upended an entire vase of water on themselves. It's obvious that there's no way they were comfortable owning up to the fact that they'd been trying to get the DC to give them Tsunayoshi - as a manager, if nothing else. Even if the idea was just to anchor Ryohei back to the club room, it's an awful idea; Tsunayoshi wouldn't know the first thing about how to be a club manager!

Honestly, Tsunayoshi would have been more worried about the ploy if it hadn't been for the fact that he's pretty sure Kyoko would quickly find a way to fill the position herself before it became a problem.

"You should really keep your club under control," Hoshino says flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. "They've been interfering with another student's school life, and may even be hindering his efforts towards excellence."

*What efforts toward excellence!* Then again, maybe they were referring to his work on behalf of the Committee recently. It was just too weird that Hoshino of all people was the one protecting Tsunayoshi in this fashion so soon after trying to cause problems in his household. That guy's skill for compartmentalizing is kind of scary.

It's not Hibari's way to approve of others actions, but you could see him casually marking the Committee off his list of people to bite to death as he turned his attention on Ryohei and the Boxing Club. Saitoh swallows hard, but steels himself grimly. His jaw is still too firm for Tsunayoshi to write off as simple grim determination, though. His gut twinges.

"I extremely apologize!"

A ripple of shock and shame goes through the Boxing Club as Ryohei announces this, abruptly folding himself into a complete right angle with the depth of his bow toward Hibari. As much fighting and back and forth and shouting on Ryohei's side as went on during the last few weeks while the two clubs clashed, not once had Tsunayoshi ever sensed even an ounce of ill will from Ryohei.
"My underlings were entirely out of line in their behavior! I will extremely correct it!" he continues.

At his side, Kyoko gives the entire club a Very Disappointed Look, which seems to crush them at least as much as their own beloved captain having to take responsibility for their reckless actions. "Please forgive the club for this transgression, Hibari-san," she adds, clasping her hands together with what is, indeed, a very apologetic look.

The quick capitulation only seems to annoy Saitoh further, looking as if his pride has been injured.

"Oh?" Hibari says, easily spotting Saitoh's seething eyes. Although he hadn't leapt down with his tonfa in hand, it's a quick thing to reach back to where they're holstered to his belt under the cape of his jacket. His calloused fingers are strong and steady and surprisingly light in their touch to the body of the weapons.

Saitoh stills, his chest heaving slightly. Not even Ryohei can stand against Hibari, but he looks tempted somehow. And then his eyes meet Tsunayoshi's, of all things, and after a second Saitoh looks away and bows his prideful head.

Hibari clicks his tongue in disappointment, but as much fun as he has scattering the 'crowding herbivores,' in this case it doesn't seem to appeal. "The Committee has approved no permits to gather during these hours. This assembly is against school regulations."

As if to say 'what assembly' - and in response to the heavy tension of Hibari's battlelust - a great deal of the gathered students immediately scatter. A fair number of them are even Committee members, who have abruptly remembered they were supposed to be on patrol during these hours. It doesn't seem like it was all that long ago that Hibari would have descended upon them in a fury, not waiting to hear their reasons or listen to Ryohei take responsibility.

Speaking of, Ryohei isn't so thickheaded that he doesn't take advantage of the unexpected reprieve; there's nothing he really likes about fighting Hibari, after all. Kyoko is a little slower to follow, a slight frown on her face as she - she's looking at Haru - but her brother has the keen sense of being the eldest and easily catches her and pulls her along.

Next to him, Haru is staring after Kyoko right back, a bit of a complicated expression on her face. Tsunayoshi feels something strange and unsteady and unhappy in his stomach about it.

"You."

Oh no.

The earlier temperance is nowhere to be seen as Hibari turns on Tsunayoshi and Haru, eyes narrowed intorazored slits, tonfa fit into his palms like extensions of his limbs, the severe slash of his mouth curved down. The sudden increase of his battlelust feels rather like being at ground zero for some kind of bomb going off.

"Trespassers and the tardy are to be bitten to death."

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"And Haru still didn't get a chance to meet the mysterious Sasagawa siblings!" Haru complains many hours later in Tsunayoshi's bedroom. He's dragged the low table out, as well as the first aid kit, and now they're sitting around it trying to lick their wounds. For a moment when they'd arrived home, Tsunayoshi had thought for sure that he was about to be killed. Nana had forgotten to tell him that the Muiras were over for dinner.
No, that's not just Nana - that's Haru, too, he thinks somewhat crossly. He should have known to be suspicious when she'd appeared to have skipped her club activities. It's not like anything could have possibly have gone differently if he had known, unless he'd been able to drag Haru away immediately upon Hibari's arrival, but-

All the same, arriving battered with a battered Haru and being delivered into Yekaterina's tender mercies had lead to a kind of life-flashing-before-his-eyes event that Tsunayoshi was surprised had never happened before now. Though he reached the other side of that the entire show without revelations or epiphanies, since he'd already been all too aware that he was a pathetic, useless kid who is capable of awful things.

Yekaterina, unimpressed, had banished them until dinner was ready, and Tsunayoshi somehow escaped with his life through strange and unexpected mercies.

"There's nothing really all that mysterious about them," Tsunayoshi says, swabbing at his skinned elbow. "Ryohei-senpai is the excitable and impulsive but basically responsible type who'll protect things with everything he's got. Kyoko's been lending her help to his endeavors recently, despite the fact that she should have her hands full with Mochida Kensuke, as they're - one-sidedly - dating." He pauses, reviewing what he knows of that situation thanks to just attending the same school, and the people involved. Mochida is the loud sort who can't quite help but involved himself in Tsunayoshi's affairs when the opportunity arises, and Kyoko is the idol, so naturally their business is everyone's business.

"Come to think of it," he adds, "Mochida will probably make a nuisance of himself soon." He wilts a bit, groaning pathetically. Of course Mochida would. Just about the time that Ryohei might have been calming down and really understanding the fact that Tsunayoshi doesn't like to fight, something else would come up. "A peaceful life is too much to ask for," he moans into the table top.

Haru hums thoughtfully, tilting her head at him with her brow pinched. "This campaign to get that shaggy beast to recognize you really has grown a lot of heads. Like a hydra!" Dropping the bandages, she mimes… something… with her arms. "Not to worry, though!" She straightens, propping her knuckles on her hips. "Haru is here to fight beside you every step of the way, Tsunayoshi-san!"

Tsunayoshi starts to soften, the way he often does at these kinds of declarations from Haru no matter how strange or alarming he used to find them. He's only human. Even if it doesn't make any sense to him, the idea that someone supports him or at least wants to is the kind of thing that he's going to find touching after he's stopped being confused and frightened by it.

"Although," Haru adds, looking at him unblinkingly, "for people Haru hasn't heard about before now, Tsunayoshi-san sure knows a lot about them."

"Ah!" The clamp he'd been holding the cottonball with slips out of his grasp. "W-well! They-they've been involving themselves, so-"

In the end, the reason why he's been hiding all of this from Haru is this: Haru has declared herself his girlfriend, and even though he's told her that she's not, Tsunayoshi used to watch Kyoko. Although that was a different him: a person to whom something bad was happening, who came to school solely to set his eyes on Kyoko's shining light, who was envious and wistful about it. And that person doesn't really exist anymore, but he's not quite sure that Haru will believe it. She never met the Tsunayoshi that was before That incident, so he doesn't think she'll understand that Tsunayoshi has no interest in involving Kyoko in their affairs anymore.
But he also remembers Hoshino using his secrets against him and having to say weird things about events he barely had a grasp on the fringes of in self-defense. He would have rather kept his mouth shut about the situation with Saitoh until he'd come to understand what it was about Hoshino and Hibari that made the normally easy-going boxer turn into a cornered animal.

"W-well," he says again, twisting his fingers together in his lap and avoiding Haru's gaze. "S-some time ago, when I'd first entered middle school, I-" He hesitates, and stumbles over it, flustered and uncertain. "Back then, I had no idea about doing things for myself, you know," he excuses. "Of course someone like that would do something like fall for the Idol of the school. Of course they would. Everyone had."

Haru is silent and still on her knees in front of him, and he can't bring himself to look.

"I wasn't even doing school work," he admits anxiously. "I thought - it was something like 'living is the same as being dead,' more or less. Or no, being dead was probably better, because the dead don't really suffer. It can't be as exhausting as being alive, right? It can't be as disappointing to others. If you're dead, no one really expects anything from you and so no one can be disappointed. Except that I hadn't quite gotten the power to do something about that.

"So, I - I guess what I'm saying is, the only reason I even left my room every morning back then, the only reason I woke up and even tried going to school, was for the purpose of seeing Kyoko-chan smile. It's the kind of thing that made even someone like I used to be feel a little bit better about everything. Like being alive wasn't so hard."

(Or at least: that's how he'd explained it to himself. But it hadn't been anything that kind or gentle at all, had it?

What had he been thinking, standing in the shadows and staring after Kyoko's back, and the warmth that seemed to radiate off of her? He'd wanted to warm his fingers up on it. He'd wanted it for himself.

'Fall for the idol.' It would have been natural, wouldn't it have? Anyone would accept that explanation, but-)

The person that used to do those things wouldn't have been able to think back on those actions like this, he thinks. Back then, he'd been the kind of scum that relaxed the most by lying even to himself. Especially to himself.

How could he have ever expected anyone to accept him when he couldn't accept himself?

Ahh, but. Tsunayoshi knows now. Even if it's stressful to know, he does, and now there are people around him, aren't there? He's the kind of scum that plays at being useless and then eventually at some point uses his own two hands to relieve others of the burden of living disappointing lives as scum-not-even-worthy-of-being-stepped-on.

Being dead is still probably easier, and still the best way to avoid disappointing anyone or becoming stressed about things, and he still doesn't have the strength to do anything about that - but it feels less awful these days. It's easier to ignore what a bad kid he is. He hasn't surrendered his right to live as a human being like those men who had put their hands on his mother.

If he hasn't yet forfeited his life, then he might as well do something with it, he supposes.

"I've only learned more about Ryohei recently," he adds, a much easier topic to speak about. "But that's-"
"You've never once disappointed me," Haru says loudly, snatching his hands out of his lap to hold them between her own. Her gymnastics clubs have really given her a strong grip. She's come up onto her knees and partially around the corner of the table, staring down at him with an urgent, fiery determination.

Well - that would be nice if it were true, he thinks, but he only says, "H-Haru?"

"Never once would Haru's life have been improved if Tsunayoshi-san weren't alive," she continues fiercely. Forget 'hazel' - there's an odd green light to the eyes he's always reflected on as being the color of old bloodstains. "Who would have been Haru's Prince? Who would have come over to Haru's house for dinner? You can't leave Mama in this house all alone!"

It's a bit overwhelming to be met with such ferocity after bringing himself to talk about those old - and not so old - thoughts he used to have. "Don't worry, Haru," he says, and sounds strangely gentle to his own ears. "I'm not planning on going anywhere."

Her anxiety doesn't lessen as easily as that. The heart that she has hidden, even from him, is strong and passionate. He hadn't thought it through while making his excuses; he doesn't think she'll let something like this go for a long time.

She'll probably die if left alone, too, he thinks suddenly. Ahh. What a bad trait to share with someone - even though it works out well for him, doesn't it?

Anyway, he's never been strong enough to do anything about it. He's so weak he'll sooner kill someone else before dying himself. Haru doesn't have anything to worry about at all.

"Besides," he adds, "even if I still liked her, Kyoko-chan definitely hates me, so it wouldn't matter."

Haru huffs. "Kyoko-chan was the girl with the loud boy, right?" she asks, pulling back her hands to tap her finger against her jaw. When he nods, she snorts and gives her head a shake. "Tsunayoshi-san doesn't know the first thing about girls. I bet Kyoko-chan is the kind of girl who only hates people who hurt her friends or her family." She straightens slightly, blinking widely at a middle distance. "Actually, Kyoko-chan is a bit like Tsunayoshi-san, isn't she? What would Tsunayoshi-san be thinking right now if he were Kyoko-chan?"

Tsunayoshi looks at her askance, because in what way exactly were the two of them anything at all alike? Kyoko has certainly never thought the things that Tsunayoshi thinks, nor done the things he's done. But if he thinks of it in the context of someone who simply doesn't hate others the way he's seen kids at school take an abhorrence to each other - to draw the line at becoming an actual threat to family and friends-

"There's no way I'm a threat to Kyoko-chan," he says, frowning at Haru.

Haru looks deeply unimpressed. "Who here is probably the expert on how girls think, Tsunayoshi-san?"

That just sounds like she's saying that Tsunayoshi thinks like a girl. Does he give that kind of impression? How is he supposed to feel about something like that?

"A threat to her brother then - but I don't even want to fight Ryohei-senpai!" he protests unhappily. Actually, what Haru is implying here seems to be making a lot of sense to him, despite the way part of him tries to refuse to accept parts of it. Just what about Tsunayoshi in particular is so threatening?! He can't be sorry about the kind of person he is when it was necessary at the time; as much as he hates it, as much as he didn't want to, it had to be done. Would she have preferred for
Tsunayoshi to stand by and let Nana get hurt?

Although he surmises that the answer would be 'of course not,' he really can't see himself approaching Kyoko and putting it that way, either. It's only natural that if she can tell that Tsunayoshi is capable of that much that she wouldn't want her overly enthusiastic brother fighting him and accidentally pushing him to that point. That's something the both of them can agree on.

"What should I do then?" he asks Haru, since his opinion about Ryohei has to be obvious to her at least.

"Hmm. The best answer here is probably to be patient, I think," she says with a thoughtful frown. "Tsunayoshi-san doesn't warm up easily! It took forever before you liked Haru-chan. Kyoko-chan is probably like that, too. There's no reason for the two of you to be enemies!"

That apparently settles the matter for Haru, but Tsunayoshi isn't so sure. As much as he wants to argue about being 'slow to warm up' to people, she might have a point after all. Being told to leave things alone and let them progress at their natural pace isn't exactly what he expects or wants to hear, but it doesn't seem like bad advice, either.

Besides, more importantly: he has to survive dinner with Haru's parents tonight after bringing their daughter back all covered with dirt and bruises. That's the more troubling thing by far.

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Chapter End Notes

* Unless I'm mistaken, this is the first time Byakuran shifts from Tsu-kun to 'Nayo-tan' (from Tsunayoshi). '-tan' is a cutesy way of saying '-chan' basically. Byakuran is being intentionally obnoxious by using it.

* Hoshino honestly just really likes Haru. She's got guts and goes her own way. Now if only she had better tastes in friends lmao.

* Namimori law is there to protect unknowing idiots from breaking Omerta. Because it's Florida for mafia, the concentration of strong flame-capable people is incredibly high - all these assassins and mafiosi who bring new blood into the town when they retire survived long enough to retire in the first place. So Namimori Law prevents their sports teams from competing against outsiders and accidentally revealing something dangerous.

Chapter Eight Non Canonical Character List:
* Saitoh Itsuki - a Boxing Club member and Ryohei's right hand. Kyoko often trusts him to look after Ryohei because he's diligent. Actually a bit socially clever; he prostrated himself to Tsunayoshi to beg for leniency against Hibari when Tsunayoshi got shanghaied to join the club. Despite being an easy-going happy-go-lucky type, he seems to have a serious grudge against Hoshino and was even willing to face certain death from Kyoya due to these feelings.

* Hoshino Yoshio - Disciplinary Committee's Third in Command. A stone-faced
sadist. Acts on own initiative to increase the Committee's power and position and protect Kyoya's interests despite having a poor opinion of him. Likes Haru but thinks Tsunayoshi is a self-defeating idiot.
Chapter Summary

for almost twenty years now

a reliable adult appears!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9 : for almost twenty years now

It would be nice if because Hibari and Ryohei closed the matter, all of Tsunayoshi's problems would be solved - but in the first place, it wasn't about the clubs. Tsunayoshi's problems are far from over yet.

Which isn't to say that the clubs don't back off: they do. Ryohei stops trying to get Tsunayoshi to join as if loudly extolling the virtues and adventures of the Boxing Club would ever appeal to someone like him, and though Saitoh still comes by to share a friendly word with him from time to time, he never particularly wanted Tsunayoshi to join to begin with.

Due to just Ryohei's actions alone, Tsunayoshi's problems with the Boxing Club dry right up, and without anyone trying to poach the Committee's free gofer, the DC members themselves go back to generally ignoring Tsunayoshi's existence.

It sure is nice to be a lesser being not worthy of being noticed most of the time, Tsunayoshi reflects.

Despite the way things quiet down from the noisy chaos of those last few weeks of school, Tsunayoshi still feels strangely content. A part of it must be the way Hibari doesn't uptake his usual hunting games, another the way both he and Kyoko relax as more days pass and Ryohei seems to mind his restrictions. The fact that his 'household' remains undisturbed despite his concerns about how Haru would view his twisted past with Kyoko is a large part of it.

Haru is probably not the sort to issue some kind of challenge or duel to a non-combatant that kind of way, but Tsunayoshi doesn't mind not having confirmation if it avoids the whole problem entirely. Even if he doesn't want to involve Kyoko in his affairs, he's not sure how he'd respond if Haru had tried.

After all, Kyoko isn't a threat. She's not a threat and she isn't scum, too low to be worthy of stepping on, so there's no way Tsunayoshi could have just stood by if she were being attacked. It'd get so incredibly messy.

Yeah, Tsunayoshi is grateful it hadn't even seemed to occur to Haru to see Kyoko that way, as hard as she is to dissuade from her notions.

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"Tsu-kun! Visitors!"

Tsunayoshi startles a bit, fumbling the controller rather magnificently and managing to punch every other button but the pause button. A big, fat GAME OVER shows on the screen before he can manage it, and he plants his face into the floor in despair. At least he hadn't gotten too far. Haru and everything else had kept him too busy during the school year to really play his video games, and he's gotten out of practice.

"Coming!" he calls back, dragging himself up off the floor with no little reluctance.

It's a bit of an odd time to be having visitors, actually. It's only the first Tuesday after the end of the school year, and he'd already - accidentally, while trying to subtly probe Hibari for ways to keep in touch - verified that there would be no club activities until the week before school started once more, in order to organize the usual start-of-the-year activities. Tsunayoshi hadn't believed for one second that this meant a cessation of the after-school patrolling the Committee members did, but Tsunayoshi's determined to find out how long he can tolerate not seeing Hibari at all.

(It's just - Tsunayoshi will get worried if he doesn't see Hibari. Hibari isn't the sort to wear a troubled face, nor is he the kind that can't do it for himself, but -

Ahh. But if it were as simple as biting his problems to death, Hibari would have already done it. It's not an obstacle if it's easily dealt with - even demons can't do everything on their own.

Tsunayoshi knows that better than most.)

It probably isn't Haru, either, or otherwise Nana would just have announced her or sent her up. Haru isn't forbidden in his room, after all, so long as they keep the door open for whatever reason. Besides, soon Yekaterina's vacation will be over with, so Haru is spending the first few weeks of spring vacation with her mother, and there's no way that Tsunayoshi would ever begrudge that. Just because he doesn't understand the feelings that Haru has toward the parent that keeps leaving her doesn't mean that he can't respect them.

He can't imagine would who come looking for him, unless it was someone like Saitoh or Kusakabe for some strange reason, so it's with a great deal of caution that Tsunayoshi comes downstairs.

Something faint, like smoke or wisps, curl in his chest and in his gut.

By the time he makes it to the door, Tsunayoshi isn't even surprised by who it is, despite the fact that it isn't anyone he would have normally predicted.

"Tsun-kun," Kyoko greets him brightly, more in the way the sun flashes off a glass window a blinds someone and makes them crash into things than a polite or soothing way, "Oniisan and I came by to make amends!"

"Huh?"

Judging by the frown on Ryohei's face, he doesn't entirely agree with his sister's explanation, but behind Tsunayoshi, Nana claps her hands together. "I'm sure it was only a misunderstanding! Tsu-kun, invite your friends in! Would you like a snack?"

Tsunayoshi cuts his mother a betrayed look, although he honestly expects nothing else out of her. She's so enamored with the idea of him making friends that he's pretty sure if she ever meets Hibari, she'll try pinching his cheek or something else equally dangerous. What is Tsunayoshi supposed to do if Hibari tries biting his mother to death?! Is that what they call a 'worst case scenario'?!
In light of that, he's actually a little relieved that it's Ryohei and Kyoko on his doorstep.

"Um, please come in," he says reluctantly, stepping back out of the way to hold the door open.

"Thank you! We'll be intruding for a little while," Kyoko says sweetly as she steps nimbly through the doorway. As excited as she seems to be here, Ryohei is definitely facing this as more of a matter of honor.

As a matter of fact, no sooner does Nana deliver them to the living room and provide them with snacks before bustling off to the kitchen - undoubtedly to listen in, if Tsunayoshi knows her at all, which he honestly wonders about sometimes - than does Ryohei abruptly plant his hands on his knees and fold into something kind of like a bow, as awkward as it is while sitting on a couch.

He ignores the high pitched startled noise that Tsunayoshi makes, saying, "From the one the most inconvenienced by the actions of myself and my underlings, I humbly beg forgiveness!"

"There's really no need for that!" Tsunayoshi protests loudly, not the least of which is because Kyoko is sitting next to him and delicately selecting a cookie off the platter Nana provided while radiating a kind of terrifying pressure.

His protests are easily steamrolled.

"It's obvious that my brother has caused you a lot of problems," Kyoko says, even as she scoots a drink in front of Ryohei so he either has to come out of his bow or risk getting it in his hair. "So it's only natural that we'd want to give reparations for that."

The way that Kyoko says 'reparations' sounds much less like an apology and much more like the kind of gift that would be troublesome to refuse. Tsunayoshi would very much like to be able to learn how to say it that way - it feels like it'd make his life a lot easier.

After all, what, exactly, is it that Kyoko is thinking that she'll do to him if he refuses? He's Dame-Tsuna, after all, and already considered a delinquent. He's the free gofer of the Committee. Hibari is the strongest fighter and it'll get on his nerves if Tsunayoshi's movements are hindered.

It's troublesome that Kyoko has discovered where he lives, but it's not particularly difficult information to find out. The Disciplinary Committee would know, and while Kusakabe would stand firm, the other members aren't so firm in their convictions if Kyoko were inclined to share her baking with them freely. A snack made with the blossoming idol's own hands? The Committee members have sold each other out for less.

So, he's not entirely sure what Kyoko could possibly do to him to become 'troublesome' if he refuses, but honestly Tsunayoshi isn't terribly inclined to refuse in the first place. He'd rather get along with everyone than fight them, and it would be good if he could learn a technique to use on people capable of grasping the situation at hand. Tsunayoshi can't just go around kicking everyone in the face regardless, after all.

There are really tall people in this world, and Tsunayoshi isn't growing anytime soon it seems.

"In what way?" he asks cautiously, as it seems unlikely that he'll get rid of them any other way.

Was it really only six or seven months ago that Tsunayoshi would have been overjoyed to have Kyoko in his living room? Although, remembering the kind of kid that he'd been back then, somehow he thinks that he either would have spent the entire time in his bedroom hyperventilating or basically falling all over himself and her. Dumping an entire drink on Kyoko's head by accident sounds like exactly the kind of thing that would have happened back then - and he probably would
have been too worried about himself to even notice if it had pissed her off at that.

Although, taking Kyoko's personality into consideration, he thinks it's more likely that Kyoko would have felt so sorry for him that she couldn't possibly find something like that annoying. Even though Tsunayoshi doesn't want to be at odds with her in any fashion, she's not a bad person; he doesn't understand why they have to be fighting at all. Going back to a relationship of mutual non interference would be for the best, wouldn't it?

"Sawada," Ryohei says passionately, "you mentioned that you had a kickboxing teacher! I'd like to humbly offer the assistance of my sensei!"

On some level it makes sense that Ryohei must have learned the art of boxing from someone in order to have become Nami Middle's top boxer and the captain of the club, but on the other-

"I really don't need something like that," Tsunayoshi blurts, trying to ward the blinding intensity that Ryohei is aiming his way with his palms. "I really did try several forms of martial arts before it was decided that kickboxing suited me best!"

"But don't you know?" Kyoko chimes in pleasantly, no less bright in her radiance. "It's very important to have balance in your life, Tsuna-kun."

"Kyoko is right! It doesn't matter if the foundation can withstand an earthquake if a tsunami can wash the house right off it!" Ryohei exclaims. He actually has an inside voice, which is the less confusing but more astonishing part of that. It's loud, of course, and as gravely as his shouts - his shouting actually tends to make a person overlook the scraping of his throat, which… might be part of the point. Who punched him there in the first place?

"I'm not Yamamoto, I'm not going to take a swing at a force of nature," Tsunayoshi says in disbelief.

He doesn't see why he should take them up on their offer at all. He hasn't almost killed anyone in months now, not even when Yekaterina pushed him on it, and he's feeling pretty secure in his ability to escape any more thugs. He'd allowed himself to be caught by the last set, simply when he got desperate and gave up upon realizing they had the only person he'd had left in this world.

"Yamamoto-kun aside, don't you think making friends at another dojo would be good?" Kyoko prods pleasantly.

Ah - is she still worried that he might become friends with her brother? Admittedly, now that he's not being terrorized and hunted by Ryohei, he sees more of his responsible side, which is - nice. Refreshing. Tsunayoshi thinks he could get along with Ryohei pretty well - but Kyoko had a point. There's no way that Tsunayoshi could possibly look after Ryohei and Haru at the same time; Hibari takes care of himself just fine without Tsunayoshi, that's all one-sided on Tsunayoshi's side, he knows that.

There's nothing about fighting that Tsunayoshi likes, other than the ability to make sure that Haru and himself are safe from the people that want to hurt him, and even though it's troublesome… ahh. If it'll bury the hatchet between him and Kyoko, if it'll make her feel better to think that he's just looking for some strong-armed thug to take his side - well. Tsunayoshi is capable of pretending as such.

"Alright, alright," Tsunayoshi sighs, his hands in the air still, as if being held at gunpoint. "I'll accept."
It's for the purpose of burying the hatchet, Tsunayoshi reminds himself sternly as Ryohei drags him into a boxing gym. It's Tsunayoshi's fault for not clarifying the point. Actually, no, he should have suspected as much giving that Ryohei is captain of the boxing club. Of course it's not a classic dojo, although it's certainly obvious that people are learning how to box here. Actually, Tsunayoshi feels a little relieved to see that people are really learning. They won't be inconveniencing anyone this way, which - given the situation, was entirely likely.

Tsunayoshi figures that it can't really be all that surprising that there's an actual gym that specializes in American-style boxing in Namimori. There may as well be. Hayashi-sensei taught a specifically Japanese style of kickboxing, but to help out various students, he wasn't above coaching them regarding all kinds of styles. And after seeing Haru do western style hogtying, Tsunayoshi really has remembered just what a mixed bag Namimori is.

"Sawada," Ryohei says suddenly, turning on him seriously and taking his shoulders in both hands. His eyes are stormy gray and seriously way too intense, and Tsunayoshi uncomfortably flashes back to their first encounter, his cheeks heating. Ryohei appears to take as much notice of Tsunayoshi's discomfort as he ever does, saying earnestly: "You must have rules at your dojo, but all the same! Listen to me explain the rules of the Boxing Ring!"

"O - okay?"

Despite the build up, the rules that Ryohei lays out for him are fairly common sense: listen to the master, behave as though one is training a weapon, don't be prideful. These are rules that Tsunayoshi is already familiar with from the other various dojo that he'd visited, even though only Hayashi's stuck - ah. Come to think of it, Hayashi-sensei is very tolerant of backtalk and seems to find Tsunayoshi's usual protests amusing.

There won't be room for that here, because the other rules that Ryohei tell him basically amount to: don't talk. No arguing with the master, no bragging, no questions: just do as the master says.

"Isn't there something off with that?" Tsunayoshi wonders, and furthermore if Ryohei's difficulty in taking his word at face value might not have something to do with it.

"It's training the body! Creating automatic reflexes so your body moves without hesitation!" Although Ryohei is boundlessly excited by the concept, he seems to sense Tsunayoshi's trepidation, squeezing his shoulders between those two rough, bandaged hands. "At higher levels of skill, fights move too fast for conscious planning. If you can trust your body to defend you without thought, then your mind can analyze the situation and see its way out."

Tsunayoshi blinks. Ah. He's starting to get the feeling that despite the reason he even allowed Nana to rope him into something as stressful as self-defense classes, Hayashi-sensei has been going easy on him. No - more than that. Should he say 'sensei' if he's really being let down like that?

Ryohei releases his shoulders, straightening up - he's just enough taller than Tsunayoshi that to properly get in his face about it, he'd had to bend his knees a bit. He clenches his fist in the air between them, forearm cording in an alarming way that suggests that Tsunayoshi has been very lucky that Ryohei hasn't actually tried fighting him yet. Curling his other hand over his bicep, Ryohei looks at him straight in the eye, intensely. "You're trying to protect someone, right?" he says. He doesn't wait for an answer, turning his eyes on his fist. "I got the sense your resolve was something as extreme as that. Your methods are kind of halfhearted, but -" he scratches the back of his head awkwardly. "It's the resolve I can understand! Kyoko said you weren't the kind to understand people with your fists, so I should try to use my words to get the point across."
"Oh," Tsunayoshi says, a bit stunned. He blinks again. "Um -" He scratches the edge of his jaw with one uncertain finger, avoiding Ryohei's gaze. It's a bit insulting to have his methods called 'halfhearted' when Ryohei hasn't even seen the things that Tsunayoshi can become capable of if it's required, but it won't hurt things to go along with it for now. Ryohei isn't wrong that Tsunayoshi has been kind of coasting along recently.

Although speaking of reflexes, and bodies that move without hesitation and without consulting the brain - is that really okay for someone like him? Who had never even held anything more dangerous than a stick in his life, but somehow took a gun in hand without flinching and ended lives with it?

(Under the stink of sweat, he thinks he smells it: metallic and salty. He thinks he still hears it, under the grunts of exertion. Wounded and helpless and frightened. Ahh. Some part of him had wanted to help them despite everything they'd done, despite them surrendering their rights to live as human beings. Next time, he'll do his best to reduce the suffering they'd gone through.

He's not like them, after all.)

Before Tsunayoshi can figure out a way of answering Ryohei's assumptions, the man he'd noticed approaching plants his elbow into Ryohei's thick skull hard enough to make the older boy fold. Tsunayoshi can't even be embarrassed by the high, alarmed noise that escapes him without permission, even as he recoils a few steps; he'd sensed no hostile intent from the man at all. Had Ryohei really let his guard down so much?

"So! This is the scrub you brought to me to learn?" the man demands.

If the blow had stunned Ryohei, the man's words bring him back to life, at full volume. "Extremely so!" he shouts, straightening against the pressure of the man's elbow on his skull. Not that the man seems to be trying very hard to keep Ryohei down, but he definitely is exerting some pressure that Ryohei is pushing back against without struggling. "Shi-oji! This is my classmate, Sawada Tsunayoshi!"

Tsunayoshi is going to end up going under another name if it will stop people from reacting that way to 'Sawada,' he thinks. The easy going air around the man changes suddenly, and the vague awareness he'd had of Tsunayoshi sharpens as he looks over him again.

It isn't narrow and unfriendly the way Yekaterina's attention had been, but - ah, Tsunayoshi is willing to bet that Ryohei referring to this guy as an uncle isn't just because he's too old to properly call 'senpai.' All the same, he doesn't seem to be the sensei of the dojo, either - this seems to be more American style, in that people who want to use the facilities do as they please without being led unless it's one-on-one. The idea of coming under this guy's attention one-on-one is a bit worrisome.

"I-it's nice to meet you?" Tsunayoshi ventures uncertainly.

"Sawada-kun, huh," the guy says, still staring at him without much of an expression at all. He still hasn't removed his elbow from Ryohei's head, who hasn't seemed to notice anything at all special about his uncle's attention. They're as different as night and day - almost literally. Ryohei's likely albinism aside, the man is leaner in build with skin as dark as night and long hair that's been twisted into dozens of braids. "Shioya Tadamasa."

He holds out one bandaged hand. It's a lot like Ryohei's; powerful and calloused and almost uncomfortably warm. It closes around Tsunayoshi much smaller hand and doesn't even try to crush it, although it feels like it would be easy for him.
Ahh. Ryohei's right, after all. Just because Tsunayoshi doesn't have to fight against Hibari, who doesn't even want to kill him, doesn't mean there aren't strong people out there who Tsunayoshi doesn't know about yet. Just because Shioya doesn't want to crush him doesn't mean he couldn't. If he had, what would Tsunayoshi have done?

*What if someone like this threatened his mother? Or Haru? Could Hibari-senpai fight off someone like this?* Tsunayoshi can't answer any of those questions and it makes his chest uncomfortably hot. Something licks at the back of his throat: sulfur and smoke.

"Ryo-chan, go get some gear for this guy, will you?" Shioya says, not letting go of Tsunayoshi's hand even as he lifts his elbow from Ryohei's head. Ryohei - extremely - leaves to do so like he's some kind of command-controlled robot, seemingly pleased with himself. "Now, Sawada-kun," Shioya says, looking down at Tsunayoshi with dark, unfathomable eyes. "What exactly are you intentions toward that kid?"

*Does this guy think Ryohei wants to date him or something?!* Regardless of Tsunayoshi's strange notions - which are naturally onesided in the first place! - neither Kyoko nor Haru would stand for it! He's only even here at this gym because he wants to decrease tensions between Kyoko and himself, so that's impossible no matter how you look at it.

Anyway, that question really should be asked in reverse.

"Ah - this is just to satisfy a matter of... 'honor?' I think?" Tsunayoshi says, flailing the hand that Shioya doesn't have grasped in the air.

"Is that so," Shioya says mildly, "and you have no plans of looking after him? Because his mother might need to give her decision first."

*Ryohei is the upperclassman in this situation!* This is all entirely backwards! And if his own mother weren't deaf to the atmosphere, she would have a lot more to say about this than anyone else's mother put together!

Tsunayoshi despises whatever it is about 'Sawada' that makes people act this way. He feels like he's being judged for the sins of the father that's never around to pay reparations in the first place. It's completely unfair.

"Please forgive me, Shioya-san," Tsunayoshi says; the formal polite speech that comes out would almost startle him, because he's never put a great deal of focus into remembering how to use it in the first place, "I have no intentions of being responsible for Sasagawa-kun, even if his mother or his sister were inclined to surrender his care to me." Just how ludicrous the entire thing is strikes him, and he averts his gaze sulkily. "Kyoko-chan in particular refuses to the point of not getting that I don't want it in the first place."

Even if he doesn't understand what it is about him that makes people react to him this way, arguing against it won't get him anywhere, so he can only answer to their accusations like he understands any of it in the first place.

(Or doesn't he? Even if Yekaterina had never brought it up, hadn't he thought it first himself: he'll become capable of anything if something bad happens to Haru. To Hibari. He's already gone so far for the mother that tried to protect him in her own way, even though he doesn't understand the first thing about her nature.

If he doesn't tread carefully, then seeing Ryohei get attacked in the ring will begin to trouble him, too.
Ahh. Someone like him, who isn't good for anything other than that awful feeling that devoured him then, should be careful about just who they allow close to them. Sooner or later, those feelings will come into conflict, won't they?)

"Pfft!" Shioya laughs in his face, although not particularly loudly or unkindly. "I should be insulted on that kid's behalf," he says, releasing Tsunayoshi's hand, "but you're on the nose about that. Well, I'd say 'nice to meet you' except only the future can really decide that."

One of these days, someone will be straightforward when threatening Tsunayoshi about things he doesn't understand, and he's going to end up reading something strange into it just because he won't be expecting it. Why do these adults think that he's someone worth threatening anyway? If they could sense just what he's capable of, then shouldn't they be working harder to make sure he stays away from these kids they care about?

He really doesn't get any of this at all, but he goes ahead and smiles awkwardly at Shioya anyway.

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Among the many, many reasons why Tsunayoshi doesn't want to 1) fight Ryohei, 2) be 'responsible' for him in whatever way Kyoko and Shioya mean which would require Ryohei's mother's permission, despite the fact that he actually can appreciate and look up to Ryohei's personality type - probably the biggest reason is that Ryohei is a bit of a monster in the ring.

One that Shioya seems to find a great deal of pleasure in pitting Tsunayoshi against.

"There's no need to take it easy if this isn't your first fight and all," Shioya had said with a kind of terrifyingly reasonable way while patting Tsunayoshi on the head when Tsunayoshi had tried protesting this.

Not with weights on his feet to keep him from instinctively kicking out, Tsunayoshi had wanted to shout, but had only managed a wobbly "Shioya-san!" in reply.

A monster in the ring Ryohei might be, but at least he's not a heartless or out-of-control one. Tsunayoshi is kept from running away or even dodging with his feet, so he does his best and for the most part, Ryohei enthusiastically allows him. The strikes he lands on Tsunayoshi's shoulders and forearms are much more powerful than the ones he lands on Tsunayoshi's cheeks or chin.

Just because Hibari is a demon who is indiscriminate and bloody minded doesn't mean that others can't be monsters in their own right and their own way. Ryohei is one of those; it's less like he's out of his mind and more like he's outside his limits that makes Tsunayoshi so very much against facing him directly when at all possible. The person that Tsunayoshi is right now could never win against something like that without going overboard and causing all sorts of problems.

About the time that Tsunayoshi is so exhausted from the weights around his ankles and trying to survive having that much Ryohei aimed directly at him with boundless, radiating enthusiasm that he begins to think that he'd welcome the sweet embrace of death no matter what troubled faces Haru and Nana might make - Shioya calls Ryohei off with something of an unreadable look on his face.

The floor of the ring is incredibly gross after rounds and rounds and rounds of fighting, but Tsunayoshi collapses onto it and attempts to merge with it anyway while Shioya sends Ryohei off with a few quick words. It's not that Shioya dislikes him, really, or Tsunayoshi would be more worried about the way that the guy comes over to crouch beside his heaving body. Even Hoshino has more of an opinion on Tsunayoshi than Shioya, he thinks.
"You alright there, kid?" Shioya asks.

It catches him a little off guard. Tsunayoshi can't remember the last time an adult asked him if he was okay; even Hayashi-sensei was prone to believing his own eyes over anything Tsunayoshi might say. Somehow it gives him the strength to peel himself up off the floor and onto his knees, sitting back and inspecting himself. He ends up humming an affirmative; his body aches all over from finger to toe and his limbs are wobbling a bit, but he has no scrapes or bruises to show for the beating he's just taken.

There's something odd about that. Tsunayoshi knows what kind of beating he can take and which bruises those kinds of hits would leave. He should have bruises and scrapes, is the thing. At least a few of them. There's exactly none.

It's not the oddest thing that's ever happened to him, though, so he doesn't mention it.

"Hmm," is the only answer Shioya gives him, as if he disagrees. There's a frown on his face as if he's not entirely sure what to make of what he's seeing. It's a bit unnerving to be looked at that way, but it doesn't seem to be mean or cruel, so Tsunayoshi doesn't know how to react to it, averting his gaze and scrubbing the sweat from his check onto the bandages wrapped around his wrists.

"Well, there's no real delicate way of saying this," Shioya says as he stands. "But you're a clumsy shrimp."

Tsunayoshi whips around, staring in shock at Shioya's back as the man goes to pick up the extra towel and water bottle. It's not like he really disagrees with that assessment at all - no matter how he looks at it, Tsunayoshi is small for his age and even after all the training he's done with Hayashi-sensei, it's obvious where he falls short. It's just not something adults say to his face.

Speaking of, the dry towel at the ringside gets thrown at that same face. Tsunayoshi yelps, flailing and sputtering as he tries to pull it off despite the mitts on his hands.

By the time he's gotten it off his head, Ryohei has already come back and then been sent off to see to it that his sister can rest easy with everything. That certainly doesn't stop Ryohei from loudly proclaiming that he's looking forward to squaring off against Tsunayoshi again.

It's a little bit terrifying that there are people who want to harden Tsunayoshi's resolve to do anything he has to in order to make sure the people he cares about aren't sad. No matter how many times he's patted on the head, he won't mistake being 'capable of anything' as a good thing.

(Ahh. But isn't it? If you love someone, you love them. Well - he thinks so, at least. He doesn't properly love Nana, or Haru, no matter how much he hates it when they aren't happy. How can he love them if he can't even understand them, or connect what he's feeling with what they're going through?

But if he can go as far as he has for them even with things like that, then-)

"Alright, Sawada-kun," Shioya says, extending his hand to help Tsunayoshi up. "Time to go home. You'll be expected back here every day that you're not at your kickboxing courses. I won't interfere with something you're paying for, but dealing with your instincts - that requires hard work every day."

"Ah-" Tsunayoshi starts, fulling intending to protest this - but no sooner does he get to his feet and Shioya lets go of his hand than does he collapse right back to the floor with a whimper.

Despite hardly being able to move his feet - Tsunayoshi had tried. With all his might, he'd done his
best to be able to dodge and move away from Ryohei even though it was no good. Even if he hadn't been able to move anywhere until Shioya had taken the weights off his legs, his muscles were clearly overworked and in no condition to carry him anywhere.

"Oh," Shioya says, seeming to understand the situation immediately. "Well, I guess there's nothing for it, then."

In the next instant, he has Tsunayoshi slung over his shoulders - 'like a dead body' is the alarming phrase that comes to mind, although Tsunayoshi is probably flailing too much for it to come to anyone else's - and Shioya is headed for the door.

"You'll have to help me out," he says. "I don't know where the Sawada residence is."

"There's really no need to go to all this trouble!" Tsunayoshi yelps.

It's all for nothing, of course. Shioya isn't any more inclined to listen to other people than Ryohei, it seems. Tsunayoshi is forced to wonder if it's a similar situation, and what part of him is the part that Shioya can't tolerate. The weird way that Ryohei listened to Shioya seemed to go past the kind of devotion a student gave a teacher - and to call him 'Shi-oji' at that! Just how big of a hand in raising Ryohei had Shioya had?

Since he's kind of helpless and Shioya doesn't actually seem like the bad sort, Tsunayoshi tells him the way all the same.

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Of course Nana invites Shioya Tadamasa into her home without thinking too deeply on it. Tsunayoshi had seen her invite much more shady people in, who are attempting to sell her something weird, or worse: defective. Granted, none of those people had ever been successful in selling their wares to her, from reasons ranging Nana politely declining until she can speak with her husband, to what may be a stroke of shame in the seller, to that one time Tsunayoshi hadn't made himself scarce quickly enough and Nana had made him serve snacks to them.

How a shape kitchen knife had ended up on the service platter, and what Tsunayoshi actually tripped on, he still doesn't know to this day, but his clumsiness had been especially bad at that time.

So it doesn't surprise Tsunayoshi that his mother cheerfully invites a man into her home who has her son draped over his shoulder. He's more surprised by the easy-going politeness and smalltalk that Shioya manages to engage in, as though anyone as much if a boxing maniac as Ryohei shouldn't be capable of it. Nana titters in response to those manners, and that more than anything else is what makes Tsunayoshi distinctly nervous.

Thankfully this isn't the kind of situation he has to stick around for; once made aware of his condition, Nana helps him as far as running a hot bath and then he's left to his own devices upstairs.

He won't lie to himself and say he's not anxious about Shioya and Nana being left alone, but in the end, Shioya seems like a good person even if he's a harsh taskmaster, and besides - he's associated with the Sasagawa siblings. Ryohei and Kyoko both are honors students, and Ryohei's weird intensity aside - they're normal. There's no one like Yekaterina waiting at home for them.

Tsunayoshi reluctantly relaxes back, letting the intense heat of the bath soak into his sore limbs. At least with this, his unwanted feud with Ryohei and Kyoko should come to an end. It's not such a terrible thing after all, even though today it's left him almost paralyzed from how hard his body has
been worked. If he'd just realized earlier the truth of Ryohei's persistence, maybe things would have gone a lot more smoothly - because after all, wasn't Ryohei clearly correct?

It's too bad that he's unable to return the favor and do something about Ryohei's loneliness. He's just too much of a one of a kind for there to be an easy remedy for something like that.

Ahh. Isn't Tsunayoshi the same, though? Haru can say he thinks the way that Kyoko thinks all she wants to - it's obvious they won't be able to connect on serious level. Kyoko doesn't want them to - and frankly, if it keeps her from being kidnapped by thugs, Tsunayoshi doesn't want her to either.

Maybe Ryohei thinks so too, and that's why he wants to help him.

Maybe he only likes that resolve.

If others can find something about his resolve to admire, since Tsunayoshi himself is far from worthy of admiration himself, it's not anything he can complain about. He's gotten lazy. Comfortable. His methods have become 'halfhearted' after all. In order to have the strength to make sure neither Haru nor Nana have reason to be sad, Tsunayoshi can do anything - become anything. He'll shake that admirable resolve in anyone's face to achieve his ends.

"That's almost certainly not a 'normal' thing to think," Tsunayoshi muses into the empty bathroom.

"Well, you didn't properly think of it that way the first time, did you?"

There's a boy with milkspill hair sitting on the edge of the tub, his feet plunged into the steaming water and his pants rolled up to his knees. He leans forward. The steam and the water pull at the lanks of hair.

"Aren't you being weirdly introspective for a thirteen year old?"

Tsunayoshi blinks.

"Or maybe I'm being impatient," he muses, smiling down at Tsunayoshi with such sharp edges to his teeth. "It's not really my place, after all. That cute kid said it would happen soon, but they haven't even gotten anything ready yet. Say - Nayo-tan."

Danger.

Long fingers splay out across Tsunayoshi's naked chest, even more pale still than his own sun-starved skin. Tsunayoshi inhales. The fragile bones of his ribcage arch up, straining against tendon and flesh.

Eyes like faded flowers, pressed between pages in a book and forgotten for years, and years, and years - those eyes hold no grudge or malice against Tsunayoshi as the boy says, "won't you show them how to burn?"

And then Tsunayoshi is plunged underwater.

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That dangerous spark inside of him that burned him alive and hollowed him out - doesn't so much as char.

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Tsunayoshi sits upright in the tub, steam curling in the air. His hair is dry.
* Namimori has an annoying amount of "it's not your business so don't meddle" going on in the culture, partially because the base culture is Japanese despite being a melting pot filled with criminals from all over the world, but also because it’s filled with criminals.

**Chapter Nine Non Canon Character list:**
* Shioya Tadamasa - Sasagawa Ryohei's uncle and the one that taught him boxing. Recognizes the Sawada name. Has a kind of lackadaisical air about him belied by his intense gaze. As a good uncle, finds a lot of pleasure in teasing children and making them have outbursts.
Chapter Summary

Third Year of lower middle school, BEGIN! Or Tsunayoshi's troubles increase but he makes a new, if troublesome, friend!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Chapter 10 : absolutely (story of a boy)

At seven years old, Tsunayoshi had been well known as a 'fragile child.' Already very shy by nature, it wasn't immediately apparent when he developed strange issues with his stomach and his head - but eventually his teachers took notice of the way he persistently avoided his peers in the classroom and was prone to senseless tears there were no explanations for. The solution seemed to be to send him to the nurse's office, which they often did - at first with sympathy for a 'fragile' child.

When it became obvious that Tsunayoshi's issues disappeared once there, it became a problem. 'Fragile' became 'spoiled.'

Nana couldn't have noticed the behavior herself despite the way that Tsunayoshi clung to her apron strings, but became concerned about it all the same when the subject was raised with her by his less patient teachers. She couldn't really argue with the results, and when they wouldn't let it rest at 'then send him to the office' as a solution, she eventually was convinced to take him to a doctor.

That doctor pronounced Tsunayoshi to be a more or less healthy boy. He was a bit behind his peers developmentally - his reflexes weren't very sharp, and his motor skills weren't up to par, but it was hardly enough to cripple him. Besides, his eyes were keen, and he was able to identify the solutions to simple problems and read on his grade level. Physically, there was nothing wrong with him that the doctor could uncover.

The only answer left was that his behavior was the result of a bad personality.

Since the fault lay with him and not something left to chance or his parents' sins, even his teachers felt no compunction at all in calling him Dame-Tsuna.

And Tsunayoshi? Well, he was told often enough that he began to believe it.

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Although it isn't every time that Tsunayoshi trains with Shioya and Ryohei that Tsunayoshi is left unable to walk, it happens often enough to become a pattern. It happens enough that Nana begins to have snacks and drinks already on the table by the time Shioya drags Tsunayoshi's limp body home, and they sit in the living room while Tsunayoshi recuperates in a hot bath.

At first he lurks at the top of the stairs, or near the doorway or in the kitchen, warily listening in on
Shioya and Nana talking. She sounds happy. While Nana was never the sort of person that Tsunayoshi can ever remember actually being sad on a usual day - Nana isn't the sort that lingers on unhappy things like that; she'll hug onto Tsunayoshi more than usual before she'll hide and cry about it - even more than having dinner with the Miuras, having tea with Shioya seems to brighten her up. She laughs more honestly. She smiles more widely.

It isn't really Tsunayoshi's place to tell Shioya to leave his mother alone, no matter how anxious or uncomfortable it makes him, so with one lingering, flat look that Shioya arches his brows at, Tsunayoshi never says anything about it at all.

It's not like it's really any of his business, anyway.

Before that, though, Tsunayoshi makes the mistake of trying to call Haru to complain to her about it; he's completely forgotten what kind of life it is that Haru lives. She listens to his complaints diligently, and then says, "That's great, Tsunayoshi-san!"

"Some day you'll have to start calling me 'kun,'" Tsunayoshi says, mostly on reflex while he tries to grapple with the idea of Ryohi's uncle Shioya being a good thing and not some new strange torture for him. He gives it up as another one of those Haru things he can't properly understand without shouting a bit, first, and so gets directly to it: "What could possibly be good about having to spend an hour in the bath just to be able to walk afterwards?"

"Isn't that just because you've allowed your condition to slip?" Haru wonders. "Haru had that same probably when she went back to her clubs, after all. Even working hard with Tsunayoshi-san, it's different muscles, after all."

"How could my condition possibly have slipped," he wants to know. "It's not like I've been sitting around playing video games!"

At least not for more than one day, and there's no way Haru knows about that.

Haru sighs into the phone. "Regardless of the games you play with that shaggy beast, it's not to the level of fighting the tiresome brats that follow his lead," she explains, as if there's anything at all normal with how she sees the situation; Tsunayoshi is glad none of those 'brats' are around to hear her opinion of them. "Haru noticed it herself, that our abilities had plateaued - there's no way to be recognized by Hibari-san if we stay at this level. That's why it's great that you've gotten a home tutor!"

Is that really what it's like?

"I don't know, Haru," Tsunayoshi says uncomfortably. "I mean, I've never had a tutor before, but something about that description is a little off, I think."

"Mama sure is lax on you," Haru says; something about her tone brings to mind the kind of pinched brow look that makes him feel about two inches tall. "I thought it myself, but Tsunayoshi-san is the kind that especially benefits from the home tutor approach! Only good things will come of having this Shioya-san's diligent attention!"

She's kind of missed the point of his concerns entirely, he thinks.

"After all, Haru understands things more and more when she works with a home tutor! Everyday the tutor works hard to make sure I understand the things that were taught that day and keep my grades on top! That aside, at school, I have study groups that I'm a part of during free period, and even lunch!"
Hearing that, Tsunayoshi wonders again when she has times for clubs let alone coming and tagging along with him. It really does seem to speak the essence of going 'overboard.' "Isn't studying during lunch taking it too far?" he wonders.

"Ah - please, this much is easy for me," she demurs, tittering in a way alarmingly the same as Nana. "With my father's support and my tutor, it sounds harder than it is, you know. If someone believes in you and supports you, pretty much anything is possible, right?"

It must be amazing to be raised that way, so Haru thinks nothing of trying to do that for other people herself. Tsunayoshi is just glad to have further context for her bizarre behavior.

"I guess 'anything' probably depends on a person's moral codes," Tsunayoshi says uncertainly, because of all the many things that Haru is capable of, he knows without considering it deeply at all that Haru isn't at the same level he is.

What does that say, exactly, about his moral code anyway? Trying to resolve it by saying that it's their own fault Tsunayoshi murdered them is bit dishonest. He really is a special kind of advanced scum that he thinks: *all other avenue of action was unacceptable.*

Well, he's scum that kills lower, worse kinds of scum, so he can probably live with that.

"Hahi? Haru was talking about winning the district championships…?"

Ah! Had he said that out loud? Tsunayoshi laughs a bit too loudly and harshly, waving one hand despite the fact that they're on the phone and Haru can't even see him at the moment. "Sorry, sorry, it's nothing," he excuses.

Haru hums briefly for a moment while she considers the matter, then drops it; Tsunayoshi is getting the feeling that as much as he lets things go on account of them probably just being 'Haru things' - Haru might also sometimes let things go as being 'Tsunayoshi things,' too. "I'm so jealous, though," she frets. "I'll have to ask Papa if I can get a coach to home tutor me, too!"

"Haru," he says, the name coming out with a strange hush of admonishment; the moment passes, and he continues with, "seeing as how Hibari-senpai will be moving up this next year, I don't know that there's a point."

"Hmph! Would you really be okay with a wallflower as a wife?" Haru demands heatedly. "If I don't meet you honestly at every level, I could never live with myself!"

"Aside from the fact that there are certain things that I'd rest easier knowing you didn't have to face," Tsunayoshi says with a sigh, "*... exactly when we were supposed to be getting married?!*"

Especially considering they aren't even dating in the first place!

"Well - definitely after I finish college, and then-! A June wedding would be the most ideal!"

It must be nice having your own life planned out so far. Tsunayoshi was probably going to go on in life to become a street sweeper or a homeless person, if Nana was too impatient with him to tolerate him as a NEET. Then That incident happened, and there's no way that Tsunayoshi can be that relaxed about it, since he needs Haru and Hibari if he wants to live.

"Thanks for your support," he sighs wearily into the telephone in defeat. A June wedding after Haru graduates from college it is, then.
Although the break between school years isn't long in the first place, it seems to be over faster than ever even though Tsunayoshi hadn't been strongly dreading it as usual. The changes around their household, mostly the addition of Shioya, leave Tsunayoshi with so little free time that he feels like he blinks and then Nana is waking him to go attend school. He's started to be in the habit of soaking in a hot bath every morning just to loosen up his wobbling, aching limbs - and that morning is no different in that manner. He soaks until he can tolerate the usual stretches he does to work the rest of the soreness from his limbs so that he doesn't tear something on accident, and then he has breakfast, and then at some point Nana looks at him and says, "Oh, Tsu-kun, you'll be late for the morning assembly, won't you?"

It's a question that's met with a fair amount of frantic screaming.

It isn't easy to force himself into a run, but Tsunayoshi is already accustomed to forcing himself to do things that are difficult in various ways - 'physically' is honestly the least troubling of those ways. It's amazing how well Hibari has trained the entire campus in just a few years; even though Tsunayoshi knows better than most that the Committee won't be headed by him this year, instinct still forces his sore body to move as quickly as it can.

Honestly, Tsunayoshi suspects that Ryohei's enthusiasm is a self-defense mechanism for just how unrelenting Shioya can be about training. Maybe at one point he'd actually been a normal kid, but being raised by Shioya in some fashion had encouraged him to grow that way. Maybe that was even the cause of his white hair?! What a terrifying concept.

He gives a vague thought to the hope that Ryohei and Hibari haven't gone to the same higher secondary school.

Even though a part of Tsunayoshi reasons that there's really no need to hurry as much as he is, since surely even if he's late his peers in the Committee will be forgiving - and if they're not, then he'll just run away. Even Hibari has a hard time catching up when Tsunayoshi really puts his mind to it, and even if his body is sore already, he can definitely do that much. So there's no real need to hurry, but - ah. It feels like his sixth sense for Hibari Kyoya has been going off for a while now?

It's like there's a part of Hibari that lives somewhere under his ribs - the incredibly sore one under his right arm that's cracked, probably.

Certainly Shioya had promised him it was bruised at worst, but it was enough to make Tsunayoshi want to cry. "So protect it," Shioya had said in that scary, reasonable way of his, and taught Tsunayoshi some more about how to tuck his elbow in just so.

A sixth sense for Hibari might instead just be a general idea of who the biggest predator on campus was, Tsunayoshi rationalizes. And he's missed morning assembly, so naturally he's in danger - "Ah."

Naturally they notice each other at the same time, Tsunayoshi digging his heels into the sidewalk and stumbling to a halt as *Hibari Kyoya* glances over. For a pathetic few confused seconds, Tsunayoshi thinks that maybe Hibari is going his own way again, making sure the first day at the campus he put so much work into was going smoothly.

It's just, he shouldn't be wearing the Nami Middle uniform, if that was so.

"B-but you're a third year!" Tsunayoshi yelps.

Hibari narrows his slanted eyes; he's looking incredibly *Hibari* today. That is, the way Hibari
always looks - long and dark and dangerous with those narrow gray eyes that look purple in the wrong light. Sharp white teeth in the slash of his smirk. Tsunayoshi spares a thought for the fact that he didn't used to notice these kinds of things about Hibari until Hibari broke into his bedroom. It makes him feel itchy and weirdly nervous.

"The same as you," Hibari says, his mouth pulling back into a long slash that only a fool or maybe a serial killer would mistake as a smile.

It's a mixture of that strange tension and the fact that Tsunayoshi has somehow already read his doom and has been preparing for it since he left his house somehow, which gives him the recklessness to answer: "I meant last year! Go be a first year at some other school!"

What exactly is Hibari finding pleasing about that? But he does, it's clear from the way he bares his teeth more like an animal than a man. "Oh?" he says. His hands flicker down around his belt, reaching up under the uniform's sweater vest; no doubt that's where his tonfa are secreted away. "This place is my territory. Are you expecting me to leave it in incompetent hands?"

As if the picking for next year's Committee president will be any better!

Tsunayoshi is distracted enough by his bizarre delusions of Hibari as a fully grown man in a middle school uniform - it's a difficult thing to process, so it's just Hibari with grey hair and wrinkles around his sneer - that he almost gets his head taken off. Thankfully, Shioya was on to something there, and his wry remarks about Tsunayoshi being a quick learner weren't misplaced. The squeal that escapes Tsunayoshi is equally in surprise about being attacked as it is surprised about his own reaction when reflex kicks in and he ducks, pivots, and promptly tries to take Hibari's feet out from under him.

It doesn't work, of course. The only thing that does is make Hibari annoyed and try to break his leg.

If Tsunayoshi gets his leg broken in the street, it's going to cause problems, he thinks, and promptly launches a feint. They'd never covered feints in Hayashi's class, so Tsunayoshi has never used one before; Hibari obviously knows how to counter one, but he doesn't expect one from Tsunayoshi. Ducking under a tonfa moving so fast it feels like it should 'pop' from breaking the sound barrier, Tsunayoshi makes a desperate attempt for the school.

He trips over nothing, which coincidentally allows a tonfa to go sailing, spinning end over end, right over his head, barely brushing his unruly hair. The fact that it hits the school building and chips the bricks before bouncing off wrings a noise better suited to a rubber duck, or chicken maybe, than a kid. Hibari had never thrown his tonfa before! Tsunayoshi is clearly not the only person learning new tricks.

Tsunayoshi manages to bleat out one more desperate "senpai!" before Hibari catches up to him and firmly stomps him into the ground.

The sudden unplanned dodge he'd had to make when the rebounding tonfa nearly hit him on his way back had left Tsunayoshi wide open to taking the one Hibari still had in hand to the back of his knee. He then took a foot to his back, right between the shoulderblades, and before he could even scramble, he was laid flat with an 'omph!' by that exact same.

Some weird part of his brain bemoans the fact that his perfectly washed and carefully pressed school uniform has just been utterly ruined by Hibari before he can even get through the school's front doors. Nana had been so happy to do it for him, too. A 'good impression' for his third year, she'd said.
Hibari steps on him a bit, like he senses his wandering thoughts. "If that's all the effort you're willing to put into it, I should save myself some time and bite you to death, Sawada Tsunayoshi," he says, much sharper than the almost friendly exchange before. Hibari grinds his heel into the bone of Tsunayoshi's spine, enough to be painful as he adds, darkly: "A few months ago, you were willing to die for it."

Is it really Tsunayoshi's fault if his resolve is weak? He honestly hadn't thought it was, but if Ryohei thinks so and so does Hibari, then it must be true.

Even after Hibari lifts his shoe and retrieves his stray tonfa, Tsunayoshi stays laying on the ground for a while after that.

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Seeing as how he missed the school assembly first thing this year, Tsunayoshi goes to the Nami Middle school administration office to get his affairs settled. There he encounters one of the Committee members, Nakamoto who had invited Tsunayoshi and Haru to step on thugs again with them someday; it doesn't take more than a glance to determine that while Nakamoto had been a rookie last year, this year he's taken on new duties.

Although Tsunayoshi has always more or less gotten along with Nakamoto, he's grown slightly since the last time they saw each other, and his new responsibilities sit on him like a badge of honor. He actually manages to look somewhat intimidating in a way, the frown on his face and his folded arms managing not to look silly as he looks down on the school's administrators and says, "Hibari-san will see to it."

After having become the Committee's gofer last year and his encounter with Hibari just a few minutes ago, Tsunayoshi can't really take it seriously. "Nakamoto-kun," he calls out in a friendly way, coming to a stop near the other boy. He blinks. He has the vague feeling that when he first started chasing the Committee around, Nakamoto had been shorter than him... it's no longer the case now.

Nakamoto turns the same severe look on Tsunayoshi that he'd pinned on the adult woman working the desk; the same thought seems to register with him, and Nakamoto straightens just a little - and then he seems to flinch a bit.


Tsunayoshi blinks at him again. It's not quite the stiffness he would expect out of being too friendly with someone while they're attending business. Nakamoto has tensed too much for that - is leaning just slightly away, with his folded arms shifted just so, like there's a rib he's trying to protect; only he has no injuries and Tsunayoshi has no reason to attack him in the first place.

Maybe Hibari staying back a year is causing more problems for other people than it is for Tsunayoshi.

Despite the dirt smudges on his clothes that he wasn't able to shake out, Tsunayoshi does his best to look friendly and harmless and inviting and not at all like someone who would do harm or cruelty. "Do you mind waiting up for me, Nakamoto-kun? It'll only be a moment."

He doesn't have time to get an answer before the woman behind the desk, eager to move on from whatever business Hibari has with the administration - possibly his staying behind a year? - calls Tsunayoshi over. It only takes a few minutes for him to get his papers from her as she's being uncommonly helpful for an adult having to deal with Dame-Tsuna.
It's not like the adults in his life really go out of their way to target him or anything, but it's certainly not as if they've gone out of their way to keep his peers from it. It's always been something about 'developing methods to deal with the unfairness of real life.' He's unfairly a bit pleased that Hibari seems to be turning that right back on them.

After that's sorted and he steps outside the office, Tsunayoshi is pleasantly surprised to see that Nakamoto has listened to his request; the delusion that they might be friends immediately evaporates when he notices that Nakamoto is still guarding his soft belly.

"Sawada," Nakamoto says, uncertain beneath his stiff tone, "you have business with the Committee?"

Tsunayoshi sighs. "Can't I have other reasons for wanting to talk to you than just the Committee?" he asks, although Nakamoto isn't wrong; they haven't gone out of their way to speak to one another if it's not on patrol. This level of tension is kind of weird, though; Nakamoto's hands seem restless somehow, and the sound of his swallow is kind of loud.

Tsunayoshi knows what that means, he just doesn't get why it's being aimed at him.

Trying to soften further, to remind Nakamoto that he's just a useless kid who can't be depended on for anything that Nakamoto would know about, Tsunayoshi offers him a smile. "We're friends, right?" he says, although it's blatantly obvious they're really not.

Nakamoto more or less looks like he's on the same page as Tsunayoshi about that, but strangely enough, his resolve clearly wavers all the same.

"And as friends," Tsunayoshi pushes, doing his best to look completely useless, not even good enough to be the butt of a joke, "you know that I was met at the gate by Hibari-senpai, right?"

That much should be obvious in a glance, even if Tsunayoshi isn't displaying any of the more common signs of such a thing - but if anyone else had roughed him up, then Hibari would have done a lot worse than just stepping on him a bit. The question only seems to make Nakamoto even more nervous though.

"Of course," he says. "But it - isn't it your own fault for putting yourself in that position? On the first day of school? Sa-Sawada-san."

"No, no, no! I know that much," he says, making an effort to lighten his voice more, to open his hands and wave them and to speak wryly. Clearly he isn't being friendly enough to set Nakamoto at ease, with the way he's stuttering. It's a bit frustrating to have someone trying to guard their soft belly from Tsunayoshi when he's not even interested in that in the first place. "I'm not arguing about that at all! It's been like that for a while now - before even coming to Hibari-san's school!"

No one was quite sure what school Hibari had attended before Nami Middle, but he'd made an impression that has turned into a legend almost immediately. Nami had been quite the prestigious school before he'd come and suddenly the requests to attend had dried up. A kid like Tsunayoshi would have never made the cut, before.

Nakamoto looks like he likes the idea of this not being about the tardiness beating even less, and Tsunayoshi runs a hand through his hair, glancing up at his taller peer askance and through his lashes as if the indirectness might somehow reassure Nakamoto. It only serves to make him break out into a weird sweat.

"It's weird, right? Hibari-san was a third year last year already."
"O-oh?" Nakamoto stutters, as if both of them haven't already suffered through two years under Hibari - although Tsunayoshi has always been beneath his senpai's notice until recently. He meets Tsunayoshi's gaze for a split second and inhales sharply before averting his eyes. He looks pale and vaguely terrorized, saying stiffly, "I can neither confirm nor deny any information regarding Hibari-taichou's activities!"

Tsunayoshi stares, wondering just what kind of threats Hibari holds over his men's heads to make them act like this. That aside -

"'Hibari-...taichou?'"

Just what exactly had Hibari been up to over the school break?! Certainly Tsunayoshi learned a lot from Shioya during that time, but this is a much bigger change than could easily be overlooked! Nakamoto had been in the Committee for all of last year, more or less, but to come to think of Hibari in a way as to call him 'taichou' to Tsunayoshi?!

Even worse, Nakamoto looks like he regrets the slip up. Tsunayoshi eyes him with concern for a few moments longer before he ends up taking pity. There's no point in pushing it if Hibari's threats are so impressive that Nakamoto is clamping up like Tsunayoshi has killed five men in front of him. He's never really understood how it was that the Committee worked at all, let alone internally.

"Well - if you can't say, I guess you can't say," Tsunayoshi relents; as important as he feels his question is, there's no real reason for Nakamoto to know anyway. He glances around and then down at the paper in his hand. "Ah, I have to go this way for my class. Maybe we'll talk after school?"

"Y-yes! I understand!" Nakamoto says, clipped. There's something kind of implied in his tone that makes Tsunayoshi look back at him, blinking, but Nakamoto just wrangles out something more of a grimace than a smile, looks mildly horrified by that, and then beats a hasty and not-at-all suspicious retreat.

Left standing in the hallway, blinking after him, Tsunayoshi wonders if Nakamoto is sleeping alright at night. The two of them have a rather anxious personality in common, and the stress of whatever strange threats Hibari has over his Committee might be getting to him.

There isn't a lot of reasons for Nakamoto acting like his life was in danger the entire time they talked.

With a sigh, Tsunayoshi turns back around and heads for his class; it seems unlikely that Nakamoto actually will talk with him after school, if he has to guess about it. Well, if it were just Hibari, then Tsunayoshi thinks that he could try something to ease the pressure, but - what if it wasn't Hibari or Hibari's threats that had been scaring Nakamoto the entire time anyway? Sure, the DC members were scared of Hibari, but never for the sake of their lives. Maybe someone else is putting that pressure on them, waltzing in while Tsunayoshi had been distracted recently? Maybe that gofer job was to keep him out from under foot.

Ahh, if that's true, then Tsunayoshi feels like he'll be really troubled by it.

Generally speaking, Tsunayoshi doesn't worry about Hibari Kyoya; anyone who has known him for one minute gets the feeling that more than any of the other kids his age, Hibari takes care of himself. But a weird feeling settles inside of Tsunayoshi's chest that makes him squint his eyes just a little bit.

Makes his mouth taste like ash. Makes his thoughts settle down, just slightly - go entirely placid,
like various bodies of water with something that lurks beneath.

There's no way that Tsunayoshi can rest easy if someone has been poking around where they don't belong.

(Of course he can't rest easy. His life isn't the sort where 'resting easy' is a thing that he really knows how to do. When one starts life as a shy child, and then gets bullied and other people decide for him that he's useless, there's nothing to relax about.

Ahh, but it's unusual in that Tsunayoshi thinks: 'I can't rest easy' and that thought is followed by 'so what should I do?' He has to be the sort of person that people won't want to leave, because he'll die if he's left alone, but also they have to feel like they're allowed to want to not leave him.

If other people try to pressure them against their will, then they'll leave anyway, right? Tsunayoshi is familiar with that feeling: with 'although I want friends' and 'although I want to be with others,' because of the actions of some people, he's been made to make himself small and unnoticeable, and to remove himself from the ones he wants to spend time with.

If Tsunayoshi wants to survive, then he has to be a person people want to be with, and he also has to make being with him possible. So what should he do? Ahh, being 'capable of anything' isn't a good thing, but if they want to be with him in the first place, can he answer that less honestly? With less than his full heart?

He's already the kind of scum that can't stand up for himself but will turn around and kill people over it.

Wouldn't doing nothing make him even worse?)

If it's not bad enough that Hibari is sticking back a grade - somehow: if it were possible to do in an easy way, Tsunayoshi would have been held back at least once for being the kind of loser who can't even understand lessons - then Tsunayoshi arrives to homeroom only to find out that this year he'll be sharing it with Kyoko. It could be worse - almost certainly would have been if Kyoko and Ryohei hadn't come over to his house to do 'reparations,' although Tsunayoshi still feels twitchy about that.

As it is, Kyoko smiles at him when he comes in - not unlike the unrelenting glare of the early morning sun - and the taller girl with seaweed hair standing next to her desk gifts Tsunayoshi with a kind of look that would be less shocking coming from a yankii.

Somehow, Tsunayoshi immediately identifies her as the 'Hana' person that Kyoko mentioned, who is 'a bit like Hibari-senpai.' The resemblance is uncanny. Tsunayoshi wonders which of her parents fell that far from the Hibari family tree.

Nervously, Tsunayoshi manages a kind of wave at the two of them, wilting slightly as the death stare he's getting from Hana immediately cranked up into a fully fledged glower. He'd like to tell her that he agrees completely and won't be bothering them anyway, but the angle of Hana's elbows is convincing enough that he's better off just staying away.

"Oh! Tsuna! There's an empty seat here!"

Tsunayoshi probably shouldn't be surprised, considering the way Yamamoto had been behaving
last year - it's just that, well, Yamamoto is pretty popular, based on his work with the Baseball Club alone, but he's also tall and good looking and nice. The fact that there's an open seat anywhere in his vicinity is - unusual.

"Oh! Um," Tsunayoshi says, catching sight of Yamamoto's neighbors, who are giving him something of an incredulous look, "That's - thanks but, I should just -" He looks around the classroom, but without people being in their seats before class started, it was hard to tell where he could sit.

"Haha! Don't be like that." Yamamoto radiates good will and good things and sunshine and happiness in a way that distinctly reminds Tsunayoshi of Kyoko before she recognized him - well, not quite. Tsunayoshi is reminded in that he reacts the same way to this as he did to Kyoko before That happened. "Come on! Sit down. You're an interesting kind of guy, Tsuna!"

Sit down and die! at least a few of the faces around Yamamoto seem to say, but Tsunayoshi is kind of helpless in the face of Yamamoto's grin and before he can blink twice or protest it, he finds himself in the desk to Yamamoto's left. Just outside the bubble of Yamamoto's benevolent aura is one full of murder and death.

Ahh. If they try, no one will be happy with the out come of that. Tsunayoshi is good at knowing when he doesn't want to tangle with someone, and these kids are - well. Kids. They're not even at the level of the DC members who cluster around Hibari. He can only hope that they don't come after him with a sincere intent to kill.

"It's Tsunayoshi," Tsunayoshi says under his breath, the only form of rebellion against Yamamoto's overwhelming charisma that he can manage.

"I always heard it as 'Tsuna," Yamamoto says brightly, apparently having the ears of a bat. "Tsunayoshi is kind of a heavy name, isn't it?"

Tsunayoshi wonders if he's being bullied. He hadn't thought so, as Yamamoto had always seemed too kind for that, and it's certainly not a joke that Yamamoto's friends are in on if so. "Yeah, a bit," he agrees, reaching up to tug at his hair. He's heard it all before, even if it's mostly from the adults and not his own peers.

"Guess that means you have a lot to grow into, right? Tsuna," Yamamoto says. "Hey, if it happens while we're friends, I'll call you that way, too!"

"I'll never amount to anything like that!" Tsunayoshi blurts, aghast.

"Haha, so you're saying that you're not worthy of it?"

This is met with wild flailing and sputtering. It sounds like bullying, it really does, but - there's nothing malicious or condescending about the way Yamamoto looks at him or asks the question. As if he doesn't really believe it himself, even though he's asking Tsunayoshi about it. And that's not - Tsunayoshi had never looked at his aspirations that way before. Wanting to be known by his entire first name, while at the same time never foreseeing himself as someone who could comfortably carry such a weighty thing - that's kind of hypocritical, isn't it?

"That's not it either," Tsunayoshi argues, although he's not sure what it is. Yamamoto doesn't seem to mind though, mostly looking entertained and happy to be entertained, and - and the murderous air from earlier is gone. A quick glance shows that Yamamoto's friends now just look fondly exasperated with Yamamoto, as if he's doing something foolish but ultimately harmless. Apparently his Yamamoto-ness cancels out Tsunayoshi's dame-ness.
It's foolish to think back to what could have been before That incident, since no one had given him the time of day back then, but Tsunayoshi still does, just a bit.

Even though the attention coming from the boys around Yamamoto has stopped being murderous, it still feels pointed and resentful. There isn't even any time to let Yamamoto's strange influence work on his friends further, given that class starts then. It's rough. The constant attention ties a knot into Tsunayoshi's back and makes him uneasy. It makes his head begin to ache.

Ahh. They must have really wanted to sit right next to Yamamoto, but instead that kid went out of his way to keep that seat empty and then call Tsunayoshi over, even though he hadn't been at the beginning of the year assembly. They must know about his connections to the Committee. They have to have heard about Ryohei's efforts.

And now he's butting into their space and distracting their star player.

It makes sense why they'd resent him even if he weren't Dame-Tsuna, so he can hardly hold it against them. It still feels like the ticking of the clock begin to slow and grow incredibly loud, like a banging drum. Every scratch of a pencil, every squeak of a chair, every shift where cloth rubs against cloth against skin - it creates a kind of pointed pain that seems to drive itself right through the center of Tsunayoshi's skull. The chalk against the board, scraping and tapping, and every word the teacher says bangs against his eardrums like tiny bombs.

Tsunayoshi had honestly thought he was past these kinds of episodes. He hasn't had one in years - how long has it been since the last one? So many days he'd stayed home miserably from school, not because of the bullying, but because he'd come down with throbbing headaches and develop strange rashes along his arms and shoulders and legs. Across his belly. It hadn't exactly made him a lot of friends when he preferred to sit fretfully in corners instead of interacting with the class.

He's had two unaffected years at this school, so the chances of it being somehow related to the location is unlikely at best.

Tsunayoshi is really starting to think it's not a strange health issue after all. It's a bit hellish for the episodes that plagued him as a child to make a sudden return just as he's turning his life around. It's difficult to focus on the teacher when his head feels like it might split in halves, and when the pain begins to churn his stomach into sick knots.

Still, he tries to follow along, and glances often to Yamamoto's book to tell where he's supposed to be in it. Yamamoto takes no notice of his wandering glances - or doesn't indicate that he notices, anyway - but his friends do. His stomach clenches and churns unpleasantly as Tsunayoshi tries to focus better on what the teacher is doing at the front of the class, rubbing at his eyes.

Because of that, he's unaware of Kyoko putting her hand in the air, but even so, he can't miss the sound of his own name.

"No problem! Sensei, I'll take him to the nurse!" Yamamoto calls out beside him, which - that's not exactly helpful to the things that Tsunayoshi's head is doing, and he clasps a hand to his mouth, coughing wetly.

"No way! Yamamoto, you can't start skipping class on the first day of school," one of the boys around them says, reproachful.

"It's not skipping. It's not like I'm class president or anything, but I'd do the same for you!" he argues back.
"It's different when it's not your club, Yamamoto-kun," the teacher argues. It's not Nezu, that's true, but Tsunayoshi thinks he's probably seen this man talking to him. "If you start off slacking on the first day, then your school career is only bound to get worse!"

"You think so? Maa - but it's the first day and this feels a bit like a civic responsibility, doesn't it?"

Somewhere behind and to the side, someone scoffs about 'Dame-Tsuna' being something as troublesome as that, unable to take care of his own problems and his own self, and the class breaks into laughter. Tsunayoshi lurches to his feet, his stomach tightening and heaving upward dangerously. It feels like there are shards of ice digging through his brain at the same time as it's being consumed by fire.

Their teacher takes one look at his face and, horrified, shouts at Yamamoto to get him out of the classroom. The noise the other students make, laughing and jeering, has Tsunayoshi's head ringing and his vision goes black and spinning red.

He doesn't actually vomit, but it seems like a close thing, standing in the hallway and bent over with one hand braced on his knee and gagging on all the saliva filling his mouth and throat. The way the muscles spasm. He shakes and shivers.

"You're really not doing well at all," Yamamoto says with surprise from beside him, as if Tsunayoshi would fake something like this and draw attention to himself. Tsunayoshi can't even startle, can't defend himself as a hand settles over the back of his neck, and practically swallows the entire stretch of it from hairline to shoulder.

If that's supposed to help, it really doesn't - at least not immediately, anyway. The sounds from the closed classroom door behind them continue to pierce straight through Tsunayoshi's eardrums, and the unfriendly regard with which Yamamoto's friends are surely paying him. The teacher's voice, as he tries to call the class to order, feel like angry drums mushing what's left of his brain that isn't shredded and frying. The space behind his eyes pinches and throbs.

It takes several long moments more before the raw awareness of the long, echoing hallways, the students and teacher behind them in the room, and every last scraping noise of Yamamoto's shirt as he breathes stops shooting through Tsunayoshi's skull. It gentles, eventually, to cold concrete and brick and tile, warm glass, and soft, steady breaths and the squeeze of a calloused hand on the back of his neck.

"Thanks, Yamamoto," Tsunayoshi manages, swallowing a fresh flood of saliva and taking a few deep breaths. It feels safe enough for him to lower his hand, like he might not actually vomit anymore, and he braces both on his knees and just breathes a bit.

"No problem," Yamamoto says, "but we should probably get to the nurse's office. You up to walking?"

"It's - that's not necessary," he says, inhaling and holding it for a second. Yamamoto pulls his hand back and Tsunayoshi straightens, reaching up to brush his collar back into place. He glances up at Yamamoto, and - "Thanks for the save. Sorry for always being a burden."

Yamamoto blinks rapidly, a bit like he's taken a splash of water to the face. A smile settles on it, but it looks more like a reflex to fall back on the way Tsunayoshi does when he starts flailing around. "It's not a burden at all?" he says, almost uncertainly.

There's a look on his face a bit as if he's walked into a game of laser tag unexpectedly when he thought he was joining a baseball game.
Tsunayoshi feels wrung out and twisted up into knots and carelessly pulled apart. He would have rather have gone another ten rounds with Ryohei under Shioya's 'tender mercies' than have another episode like he'd had in his primary schools. "But you've always been looking out for me recently," and framing it that way makes something in him go unexpectedly gentle and soft, the way he always feels about it when it comes to Haru.

Yamamoto's habitual smile quirks at one corner, odd and uneasy. "Haha, have I really?"

Well, Tsunayoshi can't be the only one who acts on instinct without consulting his conscious decisions. He hates being confronted over that as well, so it's obvious Yamamoto would be uneasy about it.

"Well - you saved me, but it's fine now," he says kindly. "I was like this a lot as a kid. There's no point in going to the nurse's office."

Tsunayoshi would honestly rather skip and get bitten to death than revive his reputation of being 'spoiled.' Or maybe he should seek Hibari out on purpose and beg for discipline or something equally weird. Although he wants to live a quiet life, somehow being known as the Committee's gofer, or whatever strange thing Haru was labeling him with when she said 'M' would be better than going back to being 'spoiled' Dame-Tsuna.

"Oh?" Yamamoto looks a bit grateful at the subject change, but now he looks way too engaged. "Is that why you're 'Dame'?"

There's nothing mean or malicious about the question, but it kind of makes Tsunayoshi wilt all the same. He's really too worn out to be coping with Yamamoto's baseline level of energy, he thinks. "I was 'Dame' and then I got sick," he says all the same, maybe specifically because Yamamoto had tried on occasion to save him from Hibari in his own way, and because he's nice, and willingly put his hand on Tsunayoshi without even hurting him.

"Oh," Yamamoto says again, but like this makes perfect sense to him. He looks at Tsunayoshi with big brown eyes, adds "huh," and then says, "maybe you should come over to my house and meet my dad? He's really good at anatomy!"

Tsunayoshi blinks. "Your dad… is a doctor?" That doesn't -

Yamamoto laughs. "He's a chef!"

What kind of meat is he cooking?!

"I have a human's anatomy!" Tsunayoshi yelps, even as Yamamoto takes him by the shoulder and starts guiding him down the hall. Toward the nurse's office, he notices absently, still too horrified by Yamamoto's logic to really worry about that.

"That, too," he agrees. "Well, he runs the restaurant to make a living, but on the side, Dad is actually the master of a martial art or something like that? He understands well how a body works, you know. He's made sure that I'm healthy all these years, and he's helped some of my teammates, too!"

Right - now that Yamamoto mentions it, Tsunayoshi is pretty sure he's heard about his dad being a chef before, or at least running a restaurant. It was - something like sushi, right? Actually, the whole thing sounds like an amazing dream - Yamamoto's father who owned an entire restaurant with his star athlete son, giving them some place to go to celebrate. And to be able to doctor them on top of that?
Some people get all the luck.

"Thanks," Tsunayoshi says, "but there's no point in it. Mom already took me to a doctor. He didn't find anything. It's just me."

"You really should take me up on that, Dad's pretty smart you know. He always seems to see to the heart of the matter." Yamamoto seems to make himself nervous with all this, rubbing at the back of his head with an awkward expression. "He sure sees through me a lot. It's rough having a parent who notices these kinds of things!"

Well - but, Tsunayoshi has one parent who convincingly played dead for years at a time, that's how little he's around or in contact, and another who he can't understand or empathize with even though they live together. None of which Yamamoto is responsible for, and somehow Tsunayoshi can't even feel jealous of the edges of the expression on his face, where 'having an attentive parent' becomes 'troublesome.'

It's kind of nice, actually, the same way that Haru loves her troublesome mother. Whatever feeling that invokes in him, he thinks it's happiness. He doesn't understand the things they're going through, but somehow it's a relief that they experience them all the same.

So when he says, "I wouldn't know," it comes out gentle rather than wry.

Yamamoto blinks at him. Something goes strange and sharp in his eyes, and the hair on the back of Tsunayoshi's neck goes up to see it - but his heart doesn't so much as thump. Whatever smolders in the core of him doesn't so much as glimmer in response. He blinks back.

Even if Yamamoto doesn't seem likely to find a reason to attack him, Tsunayoshi suddenly realizes that he'd very much rather not face him like that if it can at all be helped.

Looking away first, Yamamoto says, brightly, "well, someday come experience it first hand at TakeSushi, okay?"

It's weird to think that Yamamoto suddenly sounds like an advertisement for the place, Tsunayoshi thinks, although the weirdest bit is how well it matches his usual way of speaking. Or no, maybe that's not weird at all?

Those keen eyes, not unfamiliar for all that Tsunayoshi has never seen them in Yamamoto's face before, disappeared much too easily for Yamamoto not to be practiced at it.

"Well, if it's alright, I'll tell my Mom we've been invited and come see you sometime," Tsunayoshi says. It'll probably make her happy to go out to eat - well, to hear that Tsunayoshi was invited by someone anyway, since she actually seems to enjoy cooking, or finds something good about it either way. As happy as it makes her to visit with the Miuras, and to have tea with Shioya, just the two of them going to a restaurant would probably make her happy, too.

"That's great! You should invite your friends, too - or, ha ha! Don't invite Hibari," Yamamoto says, swiveling slightly to clasp his hands together and bend over them a bit with apologetic smile. "Even if you two are close, I don't think it's the kind of thing he'd like."

"We're not as close as that!" Tsunayoshi yelps, warding Yamamoto off frantically. The idea that Hibari would tolerate him outside of school - or no, it's true that Hibari is still here this year, but that has nothing to do with Tsunayoshi!

"If you say so," Yamamoto says happily, as if his request has been taken seriously. He loops his arm around Tsunayoshi's shoulders, easily dwarfing him, and - he might be no Ryohei or even a
 Hibari, but the muscles pressed against Tsunayoshi's shoulder and back are kind of excessive for a baseball player, he thinks.

It's hard to panic with the ribs and soft belly that Yamamoto has left wide open, snuggled up to Tsunayoshi's elbow.

It doesn't seem like the kind of thing Yamamoto, careless as he seems, would do by accident.

"How come Sasagawa Ryohei never tried to fight you?" Tsunayoshi wonders aloud, and then blinks. Because surely it would have happened, unless Yamamoto was just that good at smiling with his eyes shut. And Tsunayoshi would have heard about that no matter how self-absorbed he'd been before That.

Yamamoto laughs, a bit too loud and strangely stilted. "He did! We just went to a school together before this," he says.

It wasn't long ago for himself, but Tsunayoshi thinks about two elementary school kids like Ryohei and Yamamoto fighting and even though it's a bit funny, he doesn't laugh about it to Yamamoto's face. After all, Yamamoto is no Ryohei and baseball isn't boxing, so the conclusion is a bit forgone.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised, since he's older than us, too," he says sympathetically, "but Ryohei-san really will fight anyone. That's rough."

Yamamoto coughs.

Tsunayoshi blinks up at the distinctly uneasy look on his face as Yamamoto inexpertly attempts to avoid his eyes and - "No way! You beat Ryohei back then!"

Pulling back, it's Yamamoto's turn to wave his hands around. "Now, now, Oniisan was fighting everyone back then, especially if his sister was around," he says, "there were certain circumstances, and she was small and cute, and-"

Well, Tsunayoshi shouldn't be surprised that even Yamamoto would fall prey to Kyoko's Kyokoness. Come to think of it, with their respective popularity, they could probably be king and queen of the campus if they wanted to be - which is - well, that aside, he's never really noticed them even being aware of one another, so -

Yamamoto has given up on trying to defend himself, like he realizes that Tsunayoshi isn't really paying attention to that part. Rubbing the back of his head with one awkward hand, he says, "anyway, I guess Oniisan is kind of terrifying as an opponent, but - anyone goes down if you hit them hard enough in the head."

Forgetting his weird preoccupation with the idea of Yamamoto and Kyoko, Tsunayoshi stares at him. Yamamoto winces, avoiding his eyes some more. His smile is tight and a bit unhappy, pulled shut over the edges of his teeth so they won't show.

"Kyoko isn't the kind that forgives it when you leave a scar on her brother, haha. I got into a lot of trouble with my old man, back then," he says apologetically. Since when was there more than an arms length of space between them?

Tsunayoshi had never really wondered where the scar that goes through Ryohei's eyebrow came from, but he never would have guessed that someone like Yamamoto would have done it during a schoolyard scrape -
No. That's not right.

Even if he's inclined to think that way, it hadn't been as simple as a 'schoolyard scarpe.' Yamamoto more or less said so himself when he'd casually talked about hitting hard enough.

He must have felt desperate.

"I guess I can't blame her for being worried about him all the time with a story like that," Tsunayoshi says. "I've been facing him myself recently, and he's kind of scary. I could see how in a fight without a coach or anything, it'd get like that."

"Yeah," Yamamoto says, but he's still sounding a too strained. "Only-" he adds, his face turned away, "I didn't think it was scary. It wasn't like that. Oniisan wasn't scary at all." The laugh he gives suddenly is sharp. It sounds like it's painful. "You know? This is the first time I've ever told anyone? No one but us three kids and our parents know about it."

Tsunayoshi stops walking, watching him. It's not exactly the feeling of 'but something scared Yamamoto about it,' but it's not exactly not. Something unpleasant happened, or something Yamamoto didn't like, anyway. Some kind of realization that still makes him uncomfortable to this day.

It's not the same thing at all. No one died. Although Ryohei was hurt, the way it sounds nothing worst than a scar came from it, although even Tsunayoshi knows that head wounds are dangerous.

But even if it wasn't killing anyone, Tsunayoshi can see how having an event like that in his past would stress Yamamoto out. The same kids that crowd around him now that Tsunayoshi is concerned about if they try anything - that story would definitely change how they saw Yamamoto.

If they can decide that Dame-Tsuna is suddenly a dangerous delinquent with their own perceptions on plain facts in front of their face, without even any evidence in favor of it, then it's not a leap. With Yamamoto, a baseball star who scores more home runs than anyone in Namimori records - they'd hear a story about 'hit them in the head hard enough' and they'd remember Ryohei's scar and they'd look at Kyoko, flowering idol that she is, and suddenly the popular Yamamoto who always has someone begging for his attention: that Yamamoto would be standing alone.

Just like he is now, a handful of meters from Tsunayoshi since he hadn't stopped at first. Neither has he turned to see how Tsunayoshi has taken his story, looking instead to the windows that illuminate the hallway with bright mid-morning sun. The edges of his expression are tight and anxious, the sunlight turning the corner of his eye into gold. He doesn't look like the confident, popular baseball star at all.

No wonder talking like an advertisement comes naturally to him, Tsunayoshi thinks. He would never have suspected such a dark past out of him at all.

And then Tsunayoshi heaves a sigh. "TakeSushi," he says, "where is it? It's just that me and my mom never go out to eat, so we don't know our way around the eatery district."

"It's on Fifth," Yamamoto says, turning to look at him with wide eyes. He looks like a startled deer.

"Then sometime soon we'll come intrude." That's not as specific as Tsunayoshi would have liked, and most people would have given Dame-Tsuna a more precise address, but it's close enough. It'll make Nana happy to look around a bit, probably. She so rarely gets a chance to leave the house.

When Yamamoto reflexively smiles, too startled to be honest about anything, Tsunayoshi feels his own mouth quirk back. It's not like he's happy to have met someone like this, but -
"It's an awful thing to have happened," he says, "but from what I can tell, ever since you've gone out of your way not to hurt anyone. Haven't you?"

Yamamoto blinks at him, seemingly astonished. "Well, yeah," he says, rubbing at the back of his head, "baseball injuries are almost entirely self-inflicted... it's really not a violent sport at all, but - somehow swinging a bat felt natural, so-"

"So," Tsunayoshi says, "try to be a little more forgiving toward yourself, Yamamoto-kun. It'll bother me if you're troubled, even if you don't show it. Okay?"

Later, Tsunayoshi will have to come to terms with this - Yamamoto Takeshi suddenly opening up to him and acting like Tsunayoshi's opinion matters: smiling like that just because Tsunayoshi has said he's concerned. Later he'll wonder what kind of weird, parallel universe he's fallen into - and then remember that ever since That incident, nothing about his life has been entirely sane at all. There are still troublesome things that he'll have to deal with, like the return of his fits, and his concerns about being spoiled, and the fact that Haru and Shioya and Ryohei and Hibari all think that his resolve is lacking, but -

Well, for now, he's capable of fixing one small thing. If Yamamoto is suffering in a similar way to him, then at least they'll have each other.

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Chapter End Notes

* Katekyo Homewrecker Shioya~! Despite Tsunayoshi suspecting that something romantic is going on between Shioya and Nana and being like "I GUESS!! >\:" they're actually just making friends hahaha

* Hibari Kyoya holding himself back a year, I can't remember if it happened in the anime, but it certainly happened in the manga and I laughed for nine years over the idea of Kyoya thinking that tormenting Tsuna is a perfect reason to do that

* At one point I was considering calling this chapter 'a fiscally responsible marriage'

* I don't think it's really spoilers to say that Tsunayoshi's 'episodes' are a result of the seal. He's a Sky that activated when he was five. It took some time for his internal flame saturation to become unhealthy, as the attention showered on him became less and less friendly, and his instincts sharpened to protect himself from hostile intent. Because his naturally produced flames can never be 'expelled' and used up, it begins to poison him. In self defense, he started directing his flames 'inwards' ... in other words, for the past two years when Tsunayoshi wasn't having 'episodes': he was inverting. And inverted Skies are just about the most dangerous thing around.

In canon, Reborn was able to fix and redirect his flames so Tsuna didn't invert or even realize he was starting to, mostly by piercing the seal and turning Tsuna into a tea kettle, more or less. In ChromaVerse, Tsunayoshi was given a focus and had to do the hard work himself - we're finally seeing him directing his flames outward again. Well
Shioya Tadamasa.

Shioya is also partially at fault. He knows this kid is an active Sky, and so he's been trying to get Tsunayoshi to manifest his flames like Ryohei does, but Tsunayoshi can't. Because Shioya 1) Doesn't know about seals and 2) Would never conceive of anyone sealing a child, he's accidentally making the situation worse. He's teaching Tsunayoshi flame management techniques like he did Ryohei, in order for these Flame-Active children to safely deal with their powers without hurting anyone. This drastically increases the flame saturation under the seal, thus adversely affecting Tsunayoshi's health.

Thank goodness Tsunayoshi's guardians are able to bleed some of the pressure off :V

* casually implied cannibalism. Of course Yamamoto Tsuyoshi isn't chopping people up.... anymore. But he definitely never cooks them. The best sushi is raw. *I'm really actually joking please don't think the Yamamoto family is cannibals* that was just Takeshi's mom Mayu! *not really im joking!!!!!*

* "she was small and cute" Takeshi says of Kyoko, as if this other kid he's bothering now isn't lmao, nice type Takeshi

* Obviously in Canon, Ryohei got his scar from those older kids who kidnapped Kyoko and held her hostage against him, but! In ChromaVerse that was just a few years ago and Takeshi hadn't learned how to play gently with other kids... especially flame active kids, anyway lol. Hey!! A rambunctious Sun like Royhei survived it, that's amazing!!

Chroma!Takeshi is That Way because, well, what else do they mean when they say a 'natural-born hitman' other than someone whose natural first instinct is to kill someone? This is why Takeshi is a 'baseball idiot' in Canon: he wasn't able to connect with the normal kids around him except as an athlete, which is why he lost his damned mind when his arm got hurt. It's not as dire in ChromaVerse because 90% of the kids have a family member with the same kind of aura and eyes as Takeshi so they don't realize anything is off about it. It's 'normal' to them.

Chapter Ten Non Canon Character list:
* Shioya Tadamasa - Sasagawa Ryohei's uncle and boxing coach who has recently taken on teaching Tsunayoshi for kicks and giggles. Gets along well with Nana. Possibly a homewrecker?!
* Nakamoto Kei - a newly minted officer in the Committee who used to be on good terms with Tsunayoshi but has recently started reacting strangely to him. Seems to have no problem bullying adults despite his otherwise gentle temperament.
Chapter 11: a thing with teeth

Tsunayoshi's episodes don't get better.

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Shioya is kinder now that school has started up again, but he obviously still expects Tsunayoshi to come by three times a week. Ryohei is more often than not busy with his club at his new campus, or school, or Kyoko, although that last one is more of a feeling that Tsunayoshi has than anything Shioya or Ryohei themselves say. Ryohei's been through going to a school ahead of Kyoko before, so Tsunayoshi is sure he'll cope somehow, but until then Tsunayoshi stands across from Shioya in the ring and somehow manages to count his blessings anyway.

It's just that Shioya lacks that certain edge that Ryohei has which makes him terrifying, even if he lacks the intent to hurt or kill. Because it sure isn't skill or kindness. Ryohei's Shi-oiji is the master, after all.

Tsunayoshi has no actual fits at the gym, but his stomach does feel twisty and unpleasant. If he has to choose, then it's definitely the nausea and not the headaches.

Is it too bright? It is bright. His head feels achy sometimes when he's headed home. Sometimes it's a bit disorienting. The gym isn't as bad as that, although the lights are a bit brighter than his preference. It's not enough to really distract him, but it's not doing him any favors.

Shioya feints a lot. It's hard to keep up with him, but gradually he seems to decide that Tsunayoshi has learned his lesson and lessens the weights on Tsunayoshi's feet until they're removed completely. It's 'acting on instinct' but under certain rules, he thinks.

If he can figure out how to fight someone without killing them, then of course Tsunayoshi can learn to punch without kicking also. Framing it that way makes it obvious that he'll learn, although two weeks feels like ages while it passes.

This ends up not being one of the times that Shioya works him into the ground, although Tsunayoshi collapses in exhaustion on a bench and breathes heavily for a while as Shioya unwinds his own bandages and mops the sweat from his skin before applying fresh ones. He's aware of Shioya watching him, but Shioya has never once shown him a sharp or cruel expression, and with the return of his fits, there's no way for Tsunayoshi to maintain his guard against him all the time.

"Hey," Shioya says momentarily, "chin up, mini-Sawada. No one has time for a genius to stroke
their own ego over learning fast.”

Tsunayoshi looks at him with some bewilderment. Shioya has a weird way of talking where he says the opposite of what he means, although it’s not the exact opposite. The ‘learning fast’ Tsunayoshi thinks he can take at face value, although he has no metric to measure it against other than his own suffering - the ‘genius part’ is probably the opposite. He’s well aware of his own intelligence.

"I'm not," he says, sulking now. "It's taken a lot of hard work to figure it out, you know."

"Tch - just because you're not a scrapper at heart like Ryohei isn't a reason to brag about it," Shioya cautions him. He reaches out and taps Tsunayoshi's jaw with his knuckle - but lightly, a mimicry of a punch that would send Tsunayoshi's head spinning even at half strength, but turned into a friendly nudge. Tsunayoshi blinks, shocked, and apparently Shioya agrees given the immediate scowl that settles over his face like a thundercloud.

He shakes the hand out and settles both on his hips, the thunderclouds evaporating as quickly as they came. "You still have some kind of strange mental block when it comes to fighting," he says. "I thought I could force my way through it, but you're a tougher nut to crack than expected, mini-Sawada."

"It's Tsunayoshi," he says, because being prickly about being called 'mini-Sawada' is safer than trying to address that he doesn't want to accidentally take a fight too seriously. Shioya isn't the kind of person he wants to fight seriously. Even if it seems unlikely for Shioya to trigger anything the way that Yekaterina's threats had, Tsunayoshi would rather not run the risk at all.

Shioya eyes him for a long moment, to the point that Tsunayoshi wants to start squirming. He forces himself to sit still, to meet Shioya's dark, fathomless gaze evenly.

Adults either despair of him, or judge him, or find him wanting. His mother calls him 'dame' and his father is a stranger that tells him 'good job' when he does terrible, unforgivable things that can't be undone, and then leaves again so that Tsunayoshi and Nana have to pick up the pieces of what's left together. Shioya has been alone in that he seems to have no opinion of Tsunayoshi whatsoever, despite deciding on his own that he'll train him so often without even asking for payment the way Hayashi does for lessons he doesn't even take seriously with Tsunayoshi.

"Maybe someday," Shioya says finally.

Tsunayoshi sags and sighs. "That's what Yamamoto-kun said, too," he grumbles. Only Haru has ever listened to him and easily called him by the full name the way he prefers, and even she's more comfortable tagging 'san' on the end instead of 'kun' as if they're not close enough that he's never bothered with anything to do with her name at all.

"... TakeSushi's Yamamoto?" Shioya asks.

Blinking in surprise, Tsunayoshi says, "you've heard of it? On the first day of school, Yamamoto-kun invited me to come try it out, but there hasn't been time for it, yet."

Yamamoto hasn't been pushing the matter, either, although he's been enforcing Tsunayoshi's place in the desk beside him, working strange magic on his friends and distracting them from Tsunayoshi being sick all over his desk. Somehow he's managed not to have to leave the classroom since that first day, even as miserable as he is.

"Yamamoto-kun did, huh," he says, blinking right back. And then he grins. "Way to go, mini-
Sawada."

"It's not a date!" Tsunayoshi had forgotten all about Shioya's weird reaction to when Ryohei brought him to this place!

"Way to go, nothing!" Tsunayoshi sputters, "Yamamoto-kun decided it of his own accord!"

"No need to brag about it," Shioya says, still grinning at him; he seems sincerely amused at the situation, for whatever reason. He ignores Tsunayoshi's indignant 'It's not bragging!' to say, "Well, this I have to see - Tsuyoshi's reaction to that brat of his getting up to no good. Say, mini-Sawada, why don't we and that cute mother of yours go see what it's all about? My treat."

Shioya's just looking to cause trouble - Tsunayoshi manages to crush the thought before he gets as far as 'my household,' but the knowledge of how he immediately thought of it sits heavy and ominous in his head. It really isn't a date! Haru isn't my girlfriend -

Well, no, someone you going to marry was normally called a 'fiancée' - no, he's not actually going to go through with a marriage to Haru anyway! After college is a long time from now and they're not even dating! Haru will find someone a lot more suitable for her than Tsunayoshi who can't even properly feel affection toward people!

Although - ahh, that might prove troublesome in its own way, depending on how Tsunayoshi sees that person - well, no. It's not really his business or choices to make, now is it?

And that aside, Tsunayoshi isn't even properly certain of how Yamamoto would fit 'in his household' in the first place, regardless of what he'd immediately thought. Although, Hibari -

Hibari isn't part of his household either!

No, more accurately: Tsunayoshi doesn't have a household to disrupt!

Unfortunately, Tsunayoshi ends up powerless to stop Shioya anyway, as the man is an adult and he isn't even being as cruel in disrupting Tsunayoshi's household as Hoshino was last year. Motivated with what Tsunayoshi tentatively identifies as mischief, they both shower at the in-gym facilities - there's no attached springs or sauna, something Tsunayoshi wouldn't have known to wish for until he'd spent so many hours in the bath at home - and even though Tsunayoshi is moving under his own power, Shioya is following him home.

That's how Haru finds them.

"Tsunayoshi-san!" she calls out excitedly, and Tsunayoshi barely has time to turn before he's being crushed and staggering under a kind of tackling hug. Haru is too kind to put all of her weight and strength into it, staggering him but catching herself on her toes so he doesn't fall to the sidewalk.

"H-Haru!" he protests. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a joyous coincidence!" she sings out. It's been a while since they've been able to meet between their schedules, so he's not really surprised at her enthusiasm or how he doesn't actually mind it even if Tsunayoshi isn't exactly a fan of hugs or touching. Some part of him settles in place to have her at his side again, even if it is in front of Shioya. "Father gave Haru the day off, and since Tsunayoshi-san was working, Haru decided to go shopping - but! Since Tsunayoshi-san is free, then Haru will stay with him!"

Well, 'free' is -
"Oh-ho. Mini-Sawada, who's this?"

Shioya looks too amused for anyone's good, honestly, though Haru startles and stills under the hand that Tsunayoshi doesn't mean to grasp the elbow of her sweater with. It's not bad, he thinks, but first impressions are something: Shioya acted weird about Ryohei, and now he's acting weird about Yamamoto without even meeting him, and Tsunayoshi is wary of what he'll say about Haru. If at all possible, he won't let mention of Hibari pass his own lips; Hibari will take care of the rest, as loathed as he is of being around others without additional reasons to be annoyed by it.

"It's Shioya Tadamasa-san," Tsunayoshi says to her, and Haru continues to blink up at him without taking her eyes off him, but settles all the same. "This is my friend, Haru-chan."

"'Haru-chan,' huh? You're a good friend of mini-Sawada, here?" Shioya asks, although his grin suggests that much is obvious.

Haru is the kind of person who has two faces, although Tsunayoshi himself honestly has little right to judge her there - there's the strange face that she shows Tsunayoshi the most, the one that watches, the one that's sharp and eager; there's also the face that Haru shows to Nana, and to the other adults that they come across: the one that's bright and simple and happy.

"Haru-chan is Tsunayoshi-san's girlfriend!" Haru tells Shioya brightly, fluttering her big wine colored eyes at him, like she's doing her best to be a simple, harmless girl, but can't quite fully commit to it.

Tsunayoshi wonders if like he had, Haru senses on some level that Shioya isn't anyone to make an enemy.

"She's not," Tsunayoshi says, especially given the way Shioya reacts all the other times, even if he doesn't usually bother arguing against Haru's claims to the point that if things go badly, there's a wedding in his future - ah. But if it did happen, maybe he'd take Haru's last name and never have to hear about Sawada again. Hideki would surely be willing to adopt him into the family if he came to approve the match, or Yekaterina - though that's a snowball's chance.

"Is that so?" Shioya asks, ignoring Tsunayoshi entirely to look nothing less than like a dog with his teeth in a squeaky toy, and basically just as terrifying. "I'm taking mini-Sawada and Nana-san out to TakeSushi. You can come along, it'll be my treat."

"You can't just treat everyone," Tsunayoshi protests. He's pretty sure that's the lynchpin on this situation - if he can just prevent Shioya paying for anyone's food, then the whole thing will have to be called off and yeah, it's late enough that Yamamoto will probably be around the restaurant instead of doing club activities or homework, but that's specifically the point: if at all possible, Tsunayoshi wants to keep this to himself.

He wants to figure this all out on his own before Yamamoto has a chance to realize what he's getting himself into and changes his mind. Although, if Tsunayoshi's fits haven't been enough to give him pause, then -

"It's my money, of course I can," Shioya says, and then cuffs him over the head. "Don't be cute and refuse my generosity, brat."

It seems to be a terribly simple matter to run roughshod over Tsunayoshi's wishes - most of that his own fault, he knows, but even if he hates it, it's just easier to go along with things as long as no one is getting hurt. He does things he hates all the time when it's easier than fighting over the matter. It's often easier to just do something than fight about it and in the end, results in less hard feelings.
Haru bides her time until they've returned to the Sawada household and picked up Nana, and Tsunayoshi's mother is suitably distracted with Shioya, who is on his best behavior - as always. Then, gripping onto his arm the way she usually does, though some part of Tsunayoshi recognizes it as precisely identical to how Nana is holding onto Shioya's - Haru leans into him. She's making her eyes very large and guileless the way she does when demanding information he's tried to hold back. It makes him distinctly nervous.

"Hey, Tsunayoshi-san," Haru says, "What about TakeSushi is special?"

"Shioya-san is just trying to cause trouble," he protests defensively, but he's literally saying out loud something that he'd stopped himself from even thinking just a hour ago. Groaning, he averts his gaze. His cheeks and ears feel hot. "I wouldn't know," he says sullenly. "I only mentioned that Yamamoto Takeshi-kun from school invited me, and Shioya-san got weird about it."

"Yamamoto Take-" Haru's hands tighten on his arm before rears back. "That Yamamoto Takeshi of Nami Middle?"

Her voice breaks. Her eyes sparkle alarmingly.

Tsunayoshi had forgotten that Haru was the kind that dreamed of being saved by a white knight but would settle for a psychopath with a shiny enough sword in a pinch.

The target is only slightly better in this instance, given that Yamamoto is certainly much tamer than Hibari and has much less blood on his hands than Tsunayoshi, but he's not entirely convinced that things will stay that way. Yamamoto is no one that Tsunayoshi would like to end up on the wrong side of, and as little as he wants to put Yamamoto in the position of becoming just as bloodstained -

Well. Yamamoto had said it himself. In all honesty, he dislikes how people react to his actions more than he dislikes those actions. It's better to accept that part of him than it is to try and deny him it.

Yamamoto might be able to teach Tsunayoshi something about becoming someone that others won't want to leave, though Tsunayoshi would prefer to be more honest about it. Tsunayoshi wasn't always the kind who could look at someone and read their hearts as simply as that. People should be allowed to choose for themselves whether it's something they want to get tangled up in, after all.

"The shooting star of baseball, Yamamoto Takeshi? Number one male idol of the Nami school?" Haru continues with such enthusiasm it's like spring has arrived all over again, as if she's an entire sakura tree all of her own, flowering and immediately dropping every last petal on her stems at once.

Tsunayoshi boggles, both impressed and intimidated. "Even Midori has heard about Yamamoto-kun?" he asks.

"If not for that shaggy beasts, plenty of the students wanted to transfer!" Haru says incredulously. "Everyone in the district heard about Yamamoto Takeshi going to bat!"

Is - is baseball a big deal around here? Tsunayoshi has always been too caught up in his own problems to really take notice of anything like that, and while he'd realized that Yamamoto was popular, and more or less the boy's version of Kyoko - it seems a bit out there that even Midori would know about him.

"S-say, you know," Tsunayoshi says, turning into her grip on his arm and waving his free hand. "Try treating him like a normal guy if he's around? I'm sure he gets tired of hearing it all the time."
"I know that already!" she says, although the flush in her cheeks and the stars in her eyes haven't abated one bit. "So let me get it out now!"

Well, when she puts it that way. Tsunayoshi ends up learning more about baseball and Yamamoto's records in particular over the next ten minutes of their walk than he's learned about anything ever before. Period point-blank. He also learns a lot of personal information about Yamamoto to the point of thinking that Hibari needs to tighten campus security because he's pretty sure some of that information is only supposed to be known by the administration - he knows more about Yamamoto than he knows about *himself*, like what western astrology sign he is, and his blood type.

He doesn't miss the amused look Shioya cuts him over his shoulder either, which honestly just confirms that Shioya is only causing Tsunayoshi trouble for the fun of it.

By the time they arrive in front of a building that's clearly marked 'TakeSushi,' Haru has thankfully run mostly out of steam and Tsunayoshi is mostly staggering around shell shocked. Thank goodness that Haru has his arm and is dragging him forward, or otherwise he thinks he might accidentally just continue walking down the street. The thought of what Shioya and Nana might get up to alone when confronted with Yamamoto doesn't bare imagining.

For once, that dazed feeling isn't because of his fits, though; Tsunayoshi notices that. Of course he notices that. It's as if walking with others somehow lessens some kind of burden, and though there's a slight twinge between his shoulder blades, neither headache or nausea make an appearance.

"Welcome!" the man behind the counter call out to them, loud and automatic. They aren't the only ones in tonight, but if pushed, Tsunayoshi would say that they've managed to miss the evening rush somehow. Still, the chef - ah, yeah, Tsunayoshi sees immediately that this is Yamamoto's father, although he thinks it's likely that like himself, Yamamoto favors his mother the most. But they share eye shapes and the set of their shoulders and likely the set of their feet against the floor, and the remaining tension fades from his spine at it.

"Oh! This is lovely," Nana says brightly, ahead of them with Shioya, while Haru vibrates next to Tsunayoshi. "What a calming atmosphere!"

"Yeah, that kid's around here somewhere," Shioya answers her absently. "This is worse than I thought." Then he seems to start and glance at Nana. "Well, come on, it's a sushi bar, after all, Nana-san. I'm friends with the owner, so let's get a good spot."

The one he picks out is front and center to Yamamoto's father. They've hardly escaped the man's notice, but he's diligent, much like his son: he deals with the customers that came ahead of them before turning his attention to them, and then he brightens.

"Tadamasa-kun," he says with a grin. "What's this? You've always bad mouthed my food before now!"

"And I'm still not eating anything raw," Shioya shoots back; his normally measured tone has suddenly developed a bit of an accent, and Tsunayoshi blinks at him, leaning back in his stool to peer around his mother. It never occurred to him to wonder if Japanese might not be Shioya's first language, but that's what it sounds like a bit - like Yekaterina and Haru herself.

"And that's an insult to my heritage," Yamamoto's father says crankily, snapping his blade against the cutting board before him. This is clearly an argument they've had many times before, and although Yamamoto's father is sincerely a bit irritated by it, it's also obvious there's no real resentment or grudge. "You people are always worried about being sick! I've never had a customer even once get sick of my food! Except when they over indulged themselves."
"You have plenty that's not raw, so serve me some of that," Shioya counters easily, and Yamamoto's father grunts loudly, scowling. "I'm treating these guys anyway, so if you want to serve raw stuff, serve it to them."

Snorting a final time, Yamamoto's father turns his attention to the rest of them, a ready smile on his face - warmer than one that just greets the customers, but still polite and slightly impersonal. "Welcome to TakeSushi! If I'm not wrong, this is your first time here?"

"Yes! It is," Nana says happily. She's calmer about it, but Tsunayoshi feels like in her own way, she's also vibrating with excitement, although for different reasons. "Shioya-kun was kind enough to invite us out here!"

"Is that so! Well, I'll do my best to make TakeSushi a favorite of yours," he says. He turns his attention further down the line, and then his gaze snags oddly on Tsunayoshi - first going to skirt over him to take in Haru as well, then jerking back to Tsunayoshi before even taking a proper look. He smiles. "Hmm." He glances back Nana's way before frowning thoughtfully at Tsunayoshi. "I feel like I've seen you before. Are you one of Takeshi's friends?"

Tsunayoshi lets out the breath he hadn't entirely meant to hold in the first place. "No, no," he starts to say, and then, "well - now I am, I think, but this is the first time I've come here. Yamamoto-kun invited me."

Yamamoto's father arches his brows, still a little distracted but warming up slightly, and then Shioya says, "Allow me to introduce my companions. This is Sawada Nana, and that's Sawada Tsunayoshi, and ah - Haru-chan?"

"Miura Haru," she chirps, but Yamamoto hasn't looked away from Tsunayoshi, blinking at him.

"Ah," he says after a moment, cutting Haru a distracted smile, "Hideki's kid, right? That's -" and then he turns with a ferocious scowl. "Takeshi!" he shouts.

Tsunayoshi jumps, but no one else in the entire restaurant even flinches or stops talking. Apparently they're used to the gravely bellow of an irritated father.

The entrance in the back of the sushi bar that leads to the domicile gets disturbed by Yamamoto appearing in it, his eyes wide and guileless. "What's up, Pops," he says alertly, and then his gaze flickers past his father, who has his arms crossed over his powerful chest and projecting disapproval like nothing less than a massive, snarling, snapping dog - and he spots the customers his father is standing in front of.

Yamamoto lights up like his birthday unexpectedly came early. "Oh! Tsuna!" he greets excitedly. "You came!"

Yamamoto has zero sense for the atmosphere! What a terrifying person! Haru's lack of self preservation instinct is bad enough, Tsunayoshi doesn't want to add looking after Yamamoto who is completely unable to realize the situation here! Or he says that, but clearly no one else is looking after Yamamoto and at this rate-!

"Takeshi!" his father snaps, and Yamamoto's eyes go even wider as he finally seems to realize his mistake. Grimacing, he blinks at his dad, this time obviously trying to project helpless innocence. It doesn't work. "What did I tell you last time?"

"Now, now," Yamamoto says anxiously, finally releasing the edge of the doorway and coming through. "It's a different situation completely!"
There's a certain way that Yamamoto is standing that makes the hair on the back of Tsunayoshi's neck stand on end, although he's uncommonly present in his eyes, brow tilted with anxiety. There's none of that strange edge to his gaze, but Tsunayoshi doesn't particularly care for that particular ratio of tension in his shoulders as compared to the looseness of his wrists and feet.

Despite the kind of person that Yamamoto is, he'd no sooner hurt his father than Tsunayoshi would hurt his mother, but: this is him digging in is heels, Tsunayoshi thinks.

"Um," he says, and almost flinches at his own unexpected interruption. No one quite looks at him, but their attention comes to bare all the same. "Yamamoto-san - that is… um. Yamamoto-kun has been helping me out recently, thanks to various things, so… if we could be friends, I think that'd work out well for both of us."

Yamamoto's father finally stops scowling at his son long enough to look at Tsunayoshi. And oh - that's where Yamamoto gets that odd sharpness in his gaze sometimes, Tsunayoshi thinks. Although the father learned that sharpness somewhere, he somehow imparted that into his son without even meaning to, from the time that Yamamoto was a small child, probably.

This is how Yamamoto knows without thinking about it that if you hit someone in the head hard enough, they'll stay down.

It's not the same situation at all. Tsunayoshi is more like Yamamoto's father than he is Yamamoto himself, but - ahh, that sharpness doesn't scare him at all, not in Yamamoto's hands. It's natural for a parent to worry about their kid that way, or at least he thinks so, but-

Yamamoto's father looks past Tsunayoshi at Shioya, and even thought Shioya doesn't blink or say anything, Yamamoto's father's grimace twists down for a moment and then he sighs and looks back at his son. "We'll talk about this more later," he says grumpily. "But for now, see to your guests, Takeshi."

The last of the tension evaporates, and Yamamoto grins brightly. "Sure thing, Pops!"

Rather than joining them, this seems to mean that Yamamoto should get a short apron on and take their orders. Nana seems impossibly charmed by this, cooing over Yamamoto and mentioning her own past as a waitress - what, really? - and Yamamoto reacts gamely, apparently comfortable with this level of attention from a grown woman.

Well, he is the kind of dutiful son that mothers would wish for to be their own. He's an idol, after all. Everyone wants to be his friend and girls want to date him, and-

And well, the kind of things that Yamamoto is capable of would destroy that reputation utterly. It must be exhausting for Yamamoto, even if he has never shown it even once.

It's not the same at all, since Tsunayoshi has no reputation other than useless and now delinquent, and his mother knows and won't turn her back - but. But. But. But Tsunayoshi can sympathize. Somehow Yamamoto picked him of all people to tell the darkest secret of his heart to, and part of Tsunayoshi thinks: it's not so bad as that, and another part thinks: but it could be. Tsunayoshi has no one to tell these worries and concerns to, but Yamamoto chose him. And Tsunayoshi thinks: I can do this much, at least.

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"Miura Hideki's kid, huh," Shioya says outside the sushi bar.

Behind them, Nana is busy with Yamamoto Tsuyoshi, exchanging numbers and sharing words over
their respective children and the friendship that they've allegedly foraged. 'Friendship' tastes like a watered down word compared to the way Tsunayoshi feels about it, but he's not sure what a better one would be.

Next to Tsunayoshi, Haru's hands tighten on his arm, even as she blinks big, wide eyes up at Shioya with naivety that is at least seventy percent artifice.

Shioya looks down at her with precisely the same lack of opinion that he looks at Tsunayoshi with. At last, he says, "You sure make interesting friends, mini-Sawada."

*Your instincts are quite terrifying, you know?*

He looks away at last, glancing back at TakeSushi and reaching up to rake a dozen braids back out of his face with a slightly daunted expression. "This is turning out to be quite the thing to keep an eye on." He pauses, then puts his hands on his hips in a startling mimicry of what Yamamoto Tsuyoshi did earlier, sighing loudly. "And I complained of being bored ever since those two runts got old enough to look after themselves."

"Eh," Tsunayoshi says, even as Haru loosens her grip slightly. She's still clinging to his arm, even though earlier when Yamamoto had gone to introduce himself to her, she'd squeaked out 'single' instead of her name when Yamamoto had said: *and you're...?*

Tsunayoshi would leave himself for Yamamoto, too, probably.

Although more importantly, "you're friends with Yamamoto's father?"

"Well, we were acquaintances for a long time, really," Shioya says, glancing down at him. "We used to work in the same circles until everyone started to settle down and have kids. It's good to have amicable relationships within the industry if you can manage it - a kid like you naturally prefers that, which is why I'm even giving you the time of day, after all."

Tsunayoshi blinks, and thinks about Iemitsu's strange, shining eyes, and saying *good job* when Tsunayoshi did that unalterable thing, and adults saying: *Sawada.* Yamamoto's father, who passed that kind of sharpness to his son, and Yekaterina who accused him of being the kind of person who chewed people up and spit them out without consideration or care.

He doesn't think anything shows on his face, but it must, because Shioya adds: "You take after your mother in all the ways that matter."

"I could hardly take after him," Tsunayoshi says, and then startles over how it comes out as sharp as the edges in Yamamoto's eyes.

It's not nearly as surprising as the way Shioya tosses his head back and *laughs*, though, honest and honestly amused. "I guess you couldn't at that," he allows, reaches out and carelessly rumpling Tsunayoshi's hair.

Somewhere, the wires in Tsunayoshi's head must be crossed: that feels like *good job*, only instead of being for something unforgivable, it's for something that Tsunayoshi is inclined toward, anyway.

How is he supposed to respond to that?

The burden of responding is lifted from him as Nana finally breaks free from Yamamoto's father and comes to attach herself to Shioya's offered elbow again, beaming and flushed. She really does look incredibly happy. It makes Tsunayoshi wonder if she was holding back for his sake, or if it's
only because of his connections to their children that Nana can find something in common with these adults. He's never realized how lonely she's been all this time. She's too skilled at hiding it.

He doesn't have long to consider it, since Yamamoto is lingering around the doorway watching after them, and Tsunayoshi is caught up in waving goodbye to him for a while, something Haru only too happily joins in on. At least she doesn't pretend not to know him this time.

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It isn't every day that Shioya works him half to death, or he has to attend classes with Hayashi, and on those nights, Tsunayoshi sits himself down at the desk in his bedroom and spends some time agonizing over his homework. Now that Haru is mostly busy with her own clubs and activities, they can only convience once a week or so during which she'll try to help him with what he doesn't understand.

While suffering bizarre episodes of nausea and piercing headaches during lessons, that's more or less all of his schoolwork. He's starting to understand better what Haru means by studying during free periods and during lunch, too. It's twisted to think he's starting to develop Haru's work ethic, but the way she looks at him when he doesn't is too crushing for him to cope with.

Maybe it's something he should try approaching Yamamoto about? Only, he has the general sense that Yamamoto isn't in much of a better position than he is where school work is concerned.

Regardless, Tsunayoshi has the good sense to know when he's too frustrated to really learn anything and calls it quits. Rather than fall into the trap of his video game, which he's learned will keep him well occupied until Nana comes upstairs to turn in and scolds him over it, he goes downstairs for a snack.

He finds his mother in the kitchen singing.

Tsunayoshi lingers just outside the kitchen entryway, watching her in silence. Oh, that's right, he thinks: Nana used to sing and dance in the kitchen while cooking or cleaning up. He hasn't seen her do so in years. How many years? He thinks - for his fifth birthday. It wasn't his last elaborate birthday party, but it had been the last happy one. He'd had friends over, but try as he might, he can't remember their names or what they'd looked like. They'd stopped being friends with him only a little while after that.

Only it wasn't exactly his birthday that had set the change, was it? Nana had changed a little while after that.

After Iemitsu had come to visit. She'd been so happy, then, even more so than for his birthday, and then -

Tsunayoshi winces and rubs at his forehead as an unannounced spike of pain pierces through his head. It's far from the episodes he has at school or walking home, which are prolonged and linger; the pain begins to fade after only a few moments. "Mom," he says quietly, stepping into the kitchen, "what's that song?"

"Oh?" Nana glances over, surprised but pleasantly so, it seems. "I don't remember the name anymore. It's some old aria I overhead once when I was a girl, working at the taverna."

He blinks. "But why now?"

Nana cocks her head thoughtfully, still smiling, before she returns her attention to the food cooking on the stove. She hums noncommittally, and then says, "I think it's because I was remembering
those days. Even though Mama didn't have a home to live in, and worked for many hours of the
day, there were always the customers who would come in and talk. It wasn't quite like having
friends, I think, but it was a lot of fun."

Tsunayoshi really does take after his mother in various ways. He feels like some kind of weight has
been let off his chest, the way Nana seems to be so happy these days - like he hadn't even realized
that along with being miserable himself, Nana was miserable as well, and that had compounded the
situation and made it worse.

"I think," he says, slow and uncertain and a bit unhappy, "that I'm building a household somehow.
But I don't know how to take care of it. I've never had a household before."

Nana looks toward him, blinking. "A household," she echoes thoughtfully. "With Haru-chan and
Yamamoto-kun?"

Well, apparently Hibari fits in there somewhere, too, but more or less, and so he nods.

"Hmm. I don't know much about that myself, Tsu-kun," she admits. "Your father had the same
inclinations, but I don't think it's the kind of thing that could be easily explained over the phone -"

"No, no, no thanks!" Tsunayoshi says loudly, waving her off. "Nevermind! I'll figure it out on my
own."

Giggling, Nana says, "well, I guess you are growing up and this is the sort of thing you'd want to
do without involving your parents too much! Don't worry, Tsu-kun, Mama will keep her mouth
sealed. I'll do my best to advise you, it's just - well, since I ran away from home myself, there's not
a lot I can say."

*Forget his household - "You're a runaway?"

"Oh, yes," she says, blinking at him. "I never said? Mama was about your age when she left home.
Now - let's see." She taps her chin thoughtfully. "Yes. Mama's mama was trying to get her involved
with something… come to think of it, maybe Nana's Mama was trying to add her to someone's
household?" She seems surprised by the thought, but then visibly shrugs it off - not unsurprisingly.
It would have happened so long ago that it barely holds any importance these days when she has a
son the same age as when she left home. "It seemed really important to Mama, but I'd always
wanted to see Italy, so I left."

Tsunayoshi can't be expected to cope with this. No wonder Nana never seems all that worried
about anything, even Haru's more alarming habits - she ran away from home as a teenager, all the
way to *Italy*. He's never really given a lot of thought to where Nana grew up, only that he can't
pronounce her family name. It's been forever since he heard it to try, but Tsunayoshi is pretty sure
he hasn't gotten any better at foreign languages since he was a kid.

It sounds like Nana crossed country lines. What kind of terrifying woman had he unexpected been
living with this entire time?

On the other hand, maybe that's why he's been more worried about Haru being safe while doing
her thing rather than what she's actually doing.

"But to Mama, it seems that Haru-chan and Yamamoto-kun would like to be a part of Tsu-kun's
household, so Mama will help you!" Nana reaffirms, smiling happily.

That's not the kind of thing that Tsunayoshi feels okay with rejecting, even if it's the furthest thing
from what he wanted out this this conversation. "Thanks for your support," he says anyway. It's not
like he properly knows what he expected out of this, but basically being egged on by his mother the same way everyone else is egging him on is - just weird.

He's pretty sure that health or social class never mentioned building households as a normal thing that people do, although he's so bad at his studies that it's possible he just missed out on it that day. Surely someone would have followed up on it with him, if that was true, though? Then again, he's Dame-Tsuna, so maybe it's only natural that no one would have expected such a thing to become a problem for him.

And who put him in charge of it anyway?! Anyone should be able to look at Tsunayoshi and realize that anyone else is a better choice for head of house! Haru and Yamamoto both should have better heads on their shoulders, but - then again, even people who bare their teeth over 'Sawada' seem to agree that it's Tsunayoshi's job.

Thank goodness that Kyoko is wise enough to keep herself and her own out of it. If only he could throw his lot in with them.

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Chapter End Notes

* Traditionally, a Sky's Sky-aligned parent or one (or more) of that parent's Guardians would oversee a young Sky's acquisition of Guardians, since Skies are very good at attracting people but it's an indiscriminate skill. Left to their own devices, a Sky might choose someone with an unsuitable temperament or skill level to the situation at hand. Elements are even more vulnerable to this given that Skies are rare to begin with, and then also have the tendency to consume their (unrelated) young.

That basically means that in canon Reborn is basically a Fairy Godfather for hire lmao.

That also means that Shioya Tadamasa has just willfully maneuvered his way into being Tsunayoshi's godfather lol.

* Nana is still latent/dormant, but she's a Sun element from a certain kind of family, so she still has the instincts and a vague idea of how the whole thing works.

Chapter Eleven Non Canon Character list:
* Shioya Tadamasa - Sasagawa Ryohei's uncle and boxing coach who has stepped up as Tsunayoshi's substitute Godfather. A functional Tsundere who gets along well with Nana and has connections to other unexpected adults in town.
the gunpowder plot

Chapter Summary

in which Tsunayoshi gets involved in something troublesome

Chapter Notes

**Content Warning:** sexual harassment of the type you'd expect from teenage boys who are allowed to govern themselves. The target of the harassment doesn't fully grasp the harassment, but another character strenuously objects to the implications.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12 : the gunpowder plot

Of course this year, with Hibari Kyoya still in control of the Disciplinary Committee, Tsunayoshi is still in the position of being their free, unofficial gofer. Tsunayoshi still finds himself looking longingly into the actual club room itself, where Hibari sits at the desk with a ferocious scowl on his face while he flips through paperwork. Even though Hoshino has stepped up into Kusakabe's position, Hibari must be missing his second in command - it seems like it's been ages since the last time Hibari was able to freely investigate problems on the streets.

His temperament certainly shows just how little he's pleased with it.

"If you're done being creepy," Hoshino says, shoving a packet at Tsunayoshi, "these should go to Saitoh Itsuki."

"Saitoh-kun?" Tsunayoshi echoes, blinking as he glances up at Hoshino. "But he's moved on to a higher campus."

Hoshino gives him a flat look. "That much is obvious, since he's not darkening our doorstep," he says bluntly. "I'm not telling you so you can question me. If you're a gofer, then go."

"Ehh. Do I at least get a campus name?" Tsunayoshi says, even though the whole task in general is a bit over the top. Surely the Committee has more reliable gofers than himself? Although honestly he hasn't made special note of any.

"If you want to be Hibari-san's excellent gofer, you'll figure it out yourself," Hoshino says, and then shoves him out the door and closes it in his face.

Tsunayoshi sighs heavily. It's not exactly a feeling of 'something has to be done' about Hoshino's attitude toward him, but he's getting kind of depressed about it. That and they're already a few months into school and he hasn't had a chance to speak with Hibari since that first day.

If his resolve really is something that deplorable, then he should do something about it - but what
he should do about it is a harder thing to decide. And if nothing else, then Tsunayoshi wants to consult with Hibari over this whole 'household' mess, since Hibari seems to have built something a lot similar to that with his thugs.

Although, come to think of it: can't he just join Hibari's, instead?

(Of course not, and don't be foolish: Nana has the right of it. Haru and Yamamoto want to be part of his household, not Hibari's. Of course Tsunayoshi can't just surrender that and go along with someone else. That's not fair to those two's feelings.)

Tsunayoshi isn't too worried about the specifics of his task, even though he has the impression that Kusakabe would never have sent him off campus for anything to do with the Committee. School is technically out at this time, so it's not like he'll actually get in trouble - and if anyone tries, then being on Committee business technically affords him the Committee's protection.

The few times that Yamamoto's friends tried to take issue with him away from the classroom (and Yamamoto himself), it had ended up going nowhere at all thanks to the lurking presence of one of the Committee members.

He doesn't mistake for one second that they would have stepped in on his behalf, but he can't expect rule abiding athletes like Yamamoto's baseball friends to understand that through gut instinct alone. For someone so well known for being useless in general and dull in particular, to the point of having a nickname about it, Tsunayoshi has noticed that there are many things that seem obvious to him that others don't seem to get at all.

The first place that Tsunayoshi goes after leaving the Committee office is down to the boxing club, which is across the Nami campus, a bit further than the kendo club's building. Even with all of Tsunayoshi's hard work, he doesn't feel very inclined to poke his nose into the athletics district, although the fact that they have entire stretches of the campus to themselves and buildings filled with supplies for the various clubs is a continuous source of interest to his classmates.

It must be technically true that after everyone's grades, it's the athletics department that brings the bulk of prestige to the campus. Even Midori's elite had been willing to study at Nami if only for the sake of getting closer to Yamamoto - if not for Hibari.

Unfortunately, the boxing club holds no answers for Tsunayoshi - the current members know well where Ryohei was accepted for his last three years of secondary schooling. They even have his contact information. But as for Saitoh Itsuki-

"I thought if anyone would know, that would be you, Sawada," Honda says; apparently he's graduated from being the weighted belt that holds Ryohei back to being the leader of the club.
"Saitoh-kun was respected since he was a good second-in-command for Ryohei and he was good with the underclassmen, but he didn't get close with anyone. The only person he ever got friendly with was you."

Tsunayoshi doesn't have an answer for that other than a vaguely troubled expression. By now, he's figured out what it looks like when people are asking for his attention, and Saitoh never once behaved that way toward him. There was never even any indication that Saitoh considered him as anything other than a passing acquaintance outside of his odd remarks regarding Tsunayoshi's relationship with Hibari.

Even taking that final confrontation into consideration - that was more about Ryohei than it was Tsunayoshi.
It's that thought that leads Tsunayoshi to his next destination, all the way back across the campus to the school halls, to the top floor. There isn't often a lot of cause for Tsunayoshi to be in this part of the school; the staff room of all things is this high up, as well as some of the more elite clubs. Tsunayoshi remembers that there had been something of an astronomy club? Presumably they aren't at the school at night - although it's possible if there's a teacher sponsoring it, Tsunayoshi supposes. That kind of thing seems to happen from time to time.

Well, even if Tsunayoshi had no particular official reason to be up here, he's well aware of where the Student Council holds their meetings. If he hadn't known already as a function of knowing what Kyoko is up to at most times, then his gofer duties of running papers for the Disciplinary Committee would have seen to that - although he's only handed them off to the boy who'd been the Treasurer at that time.

So Tsunayoshi isn't terribly surprised when he knocks on the door, and the boy that opens it looks startled and annoyed - no, not exactly 'annoyed,' but bothered and a bit scared.

"What do you want?" he asks with a scowl.

Since he's not actually here for anything unpleasant, and being treated this way is a bit bothersome, Tsunayoshi tries a smile out for size and does his best to look as useless as usual. "It's nothing bad," he says, "I just wanted to ask Sasagawa Kyoko-chan a question. It won't take long at all."

Rather than look reassured, the boy - Yama...? Yamazaki? No, maybe it was Yamaguchi... ah, he's never stood out enough for Tsunayoshi to really take a lot of notice of him, and Tsunayoshi hasn't been tangling with the School Council enough to recognize people who never acknowledged him as 'Dame-Tsuna' nor extended any kindness. Regardless, Yamasuke looks alarmed.

Then he clips the door shut in Tsunayoshi's face.

Tsunayoshi blinks a bit, startled and startled that he's startled. Getting a door shut in his face is a normal reaction, isn't it? Dame-Tsuna had been treated that way a lot, so the fact that it surprises him now is - well, he's gotten used to people taking him more seriously. Or maybe just dealing with people that would take him seriously, anyway.

Shut door or no, Tsunayoshi can still hear them talking inside in urgent whispers, although he can't really make out what is being said. A few sharp voices make themselves known above the rest, a hush falls, and then the door opens again. Or rather: is flung open.

"What do you want, monkey?" the girl with seaweed hair, Hana, demands with a scowl. Although she's flung the door wider than Yamasuke had, she has set her feet wide and her shoulders wider, so that she practically towered in the doorway. Although Hibari is older than her, Tsunayoshi is fairly certain that she's easily as tall as him.

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, blinking. It's easier to act useless at her than it was to act useless at Yamasuke, mostly because he doesn't want to fight her - and it isn't quite a threat that she's leveling at him. Her determination to fight him isn't the same as wanting to, if he had to find words for the feeling. "No, it's just that I wanted to ask Kyoko-chan a question?"

"Tch. And?" she demands, but at least she puts her elbows down, holding the door open with her foot as she crosses her arms over her chest and glares down at him.

Tsunayoshi really wishes that he'd grow a bit taller, but there are first years who are already taller than he is; that's pretty depressing. "Actually, I have business with Saitoh Itsuki, who graduated last year. It's just that no one knows what campus he's moved on to, and I wondered if maybe Kyoko-
chan would happen to know? They got along well as a team, looking after Ryohei-senpai last year."

The explanation doesn't soothe Hana at all, but at least her hostility has lessened to the usual amount that Tsunayoshi is accustomed to being on the receiving end of. It doesn't matter either way, since apparently Kyoko has overhead the conversation.

"I told you it was nothing to worry about, Hana," Kyoko chides, though kindly, as she joins Hana at the door. Her friend's scowl deepens, but she doesn't protest the way Kyoko comes to stand next to her, smiling at Tsunayoshi. She clearly notices the packet in Tsunayoshi's hands, and says, "For Saitoh-kun?"

"Something like that," Tsunayoshi admits.

Kyoko glances over her shoulder. "It'll be just a moment," she tells the rest of the council, and then takes Hana's elbow. It's a bit funny to watch her force Hana out the door and into the hallway, because Hana isn't fighting her, but it's clear that Hana is surprised by this turn of events. Tsunayoshi has to step back to make room for the both of them as Kyoko shuts the door firmly, and then dusts her skirt.

There's a familiar pressure when she smiles at Tsunayoshi and says, "let's talk terms, Tsuna-kun."

Hana clicks her tongue, but easily falls in beside Kyoko, even as Kyoko steps toward Tsunayoshi in a way that encourages him to join up. "Terms," he echoes warily, but - well, if they're talking terms, then she probably has the information he needs. He falls into step with her.

"It's natural that there are terms," she says. "Oniisan and I have already made reparations for your troubles last year, after all. Oniisan says that the situation seems to be working out well for you."

For a given value of 'well,' Tsunayoshi thinks dryly; mostly Shioya seems to be having a lot of fun giving him a hard time, but - well. It's not as bad as all that. Tsunayoshi doesn't mind the teasing since it doesn't seem cruelly meant. As reserved as Shioya is, Tsunayoshi is getting the impression that he actually might like Tsunayoshi.

Having an adult like him is a novel experience.

"What kind of things do you want for information about Saitoh-kun?" he asks.

Kyoko clasps her hands together. "I want your influence with the Disciplinary Committee," she says brightly.

It's difficult to know who is more startled by this: Hana or Tsunayoshi. "With those monkeys?" Hana demands, which Tsunayoshi is grateful for as all he can do is make a confused and distressed noise about a request like that.

"It's not a lot," she says, looking a bit disappointed with their reactions. "If Kusakabe-san were still around, I would go directly to him instead, but he's gone ahead and is preparing Hibari-san's territory for next year." She looks at Tsunayoshi. "Since there's something I can help you with, and the Committee, then it's only fair that I get a helping hand as well."

"I don't actually have an influence over the Committee," Tsunayoshi objects. "I'm a free gofer! It's the only reason I'm tolerated in the area to begin with!"

"And yet Hibari-san put himself through a lot of trouble to stay behind and watch after you," Kyoko says, pressing a finger to her bottom lip and blinking at him steadily. "Even though doing so
has made it so that he can't spend time overseeing his territory himself."

Ehh - ah. Putting it that way: it's true that Tsunayoshi really hasn't seen Hibari doing his patrolling, but he'd considered that as something having to do with whatever outside pressures are being put on the Committee that had make Nakamoto so uncomfortable. Although, no, saying that it's for Tsunayoshi's sake still sounds ridiculous! Hibari breaking into his bedroom that night aside, there's no reason to think that Hibari is aware of him enough to consider him highly enough to go through that much trouble! Kyoko really has this whole situation entirely wrong!

"Well, even if you don't believe it yourself," she says, relenting, "if you want my help, I'll need yours in return."

Tsunayoshi flails his hands a bit, even as he holds tight to the packet that Hoshino had handed him. "I don't have something like that," he protests. "And even if I did, what kind of help could the Committee possibly give you?"

Kyoko lights up as if he's already agreed. "I'm glad you asked!"

The shape of the matter is the the incumbent school President has been making budget cuts to the athletic clubs, is looking for reelection and is probably going to continue on that path. Apparently she's made it an attractive deal with the events and other changes she's put into motion around the school - the decorations that Tsunayoshi had barely noticed, but others apparently appreciated.

"I can't disagree with social events for the students," Kyoko sighs, "but there are ways of raising money for that which don't require cutting the athletic clubs' budgets. Besides, not even all the money is going to these events. I suspected as much last year from the information I was able to gather, but it wasn't until this year when I managed to get Hana put in charge of finances that I was able to confirm it."

Tsunayoshi glances at the taller girl. "You're the new treasurer?" He hadn't really questioned her presence at the time - he's only really taken notice of her since the start of the term, but it had quickly become obvious that Kyoko being without Hana is an anomaly. Oddly, Tsunayoshi had expected that to be Ryohei, but - well, it's not actually as if the siblings are attached at the hips.

Hana snorts. "Well, something put the last treasurer off," she says pointedly, "and anyway, he's moved on to a new school since last year."

Well, that's not very fair, he thinks. It's not specifically his fault, he was only the messenger.

"Congratulations," he says anyway, since it can't hurt. "But then, if you have evidence of the misuse of the Council's funds, what's the problem?"

"Well, because it's an internal matter," Kyoko says.

"And that she-monkey's events are popular with the people most likely to actually do anything about it, so of course they're not really interested in changing anything," Hana scoffs loudly, then cuts a glance around to make sure they're alone in the halls and none of the classrooms are open.

Well, that's not very fair, he thinks. It's not specifically his fault, he was only the messenger.

"Congratulations," he says anyway, since it can't hurt. "But then, if you have evidence of the misuse of the Council's funds, what's the problem?"

"Well, because it's an internal matter," Kyoko says.

And if it's in internal matter, then it's no one's business but the school council. Even if it's the money that they collect from the students themselves, and employ students for events to make a lot more, and it's the money allocated to clubs that everyone is in… yeah, Tsunayoshi could see how the idea that it's not their problem would come about.
"How do you expect the Disciplinary Committee to deal with that?" he asks. "I mean, I guess senpai could just come bite the president to death, but-"

"No, no," Kyoko says firmly, turning her hands palm out. "It's an internal matter, after all. But there's something that you and the committee can help with. I plan on running against Tomaso-chan."

Tsunayoshi stares. "Ehh?!"

Kyoko gives him the name of Saitoh's new school even though he hasn't agreed to anything. It's a bit vexing, all told.

Hoshino was prompt in giving him this mission, and Saitoh's higher secondary school isn't so far that Tsunayoshi figures he can't arrive before the clubs are done with for the day. It's still far enough that rather than walk, Tsunayoshi chooses to take the public transport. Namimori is certainly big enough to support a rapid transit system, but Tsunayoshi figures the probably has only happened within the last generation or so, because rather than that, they have a tram.

Nishi High is a bit startling after Nami. Nami might have a prestigious record - or did - but it has been around for ages and Tsunayoshi is pretty sure nothing new has been built in recent memory for it. Nishi might be more recently built than that, but - somehow it feels oddly a bit lacking. But it is on the edges of the town, and Namimori residents aren't the only ones to attend it - Kyoko had named it the school someone attended to build connections with those outside of Namimori.

All in all, a very puzzling idea for Tsunayoshi, who had more or less resigned himself to NEET-hood or homelessness for some time, and even if that isn't true anymore, hasn't really found himself a new goal yet. The idea of the world outside Namimori is equal parts terrifying and arresting. If he has no idea what lays out there, then how is he expected to look after his household to the best of his ability?

Although what out there could possibly have any interest in a group of random kids from Namimori is a question he hasn't entirely asked in the first place.

Regardless, he knows his duties.

One - two - three - the fingers that count over his ribs tip up along the breastbone. "How terrifying," the boy with milkspill hair murmurs, sitting beside him on the tram, his overgrown fingernails thumping painfully against the broad bone in counterpart to Tsunayoshi's beating heart. "How old were you then? And you were already like this."

The boy sighs, pulling away and falling against the seat in a slump. "We could have been peers, you know," he laments, eyelashes sharp white wedges over his cheeks, eyes closed. "Why is it that only the worlds where things are the worst for me do things turn out fine?"

It's bad enough to suffer and not really know the extent of it, Tsunayoshi thinks: but to suffer and to be able to compare that to a different existence? Tsunayoshi used to be happier, he thinks, before he understood the extent of how he was different from other people. He's gained a lot, that's true, but that only means that he's so incredibly aware of what he stands to lose - of what 'capable of anything' means.

It's not a good thing.
The boy looks at Tsunayoshi then, his pale eyes glittering like broken mirrors, dangerous and mad. "Say, Nayo-tan. Some others might think it's fine for one to suffer for the good of many, but doesn't that sound frustrating for the person who's suffering?"

Something stretches. More than something: everything stretches. The tram stretches. The scenery outside. The distance between him and the boy with shattered memories of forgotten flowers in his eyes. It stretches and the boy stretches and Tsunayoshi stretches, too.

It isn't that Tsunayoshi's body changes into something strange and unfamiliar, but he knows that how his not-body rests on the not-seat isn't the same as it was just before. Still comfortable, natural, relaxed, but different. A kind of power curls through his limbs, a certain awareness, a certain conviction. He doesn't feel confused or disoriented by the situation at all. It's crystal clear. Everything is in its place and as it should be.

The boy that sits next to him -

The young man that sits next to him with hair too long that hasn't seen a brush, with nails too long since their last clipping: he's the furthest thing from a bonsai cut just so and expected to grow a certain way. He's been forgotten and he's wasting, his cheeks not childhood plump but lean and growing hollow, the sharp angles of his skeleton poking corners out of his skin with sharp, mad, haunted eyes-

(a thing left so long alone in the dark that it begins to think: if only i had the power to destroy all things good i was never allowed-)

Tsunayoshi, with perfect calm, says: "In the first place, who was the person who said that we weren't peers? That's not something you get to decide on your own without consulting me first. And as for that other matter-"

It stretches. The young man beside him sits with wide eyes and washed out skin that pales, almost blue. Madness has become terror in his eyes, though Tsunayoshi isn't sure what about him could possibly be as worrisome as that. The world and all things in it continue to stretch around them, and they stretch with it. In the end, it's easy to breach the distance and grab one of the hands that have been reaching out for him all this time, grasping desperately like a person drowning.

It isn't a tight grip. Tsunayoshi doesn't squeeze, but his hold is firm all the same. The young man next to him already has pinpricks for pupils, his heart already beating so fast that his thin, papery skin flutters with it. It's a bit like catching a butterfly between cupped hands, trying so hard not to scrape or bend a fragile wing by accident. It would be a terribly easy thing to do, especially for someone like Tsunayoshi whose hands are only good for things that leave them sticky and numb.

"A system that puts undue weight on someone for others' benefit is intolerable," he says to his peer with absolute conviction. "I'll crush something like that beneath my heel even if I have to die doing it."

Eyes wide and teeth bared with an awful, animalistic kind of fear, the young man with impossibly lengths of tangled white hair recoils, and with him: the world.

The reality that has been stretching to the edge of its endurance around Tsunayoshi - rebounds.

The fact that he manages to make it off the tram before he vomits is barely any kind of relief, the way his head pounds ferociously. It's embarrassing to sick up right there off the side of the rails, his lunch and endless streams of mucus and tears pouring from his face. He shivers. He judders and shakes. It feels a bit like there are ice shards digging into his brain in sharp, pulsating stabs.
It's a mixed blessing that no one stops to ask him if he's alright, though a few loiter around the station, watching him. It doesn't really help at all. Tsunayoshi miserably drags himself away from the edge of the station and sets out in search of a convenience store to get a bottle of water from.

Yamamoto really is helping him with those episodes more than he suspected, he thinks ruefully. His episodes have never been so bad outside of school before, but it feels like every bone in his body has abruptly shattered and is flaying him, even inside his skull. His eyes throb. From now on, he'll definitely have to keep someone close - Haru or Yamamoto or Hibari, if he can manage it.

(Something faint echoes, ahh, but - it's not all that important at the moment. He said himself that it isn't time yet, no matter how impatient he's feeling about it. Tsunayoshi is always patient in these things.)

There's no time to linger if he wants to catch Saitoh on campus, so Tsunayoshi moves on while still feeling tender and sore. He feels worn and wan by the time he arrives on Nishi High's campus, and that said, is grateful that it seems to be organized in a way similar enough to Nami Middle that Tsunayoshi feels confident enough to locate the athletic clubs on his own.

Actually, the security of this place is a bit pathetic? Tsunayoshi has to wonder if that's something to do with Hibari. Before he'd become entangled in the Committee's business, it hadn't exactly been easy for him to come and go on school grounds, either, but he'd compensated by just leaving as quickly as possible and arriving as late as he could without chancing Hibari's ire.

In either case, finding the boxing club isn't difficult at all.

"Please excuse the interruption," Tsunayoshi says politely to the boy that opens the door when he knocks. He does his best to look useless and good for nothing, blinking and smiling. "I have business with Saitoh Itsuki. Is he here?"

The boy is older than Tsunayoshi by a couple of years, and his surprised expression upon seeing Tsunayoshi turns into something like a smirk. "Wait here," he says, and doesn't completely close the door. So Tsunayoshi hears very well when he calls back into the club. "Itsuki! Some cute kid is at the door for you! I should have realized your tastes were that way."

"Cute kid?! It's probably just them mocking him, but - ah, Tsunayoshi feels the edges of his ears grow hot. He's not happy to hear it at all - but, even if they're making fun of him and belittling him, that's... that's still something kind of like a compliment, isn't it? It's just Tsunayoshi's luck that he'd get a sideways compliment like that.

"What the hell? You're asking for a beating," Saitoh says, so at least he's there, and it's the right Saitoh Itsuki. Tsunayoshi can't really judge him for sounding harsher than usual, the way he normally does when facing off against Hoshino, but -

The door opens wider again, and Saitoh blinks before he sees Tsunayoshi, and the harried scowl on his face transforms into something a lot more agreeable. Even with that scowl from just before, it's hard to reconcile Saitoh with the boy who stood against Hoshino toward the end of the last school year. It's a bit troubling, but Tsunayoshi isn't sure how to address it.

"Sawada-kun!" Saitoh says brightly. "What are you doing all the way over here?" Then his face begins to darken as he looks closer, and he says, "don't tell me the Disciplinary Committee-!"

"That's not it," Tsunayoshi says quickly, heading Saitoh's temper off. "Or - not entirely it. They haven't been causing me problems at all."
Saitoh only barely looks assuaged by that, but before he can relent or press the matter either way, they both abruptly become aware of the cluster of boys hovering behind him.

Rather than be embarrassed that they've been caught being nosy, the Nishi boxing club lean forward, jeering. "What's this? A cute kohai that's followed you all the way here?" and "Itsuki! You didn't tell me there were cute kohai at your school!" and "He's almost cute enough that I could do it if he keeps the sweater on!"

"I dare you to try," Saitoh snarls, at that last boy in particular. "You'd better hope I catch you before Hibari Kyoya of that Hibari house does! He wouldn't stop at biting you to death!"

This is apparently is impressive enough to cow him, although his friends cackle with mad delight, elbowing him. "Itsuki-chan is so cute, defending his old kohai!"

"Look at Itsuki being so sharp!"

"Guard-dog Itsuki!"

Saitoh's resolve to punch the offending boy in the face is rather impressive, even if Tsunayoshi isn't particularly concerned himself; he doesn't entirely grasp the implications of what was said other than a vague discomfort, but the boy's resolve is weak. He is, as Hoshino would put it: a yappy dog that's easy to intimidate with a look.

Of course, Tsunayoshi dreads few things more, but people who are _like_ those awful monsters are somehow not intimidating at all.

In an obviously foul mood, Saitoh nudges Tsunayoshi back so he can step out of the door and slam it behind him with a huff and a ferocious scowl. He's obviously in no mood for being pacified, so Tsunayoshi follows him peacefully for a little bit as he puts some distance between them and the club, which is still being so noisy that Tsunayoshi can hear them laughing and jeering without even trying.

"Sorry about that," Saitoh says roughly, tugging at his hair unhappily. "You came all this way, and-" He glances back toward the club with a frown.

Well, now Tsunayoshi just feels guilty. Maybe Honda had been onto something when he'd said that Tsunayoshi was the only one that Saitoh was reaching out to all along. He'd been ready to forget all about Saitoh come this school term, and it's only because of Hoshino's mission that he's bothered to find out where Saitoh had been accepted.

Although perhaps that's on Saitoh, too. How is Tsunayoshi supposed to know if he isn't told? Saitoh should have said so himself. There's no reason for Tsunayoshi to refuse.

"I said it wasn't like that," Tsunayoshi reminds him. "Although the Committee isn't giving me problems, I am on Committee business."

"Tch. This term, too?" he asks, turning to give Tsunayoshi his full attention. If he's disappointed by the fact that Tsunayoshi isn't here of his own accord, it doesn't show.

"Well, I benefit from the arrangement, too," he excuses, and leaves it at that. His circumstances haven't changed so much that Saitoh isn't already more or less familiar with him. "I was asked to deliver this from the Committee to you." He removes the packet from his satchel and hands it over, although Saitoh is automatically reluctant to take it the moment he sees what it is.

"This," he says with the same sharp, seething tones he used against Hoshino.
Normally, Tsunayoshi would be on his way back to the Committee offices by this time. Normally, the people he delivers the packets to aren't interested in even acknowledging those packets exist until they're alone - but Saitoh isn't really all that typical of a person. Without even looking at Tsunayoshi, he opens the packet, breaking the seal on it and looking inside. Whatever he sees causes his face to twist in a way that Tsunayoshi thinks should worry him, but -

It's a bit complicated, and quickly becoming moreso. The fury drains from Saitoh's face and becomes twisted and confused. The contents of the packet are still being shielded by the fact that he hasn't pulled the papers out, but Saitoh flips through them, jaw setting and brow buckling.

"Sawada," he says at last, "you're friends with Hibari, right?"

Tsunayoshi startles a bit at a presumption like that, but - ah, even though 'friend' isn't right for Hibari, just like it's not right for Yamamoto, the same way 'friend' or 'girlfriend' isn't right for Haru (fiancée, he thinks, is closer but still inaccurate, itself)... that's not wrong.

"Um, I guess we're like comrades," he says thoughtfully, and then shrugs helpless with a smile. "I can't really leave Hibari-senpai alone, and it seems the feeling is mutual, so I guess that's 'friends.'"

"Nmh." Saitoh seals the packet again and looks at him searchingly. "And what kind of person do you think he is?"

"Hibari?" Tsunayoshi echoes again, sincerely confused. Hibari is - Hibari. "Hibari Kyoya..." He rolls the name over his tongue, thinking of 'Tsunayoshi' and the weight of a name versus a person's reputation versus their attitude on life. "Well, obviously senpai isn't the kind who suffers the constraints of expectations. Or no - Hibari follows very specific rules, they're just not rules that a normal person is aware of. His behavior is strict, so I think that his thoughts must be fairly straightforward? I think he understands behavior well, but for him, it's really not that complicated. Which isn't to say that his thoughts are inflexible, but they're very black and white. Something is either good or it isn't, even if his idea of what is good or bad may not precisely align with a 'normal' person's."

It's about then that Tsunayoshi takes note of Saitoh's rather overwhelmed expression. He pauses, blinking.

"That's a lot more than I was really expecting, Sawada-kun," he says. "You've really thought about this."

"I've been trying to understand things more, recently," he says with a frown, hunching his shoulders. "Being able to connect with others is something I've been struggling with, you know. Of course I have to think about things like that."

It puts that look on Saitoh's face, the one that says he thinks of Tsunayoshi as some kind of benevolent devil, trying to stand between the Demon of Nami Middle and the population of the school. Tsunayoshi isn't comfortable being looked at that way, because he doesn't attempt that at all.

"Unbelievable," Saitoh says, and then drops the look a bit to pay attention to the matter at hand. "Trying to build a connection with Hibari Kyoya... I don't know that it's possible, but if anyone could do it, that might be you, Sawada-kun." He sighs and tucks the packet between his arm and his ribs. "If you think he's worth it, then I guess it doesn't hurt to hear them out."

"I'm not as good of a judge of people as that," he objects, because he never asked to be anyone's character endorsement. Hibari probably wouldn't appreciate it, anyway.
"It's good enough for me," Saitoh says firmly, in a tone that suggests that's the end of the matter. "Even if it was for something like this… thanks for coming all the way out here so soon."

That sounds more or less like Saitoh 'saying so,' Tsunayoshi reflects, and so: "if you're taking my comments so seriously, then we should probably exchange numbers."

Judging by the look on Saitoh's face, Tsunayoshi had judged the situation correctly.

Tsunayoshi only has his house phone for the time being, although Saitoh already has a personal mobile of his own. With the way things are going - Tsunayoshi now has the home phone numbers of two people who have their own personal mobiles - he should probably ask Nana about them both getting their own mobile phones. There hadn't really been a need for it before now; although his peers had joined clubs, and gotten phones to keep in touch with their friends and their parents while spending so much time away from their homes, Tsunayoshi had never needed to. He'd only ever left the house to go to school, and then he'd come right back.

Now he's taking tram lines all the way out to the outskirts of Nami to see to friends in different schools. Being able to spontaneously contact any of his household within seconds, no matter his location in the city, is swiftly becoming a necessity.

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It's probably a really bad sign about the way Tsunayoshi's personality is developing that he's starting to have an endless source of entertainment when it comes to having study sessions.

He should have more or less expected it after the way Haru was behaving when it came to going to TakeSushi, but Haru had made a few gambles at quitting her clubs again, just for a chance to come to study sessions with Yamamoto. A few delicately posed questions and comments to Tsuyoshi had Tsunayoshi picking nights where TakeSushi wasn't so busy as to need Yamamoto chipping in. A phone call to the Miura house when Tsunayoshi knew Haru would be away also allowed him to have better insight into her after class schedules.

After that phone call, Tsunayoshi feels a lot more confident about the idea of Hideki being willing to adopt him if it became necessary.

So Tsunayoshi had scheduled the study sessions all of his own accord, given how much he's been struggling with his classes. Haru had been a strange mix of ecstatic and hysteric over the whole situation. They've already gotten through a few such sessions, but Haru's starry eyes have had yet to fade.

That's the entertaining part, Tsunayoshi is discovering. Haru's endless well of stubborn, heedless optimism versus Yamamoto's default lack of reading the atmosphere. Yamamoto keeps making bunny eyes - wide and terrorized and a bit desperate. He really doesn't know how to deal with Haru, and Tsunayoshi has a bit too much schadenfreude at the moment to be of any help.

Although sooner or later, he will probably come to Yamamoto's rescue. This will be their third session where they don't actually get any studying done, and Tsunayoshi really would like to be able to make some kind of attempt at actually passing his classes. Hibari and Haru won't want to hang around a street sweeper or NEET.

Even if it's more like Tsunayoshi thinks: as head of household, I won't be able to provide for them that way.

He's slowly coming around to understanding the strange twists his thoughts take. The idea of
Tsunayoshi providing for anyone is a bit laughable, but it seems to be the shape of the wishes his heart is making, so he should probably be trying to achieve those kinds of things.

A knock at the doorway disrupts the session for a moment. "I've made more snacks!" Nana chirps. "Maybe a bit too much - would one of you come help me?"

"I'll help, Mama!" Haru declares, even raising her hand before she scrambles to her feet. Even though this is the third such session, her cheeks are still flushed. Her emotional stamina really is amazing.

Although maybe no less so than Nana, who had gotten so happy about the idea of both Haru and Yamamoto coming over for study sessions that she'd almost burst into tears. Tsunayoshi really had been so pathetic that he'd never noticed just how badly his situation had been stressing his own mother out.

Then again, maybe she's over compensating a bit, because these study sessions really have been more like tea parties, in that there's such an extensive array of snacks and drinks that it might be a good thing that they've only made token attempts to have their school books and homework out.

"Tsuna," Yamamoto says the moment they're alone in the room, despite the door being open, "I'm really sorry about this."

Tsunayoshi blinks, turning back to Yamamoto who is still making bunny eyes. "Sorry about what?"

"Your girlfriend, of course," he says, but at least he's calming down a bit from terrorized to just apologetic. He anxiously runs a hand over his short cropped hair, brow buckled. "Usually it gets a bit more manageable if I just ignore it, but - haha, Tsuna's girlfriend really is special, huh?"

Ah - something that Tsunayoshi had been having fun about really had been upsetting Yamamoto all this time. Now that he thinks about it, Yamamoto's bunny eyes are making a lot more sense - it's not just Haru terrorizing him. Smiling slightly with sympathy, he says, "I guess the baseball club members with girlfriends get a little tense about it?"

Even though Yamamoto tries laughing it off, there are fine indications of tension and stress around the corners of his expression. For all that Yamamoto tries to play things off, he really is the high-maintenance sort, Tsunayoshi supposes.

"Don't worry over nothing," Tsunayoshi says gently. "For now, it seems like Haru still has some idea of getting married to me, but to be honest, this whole situation has been something of a relief. I'm not the sort of person that people should get married to, if they can help it."

It's obvious that those words won't be enough to let Yamamoto rest easy about the situation, but he's the avoidant type anyway: he changes the subject. "Pfft hahaha! I don't know, if I were the type, I'd probably marry you in a heartbeat!"

"Yamamoto," Tsunayoshi objects loudly out of reflex as his ears burn up - although he's not the only one, since it seems Yamamoto managed to embarrass himself with that remark. Scowling, which only makes Yamamoto laugh louder, he says, "there's nothing about people wanting to marry me that makes me happy in the first place! Anyway, fight it out with Haru if that's how you feel about it!"

That just makes Yamamoto reach over the table to poke Tsunayoshi's flushed cheek, making him
sputter. "Maybe I will," he teases. "Although, Pops would probably be moody about it if he doesn't get grandkids."

"Something like that is impossible for me, so find someone else to marry!"

Yamamoto smiles a bit at that, but it's kind of a complicated look, as if he's remembering something a bit unpleasant. "So things with Haru really don't bother you at all?" he asks instead.

Tsunayoshi is still in a bit of a bad mood about getting teased about something like that, but he relents. "I'm serious," he says firmly. "It doesn't bother me at all. It'll feel a bit weird, but if Haru can find a better prospect, then that would be for the best."

He frowns at the thought, not entirely due to the idea of their relationship lessening from 'fiancée', although the word continues to be an ill fit. "That shouldn't be hard in the first place, considering that it's me."

Yamamoto doesn't look entirely impressed with that line of thought, but he doesn't pursue it either. "Haru seems a bit hard headed," he observes with a tight smile. "So I should probably wish you luck on that."

Tsunayoshi can only really respond with a smile, although it's probably about as pleasant as Yamamoto's. He has anywhere from six to eight years for it to happen, though, depending on the kind of career that Haru is studying for, so the matter isn't really all that urgent.

He's a bit relieved that Yamamoto dropped the matter though. There's no way he can explain it plainly, and he thinks that Yamamoto probably wouldn't understand the meaning of it anyway, nor would he agree. Even though Yamamoto thinks that being accepted as someone who has the capacity to 'hit someone in the head hard enough so they won't get back up' - ahh. It's different. It's bad.

People aren't supposed to be like that.

Even if he technically has a choice not to go to any possible lengths - at the same time, Tsunayoshi really doesn't have that choice. 'Doing nothing' is not an acceptable outcome for the situations in which he becomes 'capable of anything.' If he has the power to change the situation, then wouldn't it be worse for him not to use it? In that case, doing anything is the lesser evil, isn't it?

It's that kind of way of viewing the situation that he doesn't want his friends to have to experience. It's why he hopes that Haru never has to learn about that kind of thing. People with futures who don't even hit people until they don't get back up shouldn't get married to deadbeat slackers who decide that death is an acceptable manner in which to make someone 'stop' and don't even cry about it afterwards.

Tsunayoshi would be better off marrying Yamamoto, putting it that way, except that Yamamoto's hands aren't even sticky and he's already managed to get along with everyone else without Tsunayoshi's interference. A guy like that has a future ahead of him.

Not that he wants to marry Yamamoto, of course, Tsunayoshi reminds himself, coughing abruptly over his own accidentally swallowed spit. Yamamoto thumps him on the back over it and isn't much of a help at all.

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* Generally speaking, Tsunayoshi is conflict-avoidant, not actually a nice person. He acts timid and polite to spare himself grief, not other people. That's why in situations were conflict is avoidable, he actually gets pretty salty.

* literally everyone else can tell that Kyoya has a favorite chewtoy except Tsunayoshi lmao. Although that's not how Kyoya sees the situation, but that's the way it looks from outside perspectives.

* RIP Byakuran. You would also rebound into the aether if the characters on your TV screen suddenly talked back to you. And there's Tsunayoshi, "well, something really weird just happened but it seems like Not My Problem so......."

* These kids are still struggling with the idea of good Flame compatibility not being like-like. smh. I mean, they don't actually know what Flames ARE but still.

Chapter Twelve Non Canonical Character List:
* Hoshino Yoshio - Became de facto head of the Disciplinary Committee thanks to Kyoya being busy with personal matters and Kusakabe graduating to prepare the campus for Kyoya. Seems to think that Tsunayoshi is 'creepy.' Likes Haru. Thinks of Kyoya as a spoiled brat.
* Saitoh Itsuki - a senpai who graduated to a new campus; attends the Boxing club there. A dependable person. Apparently has some kind of grudge against Hoshino and Kyoya, but willing to give Kyoya a chance for Tsunayoshi's sake. Seems to have aspirations to leave Namimori. Despite a gregarious attitude, he doesn't really get close to others.
* Tomaso Nerina - Current reigning School Council President. Related to Namimori's Mayor. Has been cutting sports club funding and putting on social events for students to keep them from complaining about it. The type or person that makes even Hana break her own rule and refer to her as a 'she-monkey.'
There's still this problem about Kyoko's request to work out. It's nothing as easy as 'convince the Committee to vote for her,' since she could easily have done that herself, just as well as with Kusakabe. It's not as if the Committee hasn't gotten a taste for her baked goods from the previous term, when she'd been trying her hardest to bribe Kusakabe into taking Tsunayoshi into the Disciplinary Committee. The infighting that had broken out had been frighteningly excessive.

Honestly, Tsunayoshi doesn't know why she thinks he has any sway with them at all, even assuming that Hibari has any concerns with him. It's not as if Hibari will order them to do any favors for him.

Which now means that Tsunayoshi is in the awkward position of trying to figure out how to get Kyoko elected Student Council President against the incumbent President, Tomaso Nerina.

As reluctant as he is to try his hand at convincing the Committee about anything, Tsunayoshi completes his gofer duties - this time picking up a packet from a student rather than delivering one - and then he meets with Nakamoto, as he arranged earlier that day.

Despite everything, it had been a surprisingly easy thing to do. After that badly handled meeting on the first day of school, where Nakamoto had seemed like his life was under threat, and who had not showed up after school, Tsunayoshi had wondered if they weren't going to get along anymore. For some time, it seemed like Nakamoto had even been avoiding him, not that Tsunayoshi had a lot of time to pursue the thought between his usual duties and Shioya and now Yamamoto and the study group - but thankfully, that's no longer the case. Despite looking slightly anxious at being approached, Nakamoto had agreed with his request without much trouble.

It's not terribly clever, meeting in the shadows behind the school, but Tsunayoshi isn't really trying to hide what he's doing anyway. There's no need to make anyone overly suspicious about it. If Hibari gets irritable about him using his underclassmen, then he'll be twice as irritable at Tsunayoshi for trying to hide it.

Nakamoto stands there in the shadows against the wall, not particularly trying to hide, either. He looks a bit unfamiliar, the way he always does when away from Hoshino - of all of the Committee members that Tsunayoshi has met, Nakamoto was always the one that had looked the most welcome and friendly, even if he finds it particularly easy to harden his jaw and demand money from shops.
"Sawada," he says tonelessly, but he seems to relax, his grip easing a bit on the packet of papers in his hands.

Tsunayoshi had quickened his pace when he'd seen Nakamoto already there, despite being fairly certain that he'd been more or less on time. "Nakamoto-kun! Sorry. Were you waiting?"

"Only because I got here early," he says, and makes no move to hand the packet over.

Tsunayoshi blinks. There's no evidence of the harsh expression that Nakamoto wore at the beginning of the year - his face isn't really made for in the first place, a trait that Tsunayoshi unfortunately seems to share. He looks almost inquisitive - searching, maybe. Tsunayoshi shifts uneasily under his regard, but - there doesn't seem to be anything for it.

Finally, Nakamoto says, "why do you want the Committee's information on Tomaso Nerina in the first place?"

Well, that is a bit unusual, so it isn't strange that Nakamoto would ask, is it? All this time, Tsunayoshi has been more or less content to simply be around the Committee, mostly for the sake of being where Hibari is without crowding him. He hadn't wanted to join, and no one had wanted him to, but he'd worked together with them to further their goals on occasion - Kyoko would probably say that 'it's about time to balance the scales, right?' But that's not really how Tsunayoshi feels about it at all.

"I've been caught up in something annoying, to be honest," Tsunayoshi says, wry, averting his eyes self-consciously. "Since I usually keep out of school affairs, I don't really know much about it? I thought the Committee dossier would be a good place to start learning about the President."

Nakamoto waits for a moment, like he expects further explanation, and then sighs. "You always have such a laid back attitude about dangerous things, Sawada," he says. "Even about things that endanger your companions."

Frowning, he protests: 'I'm not really laid back about this at all."

Nakamoto doesn't seem particularly judgemental about it though. "A kid like Tomaso-chan has powerful adults backing her up, you know." he warns. "Not the least of which is Di Tella Arturo. All the children attached to the Tomaso name have people like that - it's been like that for about twenty years now."

"Ah-" Well, if they know the approximate time that changed, then: "What happened then?"

But Nakamoto can only shrug. "There's a lot of things that we haven't been able to discover," he says apologetically. "A lot of people change their ways of doing things without there being obvious reasons for it, because they're watching for stuff that doesn't seem important to the rest of us, or isn't in the papers. Maybe at that time, they got a threatening letter, but unless it's discovered, we'll never know."

That's - a bit different from what Tsunayoshi had thought was going on. All this time, he figured that the dossiers that the Committee created were in regards to school life. Pinning it down to the moment the first Tomaso child started to have - what? Bodyguards? He would have thought that it was a matter of public knowledge.

"The Hibari family probably knows," Nakamoto adds, watching him, "but there's no way of finding that out without drawing their attention."

Never once has Tsunayoshi given consideration to Hibari Kyoya's home life, outside of the time
he'd decided that Hibari had never let even his mother or father bring him to heel - unless they'd beaten him into such. He remembers, sharply: the tense, unhappy edges of Hibari's expression, like a tiger with an infected tooth.

The back of his tongue is bitter - char and sulfur and ash. He thinks about something with Hibari's instincts not flinching in the face all-consuming fire that waits, banked, inside his chest between lungs and heart. The idea of someone in particular putting that tight, cornered expression on Hibari is unpleasant. A bit itchy, and not in the almost pleasant way he'd felt about Hibari at the start of term. His head throbs in sharp aches that echo through his bones and pulsates in his fingertips. He should be choking on so much smoke and sparks.

Ahh. It's bad.

"Sawada," Nakamoto says, and then flinches under Tsunayoshi's gaze, pale. He avoids meeting his eyes. "The Hibari family is generations strong."

Generations strong and widespread like a complex root system, Tsunayoshi thinks, remembering suddenly that woman that had approached Iemitsu, saying things about Tsunayoshi that Iemitsu had laughed off. Come to think of it, she'd been part of the Hibari clan herself, hadn't she? And Iemitsu, despite the way she was speaking about the family he supposedly cared about, had been more or less respectful.

"What about Di Tella Arturo?" Tsunayoshi asks.

Nakamoto swallows. His throat clicks. "Di Tella has been in service to Tomaso-chan since she was five years old," he says. "Although as far as we can tell, he's never taken assassin work, he doesn't hesitate to kill to protect her." He holds out the packet, and adds, "we haven't been able to locate records of his life before being contracted to the Tomaso family."

Tsunayoshi hums as he accepts the packet, breaking the seal. His first curiosity is any information they have on Di Tella, meager as it is. He never accompanies her onto the Nami campus, but obviously picks her up and drops her off. He's younger than Tsunayoshi expects, honestly. He would have been fairly young when he'd been contracted to Tomaso.

There's no way even Tsunayoshi can get a gut instinct in regards to a photograph, but he can tell already that Di Tella will be a pain.

Sighing loudly, Tsunayoshi closes the packet and tugs at his hair restlessly with his free hand. "Kyoko-chan sure is the troublesome type," he laments. "Getting caught up in this kind of thing really isn't equal to finding out about Saitoh-kun."

No, a troublesome thing like this is dangerous, it's true, but wasn't he just thinking that Kyoko would say something about balancing the scales? If making deals with Kyoko is unfair, then won't others also not want to make deals with her? He's sure if he puts it that way, not even Hana will be able to argue with him about it.

"You shouldn't get tangled up in something like this over a girl, Sawada," Nakamoto says with a slight frown.

It seems that despite his weird reaction earlier, Nakamoto is actually worried about him - that's a kind of nice. He seems like someone with a good head on his shoulders, Tsunayoshi thinks with a small smile. "It's not like that," he reassures him, "I'm just returning a favor."

It's a bit dishonest to try putting it that way, and maybe Nakamoto senses that since he doesn't look
relieved at all. Worse than that: he looks a bit despairing. "Sawada, don't get caught up in accepting favors," he says reproachfully. "You'll make Hibari-san's mood even worse if you get involved with the wrong kind of person."

"I'm the last person who wants to bother him," he tries to say, but Nakamoto gives him such a wild look of disbelief that he cringes a bit and then grows sullen. Alright - so fine: he frequently provokes Hibari, but it isn't like it's ever a conscious decision to do so! There's nothing he likes about getting bitten to death, after all!

Feeling pressured to try again, Tsunayoshi sighs and amends it. "I'll be careful, Nakamoto-kun. It really is the last thing I want - disturbing the household you belong to by causing Hibari-senpai problems, I mean."

For a moment, Nakamoto seems strangely more unsettled by his words than reassured. It's a bit odd to watch someone other than Haru decide to forget something as a 'Tsunayoshi thing,' but the expression is so similar that it can't be anything else. "Don't let this come back on me," he says, resigned. "I made copies of those files, but I don't want to be killed for doing a favor, either."

"It really isn't all that bad to get bitten to death," Tsunayoshi says, and smiles to reassure Nakamoto's doubtful expression. "Don't worry, Nakamoto-kun. I'll watch out after you."

"That's not as reassuring as you think that is," Nakamoto says.

(No, but it will be. The world had stretched. Tsunayoshi has not forgotten that; it echoes through him, still.)

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A few days later finds Tsunayoshi loitering around the top of the school building once again. The patterns of behavior he'd noticed more than a year ago when he'd been haunting Kyoko's footsteps is still more or less accurate - and through trial and error, he's managed to remain unnoticed after attending to his Committee duties and wait around the club room.

It sure is handy to be known by the Literary Club's leader, and have a reputation for being willing to clean up after the club as long as he can borrow the key to the room. Thanks to that, he's aware of when the light in the Student Council room goes out, and Tomaso leaves the room alone. She's always the last to leave, well into the evening.

Before she can make it very far, Tsunayoshi grabs up the bag of trash in one hand and dashes out the door, pausing only long enough to shut and lock it. "Ahh, Tomaso-chan!" he calls out.

She pauses and turns as he stuffing the key into his pocket, snatching his bag from beside the door. It's obvious that she doesn't recognize him at all, not as Hibari's and not as Dame-Tsuna. Just how out of touch can one person be, Tsunayoshi wonders, even as he smiles. Like most girls, Tomaso Nerina is taller than he is by some measure, but not unusually so. She doesn't seem overly guarded at his approach, even as she straightens her shoulders and back just a slight bit more.

"Yes? What can I help you with?" she asks as he comes to a stop before her, dropping both his school bag and the trash bag at his feet.

She even sounds like she means it. Doing one bad thing doesn't necessarily mean that a person is completely bad, Tsunayoshi reflects - or she's very good at acting. He keeps his shoulders rounded, his face tilted slightly - the shy, wary behavior of a useless kid more often bullied than not. "Ah, I was wondering," he says, shifting his feet, harmless, useless, mostly beneath notice. "Tomaso-chan
is the kind of school president that likes to work on school unity, right?"

"That's right," she agrees, warming enough to smile a bit now. "A unified school is important. Society is built on the bonds that we humans form with one another so that we can all collaborate and exist in harmony with each other - or, that's what I believe."

Wow - what a soundbite, Tsunayoshi thinks, reminded particularly of Yamamoto talking about TakeSushi. It's just - she lacks the chrome finish that Yamamoto had. She really believes something like that.

It's an easy enough thing to believe, though, so he can't really blame her for that. It's just that Tsunayoshi has been denied connections over and over again since he was a kid - of course he can't connect with her ideas. As the one who has been called Dame-Tsuna for years, it's hard to be sympathetic at all.

In the same way that Haru simpers at adults she doesn't like or trust, Tsunayoshi clenches his hands in front of him and gives Tomaso Kyoko's sunglare smile. "I believe that, too! Spending time together and getting to know one another will help everyone get along and understand one another better, right? I thought that might be the case for Tomaso-chan!" As she turns towards him with her smile getting larger and warmer, he continues. "I also wanted to do my part - I thought, maybe a test of courage would be a good plan for the school? But not everyone likes those things, so a field trip instead! If people experience something new together, they're surely going to grow closer!"

It feels like he's really overselling it, but Tsunayoshi clenches his teeth and commits to it with all his resolve. After all, with a favor like this, then Kyoko will have to owe the Committee one. It can only help Hibari if the Student Council President feels in their debt. If Tsunayoshi can lessen Kyoya's workload even a little bit, then maybe they'll both be able to relax a little bit, and maybe then Tsunayoshi can find a way of pulling that infected tooth.

"A field trip," Tomaso says, frowning with concern. "Like what? It's not easy to get funds for that kind of thing."

"Don't worry, I thought ahead on that, too," Tsunayoshi says, waving her concern away before fetching a flyer out of his back pocket. "See? In a few weeks, the hotel out in the mountains, past the shrine? It'll have a special. There are enough cabins out there for Nami's third year class to stay for the weekend."

"A few weeks?" Tomaso echoes musingly.

Yes, and one week after that, the School Council election would occur. Preparing for something like that might bite into Tomaso's campaign time, unless she's able to nominate a committee to take care of the details, but everyone's moods should be pretty high just after a field trip. A week is enough time for anyone that has had a bad time to get over it or at least hear their friends reminisce fondly enough that they'll be convinced.

She takes the flyer from him.

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Not the next day, but the day after that, Student Council President Tomaso Nerina announces about the good field trip opportunity she's discovered for them all, and the impromptu sporting event being held to raise funds for it. Although it hadn't really been much of a problem in the first place, any lingering sense of discomfort that Tsunayoshi felt about the entire situation evaporates.
"Way to go, Tsuna!" Yamamoto congratulates him under the explosion of excited chatter, and grabs onto him just as completely as Haru ever has. Tsunayoshi oomphs a bit because Yamamoto is going through some kind of growth spurt and does a lot of exercise to maintain his position as star hitter, and Tsunayoshi isn't at all as fragile as his short frame suggests, but there's something to be said for being caught off guard.

"Don't 'way to go' me," he complains under his breath, although he doesn't struggle, either. Just because he doesn't feel guilty about it doesn't mean he's happy about doing it. It might be necessary that he succeed for the sake of various outcomes, but he can't be happy about tricking someone.

Can't they all just come around to his way of thinking?

Speaking of that, his head throbs dully. He doesn't need to look to know why that is, but he glances anyway. It reminds him of an unpleasant fact: during the field trip, Yamamoto's friends will want to hang out with him.

Being a class field trip, that means Haru won't be along with them - and even if the eligible members of the Disciplinary Committee come along, and that means Hibari Kyoya will, they'll no doubt be running herd on the class to keep them out of trouble… or roughing them up for further funds, one or the other. That means that Tsunayoshi will be on his own, most likely.

It feels like a chill goes down his spine about it. It'll only be for a little bit and there's nothing even sideways permanent about it in the first place, but under the stabbing pain of his headache: that feeling comes back. The one that warns him with certainty that he'll die if left alone.

"Tsuna?" Yamamoto says, and only then does Tsunayoshi realize that he's grabbed onto the front of Yamamoto's shirt and is wrinkling it beneath his white knuckles. It doesn't seem to deeply worry him, but he's obviously a little concerned over it - over Tsunayoshi, rather than the shirt. Then again, he can't figure out how to properly wear his tie, so wrinkles probably don't even register as a problem at all.

"Ah," he says, letting go. "Sorry, I'm a bit nervous about everything."

Grinning, Yamamoto says, "don't worry about it! If it's Tsuna, then it'll work out great!"

"I'm really not as lucky as that," he says, even as Yamamoto leans back across the aisle and settles into his desk. Somehow it's a bit difficult to remain pessimistic with how Yamamoto is radiating faith at him. Is he a buddha? Even Tsunayoshi's headache seems to fade a bit, and usually that takes Yamamoto using him as an armrest.

"It'll be fine! Anyway, you have me and Haru watching your back, and Hibari-senpai, too!" he points out.

True - Haru did most of the hard work in his case. After Tsunayoshi had aired his concerns to the two of them during their study session, thinking of Nakamoto's words, Haru had been dead set on backing him up. It had taken a bit of work for Haru and Tsunayoshi to break into the school and then the school council room after that, but Haru's determination wasn't to be underestimated. She'd made copies of all the treasury books that had been available, luckily going back a few years, and then she'd taken them to her father.

Hideki had looked the three of them over, smiled mildly, and confirmed Kyoko's suspicions regarding Tomaso's behavior. He'd then asked Tsunayoshi a few other strange questions regarding the entire situation, seemed to find it funny in some manner, and patted Tsunayoshi on the head.
It had been Haru's idea about the field trip, though. Both she and Yamamoto had helped coach him on how to appropriately submit the idea to Tomaso, so really: it's because of Haru and Yamamoto that any of it had worked so far. None of the successes has been due to Tsunayoshi at all.

Still, things really have been going his way recently, which he can only attribute to so many people coming together and being willing to work for his sake. So in the end, Tsunayoshi smiles at Yamamoto. "Thanks. You're right about that."

Yamamoto brightens, pleased to have gotten his way. "Say, Tsuna, it's nothing that has to be done soon, but Pops wanted me to invite you again - ah, this time at home, instead of the shop."

"Hey, is that really fair?" One of Yamamoto's baseball friends demands, unable to hold his tongue over this newest insult. "You never invite us over to your dojo!"

"Now, now," he chides, a little surprised. "It's not like that! That's Pop's, anyways, so I can't invite anyone where I'm not allowed myself."

It doesn't go over well with the boys, who start heckling Yamamoto over it, thoroughly distracting him by making him explain that it was his father that extended the invitation, not Yamamoto himself, so it's a totally different situation than they think. It kind of saves Tsunayoshi from replying, but at the same time, those guys' jealousy over Yamamoto is really getting out of hand.

Certainly Tsunayoshi doesn't want Yamamoto to be lonely, but it'll become a problem if they refuse to accept that Yamamoto doesn't want to be their head of household. They can't force him into a position like that - it isn't fair to Yamamoto. Normally, someone being put on the spot like that would start to resent it, but one way or another, Yamamoto's personality is twisted in strange ways to the point that it doesn't seem to bother him at all.

Although maybe Tsunayoshi shouldn't be casting stones, since he'd only resented it a little bit himself, and that was mostly because no one was considering his opinion in the matter. Haru and Yamamoto had simply worked for his sake and followed his lead until he'd finally given up on the whole thing and was ready to step up on his own accord. They never forced him into it. It's hard to resent them when it's like that.

And also unlike those baseball kids, Tsunayoshi isn't careless enough to be happy about being invited to Yamamoto's father's house - or dojo, for that matter. Especially dojo. Maybe Yamamoto's father also thinks Tsunayoshi's resolve is pitiful.

Maybe he means to deny Tsunayoshi's words after all?

Tsunayoshi had only said them to break the stalemate between Yamamoto and his father, but - that doesn't mean he wants those feelings so easily thrown away. And Yamamoto is a dutiful son, but it feels like if his father tries to push it, no one will be happy in the end, will they? What if he tells Tsunayoshi to stay away to avoid taking responsibility for doing such a thing? Does Yamamoto's father expect Tsunayoshi to give up first, and does he mean to frame it as being for Yamamoto's sake? As if Yamamoto hasn't been staying awake during classes these days and not skipping class and seems more energetic than before.

Tsunayoshi's head aches. His chest hurts like crackling heat and the back of his tongue tastes bitter. Why can't Yamamoto and Hibari's families just support their children the way Haru's does?

Even Tsunayoshi's mother has welcomed everyone with open arms, and she and Tsunayoshi had lived as shut-ins for years and years.
Ahh. There's no way for Tsunayoshi to rest easy about this.

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Even though Yekaterina has gone back to her job, Hideki still visits Nana plenty, mostly bemoaning that he's not much of a cook even though Haru has assured Tsunayoshi that it's a lie - a good cook he might not be, but he'd been able to teach Haru more than enough in her youth that she's become accomplished in her own right. Thanks to Nana's fretting, Tsunayoshi has the vague idea that Nana probably brings them containers with meals quite a lot, as to lessen the burden on Haru. It isn't really anything that involves him any more than her afternoons with Shioya, but it's a bit interesting, he thinks.

Being aware of Haru's school schedule for the sake of the study lessons, it's not difficult to arrange things so that instead of attending his gofer duties for Hibari, Tsunayoshi arrived home in time to catch his mother on the way out the door.

"Wait up, and I'll help," he says.

"My, my," Nana says when he gets done putting away his school things and comes back to take most of the load of food containers from her. "My Tsu-kun is so thoughtful!"

He's not really at all, but he let's the comment pass without more than a self-conscious laugh.

"But you are home early," she points out on the next breath, tilting her head and blinking inquisitively at him. "Why would that be?"

"No particular reason," he says, because it's not like he got shooed away or chased. "I finished up early, but Yamamoto-kun is busy with baseball and Haru is busy with gymnastics, so I came home."

Nana hums, clearly seeing right through him, but she doesn't press the point. Instead he listens to her tell about the gossip in the neighborhood, and who has moved in and who is thinking about moving out because of the school that their kid got into this year. He thinks he remembers that she used to do this a lot when he was younger, although she'd eventually given up on it and even went so far as to buy him a video game so at least he wouldn't just be staying in his room and staring out the window all the time.

It had taken some time for him to become interested in the video game even, now that he thinks about it.

"The Irie family from our neighborhood are having a few problems themselves," she muses. "Tomoko-chan asked me about it since I have my Tsu-kun, but it's a different problem altogether, after all."

Tsunayoshi tries to remember who the Irie family is, but his memory has always been a bit dull since he became fragile. And before that is so long ago that he can't even remember the faces or names of his friends. "Tomoko-san was asking… for her child's sake?"

"That's right. She has a son - now that I think about it, Shoichi-kun is your age! Only, Tomoko-chan has been sending him to special private schools even before middle school, so despite being from the same neighborhood, you've never met."

It's such a contrast to Tsunayoshi's frustrations with some other families he could name that his shoulders sag. "What kind of problems are they having? Maybe we could help?"
Nana brightens, clapping her hands together. "You think so? That would be wonderful, Tsu-kun!"

"W-well, it doesn't hurt to take a look," he says, a bit taken aback by her reaction. "We don't know that we can't help unless we try." He doesn't know that he can help, either, but someone working hard for the sake of another should be given a few breaks, right?

"Recently it seems that Tomoko-chan's Shoichi-kun has become a bit of a hermit," Nana says. "Apparently he's been struggling to make friends to begin with, but now he's withdrawn completely and has started refusing to come out of his room. Tomoko-chan says that he's still submitting his schoolwork online, but the teachers are telling her that it's not a long term solution.

"Tomoko-chan asked me: how did I get Tsu-kun to go out and make friends, but-"

She's been fidgeting a bit all along, but now she looks at him, and her expression is pale and tight and a lot awful, her eyes wide but her pupils only pinpricks. Her mouth thins and trembles.

"I didn't know how to answer that," she finishes weakly.

It's not like Nana is wrong, he thinks even as a chill goes up his spine and his heart thumps hard. The Tsunayoshi before Then probably never would have heard Haru, let alone thrown himself into danger for her sake. He certainly wouldn't have had the training to escape. At best he would have been beaten by those men and Haru would have disappeared anyway. At worse-

Would his heart had ignited for Haru's sake the way it had for Nana? He doesn't know. Tsunayoshi can't say either way. And if it had, surely Haru would have never stuck by his side in that case.

Ahh. It hadn't been a good thing, but because of That, he's come quite a long way.

"I'll meet with Shoichi-kun," he says gently, while Nana stands beside him, barely breathing, with the haunted eyes she'd had while she sung lullabies. "I don't know what I can do about it, but looking into the matter isn't impossible."

He already has so much to do, but: Tomoko is working hard for the sake of her son, even going as far as to approach Nana about her dame son. She deserves a helping hand, he thinks. It wouldn't be fair to her if Tsunayoshi could help and he just decided not to.

Nana is quiet for the rest of the walk, but she's mostly recovered by the time they get to the door of the Miura home. After she rings them in and Hideki welcomes them, she takes the containers from Tsunayoshi and into the kitchen.

"Tsuna-kun, it's been a while," Hideki says, smiling at him.

Well, that's true enough. Since the last time they spoke one-on-one was when Tsunayoshi was trying to set up the study groups. "Sorry," he says, "there's been a lot going on. Thanks again for looking at those books for us."

"It's no problem," he says, waving the matter away. "I can't properly charge for something as simple as school finances, and with such a lazy cover up. Although - I wonder: what came of that?"

"It's still a work in progress. Haru is helping me figure out how to handle it delicately," he answers a bit awkwardly. Regardless of the circumstances, he doesn't know how Hideki would feel about the way they're going about it. "Actually, I wanted to ask you a question."

"Hm? And what's that, Tsuna-kun?"
Suddenly, Tsunayoshi wonders how he's supposed to explain himself. Hideki has never once indicated that he has recognized Tsunayoshi as Dame-Tsuna, or as if 'Sawada' means anything to him the way it seems to when it comes up around some adults. Despite how badly Tsunayoshi has disrupted Haru's life again and again, Hideki has never indicated that he's against their friendship. Even if, technically, by joining Tsunayoshi's household, Haru is leaving her family's.

At last, he says: "no matter what, you support Haru, right?"

Hideki's face is unreadable as he leans back slightly and folds his hands together. "To a point," he says eveny. "Haru-chan is a good girl with a good head on her shoulders, if a bit lonely. For the most part, it's best to allow her to learn for herself. After that point, I am still her father, and if I must become a tyrant for her sake, then a tyrant I will become."

There's a very strange look on his face as he gazes at Tsunayoshi - one that seems to say: we are alike in this, you and I. It makes him feel a bit queasy.

Tsunayoshi is no tyrant. He refuses.

If the thought would have ever occurred to him, having watched Yamamoto stand against his father is more than enough to keep any such inclinations at bay. The day any of his friends feel the need to set their feet against him, Tsunayoshi will let them go completely without a single grudge and with his full support. He doesn't want to cause them distress or give them a reason to hate him; he wants them to feel completely at ease when they're with him.

Isn't that the best way to make sure that someone will always come back?

"Why do you ask?" Hideki asks at last.

Tsunayoshi blinks, breaking the deadlock. "Not every parent wants to let their kids be friends with someone like me," he admits with an uncomfortable smile.

"I see," Hideki says. "I wonder - shouldn't you be talking to Shioya Tadamasa about something like this?"

Of all the things that Tsunayoshi might have accepted from Hideki, mention of Shioya was one of the last. "Ehh - how do you know about Shioya-san?" he asks in surprise.

"You shouldn't underestimate Tadamasa," he says easily. "Knowing that he's involved takes a weight off my mind. I'll leave it to his capable hands. Ah - that aside: your question. You feel that a friend of yours doesn't have the support of their family? Specifically to become your friend?"

"Something like that," he admits, because this isn't just about Yamamoto, but he doesn't know the specifics of Hibari's situation - beyond that his family isn't keeping up with him and something is causing him sore teeth. Whatever it is, it'll bother Tsunayoshi until he can take care of it, even if he has to yank them out with his own hands - maybe in that way, he'll finally become useful in the only way he can. "But also that they just don't seem to support them, so... I don't know what I should do."

"I see. That's a very difficult situation, Tsuna-kun, I can see why you might struggle with it," he says.

Tsunayoshi feels himself flush a bit and he averts his gaze, fidgeting. He's never been praised for asking a question before - actually, for as far back as he can remember, asking questions had been
greeted with exasperation and frustration. *You won't get it anyway.*

"Unfortunately, there isn't an easy answer in this case. Despite everything, you're only a kid, and your friends are their family's responsibility. It's impossible for you to replace them in your friend's life. If at all possible, respecting that parent's decision and not putting pressure on your friend would probably be the best way of going about it."

It's not the kind of answer that Tsunayoshi could ever rest easy hearing. It's not an answer at all. The only part of it that sounds good is the part where he doesn't make the problem worse, but if it were easy sitting back and letting someone suffer, Tsunayoshi wouldn't be here asking these kinds of questions.

"If nothing else," Nana says brightly from the doorway, "there is always running away!"

The both of them startle at her sudden words, but it's Hideki that seems the most perturbed. "Nana-chan," he says, taken aback.

She doesn't look at him, smiling sweetly at Tsunayoshi. "Mama's been saving up for a long time, Tsu-kun. If your friends ever need it, they can always come live with us! Living in a full house has always been a dream of mine!"

"*Mom,*" Tsunayoshi says, the way he might at Yamamoto, with more shock than censure. Come to think of it: don't the both of them casually deny what's directly in front of their faces in the same way?

"I want my Tsu-kun to have a large family, so something like this is easy," she says, and then turns her smile on Hideki, and there's something like *so what will you do about it* to her expression.

The effect it has on Hideki is a little amazing. The normally calm and unflappable man stutters a bit and seems at a total loss, as if this is nothing he can find a reasonable way to argue against. Finally he says, "Nana-chan, something like that will cause problems for the families."

"They're the ones causing problems for themselves," she says calmly, walking into the room and setting her hand on Tsunayoshi's shoulder. "If they want to keep their precious children, they should listen to them."

It seems obvious and plain when she puts it that way, even though some part of Tsunayoshi is protesting that it really isn't that easy. *Why isn't it?* he wonders. More than anything else, it's Hideki's expression that makes him think that way.

"My Tsu-kun and I aren't tyrants," she adds gently, still smiling serenely. "If they want those children back, then treating them well is all that it takes. We wouldn't keep them against their own will if they'd like to go home."

Hideki sighs, looking troubled. "Nana-chan, please be reasonable," he says. "There's no way that everyone else will continue to mind their own business when it comes to your son if you start doing something like that."

Nana presses a finger to the bottom of her chin, blinking. "Strange that they'd mind their own business over worse things, isn't it?" she muses. "Maybe the whole town needs a little shaking up. Say, Tsu-kun, you can do it carefully without startling everyone, right?" She looks down at him with bright eyes and a warm, trusting smile.

Tsunayoshi wants to say 'no way' - but. He doesn't want to cause problems and draw attention to himself - but. Shaking up the entire town over a few families sounds like the height of carelessness
Ahh. It's for Yamamoto and Hibari's sake, isn't it?

"Um," he says, and then looks at Hideki apologetically, since he'd come all this way and bothered the man for advice only to discard it, "I'd really prefer it if everyone could get along, but - it's not like I want to make enemies!" He waves his hands around, palm out, but his anxious nature is soothed a bit when Nana gently squeezes the shoulder under her hand. "But - there are certain things I can't just let pass, you know?"

Hideki crosses his arms over his chest, still looking troubled as he peers down at Tsunayoshi. He says nothing either way.

It's a bit disappointing that after getting praised earlier, that Hideki would withdraw his support, but it's not like Tsunayoshi can back down from this now, no matter what. All the same, this is Haru's father who is prepared to become a tyrant for her sake, so-

"What kind of person would I be," Tsunayoshi says, "If I left my friends struggling in dire straits, Miura-san? Not every family supports their kids like you support Haru. You said she has a good head on her shoulders - wouldn't she be also be troubled if she knew?"

Hideki blinks. "That's blackmail," he says, sounding surprised and a little affected.

'Blackmail' sounds like a wonderfully nonviolent solution, even if it may result in resentments and hard feelings. Tsunayoshi doesn't want hard feelings between Hideki and himself, because if Haru's parents start to trouble her, then everything that Tsunayoshi has been struggling with recently will go off-kilter somehow.

(He'll stretch.)

"Please, Hideki-san," Nana says gently, "at most that's just a feeling of 'guilt.' I'm sure you're a fine father whom Haru-chan could be proud of."

If anything, Hideki only looks deeply impressed with Nana's words, as if she's caught him off guard. Still, it seems unlikely that he'll bend on his position, and as if sensing that, Nana dips into a polite bow that Tsunayoshi hastily echoes. On that note, they turn and take their leave of the Miura household.

It takes as long as walking a block away before Tsunayoshi blinks owlishly up at Nana. "Did - um. Did we just declare war on Namimori?" he asks, and hears himself begin to grow shrill with alarm.

"Oh my!" Nana stifles her giggles behind her fingertips, and then peers down indulgently. "Of course not, Tsu-kun! Don't be silly. That was only an informal declaration of willingness. We would need a much larger household with many more allies before going to war with Namimori!"

What part of that is humorous! Be more serious about something as dangerous as that! But he doesn't shout it after all, despite the anxious sigh that escapes him in reply.

"No - but, it annoyed Mama a little bit, the way Hideki-san was speaking," she continues on more serious note. "It isn't fair if parents project their own desires on their children that way." She looks at him. "You should ask Mama for advice now and then, too."

Tsunayoshi just looks at her for a moment before wryly pointing out: "It's a bit hard to run away across a country when it's Japan."
"Oh!" she says, blinking. "So it is!" Then she clasps her hands together and declares: "Then we'll get a boat!"

"Mom!"

Chapter End Notes

Tsunayoshi: [jumps to conclusions] parkour! Vongola style!

* I hadn't really thought about it before, but Nakamoto is probably one of the first people to see Tsunayoshi’s 'scary expression' - though it's not actually much of an expression so much as the lack of one.

* The past Tsunayoshi wasn't a good person. He's actually become a better person now that he's trying to do right by Haru and Takeshi and Kyoya, but... lmao. That Literary Club Captain wasn't a good person either.

* but slowly and surely, Tsunayoshi is getting more and more anxious about things.

* Hideki is a useless male who depends on his 13 year old daughter to act as his wife \ I mean... he comes from that kind of culture, but still.

He still tries in his own way to help Tsunayoshi, but Tsunayoshi is also the type to insist on not becoming a mafia boss until he gets attacked by his ancestors, and then decides he's going to motherfucking crush the mafia if everyone is going to be so hard headed about this.

* Nana is a bit of a useless adult tbh, idk what to do with her but she gave half her genes to Tsunayoshi and raised him and now they're both like this. This is why therapy is a thing! Or should be! Or would be, except when you retire from the mafia, it's just to many years of heavily repressing your trauma into a molotov cocktail of homicide and alcohol!

Chapter Thirteen Non Canon Character list:

* Nakamoto Kei - A Disciplinary Committee Officer. Anxious personality, but capable of bullying adults. Used to get along with Tsunayoshi, but now reacts strangely to him. Willing to go along with Tsunayoshi's requests and use Committee resources for his sake. The first person to see Tsunayoshi's 'scary expression' and survive to tell the tale.
* Tomaso Nerina - The School Council Student President. Apparently stays late at the school after everyone leaves. Has a bodyguard assigned to her by her family. Seems to be embezzling school funds, and takes credit for other people's ideas.
Chapter Summary

A girl named Yoshiko, her friend Kaoru, and the secrets they discover together. Also Tsunayoshi attends an omiai.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14 : a house on the cliffside

There's a saying that without the Hibari family, Namimori wouldn't exist - but something like that is surely an exaggeration? It's true that 'Hibari' is a common name to find among the people in police uniforms, and in other places; it's true that they're a very prominent family, so that their looks aren't uncommon even among families that don't bare the name. But is it okay to say that a town exists for the sake of one family?

Or maybe it's said because on the lonely hill beneath the shrine, there are ancestral lands that the Hibari family holds. A massive, elegant estate is built there, and around it and the public shrine behind it, Namimori came into being. It may be a very young town in respect to its neighbors, a mere several hundred years old compared the near-thousand of towns nearby - but there is some pride that the residents feel toward their history.

Rather than being called 'Lark's Haven,' though, shouldn't it be something more like 'Tengu's Roost' if Hibari Kyoya is living there? The Demon of Nami Middle. However his family name is spelled, something like a raven or a raven type demon fits him better.

And if the Hibari family is the backbone on which Namimori is built, then what does that make the Tomaso family? The hands? The mouth?

-0-

The way things stand, Tsunayoshi decides early the morning after hearing about it from Nana to go visit the Irie household. He simply won't have time to look into the matter at any other moment, although intruding in another family's breakfast is unpleasant. Well - leaving early from his house for that purpose is unpleasant in its own way, too, since Nana embarrasses him with a kiss on the cheek at the doorway before handing over a bento.

"Tsu-kun is resembling his father more and more each day," she coos, cupping one hand to her cheek and looking so touched and so proud that Tsunayoshi strangles back the first five replies he has for something as abhorrent as that. It's too bad he really doesn't know Iemitsu better in order to avoid more things like that, he reflects with a weak smile to Nana as he heads off.

He definitely doesn't want to be compared to someone that can't even be bothered to be around those that are supposed to be important to them, and then says good job when they've done something despicable and they're clearly unhappy.
(Although, clearly: there's only one person in this household that is important to that man. Fine, fine. However it has to be - but at least attend to that person diligently. It can't be done from a distance, after all. Ahh.

More than a dame son, isn't it true that Nana's husband-)

Tomoko is already expecting him at her house, even so early in the morning as this, because Nana had already called ahead for his sake after he'd explained his attentions. Tsunayoshi doesn't have to wait long at all for Irie Tomoko to answer the door and welcome him inside. She does seem a bit oddly surprised at him, though - she blinks at him quite a lot as he toes off his shoes.

By the time he's achieved that little, Tomoko says, seemingly reluctantly impressed: "Wow, Tsunayoshi, you really have stepped up as the man of the house, huh? As long as you remember to take a step back when your father comes back home! I'm sure he's proud!"

Straightening abruptly, Tsunayoshi cuts her a look from the corner of his eye. What would she know about it in the first place? He's only ever gotten one kind word or bit of praise, and there's no way someone like Tomoko would accept the reason for it. "No way," he says bluntly. "In the first place, 'the man' has nothing to do with being the head of a household. I'll only recognize Mom's hard work."

Judging by the way Tomoko reacts like she's just gotten a rude surprise, perhaps he should have been more polite about it. It's just that there's no way for Tsunayoshi to rest easy with the thought of stepping down for a reason like that. But - ah. What does Nana think about it?

After a moment, Tomoko, still looking taken aback, points him toward the stairs. "Shoichi's room is that way," she says.

It isn't hard to tell which room that is, since the doors are labeled like Tsuna's own. The computer design of the placard for Shoichi's room isn't all that bad, but it isn't the sort of thing that Tsunayoshi thinks a boy his age would choose for himself - the idea that Shoichi had any say in it's design seems increasingly unlikely, although Tsunayoshi has nothing to base that thought on except for the family pictures he'd passed on his way up the stairs.

Still, maybe it's a bit fitting, given that even now, there's the sound of what Tsunayoshi suspects is a keyboard tapping away inside.

It's only then that Tsunayoshi comes to a stop to really think about what he's doing here outside Shoichi's room. He wants to help Tomoko if she's trying her best for her own son, even going to far as to risk having him compared to Nana's infamous dame son - but: he doesn't know the first thing about Shoichi. How is he supposed to help or explain himself?

Well - standing outside Shoichi's door isn't likely to give him any answers either. He'll just have to look and see for himself.

Tsunayoshi knocks, and then a bit harder a second time when the clacking keyboard doesn't even stutter. He hesitates anxiously, but - Nana said Tomoko complained that Shoichi hadn't even been leaving his own room all this time. He knocks one more time, adding an "um, Shoichi-kun?" for good measure, but it's just as likely that Shoichi has plugged in headphones, he decides.

He tries the door. It's unlocked.

Shoichi sure is spoiled, having his own desktop computer, is Tsunayoshi's first thought - but the room is pitch black other than the white glare of the screen, so he should be excused for such a
useless first impression. The form with tousled hair sitting in front of the keyboard is likely to be Shoichi, his fingers moving so quickly across the keyboard that it's amazing he doesn't get something wrong. It's so confident and decisive - if only Tsunayoshi himself could ever be half as certain as that.

There's a boy sitting on the table next to the computer, his head laid on arms folded over the monitor, his overlong hair stretched over everything like cobwebs. His face is cast in eerie shadows by the odd position he's in relative to the only source of light, but it makes his eyelashes glitter like snowflakes on the hills of round baby fat cheeks, and he doesn't look up from staring at the hidden face sitting in the chair before him. Those eyes in this darkness should probably be shining, but they're faded, and strained, and dull.

Under the edge of the hospital gown he's been wearing all this time, his bare feet dangle: knobbly ankles, and delicate bones like glass.

Tsunayoshi blinks.

"Um," he says, because he can clearly see now that Shoichi isn't wearing headphones. "Excuse me?"

Actually, he can kind of hear murmuring. After a moment, Tsunayoshi ventures inside, carefully circling a bit. That alone proves that the murmuring seems to be Shoichi talking to himself under his breath, who even then scowls and stops tapping away at the keys to irritably pound one key in particular. Grabbing at the mouse, he swings it around, striking it with one furious finger - click, click, click like the rattle and pop of guns, tap-tap-tapping the key like spent shells striking the floor.

The room goes a little strange, Tsunayoshi's heart thumping wildly in his chest in counterpoint. His skin prickles. His palms sting. "Shoichi-kun," he says, forcing his fists to release as he reaches out. His fingers curl around the back of the chair, which feels strange and fragile and flammable. "Who are you going to war with?"

All movement at the desk freezes, and Shoichi slowly turns. Their eyes lock together, and then Shoichi screams and hurls himself from the chair at the desk. He scrambles frantically, cornered thing with wild eyes and white teeth. Tsunayoshi only watches him as long as it takes to determine that his resolve is hardly any kind of threat, and then returns his attention to the computer.

He doesn't have one of his own, and it's difficult to have gut feelings about something like a computer in the first place, but Tsunayoshi still looks, trying to understand. The light clicks on overhead, but it's not until he gets an itch does Tsunayoshi look away from the screen full of symbols and kanji and roman letters that he think might be English instead of anything else.

Shoichi has turned in the overhead light in the room and he has a mop in his hand. He clearly means to use it as a weapon, heaving for breath but clutching a little low on his abdomen for it to be his heart that's bothering him. He has red hair, which seems a little odd for someone with a mother and sister who so clearly favor their heritage.

Still, Tsunayoshi frowns at him, or more specifically at his defensive grip on the mop. "Shoichi-kun," he says, "you'll hurt yourself with that." Or Tsunayoshi will - he'll probably accidentally brain himself taking it away from Shoichi, anyway.

"Who are you?" Shoichi demands shrilly.

Ah. They have a nervous personality in common it seems - which makes whatever war Shoichi is
fighting all the more troublesome. "Sawada Tsunayoshi," he says. "Nana is my mom. Tomoko-san brought you up with her, so I was asked to get involved."

Apparently standing still and being calm is useful for something, because Shoichi is catching his breath and his knuckles have eased up on the mop. "Sawada Tsunayoshi - Sawada Tsuna - ah. Tsuna. Tsu - dame-Tsu-! Ah." After looking enlightened, he now only looks awkward and embarrassed, blinking a little uncertainly at Tsunayoshi as if he's not sure that the guy that broke into his bedroom might not get angry for being called something like that.

In this case, though, it's kind of useful, so Tsunayoshi makes sure to round his shoulders and dip his head appropriately with a smile. "That's right," he agrees. "It must be pretty bad if someone like me gets involved."

More importantly: even a guy that goes to a private school recognized the name 'Dame-Tsuna,' he thinks. Tomaso Nerina is either a liar or a hypocrite - aren't those people on the edges the most important to catch before they fall away from society?

After all, Tsunayoshi is the one who has become such dangerous scum over the fact that he only has a few precious connections to protect. Hasn't Haru been denied? Hasn't Yamamoto? People should really try reaching out with both hands to something they want to keep.

Shoichi flails at his words, though, and nearly brains himself with the mop. "Ah - no! I'm sorry you got involved," he says, finally setting it aside the way he should have when Tsunayoshi first suggested it. "Or...? No, I'm not sure why you were asked to get involved..." He tugs fretfully at his hair, much more harshly than Tsunayoshi ever has. Then again, there's a hot, angry angle to his frustration that Tsunayoshi's never had the nature to generate for himself, too, so surely that factors into it.

"Because Tomoko-san was worried, of course," he says.

"But why?"

"Even I know it's not okay to lock yourself up inside your room alone," Tsunayoshi says, despite once have done that very thing - in a much more serious way than Shoichi has, honestly. At least Shoichi us doing more than just sitting around staring at nothing. Speaking of - "you never answered," he points out. "Who are you going to war with?"

"Going to-" Shoichi's gaze goes to the computer that Tsunayoshi is pointing to, and he startles. "Ah- no. That's not - that's just some code that I'm working on - although it's a bit frustrating." Now that he seems to have rejected the idea that Tsunayoshi is a threat, he doesn't hesitate to cross the room quickly and assess what's on the screen. He mumbles fretfully, clicking at it, before pulling back again and scrubbing at his eyes behind his glasses.

This close up, it's even more clear that Shoichi really hasn't been sleeping well, or even keeping up with his bathing appropriately. No wonder his mother has been getting anxious about this - even Tsunayoshi, who used to sit alone for hours at the window, still came down to eat and out to bathe when it was time to do so.

Smiling slightly, he says, "it sounded like you were fighting it as if you were prepared to die, though."

Shoichi lowers his hands, staring at Tsunayoshi as if he's never seen him before - although this is the first time they've met. His eyes are actually dark gray, like Ryohei's, although not the same at all aside from the color.
Come to think of it, he didn't look too closely at those family pictures, but it's becoming very obvious that Shoichi doesn't look like the rest of his family at all, not in the shape of his face or eyes and he definitely doesn't share any traits with the mother that opened the door or the sister who'd been sitting, half asleep, at the table for breakfast.

"No?" Shoichi says, but he seems to fluster a bit, as if Tsunayoshi's suggestion has somehow made him uncertain of himself or the situation again. "F-fight as if I were prepared…?" Just saying the words seems to terrorize him.

Well, not everyone can be Hibari or Haru or even Yamamoto, Tsunayoshi thinks. It's not bad to be the sort of person who can't get along with the idea of fighting for one's life. Tsunayoshi used to be that way himself, until circumstances conspired to threaten him with losing the things that he's found to be important. He still hates the idea of hurting others and would rather avoid having to do so, but at a certain point: it just becomes impossible to pamper people who insist on living like scum.

Still, Shoichi doesn't have to understand Tsunayoshi in order for Tsunayoshi to help him. "Sorry, it's my mistake," he says easily. "Shoichi-kun seemed to have been getting pretty intense there, as if it were a fighting game. Did I interrupt you having fun?"

"Aah, 'fun' - no, it's nothing I do for fun," Shoichi says, even as he gratefully accepts the lie as an explanation. "And it's not a game, either. This is something my Dad sent me to look at as a favor for him." But instead of sounding happy about it, Shoichi seems to be feeling even more tired and resigned than before.

"Usually, you'd ask a favor from someone who is really good at something," Tsunayoshi observes. "Unless Shoichi's father is just really that desperate?"

"Desperate is probably the right word for it," Shoichi says miserably, snorting. "It's not really that I'm good at it. I mean - I mostly understand it, but there are a whole lot of guys out there who are a lot better than I am. I just learned because I wanted to improve the online song players - ah, not music players, but - here, let me show you."

He drops into the chair that Tsunayoshi is still gripping in one hand, reaching for the keyboard and mouse again. All the nonsense on the screen shrinks away, and Shoichi's fingers go right back to pounding away on the keyboard as he swivels the mouse around and click, click, clicks. It doesn't sound like fighting a war at all this time. "See?" he says as something else comes up on the screen. "It doesn't play music that's already written - you tell it what noises to make, and then it plays them. Like - a simulated band!"

A pretty handy thing for a kid who doesn't easily make friends. Although - that's looking less and less correct by the second if Tsunayoshi is honest. It's less that Shoichi seems overly nervous or anxious about Tsunayoshi's presence, and he's confident about the things he does without hesitating or flinching, even though Tsunayoshi more or less barged into his room without warning. He has an anxious personality, it seems, but he doesn't seem socially awkward the way that it sounded like to Tsunayoshi.

Definitely not along Tsunayoshi's own problems with connecting with others.

Judging by the way he said it, Tsunayoshi taps thoughtfully at the bone of his jaw. "So, Shoichi-kun wants to be a musician, then?" He doesn't know anything at all about coding, but definitely has the feeling that Shoichi is a bit better at it than he made it sound - but it's not the coding itself that he cares about, but what it can do for him.
Shoichi laughs wryly, ruffling a hair through his hair - seems to notice only then just how oily it's gotten, grimacing and rubbing his hand on his shirt. "It's not really an appropriate aspiration for someone going to Yumei middle, right?" He sounds a bit defeated about it, which is - well.

"It's a better aspiration than becoming a street sweeper, or a NEET," he says, glancing down at him. There's no way that Shoichi can become the idol type, even without his glasses, so what kind of musician does he dream of being, then? Shoichi seems a bit reluctantly amused by Tsunayoshi's suggestions, but he's still preoccupied by his own problems. "If you specialize in music code, then your father sent you something like that?"

"That would have been nice," he says, "but no. This is - ah. Honestly, I don't really know what it's supposed to do, but judging from what I have here, it's some kind of game code, I think. Dad only sent it to me because he knows that I'm into replicating music without actual musicians involved. Do you know what VR is?"

Tsunayoshi could probably guess from what's been said so far, but in the interest of seeing what else Shoichi will say without meaning to, he indicates his ignorance.

"It stands for 'virtual reality,'" he says, returning his attention back to the computer so that he can draw up more things, like his program that makes songs. "There are a couple of different kinds - I like the kind that projects into the reality as we know it, so that maybe one day, we can play games that send out projections so that onlookers can enjoy it without needing a screen. Being able to interact with something like that - holograms, I mean - would probably be the pinnacle of human advancement. Especially if it could be attached to AI.

"But this code that Dad sent to me, it's a different kind of VR. Instead of being the kind of thing that anyone else could participate in without the equipment, in public - this is the kind of private, worldbuilding type VR. Although maybe someday, a lot of people could plug into the same world, right now, just fitting one player into a simulated world so they can interact with objects, or even AI, is the first stepping stone."

More or less like entering some kind of game world, without a controller. Ah, but: Tsunayoshi would die if he were alone, so: "I think I like the hologram idea best, too, Shoichi-kun." Shoichi brightens, turning to him with a happy expression - but that just bugs Tsunayoshi, because no part of Shoichi seems to be struggling with talking with him. Shouldn't someone like this easily make friends? "But - then, if you're not going to war, why have you shut yourself into your room?"

All of Shoichi's happiness immediately melts away. "Are you joking?" he asks with a scowl, voice cracking with indignation - not at Tsunayoshi, but at the situation. "With everything piling on, if I don't do things this way, then I can't spend any time with music! It's the only thing that calms me down." He clutches at his abdomen again, but it seems to be out of reflex and not because of anything actually bothering him. "Between school work, that program my dad sent me, and trying to plan my future - I don't have time to leave my room, never mind socialize!"

So he actually understands precisely what has his mother concerned. At least Shoichi has a better grasp on the situation than Tsunayoshi ever did, since he himself never noticed just how upset Nana was about the situation in the first place.

"If it's that bad, can't you just tell your father 'no' when he asks you to do something like this?" he wonders. "If it were me, I'd do it right away."

Although - if Iemitsu were the sort of dad that actually kept in contact enough to send Tsunayoshi things, maybe it would be harder to do that? Tsunayoshi can't really wrap his head around the whole concept though, because never once has anything like that happened. He'll just never get it.
"It's not that simple," Shoichi says gloomily.

"I see," Tsunayoshi says, even though he doesn't, even though despite everything, Tomoko is working hard for him - even if she doesn't understand what Shoichi actually needs and misunderstands the situation. Obviously she has her own idea of what's going on that won't be easy to shake. "In that case, I don't want to be late to school myself and get bitten to death-" although if he were, then at least Hibari would have to pay him that much attention, "but I'll probably see you again soon, Shoichi-kun."

The sudden departure seems to shock Shoichi, as he'd half accepted Tsunayoshi to be some kind of weird hallucination or apparition borne out of stress and sleep deprivation. That's more or less the last straw, Tsunayoshi thinks as he encounters Tomoko at the bottom of the stairs. She has her hands clasped together and her brow is pinched in concern, her mouth a soft circle and looking like some kind of praying saint with a dawning light over her brow.

Halting on the step that leaves him at eye level with her, Tsunayoshi just looks at her for a moment, and the face that's depending on some kind of god or demon to take pity on her and save her - flinches. Plainly, he says, "your husband is overloading him with extracurricular projects to the point that he's hallucinating from the stress."

Tomoko blinks rapidly as if waking up from a bad dream. She seems a bit confused for a moment before remembering the situation at hand. "Masatsugu is?" she says, shocked.

It's not a complete lie, so Tsunayoshi doesn't feel bad about telling it, but if she at least confronts her husband over something like this, then maybe the family will start paying attention to each other again - or something like that, he thinks. Otherwise, regardless of what Shoichi thinks, he really will snap and go to war against that father of his instead of just the codes send to him. More than anything, Tsunayoshi knows what someone pushed to the edge of their endurance looks like.

"I'll come back to check on everything as I have time for it," he adds as he goes to collect his shoes from the doorway. "Hopefully by then, Shoichi-kun will have gotten some sleep."

"Ah - ah! Thank you," she says, but it sounds more like she's saying it because it's appropriate than because she really feels like it. If she weren't an adult, maybe it would sound more like a question.

Honestly. What a troublesome situation. People working hard for the sake of others deserve a break, but only if they've actually tried fixing the problem themselves, first, Tsunayoshi thinks irritably as he shuts the door to the household behind him. Looking to someone else to fix it before trying yourself is despicable.

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As prominent as the Hibari family is, the Tomaso family is roughly on the same level - although, just considering it feels a bit like he'll get bitten to death by Hibari, even though Hibari doesn't seem to care about his family's name or reputation. Given everything that Tsunayoshi has come to understood, he wonders if it bothers him at all to be called by his family name all the time. Although appropriate in most cases - he really, really wonders it.

If it's true… and since Tsunayoshi has selfish reasons for it, he wonders if it's really okay to try calling Hibari by his given name. Maybe he'll want to bite Tsunayoshi for being overly familiar? Well, some part of Tsunayoshi is twisted enough that he thinks he might welcome it. It's difficult to go from regularly being chased and beaten by Kyoya to not feeling his presence anywhere in his life. It's rough. It's bad. Ahh. He doesn't feel good about it at all.
Besides, there's no way that Tsunayoshi wants to attach Kyoya to people who have put that look on his face.

And if it's not his family, then Tsunayoshi just likes how it fits in his mouth better. Surely he can do this much without making Kyoya feel crowded or pressured. Even if he's being ignored, maybe Kyoko was right when she said that Kyoya was putting himself through a lot of trouble for Tsunayoshi's sake. On the off chance that it's true, then Tsunayoshi should probably take responsibility, right?

And if it's not, it isn't as if Tsunayoshi will regret working hard for Kyoya's sake, either.

Still, there should probably be limits, he thinks, reaching up to scratch at the uncomfortable wig. He barely manages to even touch it before Haru promptly slaps his hand away from it. "You'll mess it up," she complains, and then twists their hands together to interlock their fingers.

Tsunayoshi's cheeks have been burning for ages now, but at this point, his ears join in. He's not the only one, but at least Haru seems happy about it? No - even with that, Tsunayoshi isn't sure that he can resolve the situation! "I'm losing feeling in my legs," he complains.

Haru scoffs. "Welcome to a woman's world!" she says. "Anyway, they're necessary to draw attention away from your knees and calves, you know? All the heels in the world can't entirely change the shape." She gives Tsunayoshi another once-over, but ultimately seems satisfied by the effect.

When Tsunayoshi had reasoned with his guardians that there's no way anyone of their skill level would be able to completely hide themselves from notice when following someone like Di Tella Arturo, who is prepared to kill for Tomaso Nerina's sake, he honestly hadn't expected Haru's previously unknown skill for costumes to come into play. It's just his unfortunate luck that Haru said with Yamamoto's frame, there's no way he'd pass without drawing way too much attention to them.

"If my knees are a problem, then give me a longer skirt!" Tsunayoshi complains, tugging uneasily at the bottom of the one he's wearing. It might be long enough that he managed to wear his boxers underneath, but the stockings are another problem all together!

"Are you kidding? It's not nearly cold enough for a full length skirt," Haru sniffs. "Don't you pay any attention to fashion at all? Soon everyone will start wearing their summer uniform. Anyway, Tsunayoshi-san is cute!"

"Calling me that while crossdressed in a girl's uniform won't make me happy," he says flatly. _He hadn't found himself cute, although Haru is good at her job and Tsunayoshi is fairly certain that most people would easily see him as a girl - maybe Haru's underclassman. It's just - if they run into any of Haru's classmates, they'll probably immediately realize they don't recognize him._

Still - between the heels, the blazer, and the wig… there's a good chance that no one will easily recognize him as Sawada Tsunayoshi, either, and that had been his main concern. Haru has excuse enough, since she doesn't attend the same school as Nerina, but if anyone were to catch Tsunayoshi around the Tomaso house, that could cause problems.

Although, comparing the Hibari estate to the Tomaso estate really does seem like a kind of slight against the Hibari family, he reflects as the two of them turn the final corner. Which isn't to say that the Tomaso estate isn't impressive, with it's multiple stories and elaborate detailing and high, fancy fences, like something Tsunayoshi thinks would fit in perfectly with the shows he's seen set in America. Or maybe it was England?
It's clearly worth a lot of money, but it kind of clashes badly with the neighborhood around it.

"So," Haru says, gazing at it. "This is the kind of place the mayor of Namimori lives, huh."

Worse than that, Tsunayoshi doesn't say, thinking about all the Tomaso children and their bodyguards. It's safer to say it out loud as 'mayor,' which is also true besides. He wonders what Kyoko thinks of herself that she's pitted herself against Nerina, who has these kinds of family connections.

Although, maybe Tsunayoshi should learn more about Kyoko's family before thinking such a thing. He sure is an incomplete stalker to not even know that much. It's things like that which really make him think that he's dame.

But now at this time, without really looking closely at it, Tsunayoshi picks out at least seven people who are patrolling the grounds. They're very paranoid folk, he thinks, but as someone who was kidnapped less than a year ago, he figures he can't really blame them for that. There's significantly less reason to kidnap Nana and Tsunayoshi than there is to kidnap members of the mayor's family.

"Although, I guess 'mayor' is overselling it," Haru adds, even as she tugs Tsunayoshi along the sidewalk in front of the house. "Since Namimori has had a Tomaso mayor since way, way before Haru's family or Tsunayoshi-san's family came here."

He hums. It's not like he'd know the difference, but leave it to Haru to go as far as researching Nerina's family for the sake of Tsunayoshi's plans.

Although when he's mentioned wanting to collect more data on Nerina, he really hadn't expected going undercover to be her answer - but maybe he should have.

Abruptly, Haru goes up on her tiptoes, waving her free hand in the air. "Hi," she calls out, obviously to one of the men standing guard at the gate of the estate. "Hello!"

"Haru!" Tsunayoshi hisses, tugging on her other hand. "What are you doing?"

"Trust Haru, Tsunayoshi-san!" she says breezily, and now that she has the man's attention, she begins dragging Tsunayoshi across the street toward him, ignoring all of Tsunayoshi's further protests.

The man doesn't look pleased in the least to be approached, but at least he doesn't seem likely to strike out - anyway, Tsunayoshi would break his arm if he tried, or his face if he's particularly stubborn about it. It's a fair gamble that even so, none if the other guards will try killing two girls over something so minor as approaching them in broad daylight. Their resolve just isn't strong enough for that.

Still, Tsunayoshi self-consciously lags behind, his cheeks burning almost painfully as he clutches at Haru's sleeve and ducks his head down, hoping that the long brown wig will shield his face enough.

"What do you girls want?" the guard asks a bit gruffly. He's not happy, but at least he isn't completely unreceptive to listening to Haru.

"Mm! It's Kaoru, and this is Yoshiko-chan," Haru chirrups, bouncing as she comes to a stop, which is wait what? When Tsunayoshi had said his piece and eventually allowed Haru to talk him into this, he doesn't remember agreeing to having any kind of name over it or otherwise he would have refused! "Is this where Mayor Tomaso lives?"
Against all logic, this question actually makes the man relax a bit. "That's right," he says.

"Wow, cool," Haru enthuses, clutching the front of her blazer with her free hand. "Is it true that he's recently gotten a love interest?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss Mayor Tomaso's private life," the man says, but he's definitely tolerating them.

Haru squeals in reply. "I'm marking that down as an affirmative!" she exclaims, and the other man standing at the other side of the gate laughs despite keeping an eye on the opposite end of the road.

"Make it a direct quote or otherwise you'll cause trouble for me," the guard facing them says, but he definitely doesn't seem like he minds the situation anymore. Haru is obviously some kind of magician.

"No problem," Haru says in English. "Then: not commenting on his private life, do you think the Mayor will build on additions to the house? Since his sister-in-law and niece are there?"

"That's planning too far ahead into the future."

"That's no fun!" Haru chides. "Play ball, play ball!"

Rather than finding this bratty of hers, the guy just smiles, waving her away. "I don't want any trouble," he says. "That's my livelihood on the line, you know."

Haru pouts about it but it's obvious that the man won't budge on it. "Aw," she says, then tilts her head. "Then, in the interest of saving your skin, is there anyone else we could interview? It's an exciting report on the future of Namimori for the paper, you know!"

Undoubtedly, if Haru had walked up and opened with that statement, the guards would have told her to get lost. Instead, Tsunayoshi watches as the man wavers. His partner at the other side of the gate must surely sense as much, but rather than step in, waves him off as if to say that the decision is his, and on his head it'll be.

Tsunayoshi wonders if that wig and skirt have really fooled these adults into think that he's something harmless. Then again, they only looked at him as an extension of Haru, and even then only once before seeming to forget his existence entirely.

"It's also a big part of my grade," Haru simpers. "Please? You don't want me to fail, do you? A young girl with a bright future?"

"Aah, fine," the man says in exasperation, glancing around - looking at the other security guards scattered around, keeping an eye on the situation. "I guess letting you talk to someone wouldn't be impossible." Haru bursts into cheers, and even though the man clicks his tongue, he doesn't change his mind about it.

Haru is certainly amazing. Maybe they should have tried committing to the school newspaper interview thing and had Yamamoto come along as their 'cameraman' or something like that - if Midori weren't a girl's only school. Surely some other school would have sufficed? But maybe Haru's inside knowledge is vital in some way that Tsunayoshi hasn't seen yet.

Tsunayoshi trusts their path to Haru, looking around as they're lead inside. The walls are kind of suspicious, he thinks - as if the building had once been a more traditional compound before the building had been torn down and replaced with the Western style home. Come to think of it - although there are some plants on the inside of the tall walls, it's difficult not to notice that the trees
nearby aren't growing as closely to the estate as the others in the neighborhood. Those trees have been growing for many generations, judging by the trunks.

Although someone has planted a fruit tree.

The inside of the house is kind of stupidly lavish to someone with Tsunayoshi's background, which has always been about doing as much as possible with only the meager amounts left over from Iemitsu's pay after the house and utilities were paid for. At least some of that must be a side effect from the 'saving up' that Nana mentioned, but even so: Tsunayoshi hasn't ever really wanted for anything. The things he's felt the absence of aren't really the type that can be bought with normal amounts of money, anyway.

More alarming is the number of people who are inside the house - not as family members, but as servants. No, the alarming thing about them is the ones that Tsunayoshi would find inconvenient in certain ways, who look even at the awkward girl that Haru is dragging around by the hand. He only listens with half an ear as Haru talks to them, or the servants in charge of the other servants, really, and reflects that Kyoko certainly asked him for something very difficult.

Still, now he has Haru and Yamamoto backing him, as well as Nakamoto - and hadn't that been a surprise! Tsunayoshi hadn't particularly thought that Nakamoto would have been inclined to help after the trouble he gave Tsunayoshi over the dossier, but he'd been worried enough to follow up.

And ah, but what a scary face he'd made when Tsunayoshi had finally plainly told him what the reason behind everything was. Lips peeled, white teeth bared. That had been super surprising - for a moment, Tsunayoshi had wondered if Kyoya could forget about biting Tomaso Nerina to death because Nakamoto was going to do it for him. Maybe with his actual teeth.

"Hey! Who is this!"

The sudden shout after the halls of the Tomaso house being relatively quiet makes Tsunayoshi jump so hard he bumps into Haru. They both look around, Haru's hand clutched tight over Tsunayoshi's, to see a boy around their age coming down the hallway behind them. It's immediately evident that this is a loud type of person, from the way he walks with his elbows and knees turn out, to his bleached hair and his ridiculous sense of fashion.

"Is he some kind of loud bird?" Haru wanders under her breath, and Tsunayoshi hums uncertainly.

Whoever it is, or whatever he thinks that he is, it's clear that he's no one's favorite - still, there seems to be a servant hot on his heels, following with a stern face. It's the servant who shouts at them: "What are you two doing in here! This house is off limits to outsiders!"

"Relax," the boy chides him, waving him off. "They're getting along with everyone, so it can't be bad!"

That's a really simplistic way of viewing things for a Tomaso child, Tsunayoshi thinks - and then in the next moment, the boy has arrived before them and has grabbed both of their free hands in his own, shaking them vigorously. Haru manages to stand firm in the onslaught, but Tsunayoshi staggers and sways and ends up throwing his weight against Haru to steady himself, grasping her hand even tighter. She stands firm beside him, clutching his hand back with equal strength.

"It's nice to meet you!" Haru says, matching the Tomaso boy's energy flawlessly. "This is Kaoru, and this is Kaoru's friend, Yoshiko-chan! We're here to see for our school newspaper! Say, say, Tomaso-kun - are you free to do an interview?"
The question strangely seems to fluster the boy. He flushes like no one has said a kind word to him to the point that Haru merely asking for his attention for a bit seems to feel like a kind word. He sputters. He flails. He says, "please," and finally gets out: "It's not 'Tomaso' at all! It's Naito! Naito Longchamp!"

Haru stares. Tsunayoshi stares right with her. Even if he's not up-and-up on his local history, even Tsunayoshi knows that the previous mayor had been named 'Longchamp' and so is the current one. But they definitely both had the family name 'Tomaso.' Tsunayoshi looks at the severe adult standing in Naito Longchamp's shadow, who seems severely cross about it all - even with being the only person who looks at that kid kindly.

What kind of twisted thing has Tsunayoshi gotten involved in?

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Despite the way that Naito Longchamp commandeers the rest of their visit to the Tomaso household, the reconnaissance isn't a bust at all. He's a lonely kid overseen by a stern adult who appears to be unwanted by all the other people living in that whole huge house. He has a wing to himself, but it's mostly deserted other than a glimpse of a few other people Naito's age. Naito's room is cluttered and uncared for, although the stern adult who continued to hover protectively makes a few gestures at trying to right the mess of it. Naito calls Nerina his cousin, even though there had only been the two children of the previous Mayor Tomaso, and the current mayor had no wife or children.

He's too clever or otherwise too self-conscious to be loose lipped about Tomaso family concerns and Haru and Tsunayoshi never do meet Nerina herself or the other members of the Tomaso family, but it's an interesting trip all the same.

"Wow, playing a Spy game seems pretty fun," Yamamoto says brightly. "Hey -" putting his hands together in the classic sign of entreaty, he says, "next time, invite me along, too!"

"If it's possible," Tsunayoshi says, having failed to specify the specifics of the entire venture: that they had arrived as 'Kaoru and Yoshiko' rather than Haru and Tsunayoshi. The less said about 'Yoshiko,' the better. Anyway, despite Yamamoto's ability to be popular while also feeling the weight of the terrible things he's capable of - well. Yamamoto is a more honest sort than either Haru or Tsunayoshi himself.

Not that there had been a lot of call for Tsunayoshi to be overly dishonest as Yoshiko, but still.

"Well, if there's anything I can do, let me know!" Yamamoto adds. "I've been spreading word around for Kyoko, so you can count on the baseball club's vote!"

Well, even so, Yamamoto is still working hard to achieve Tsunayoshi's goals. "Thanks, Yamamoto," he says with a smile borne more of gratefulness for the effort than because the team's votes will count for much.

It sort of feels like it should be a foregone conclusion with how popular Kyoko is as an idol, but he's seen enough about the spirit of Namimori to know that it's a bit set in its ways. Probably from day one, the name 'Tomaso' had given Nerina the ability to step into roles of power without being questioned. Class president at first, but now that they were in middle school, she'd taken control of the Council President position when there were older or more experienced candidates available.

"It would cause less problems over all if we could just do this honestly," he adds after a moment. "I don't exactly want the kind of attention that will come if we're caught at what we're doing." He
already doesn't have a great reputation - still half Dame-Tsuna, now with flavors of delinquent - but this kind of thing, if the adults find out about it, that will make them even more reluctant to let their children associate with him, won't it? Other than just 'Sawada'?

"Don't worry so much about it, Tsuna," Yamamoto says, clasping a hand to his back. "Kyoko wouldn't have asked you to do something that bad. Or - haha! - something that could end badly. Right?"

"Well, she didn't ask, exactly," he says, because if anyone asks her, she can honestly say that she never asked Tsunayoshi to rig the election in her favor. But he gets the idea that Yamamoto is probably right - even if Kyoko could honestly weasel out of any repercussions, it doesn't seem like it would be in her nature to do so. Even if it would be troublesome, Kyoko isn't the sort that allows trouble to dissuade her - or surely she would have given up on her own brother.

She's not as fond of Tsunayoshi as she is Ryohei, but Kyoko likes to leave her fingerprints on things. As long as he continues not to be a threat to her and her own, she'll lend him aid.

"It's bound to work out fine!"

But Yamamoto also thought nothing of the fact that his father had asked to meet Tsunayoshi in their own home, either.

For all that there's a small back area in TakeSushi for the sake of the Yamamoto family getting some rest if the restaurant requires their constant care and attention, they have an actual home that Tsunayoshi needs guidance in order to reach. The neighborhood is making him a bit anxious, truth told. He grew up living a simple, unassuming life - nothing to pay attention to. Not so poorly done by that they'd struggled, not so well off that anyone noticed that either. His possessions are few, and Nana's too.

But Yamamoto's father has a dojo, he remembers. The baseball team had complained about it. Of course things aren't as simple as that, though Tsunayoshi has to wonder just what kind of man Yamamoto's father is that he got such a nice place to live.

"I feel like I should have dressed better," Tsunayoshi says when they arrive at the gate, but Yamamoto just laughs at him, catches him with an arm around his neck and drags him in.

"It's not like that," he says. "I think Pops must give off that kind of atmosphere, but we're really a relaxed family - well, outside the dojo, anyway. But that's to do with blades! You have to take that seriously or someone could die."

There's an odd kind of gravity to how he says it, despite his easy-going tone. People sometimes talk about 'death' and 'dying' - but, Tsunayoshi's noticed that it tends to be divorced from the actual idea of what death means.

"I guess even you take 'death' seriously," he says.

"Ah - well," Yamamoto says, slightly stilted. The air seems strange for a moment. Flat. "Pops said it was pretty important. Even I can tell when I need to pay attention to something and learn it by heart." He glances down at Tsunayoshi and the edges of his expression are strained even as he tries to grin it away. "I don't want to cause problems for him, you know?"

"You're a good kid, Yamamoto," Tsunayoshi observes bluntly, only for Yamamoto to fluster over it. It's not like Yamamoto is short on praise, Tsunayoshi thinks, but it's like when Haru praises him - it doesn't mean as much from someone who doesn't know everything. It's a bit nice to be trusted
so much.

Heavy, but nice.

Still, Yamamoto not wanting to cause problems with his father will make things a bit dicey here, especially because Tsunayoshi sharply remembers his introduction to Yamamoto's father and just how Yamamoto had gotten about it. The same kind of dread and tension that he feels on exam day settles around him now, no matter how hard Yamamoto squeezes the arm around his shoulders. It would be nice to take reassurance in that, but Yamamoto has it all backwards about who is protecting whom.

Ahh - but isn't that right? Whatever Yamamoto's father's thoughts are on all of this, even if it's a negative one: when it comes to Yamamoto, Tsunayoshi is capable of anything. He's been thinking that way and taking it to the worst possible conclusion, but - 'anything' can be waiting patiently, can't it? At some point, Yamamoto will leave his father's house and become free to join Tsunayoshi's household.

(Even a tyrant like Hideki can't control his children forever. And if they reach out to Tsunayoshi with yearning hands and call for his help, then what should he do? What shouldn't he do? Wouldn't ignoring the problem be the worst decision by far? Even if he's scum that can't lift a finger for his own sake, wouldn't the worst kind of scum turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to a cry for help?

And even if there are only a few things he can do to help, even if they're scary: isn't holding back still worse than any of them?

It's bad. He reminds himself that it's bad. He's can't be thinking like that. But it's just if he wants them to stop then-

Yamamoto squeezes his shoulders a second time even as he calls out to his father, "I'm home! I've brought Tsuna with me, too!"

He leads Tsunayoshi to where his father's reply comes from - a sort of reception room with a tatami floor and a low slung table with zabuton placed around it; Yamamoto's father is sitting seiza at the table, a box at his elbow with several papers in it with painstakingly neat handwriting on it, his face stern and unapproachable.

"Ah," Yamamoto says with such a tone of deep surprise that Tsunayoshi knows that he should have definitely dressed better.

His father doesn't look up as he places the paper - the letter - in his hand into the box. "Takeshi," he says, none of the smiling chef in his manner, "sit your friend down and make us tea."

Tsunayoshi doesn't know the art or the form of this kind of setting - Iemitsu has some Japanese blood, but neither of his parents have taught Tsunayoshi any of the traditions or rituals of formality and politeness. Rather than panic, Tsunayoshi remembers taking a gun in his hand when he's never held anything more dangerous than a stick before and killing five men over it. He remembers Nana's panicked face in the memory of it, and waiting for her to catch her composure again. Kyoya setting his tonfa to Tsunayoshi's throat and thinking: _ah, he'll definitely kill me if it becomes necessary - isn't that a relief?_

Set against those events, this is nothing.

Before Yamamoto can act on his father's orders, Tsunayoshi steps into the room, and even though he's never actually trained himself, he sits seiza as best as he can on the zabuton across the table
from Yamamoto's father. From the doorway, Yamamoto casts him a look nothing short of the
desperate bunny eyes he's shown once before, so that Tsunayoshi is moved to smile at him just to
prove that he's fine, that everything's okay.

Yamamoto blinks, but he settles slightly, casting his father a wary look. "I'll be right back," he says
to the room in general before turning on his heel and leaving the two of them alone - a mixed
reassurance to Tsunayoshi and a warning to his father.

He really does have no idea who is protecting whom in this case. But that's fine. Tsunayoshi is
capable of it.

Across the table, Yamamoto's father looks at him like he's already sliced Tsunayoshi open from
belly to throat; the hair on the back of his neck and his arms prickle - in a different way than it does
with Yamamoto himself. This definitely isn't a man that Tsunayoshi wants to face in a fight, not
now. Not ever. It feels a little like to him, Tsunayoshi is already a corpse on the floor who is only
still breathing out of a minor mistake that hasn't been corrected yet. A mild inconvenience. A mess
to be cleaned up at some later date.

That's fine. To Tsunayoshi, that man is the same. But still -

"Please pardon the intrusion, Yamamoto-san," Tsunayoshi says, even though it's probably impolite
and bad manners to speak up first. It doesn't really matter. Yamamoto's father isn't the sort that will
change his mind over a few social gaffes. "Um - it's my preference that we can all get along and
work together, since over all, it's less stressful for your son that way - but, um."

Tsunayoshi allows himself to look away from Yamamoto's father's stony stare. If he wants to kill
Tsunayoshi, then he already knows that there's nothing he can do to stop that man. He loses
nothing by putting all his cards on the table. He thinks of Nana promising to house any of his
friends that need it, and running away on a boat across the sea.

"Sorry," he says at last, meeting Yamamoto's father's eyes again, "I'm afraid I can't really leave
things alone unless it's Yamamoto-kun himself that tells me so."

He watches himself die a hundred times in Yamamoto's father's stony eyes. If he wants to kill
Tsunayoshi, then he already knows that there's nothing he can do to stop that man. He loses
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"Sorry," he says at last, meeting Yamamoto's father's eyes again, "I'm afraid I can't really leave
things alone unless it's Yamamoto-kun himself that tells me so."

He watches himself die a hundred times in Yamamoto's father's stony eyes. Still, that man doesn't so
much as twitch, his breathing calm, his heart steady. It's plenty impressive. Tsunayoshi's
impressed. No, Tsunayoshi is in awe - he wants to learn a trick like that. There's no way for him to
emulate Yamamoto's composure, since it comes as part of Yamamoto the same way his height
does - but Yamamoto's father is a person who is more like Tsunayoshi himself. It doesn't come
naturally to him, but somewhere along the line, he learned the discipline.

Tsunayoshi wants that discipline more than most things.

Not enough to leave things like they are, though.

At last, Yamamoto's father seems to come to some sort of conclusion, turning to the box at his
elbow. "Someone came for my wife, once," he says, not reaching for it, but looking at the papers
inside. They're old, careworn and creased. The writing is painstakingly neat, like it was performed
by a calligrapher. "I already knew it, but I learned again that it's possible to lose things by trying to
keep them." He stares for a long moment at the letters, and then says, "if Takeshi himself tells you,
you'll let him go so easily, huh."

He doesn't know what the right answer is here, but Tsunayoshi frowns, a bit bothered by the
question. "It's not a matter of 'easily,' Yamamoto-san," he says, because it's not. It won't be easy.
It'll bother him for years: the question of 'is Yamamoto okay? Is he happy? Did he find someone
who can understand him? Accept him?' Yamamoto fought so hard to come to Tsunayoshi's side, endangering the things that he needs to live happily - his reputation, and the acceptance of the kids in his club. He'd been so anxious about Haru's behavior and how Tsunayoshi felt about it.

Yamamoto is the type that sets his life on the line without hesitation or even thinking for a moment that there might be a different way. He needs someone to look after him if he's determined to be so reckless. It's clear his father's regard isn't enough.

"It's not a matter of it being easy," he says again. "But I don't want Yamamoto-kun to be unhappy, after all. Someone said to me that I might become a tyrant, but - um. No one's happy living under a tyrant, are they? I decided then that holding people against their will is despicable. So - um. I thought, if I let someone go when they want to, and support them in that, then they'll remember it and want to come back from time to time - right?"

If he has to settle for little scraps like that, then certainly Tsunayoshi will settle - if it's that or nothing at all. Any tiny indication of affection can be enough for him, but - ahh: he's like Yamamoto that way. He's a greedy person. More than just working for his sake and trying to achieve his goals, he wants someone embrace not just the all-devouring ember within him, but also the char that's the only thing left of his heart afterwards.

Someday, he wants someone to choose what will make him happiest for his sake.

If Yamamoto's father has a reply for that, it's delayed by Yamamoto showing back up with a tray that has a hot kettle and cups on it. He still has an anxious look about the corner of his face when he appears in the doorway, but seems to relax a little more when he notices the looks on their faces.

"Haha - I wasn't sure which type to choose, so I got some of everything," Yamamoto says, setting the tray down on the table. It's crowded with several canisters of different tea blends - Tsunayoshi stares with no little apprehension. Tea isn't really a drink of choice at his house, outside the cold drinks that can be found in a vending machine. If anyone drinks something hot, it's usually coffee, although Tsunayoshi just normally goes without.

"Ch' - you overeager brat," Yamamoto's father says, rising as far out of seiza as it takes to reach across the table and swat Yamamoto's head.

Yamamoto doesn't quite yelp, but he flinches and grasps at his head, blinking wide eyes even as the rest of his tension evaporates. It was a gentle thing, Tsunayoshi reminds himself, the kind of thing that the baseball team does to one another. Proven a second later when Yamamoto laughs about it, seeming relieved. "Isn't it better to go overboard than under perform?" he asks happily.

Tsunayoshi will never understand the relationship Yamamoto has with his father.

All that is set aside for a moment while the three of them mix up their tea. Tsunayoshi goes for what he's familiar with, which is generic and probably cheap - or as cheap as it can be, coming from a canister. Yamamoto's father goes for something pale and floral and Yamamoto something stronger and black, with citrus notes that tickle Tsunayoshi's nose.

"So," Yamamoto's father says, "Sawada Tsunayoshi. What exactly are your future prospects?"

Tsunayoshi blinks rapidly at him. "Eh?"

The man looks at him calmly, and not with the eyes of a killer, but with the eyes of a father - which is somehow much more terrifying than seeing the hundreds of deaths that Tsunayoshi suffered in Yamamoto's father's mind. "My Takeshi is aiming to become a professional baseball player," he
says bluntly. "But I've also been teaching him how to run a business so he has something more stable to fall back on. How do you plan to support yourself as an adult?"

"Ah-" Although Tsunayoshi himself has realized that he needs to figure something like that out - he hasn't even gotten started! Suddenly being put on the spot like this is making his heart hammer anxiously. "Um - that is - um."

"Pops!" Yamamoto objects. "Come on, play nice!"

"I won't surrender my son to the care of someone else until I'm satisfied," his father says mulishly, scowling at Tsunayoshi and going so far as to cross his arms across his chest. "Well? You've given it some thought, haven't you?"

"Marrying Tsuna was a joke!" his son protests.

*Just what in the world has Yamamoto been telling his dad!*

Panicking now, Tsunayoshi quickly puts his cup of tea on the table before he spills it all over himself, or worse: everyone else. "Um! I - I've given it some thought, of course, but-! Even though I haven't decided yet, I'll do my best and work hard at it! I've noticed myself that I can't provide for Yamamoto-kun yet, but in order to ensure his happiness, I'm willing to do anything-!"

*No, wait! What is he saying himself?!!*

He's not the only one to think so, by the way Yamamoto's head whips around and he stares with a somewhat wild cast to his eyes.

"Well, it can't be helped," Yamamoto's father says gruffly. "From now on, so that you can learn something about becoming a responsible adult, you're to come by TakeSushi and start working for me!"

"Hiee!"

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Chapter End Notes

* Ok but consider this: Shoichi is a vocaloid nerd.

* And Tsunayoshi just keeps getting increasingly stressed out.頑張って!! 綱吉くん!!

* And there it is: Manga-only character Naito Longchamp. I'm personally not that fond of him or his character arc too much, but I really loved the idea of the character? So Here's Naito Longchamp of the Tomaso family!

If you're curious about Tsuyoshi's side of this, consider reading *Shioya's intermission*. It's a sort of 'sidestories' thing. Careful of reading ahead, since there are future spoilers,
though!
Chapter Summary

Yamamoto Takeshi VS Mochida Kensuke, FIGHT!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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Chapter 15: taking time running in place

Whatever it was that Tsunayoshi had expected out of working for old man Yamamoto - or no: Tsuyoshi. The man himself hadn't tolerated 'Yamamoto-san' for very long before he'd said, stiffly, like holding a knife to Tsunayoshi's throat: "If you're really concerned about my Takeshi's happiness, at least call him by his own name."

As badly as Tsunayoshi had stumbled over it the first few times, old man Yamamoto had seemed to be onto something about Takeshi's happiness. And from that first time that they'd really talked, Tsunayoshi had thought that he'd wanted to see Takeshi like that a lot. He's capable of this much, he thinks.

Still, Tsunayoshi gets put to work at TakeSushi. Only old man Yamamoto is allowed to have anything at all to do with food preparation, though. Takeshi occasionally fetches ingredients or tools for his dad, but mostly Takeshi helps by minding the customers or washing the dishes as necessary. With the addition of Tsunayoshi, however, Takeshi becomes solely responsible for the customers and receiving orders and handling the phone.

Meanwhile, Tsunayoshi gets to spend his time sweeping the floor and washing the dishes. It's not really dignified work, Tsunayoshi thinks, which is fine for someone who thought to do something like this for the rest of his life anyway. Actually, it turns out to be hard work, to the point that if Tsunayoshi hadn't already come to the conclusion himself, without old man Yamamoto's interference, he would have decided to try for a better job anyway. That aside, this also seems to make Takeshi happy, so for now Tsunayoshi bends to the work and does it diligently.

Besides, Tsunayoshi likes being where Takeshi is. More than just not getting headaches or nausea no matter what kind of gross thing he ends up having to clean up after, Takeshi's mood is infectious. Haru seems to think so as well as they easily move their after club study sessions to the back of TakeSushi, and then Shioya himself interferes once he finds out: he has Tsunayoshi quit lessons with Hayashi, and then somehow prevents Hideki from becoming a tyrant on Haru's behalf.

Tsunayoshi isn't entirely clear on Shioya's reaction when Tsunayoshi forcibly drags Shoichi into the mix - not to the study sessions themselves, but rather insisting that he come by for at least a light meal - but he's pretty sure that he's gotten the wrong idea about it somehow.

"What kind of strays are you trying to collect, mini-Sawada?" he asks, but Tsunayoshi doesn't bother to disagree: he's only doing it to make Nana happy in the first place. Shoichi isn't the kind that could easily stomach the things that Tsunayoshi gets involved in; it would just be too cruel to involve him if he hasn't asked for it while knowing exactly what it is he would be agreeing to.
Gradually, though, Tsunayoshi dies less and less in Tsuyoshi’s eyes, so that’s something at least.

When Takeshi had said that he spoke with his team about voting for Kyoko, Tsunayoshi had been thankful, but perhaps he’d underestimated the effects of that - not only that the boys in his team would speak with the other athletics teams, who had been chafing under Nerina's cuts, but also the effect of the most popular boy in school throwing in his support behind the most popular girl.

"I said you were too laid back," Nakamoto says reproachfully, having watched Tsunayoshi's reaction in real time. Nakamoto's efforts aren't to be underestimated, either - the campaign that he has almost single-handedly arranged is nothing to easily disregard. Although someone must have realized that Kyoko meant to run against Tomaso Nerina for her position, it's only now that anyone has sat up and paid attention to that, with Kyoko's shining face plastered all over the school to the point that Nerina herself seems to have felt pressured into putting more work in herself.

"Although I feel weird selling pictures of Kyoko for votes," Tsunayoshi says.

Nakamoto gives him a look like he's being overly judgemental or wary. "It's just an incentive," he says flatly.

"And the posters?"

To Tsunayoshi's surprise, Nakamoto flusters. "I worked hard with Hana-san on those!" he snaps, color flushing up his neck and into his cheeks and ears.

There haven't been a lot of reasons for Nakamoto to become embarrassed as long as Tsunayoshi has known him, but he hadn't thought of him as someone who easily becomes such. He usually seems like a rather level headed boy, the fearsome face he's shown from time to time aside. Still - "I don't know that you're Hana-chan's type," Tsunayoshi points out. He's not sure what would be, outside of the fact that it probably looks something like Kyoko. Though not Kyoko herself, or at least, that's not the impression he got.

"It's not like that, either!"

They don't really have the luxury of arguing about it, though, since the sports festival that Nerina has organized for the sake of funding the field trip out into the woods is getting underway. Both of them have already paid for their entries, as little as Tsunayoshi really wants to actually participate - but, well, participation isn't exactly something anyone is being allowed to chose.

Normally, a sporting event would be something like a competition between classes, even as everyone tried their best to show their own skills and abilities off. A lot of people, growing interested in their classmates in a romantic sense, would think of an event like this as a good opportunity to show off their best side, especially since it's an irregular 'extra' event this year.

Tsunayoshi thinks of it as something to keep his head down during. He'd thought that way even before That happened, when he was following Kyoko around the school; there had been no way for him to perform well during something like a Sports Fest, as clumsy as he was, and so trying to embarrass himself as little as possible was the name of the game.

He cares less about embarrassing himself these days, but drawing attention to himself would still be about eleven different kinds of awful, even if it didn't inexplicably make him sick these days. At least with an impromptu event like this, it's less structured than normal. Unexpectedly, people seem to be feeling the pressure of the upcoming election, and almost immediately, Tsunayoshi is able to
see divisions between classmates over who they're choosing to vote for. There are a lot of people who are pretty happy with the status quo - but there are also plenty who aren't. Apparently a free-for-all like this is a good time to try to work those tensions out.

If it were anything other than a middle school, Tsunayoshi's gut instinct is that this kind of friction could easily lead to breaking the whole school.

"But it's a middle school and we're third years," he reasons to himself as he works to avoid falling in with either crowds, "so it doesn't actually matter." Even if the school breaks, Tsunayoshi will be leaving with Takeshi and Kyoya, so it's not his problem, after all.

"Sawada!"

Tsunayoshi jumps. His guard had lowered in the face of the laughing kids having a day off from classes and most of all: completely overlooking him. It's only in classrooms that he has his episodes of nausea and headaches, although that hadn't always been true when he'd been a younger and going through the same thing. Mostly, the others keep their distance these days even though before they used to taunt him.

First because he'd made himself very small and very cramped, more terrified of his own hands than he'd ever been of them. Then because of his place with the Disciplinary Committee.

Now, Tsunayoshi turns, only vaguely aware of how his shoulders have automatically hunched and his hands grip the front of his gym shirt. Mochida hasn't come too close - enough to make himself heard, not so much that any Committee members, were they to see this, would feel moved to step in and defend their territory the way Hoshino had against Saitoh despite not even liking Tsunayoshi.

"Senpai," Tsunayoshi says, and a look of frustrated superiority crosses the boy's face the way it usually does.

Tsunayoshi isn't sure why Mochida Kensuke is approaching him now of all times, unless he's heard about Tsunayoshi's part in the field trip. It isn't as though Tsunayoshi has been following Kyoko, and other than that, Mochida has never once been completely happy with any interaction they've had, despite Tsunayoshi doing as he says every time.

Although, from what he's come to understand, the demand to be called 'senpai' despite being a peer was meant to be humiliating. The problem is that outside of very specific circumstances, Tsunayoshi isn't really sure what 'humiliating' is. It's something that people with pride experience, he thinks.

Normally, Mochida does his own dirty work, but in this case, he glances toward one of the boys with him and gives a pointed nod toward Tsunayoshi. That's a bit interesting, he thinks, even as the boy seizes him by the front of his shirt and drags him a few steps closer to Mochida.

If he makes his underlings do the things he himself won't, they'll lose their trust in him.

"Did you really think I wouldn't notice you hovering around Kyoko again?" Mochida asks, sharp and dark.

He has it all backwards, but - "Weren't you the one that said I could, if I called you senpai?" Tsunayoshi wonders, and the other boy bares his teeth and no less resembles a snarling, snapping dog than usual… no small reason for his reaction to Mochida's voice. As much as Tsunayoshi hates to be yelled at, back then even getting beat up probably wouldn't have had a lasting impact.
And yet, despite that, Tsunayoshi's gut doesn't agree with his reflexive response at all. He's sat down with Yekaterina Miura and Yamamoto Tsuyoshi, and his peer who has trained for years to avoid lasting injury doesn't measure very highly against them. The dichotomy has his mouth running away with him.

"You should watch what you say, dame-Tsuna," Mochida warns. "My generosity isn't endless."

Tsunayoshi stares. Their first year at Nami middle had mostly consisted of Mochida working himself into Ryohei's good graces, he thinks - although it wasn't something he'd really paid attention to at the time. Tsunayoshi hadn't really noticed anything then, going about his day in something of a gray fog, interrupted from time to time when he was shoved around by his peers who kept seeming to expect more out of him but always knew his track record of failing every test and tripping over empty air most of all. The antics of people like Mochida Kensuke, the boy who made himself captain of the Kendo club before the end of his first year, were the stirring of giants far above Tsunayoshi's head.

(The world is drab and dreary and cold, like pressing his palms to windows and breathing on the glass. Like ice but not cold or dry enough to stop it from turning to dirty slush. A dull ache like the socks and mittens hadn't been put on soon enough, and his fingers and toes are leeching the warmth from his blood and sending it back around to freeze his heart out of his chest. Teeth in ice cream. A sharp throb in his skull like he's eaten it too quickly, like it's been shoved down his unwilling throat so he chokes.

Even on the hottest, muggiest days, his joints had ached in perpetual winter, and then there had been Kyoko. A vague notion that if only he could curl his frigid fingers around her, he could take some of that warmth for himself.

Ahh. It's bad.)

Peering around his shirt clenched tight in someone else's fist, the neck of it sawing across his jaw, across his mouth, Tsunayoshi watches Mochida. It isn't so much that his head is throbbing as it is that all the bones in his body do, in time with his calmly beating heart. He feels like a shaken bottle of pop. A bit like various parts of him will explode. Not with bone and blood and gore, but he's just as unlikely to survive it.

"Say," he says, his lips sawing across the collar of his shirt, "what does Kyoko-chan get out of your association anyway?"

Mochida's already furious scowl darkens. "What kind of bullshit are you talking about, you troublesome runt?" he demands, and actually steps forward, grabbing at the shoulder of the minion that has Tsunayoshi by the shirt as if it's supposed to hold him back.

Tsunayoshi peers up at him, ignoring the other boy entirely. Their resolve is kind of pathetic, he thinks, and suddenly it's itching at him: the idea of someone like this clinging onto Kyoko.

"Someone like Mochida-senpai," he says, "naturally benefits from being associated with the idol of Nami Middle. But - come to think of it, how exactly does Kyoko-chan benefit from someone like you? How much longer do you think she's going to tolerate someone who won't even work for her sake?"

It's an awful look on Mochida's face: both equally the desire to rampage and the inability because just as Tsunayoshi knew from the beginning, his words can't be argued against. Mochida Kensuke is plenty popular, between his face and his ability and his position, but - well. His personality is bad. Tsunayoshi isn't the only one to think so, and neither is he the first to say it. "Listen, you-" he snarls, and-
A hand clamps across Tsunayoshi's chest, just under the tent of his shirt in the minion's hand. The abrupt lessening of the pressure inside Tsunayoshi leaves him swooning, so that the laugh that Takeshi gives - loud, sharp, like the distant rattle of gunfire - beats through his bones and blood in counterpoint to the throb of his heart.

"Hey, what's going on over here?" he asks.

Of everyone there, the kendo club member that abruptly releases Tsunayoshi's shirt and steps back seems to have the best grasp on the situation, except that even his isn't very good at it in the way that he doesn't even run away while Takeshi is still assessing it.

Mochida plainly lacks the willingness or intelligence, leading with one foot as he snaps: "Nothing that's any of your business, Yamamoto." He grits his teeth as if instantly regretting his lack of composure, visibly working to wrestle back his temper. "Since when do you ride to the rescue of losers like that runt anyway?" he adds resentfully.

"Now, now," Takeshi says easily, not looking away from Mochida and his underlings for an instant even as he sets Tsunayoshi firmly on his feet and tugs his shirt back into place; his eyes are pale amber and his smile has too many white points of teeth in it. "If it's a rescue, it's a rescue, no matter who it is."

Is Tsunayoshi supposed to be happy about this, he wonders? It's just that at Takeshi's back is a handful of the baseball club members, the ones in their third year at least, and they look unhappy to be here - not in that Mochida has caused them to be here, like any reasonable person would hope they would, but rather that Tsunayoshi has caused them to be here. Unlike the Disciplinary Committee, they're not keen to guard their captain's territory, but they aren't so cowardly that they'd refuse to have that captain's back. Ah, Tsunayoshi wishes that Takeshi had allowed him to handle his own mess in this case since his minion's resentment toward Tsunayoshi will surely increase after this.

Well, and because of that look on Takeshi's face, like something well-fed and feral and a little pissed off. How is it again that Kyoya has become the Demon of Nami Middle when their own boy Idol can make an expression like that?

Well, perhaps it's the kind of thing that Takeshi will only show for his sake, who accepted that dark secret in his heart without flinching.

Of all the people that Takeshi could show it to, Mochida is one of the less deserving of it, and besides: it'll probably trouble Kyoko if something were to happen to him. Fixing a smile onto his face, Tsunayoshi says, "Takeshi, thanks. But we were only talking, really."

Displaying the fine instincts of someone who doesn't actually have any, Mochida says, "see? He says so himself! That's right - we were only talking about how Dame-Tsuna should stop stalking Kyoko."

Ah - that guy is really going to make Tsunayoshi feel bad for Kyoko. Maybe Tsunayoshi has misunderstood somehow? He'd been so sure that Mochida was part of her household, but if Mochida doesn't even know any of her plans and isn't helping her work toward her goals…? Maybe he'd been right to wonder just what it was she got out of the whole situation.

Takeshi just blinks down at Tsunayoshi. "Wow, really, Tsuna? You really are busy to find time for that between working at TakeSushi and the study group and that Yumei kid besides! That's some impressive time management skills - you'll teach me some time, right?"
Tsunayoshi startles, and then flails, waving him off. "No way!" he protests, kneejerk. "As if I really had those kinds of skills! Ask Haru about it if you want to become a one-man time machine!" As packed as Takeshi and Tsunayoshi's schedules are, Haru's is truly ridiculous. Takeshi just laughs at the suggestion, but - ah, thank goodness, that awful edge of his expression has eased up a bit.

"Wait, you two know each other?" Mochida seems faintly stunned by the idea, like his world view has become slightly upended. He crosses his arms and sneers, turning his attention completely toward Takeshi and dismissing the rest of them way too carelessly. "That's pretty cunning of you, Yamamoto, not to acknowledge that in public."

The edges of Takeshi's laugh and smile are still way too sharp, but it's nothing immediately dangerous, at least. "Ah, sorry, I don't really understand what you're trying to say here," he says, cheerfully enough, "after all: Tsuna sits next to me in class in the seat I saved for him, and this right now isn't exactly private, is it?"

It's really not - not the least of which because thanks to the sudden gathering of students, other kids at the fest are starting to pay attention. Takeshi, like an oblivious idiot, gives them a friendly wave like this is one of this games - but it works surprisingly well, since Tsunayoshi hears at least some of them acknowledge him as That Yamamoto Takeshi of the Baseball Club. At least some of them have recognized Tsunayoshi, too, and he sinks down a bit, ducking his head slightly - still: Takeshi's hand on his shoulder keeps the pressure down.

"More the idiot, you," Mochida mutters, controlling his face and tone better; only the heightened sense of pressure enables Tsunayoshi to make out that. "You wasting your time with him. That guy's nothing but trouble. He gets caught and he's one of Hibari's, after all."

There's a strange metallic tang in Tsunayoshi's mouth and nose. Only it's not strange at all, except that he shouldn't be smelling it now of all times, but: 'get caught?' Mochida has asked that once before. It's not uncommon. A lot of kids of Tsunayoshi's caliber get caught from time to time, although usually afterwards they don't come back to school. They must not have something strange and awful happen inside them, or take guns in hand, he thinks. They aren't like him. They don't have something inside them that had almost been snuffed out until someone accidentally breathed on it and so it began to smolder again.

(Your instincts are quite terrifying, you know?)

"I don't mind any of that," Takeshi says but like: I'd like to see them try that again. "I knew all of that old history before now - that's why, really."

"So you're taking pity on some loser, then," he says, unimpressed. Displaying the fine instincts of someone who can't even tell that Tsunayoshi is no one he should want to fight, let alone Takeshi, he says: "But associating with that will only trash your image, Yamamoto. He's dead weight. The stench will rub off on you."

The hair on the back on Tsunayoshi's neck stands on end, and without thinking about it, he grabs onto the side of Takeshi's shirt. There's no real visible change to Takeshi's expression - the wide open eyes or the smile on his face. If anything, his posture has loosened - but his feet are set. There's some strange gleam in his eyes past the golden color the sunlight has struck in them, although Tsunayoshi can't quite see it clearly yet.

"Now, now," Takeshi says calmly, staring down Mochida, "That's a really funny thing to say! Hey - you're the kendo club's captain, right?" He actually pauses, cocking his head as if he's not entirely sure of it, but doesn't wait for Mochida to do more than register that and bristle. "Let's make a duel out of it!"
"A duel," Tsunayoshi blurts, shocked, but one of Takeshi's own minion's protest is much louder than that when he says, "Yamamoto!" as if that will change or clarify anything.

Takeshi waves him off without even looking, a happy little curl to his mouth like something with long, sharp teeth licking its chops. "It's fine! We'll make it official and everything. What do you say - Mochida, wasn't it? If you win, I'll accept your claims - but if I win, then it's yubitsume for you!"

It's like someone's fired a gun almost: a sudden hush goes through not just the two clubs face each other, but also the surrounding crowd. It's impossible to miss how many of them grow pale in response to that word. It's nothing to kid around with, Tsunayoshi thinks, consider just who around town bares the reminder of it.

Yanking on the end of Takeshi's shirt, Tsunayoshi protests. "Yu-yubitsume! Takeshi, you can't hold a middle schooler to something like that! We're not yakuza!"

"Haha! No? Oh, alright then," Takeshi says, as if he's just suggested such a mild penalty as streaking or something and got shot down. Even his club members are looking a little alarmed and wary. "Then I guess something more like you acknowledging Tsuna as your oyabun will work just fine!"

"I just said we're not yakuza!"

And in any case, no one in their right mind would consider Tsunayoshi an oyabun! Even if he is the head of household, it's not because he's anyone's father figure! And they're not criminals anyway!

Well, actually -

"Fine," Mochida grits through his teeth; he'd never once responded to the threat of yubitsume, if anything looking offended. "I'll accept your terms. There's no way I'm getting adopted into anyone's family."

"As if I'd adopt you anyway!" Tsunayoshi snaps back, his frustration peaking. A guy like Mochida doesn't have the rights to his own life, or at least Tsunayoshi hadn't thought so given that he was supposed to belong to Kyoko's household. Gambling himself away like this without her permission is the ultimate disrespect. Even if she's not a tyrant, or at least Tsunayoshi doesn't think she is, this is just unbearable.

Mochida doesn't even glance his way, spinning neatly on his heel and marching toward the organizational area of the fest. Takeshi moves to follow, and Tsunayoshi swiftly falls in beside him, seething a little bit.

"Takeshi," he says, "what are you even doing? There's no reason to get into a duel with Mochida over something like this!"

Takeshi glances down at him, and though his steps are smooth and dangerous, his brow buckles and the laugh he gives is sheepish. "Ah, sorry," he says, "although I made it sound like I was doing it for your sake, I guess my honor took an insult I'll need to satisfy it for."

That honestly doesn't bother Tsunayoshi at all, but "Why? Does it bother you that much?" His face feels pinched. "You said you knew already that my reputation is bad - I'm Dame-Tsuna, after all."

"Haha - that nickname has always been the worst," Takeshi says, looking forward to where Mochida walks ahead of them. His eyes are sharp, his pacing long and patient: something measuring weakness and making easy plans to nip forward and rip flesh open with a swift snap of
That's something that Tsunayoshi hadn't thought about, despite being aware of how much Takeshi depended on his good reputation. Mochida isn't altogether wrong about that - associating with scum like Tsunayoshi would definitely mar Takeshi's reputation in certain circles. Not once had Takeshi brought it up, but - ah. It's a problem, isn't it? A street sweeper or NEET won't be worthy of his household's attentions, and neither can he relax and let Dame-Tsuna be his reputation, either.

After all, if they want to be by his side, he should do everything necessary to make it possible, shouldn't he? Right. If Tsunayoshi doesn't want to be left alone, then he should become someone successful, with a good reputation.

It's too bad that judging by the look on Takeshi's face, and the way that he's moving, that Tsunayoshi will have a great deal to make up to Kyoko over this incident. She seems like the idea type to help him figure out how to become known publicly as someone worthy of Takeshi's time. He'll owe her some favors for this that would make asking for anything more a bit awkward.

"I guess," he says to Takeshi, because Mochida's attitude isn't unfamiliar to him so it's hard to know if it qualified as 'too much,' "but isn't challenging the kendo captain to a duel a bit much itself?"

"Maybe?" Takeshi looks a bit surprised by the idea, wondering at it. "I just thought that I would have to speak a language he'd understand to get my point across, that's all."

"If you say so." It would be nice if everything were that easy, but this is kind of like bullying, isn't it? And Tsunayoshi himself can say that it doesn't do much for understanding. "But Mochida isn't something you can treat like a baseball, you know."

"Oh! Good point," Takeshi says, and it's honestly difficult to tell if he means it or if it's just another one of his jokes.

Tsunayoshi hangs back while Mochida and Takeshi pitch the idea to Tomaso Nerina, only partially as a sign of his disapproval with the whole ridiculous situation. It's not something that could possibly end well - there's a reason why Mochida made captain in his first year, and Takeshi might be Nami's star player, but will he really understand the rules of Kendo? It won't make Tsunayoshi happy for him to get beaten in this case, even if he has no intention of having Mochida recognize him as any kind of boss; more importantly, he won't know how to address Takeshi's loss.

And - looking at the Kendo club members, who are clearly conspiring without words - Takeshi will be at a handicap. He might not be anyone that Tsunayoshi wants to fight, but don't duels rely on things like points and flags? There's no way for Takeshi to avoid killing Mochida and win at the same time.

Anyway, this fest is to help pay for the field trip, there's no way Nerina will approve it.

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Tomaso Nerina not only approves it, she reserves the gym building and sells tickets. Tomaso Nerina is the worst.

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Working at TakeSushi doesn't actually give Tsunayoshi any more pocket money than usual, as Tsunayoshi hasn't turned 15 yet and so by law can't actually receive wages for the work he does. It
doesn't really matter to him, since the money isn't why he's doing the work in the first place. Still, he has enough allowance that he ends up spending it on a ticket to the duel, since there's no way he's tolerating Takeshi doing any of this without him there to see it. Even if it's not for his sake, he should at least bare witness, since he caused the problem in the first place.

Of course, Takeshi and Mochida being who they are, the gym has become packed. Takeshi is one of the Idols of the school and Mochida is popular in his own way, not just for being the kendo club's excellent captain. Or Tsunayoshi surmises that he's 'excellent' - surely the club wouldn't have just rolled over for him when there are competitions to worry about? He hasn't exactly been paying attention, but he's pretty sure they're still winning most of them.

Of course, that might equally just be the fact that Mochida's minions have been sabotaging the competitors.

"It's rough that Yamamoto is such a giant," one of them says as they dig out the armor. "He won't fit the usual armor we use for know-nothings."

"Yeah, but it's fine, isn't it? We have this gear. It's only slightly off balance, but there's no way some baseball geek will keep his posture balanced in this."

"Forget his posture," the minion who had grabbed Tsunayoshi by the shirt says as they exit the equipment room, carrying the clothing and gear that they clearly meant for Takeshi to use during the match, "there's no way he'll even keep his composure. Yamamoto hams it up way too much. No matter who we use as a referee, there's no way his flag will get raised."

Tsunayoshi, lurking outside the equipment room as his gut had goaded him to since catching that speaking look, is somewhat grateful that he's mostly beneath notice. There's really not a lot of ways for him to hide, since it's not as if Mochida's underclassmen are the only club members who like to cheat. Certain clubs have a long and celebrated history of clever sabotage, and take pride in getting away with ridiculous things so long as they aren't caught.

Whatever it is about Tsunayoshi that means that others can't leave him alone and frequently bully him about it - it also eventually, slowly, taught him the skill of being so beneath notice that standing in the middle of an empty hallway, he often manages to be overlooked. It's a bit like considering himself to be a pane of glass, or something unremarkable like a trashcan or a water fountain. He'd wondered on an off in his first year if something like what he does could really be considered stalking if he wasn't being necessarily sneaky about it, but - ah, probably.

Ahh - what should he do, though? He could easily attack these guys from behind, but can he find replacement gear in time? And in order to keep them down long enough to pursue doing so, and getting Takeshi suited up for his match - Tsunayoshi isn't strong enough to do it safely. He can't just run around hitting people hard enough on the head that they don't get up and then try to tell Takeshi that he can't, after all. What should he do? What can he do?

He doesn't want to become Mochida's oyabun or anything like that, but neither does he want Takeshi to lose for such pathetic, underhanded reasons.

Unfortunately, Tsunayoshi is paralyzed by indecision in the split second during which he could have interfered: the three boys are stepping into the room where Takeshi is stripping out of his sports fest clothing. It's not like it's the first time that Tsunayoshi has been around people who are changing from their school clothes into their PE gear, and Takeshi takes little special notice of them.

"Here you are, Yamamoto-kun," the one that called him a baseball geek says, holding out the
"Thanks," he says, reaching for them. Rather than expecting them to wait on him hand and foot, Takeshi tosses the clothing to hang on his shoulder and reaches for the armor next. Tsunayoshi bites his lip and frowns, fidgeting unhappily - maybe he should go and sabotage Mochida's gear, see how he likes it - but there's an infinitesimal hesitation in Takeshi's movements when he accepts the weight of the gear. "Ah," Takeshi says, and only that.

"Maybe it's a bit weird for a guy that plays baseball," the minion that had held Tsunayoshi by the shirt says. "But even if you're only used to having a helmet, playing with swords is dangerous, you know."

"Haha - well, maybe I didn't think that part through," Takeshi says with a smile. "But you're right, after all. Thanks, but - I don't need this." And having said that, he holds the armor back out at them.

No one takes it back for a second, more or less gaping incredulously at him. Tsunayoshi wants to protest, because surely even off balanced armor is better than no armor, but -

"Are you serious? Yamamoto, don't you understand how a duel even works? You'll be hitting each other with swords!"

"Well, it's not a metal one that will cut after all," he says reassuringly, even as he takes the clothing off his shoulder and begins to dress. "It's fine! Mochida won't mind, right?"

No one can properly argue with that, the kendo members only too aware of what they'd been trying to do.

"Well, he won't go easy on you just because you've refuse the gear," one of them blusters a bit, even as they seem to decide that this is an acceptable alternative to their original plans.

"Sure! I'm fine with that. I won't, either," Takeshi agrees easily.

The one that held Tsunayoshi up by his shirt laughs, and pats Takeshi on the shoulder. Takeshi looks at him like something with too many teeth and a wide, yawning mouth just searching for something small and helpless to shove down it. Not a single one of the boys seem to recognize his expression as anything of concern.

It's only as they leave that Takeshi seems to realize that Tsunayoshi himself is there, brightening a bit. "Oh, Tsuna!" he says. He carries the bokken they handed over in one careless hand. Tsunayoshi has seen him treat baseball bats he's snapped in half on accident with more respect.

"What are you doing back here? Did come to see the fight?"

"As if I wouldn't," Tsunayoshi says, exasperated. "It's my fault this is all happening." Uncomfortably averting his eyes, he says, "I thought those guys might be up to something, so I followed them, too."

"Oh, yeah," Takeshi agrees blithely, lifting the bokken a bit. "That gear was all off balance and this sword is a bit crummy, but - well, it's not like I was planning on holding back in the first place."

"Even the sword has been sabotaged?" he yelps.

Takeshi blinks, tilting his head. "No? It's just bad. But it's for school kids, so maybe quality ones weren't in the budget. Sometimes the bats in my club are like that, too - so I usually try to break them during practice to get them replaced. It can't be helped if it snaps when I swing at a ball, right?"
Why does Tsunayoshi even bother feeling surprised by the people who choose to be around him anymore? It's obvious from that alone that there's no way they can possibly be normal, so Takeshi knowing immediately somehow that the kendo club members were trying to give him bad gear is well within the realms of rationality - no, it really isn't!

"How is it you can possibly know instantly that the gear was sabotaged?" Tsunayoshi demands.

Takeshi looks a little taken aback. "Well, if it's sabotaged, then that explains that," he says. "I thought it was a bit funny just to be amateur gear. Oh - um. This is a bit embarrassing." He gives Tsunayoshi a sheepish look that fits strangely on his face, like some massive dog with snarling teeth suddenly trying to look cute and beg for scraps. "It's not very sporting, but - well, in the end, I never joined the kendo club because finding anyone that could give me a challenge was difficult? I actually have to work hard at baseball to be good, which is why I went with that instead. Haha - it's a bit unfair since Pops is considered a master of kenjutsu, you know?"

Ah - hadn't Takeshi himself said something about 'blades' when talking about learning from his father? All this time, Tsunayoshi had just overlooked those comments since he'd only thought of a dojo as something that involved kicks and strikes with a fist. He wonders how he could have mistaken it that way for a second, given old man Yamamoto and Takeshi's temperament and history; Takeshi even now looks like he was born to wear the combination of a gi and hakama, although Tsunayoshi doubts that any samurai from earlier eras would ever look so much like someone eagerly awaiting praise all the time.

Takeshi sure is unexpectedly cunning.

"Still," Tsunayoshi says fretfully. "Even if it's fighting with bokken and not a sword with an edge - not wearing any armor at all is a bit…"

Takeshi laughs. "It's fine! The way Pops taught me the art, we don't use armor anyway. There's a way to cut that goes through even that much, so Pops said it's better never to develop a reflex of trying to depend on it, just in case. A strike to kill will kill no matter what."

No wonder Takeshi thoughtlessly puts his life on the line without any consideration! Of course the regard of the father that taught him that way of think won't be enough to stop him!

"At least try not to die! Even if it's against someone you think of as second-rate, don't let your guard down for even an instant!" Tsunayoshi takes a couple of breaths to steady himself after his outburst - Mochida's resolve is weak and so he's unlikely to be any kind of threat, he thought so himself, but the idea of Takeshi going against Mochida with that kind of resolve carries unpleasant echoes of things that he prefers not to think about. He clutches at the front of his shirt and sighs. "If at all possible," he says, "please don't let anything happen to yourself that you wouldn't let happen to one of your club members." Then, going off his gut instincts, says, "Or even me."

When Tsunayoshi looks to see with how much sincerity Takeshi is willing to meet that, he's instead greeted with Takeshi looking bright eyed and flushed.

"Okay, Tsuna," Takeshi says, looking at him as if he's hung the moon, the sun, and the stars. "Got it! My body belongs to you."

Wait-! What kind of weird thing did he just say?!

Before Tsunayoshi can even begin to gather his scattered and flustered thoughts together, Takeshi - filled with renewed purpose - strides out of the room, his hand clenched with tight determination around the handle of the bokken that he rests against his shoulder. Tsunayoshi scurries after him,
but he has to jog to catch up and then keep up with Takeshi's long, purposeful stride. It's too awkward to confront Takeshi about whatever it was he just said in front of witnesses, so Tsunayoshi fretfully just says, "be careful."

"Leave it to me," Takeshi says without looking back, striding toward the center of the gym where Mochida already stood with three referees: one of his own members, one a council member likely appointed by Tomaso since she's standing near the edge of the, the third -

"What are you doing here," Tsunayoshi demands.

Hoshino looks down his nose at him, a fairly easy feat given that he's slowly growing into something of a giant himself; the angle is particularly bad for the scars on his face. "You didn't think for one instant that the Committee hasn't been aware of your actions, did you?" he says flatly.

"Honestly, I didn't consider the Committee at all," Tsunayoshi shoots back resentfully. The Committee member that holds the third set of kendo flags isn't anyone that Tsunayoshi is immediately familiar with, not the way he is with Hoshino or Nakamoto, but he recognizes the boy as being one of the few that he'd considered a good person aside from their behavioral problems.

"And that's why you're a shortsighted little idiot who hides important secrets from your own friends," Hoshino surmises bluntly, but Tsunayoshi only cuts him a look because he learned his lesson the first time, hadn't he? He's not keeping secrets anymore. Other than That incident, but he can't quite release the anxiety that if his household ever found out exactly what kind of scum he was-

(If they want to be by his side, he should make that possible, even if it entails cutting out the pieces of him that are undesirable. 'Becoming capable of anything' is too much a part of him to be removed even surgically, but - ahh.)

It seemed that despite the efforts of the kendo club, it would be a more or less fair match - or as much as one can be with Takeshi out there dressed only in cloth with no armor. Mochida jeers about it loudly, but Takeshi is completely submerged in his usual antics. If not for the way his feet are set and the looseness of his posture - Shioya had worked hard to instill that same kind of casual readiness in Tsunayoshi, considering that tells were such an important part of boxing - there would be no sign at all that he was taking any part of this seriously.

Takeshi, much like Haru, has a secret heart that he prefers not to share, even though he's allowed Tsunayoshi to see glimpses of it from time to time. Though, isn't Tsunayoshi a bit like that, too?

"Tsuna-kun," a voice at his elbow says, and he turns to see a different set of amber eyes gazing at him, "excuse me, but do you know what this is about?"

Tsunayoshi flinches back, but thankfully manages to swallow down the distressed noise that wants to come out; with Takeshi in the mood he's in, the last thing Tsunayoshi wants is to agitate him any further. "Kyoko-chan," he says, and then for safety's sake: "Hana-chan." He could hardly expect either of them to easily overlook something like this, especially given that it's Mochida. "Sorry, it's my fault. Takeshi is a bit - well."

"Yamamoto-kun, huh," Kyoko echoes, pressing her finger to her lip momentarily as she glances out where the match is being set up in the middle of the gym. Then she sighs heavily, brow pinching. "What should I do? It seems like everyone is set on making trouble for you."

"Well, no one said you had to tolerate that monkey," Hana points out, glowering at the boy in question.
"No, but I couldn't exactly leave him alone either," she points out, which is such a familiar sentiment that Tsunayoshi smiles a bit.

"Sorry, but, in this case I think it's my friends making trouble for you," he says. "I can handle senpai myself, but Takeshi got involved. Um." He gazes out the match as Mochida and Takeshi moved into position, Mochida in protective gear and Takeshi only in cloth, crouching and waiting for the sign to begin. Takeshi still has a pleasant smile plastered onto his face, but his eyes are overly bright and alert. Behind the wire mask, Mochida's face is savage.

Tsunayoshi returns his attention to the two girls at his side, and apologetically adds, "Sorry, I did my best to convince Takeshi to let Mochida leave alive, but…"

Hana has enough time to give him a strange look before the match begins. Almost immediately, all trace of lightheartedness vanish from Takeshi, and in the next instant, the referees are calling flags and Tsunayoshi is left wondering why he ever thought that Takeshi wouldn't carry a blade in his hand as if it's a natural extension of himself. There's no trace of the baseball geek now: while never a clumsy or awkward person to begin with, no one could possibly ask for more skill or poise from anyone with a sword in hand.

Hana lets out a startled, breathless "oh," and Kyoko hums with concern as the two swordsmen step apart, Takeshi's bokken having hit the point along Mochida's ribs while easily avoiding the slash Mochida had made for his wrists. Although the kendo club member stubbornly refuses to signal either way, both the council and committee referee easily raise Takeshi's white flag.

But for Takeshi, the rest of them may as well not even exist. His force is intense and sure and didn't waver from one instant from his opponent, despite the shocked and excited shrieks from the surrounding students. This is another part of the picture that Tsunayoshi had seen the edges of - the broad strokes of - but hadn't been able to make out. You have to take that seriously or someone could die, Takeshi had said, with full knowledge and understanding of 'death' in his eyes and in his words.

The understanding that Takeshi is a naturally born murderer, raised with his instincts honed to a fine edge, finally blooms completely. If anyone could understand That thing that Tsunayoshi had done, it would be Takeshi, wouldn't it?

Tsunayoshi is still a child in many ways. He'll have to do better for the sake of the people he's looking after.

Takeshi and Mochida meet in the middle again, and the second round is over just as fast as the first: both step and shout, but Mochida's swing at Takeshi's ribs is too slow compared to the sharp strike that Takeshi lands directly on the front of his head. As two white flags go up while they step apart, the boiling fury that Mochida feels is almost tangible. The change in the atmosphere that happens is strange - instead of holding their breath for the next round, everyone begins to chatter excitably.

Kyoko seems to sense Tsunayoshi's confusion, sighing with a bit of regret: "the rounds only go to three. Yamamoto-kun getting two points already means that the match is called in his favor. It can't even be disputed over his composure, since it was perfect the entire time."

"A surprising upset with it being the baseball monkey," Hana says, sounding reluctantly impressed.

Tsunayoshi only half hears them, attention still focused on the two boys at the center of the gym, because Mochida's resolve is weak, but in this moment of humiliated rage - "Takeshi!"
He's almost not fast enough. Only at the last second does Takeshi pull the jab he'd aimed at Mochida's throat, blinking just the once as he does so, and then Mochida's bokken strikes at his shoulder, narrowly missing the blow he'd aimed at Takeshi's head. Although it's strong enough to almost stagger Takeshi, he doesn't flinch under the strike, and his grip on his bokken remains tight and secure.

Everything has gone strangely glassy and sharp. Tsunayoshi's palms and fingertips prickle painfully, as if he's stuck them directly from frozen winter air into hot water to wash them. His head throbs the same. His body throbs, and in the time it takes his heart to beat and breath to enter his lungs, the knowledge that's been there every waking second of everyday gains relevance, as Tsunayoshi knows how -

What he knows doesn't matter, though, as the Committee referee is suddenly at Mochida's throat, holding the flag like a knife. Hoshino is striding forward with a thunderous look on his brow and something far more feral in his stride than Takeshi has dreamed of being. "Kensuke!" Kyoko says sharply, with such a disappointed tone of rebuke that it cuts through the startled noise the crowd makes.

At his side, Hana's hand clamps down on Tsunayoshi's shoulder. "Don't even think about it," she says sharply.

Some kind of awful thing shakes through him, a placid lake disturbed by something large and heavy falling into it. Hana's resolve is impressive, and he doesn't want to fight her, but there are certain things he can't bring himself to tolerate and she stands next to him with all her weak spots wide open. He looks up at her, and she clenches her jaw against whatever it is she sees in his face, her lips pinching together as white as her skin.

"Everyone already has everything under control," she tells him, and it's more or less true when he looks. Kyoko has taken over Mochida by his elbow, and at least three more committee members have joined the two already on the floor, standing between Mochida and Takeshi, arms crossed and faces forbidding. Takeshi has relaxed out of his swordsman's poise, one hand rubbing fretfully at his injured shoulder, and a few of his closest friends from his club have already arrived at his side, one already with an ice pack in hand and the other scowling furiously at the kendo captain.

Although he knows better than to think so, some part of him still puzzles over the evidence that no one has even thought to consider Tsunayoshi's part in it all. It's just - he already knew the manner in which he was going to - ahh, but no. It's bad. He can't allow himself to think things like that.

He should understand the situation better before deciding what kind of fate that Mochida will play for this. And Tomaso Nerina, for allowing it in the first place. There's so much sulfur and smoke filling his chest that he should be choking on it, except that to something like him, breathing poison and ash comes naturally; the wildly flaring embers that are scattering like a whirlwind inside his lungs and heart and head don't even hurt him, even as he chars and hallows and those embers ignite and devour and consume.

The painful tingling in his palms should be so lucky as to become numbed -

"Don't you have something like this backwards?" the boy with milkspill hair wonders, standing on the side of Tsunayoshi opposite Hana. "Again and again and again. Someone like us should be special, but you always seem to think that care should go in the opposite direction. It's enough to make me wish for a will less self-serving, you know."

Tsunayoshi should have realized before that no one realizes that he's here - the boy with long tangles of uncared for hair. There is sulfur and ash in Tsunayoshi's lungs and embers burning
through his heart, and he looks at the young teenager standing next to him in a hospital gown and bare feet and bandages wrapped around thin wrists with so many needle marks in them. For once, the boy seems to see Tsunayoshi looking back at him, and he smiles something broken and sharp.

"Ah - I guess Nayo-tan can't help it, though," he sighs. "That's just the way people like us are. We collect people around us, and then? Well, then we fear to lose the things we have, don't we? And when it comes to losing things-"

His pale eyes lose focus for a moment, flittering back and forth, reading distant text: billboards and road signs and maps.

"Well, we have to protect them, you see," he says, and looks sharply at Tsunayoshi. "Do you see?"

It's a foolish thing to ask someone whose gut instinct upon watching some guy knock his mother to the ground was the immediate murder of that man and his cohorts, isn't it? And just now, what was he thinking in the first place? Crippling Hana and then? What he was planning to do in retribution. By this time, Tsunayoshi well understands the art of protecting things. It's protecting them and keeping them at the same time that's the difficult part - it's acting on their behalf without overstepping and making them feel pressured. Terrorizing their foes without terrorizing them.

If they can't speak their hearts plainly to him without fear, then they're not being protected, are they?

The laugh that breaks out of the boy standings next to him sounds like things falling off shelves in a distant basement. "People raised into it understand it less well than you do," he says, sharp and snapping and brittle. "There just isn't any competition to that blessed bloodline of yours - ah. Although it's so misfortunate, isn't it? Or otherwise that blessed bloodline would cherish you instead of leaving you abandoned to be picked up by any hand that is kind enough." He grins. His teeth are sharp and white and strangely jagged, as if they've never been used to bite down on anything even once.

"And what about you?" Tsunayoshi asks him, and they aren't boys standing in a gym together anymore, are they? "What about your bloodline?"

What Tsunayoshi is truly asking must be transparent to the young man standing next to him, because there's something like a terrible fury on his face, and also a great loneliness, and also -

But that child has run away again, as usual. It must be difficult to visit, in various ways, Tsunayoshi thinks, and then he twitches and blinks as his surroundings come back into clarity. Over his shoulder, opposite the one held by Hana, Kyoya stands up against the wall near the door with his hands loose and empty at his sides, sharp eyes dark as he meets Tsunayoshi's with nothing more than mild curiosity. The sulfur and ash, unable to escape, begins to suffocate the searing embers inside Tsunayoshi's heart, because - ah, isn't that right? He had been relieved at one time at the idea that someone would kill him if it came to that.

He forgot for an instant that he had ever wanted something like that.

Even at this distance, he can see Kyoya click his tongue with dismissal, not irritable but mostly bored. The crowding must have drawn him here, Tsunayoshi thinks, but he's not scattering anyone; it's like he doesn't have time for it, or otherwise no longer has an inclination toward such childish pursuits. Tsunayoshi's eyes linger on his hanging fingertips, stained with ink, and where under Kyoya's jacket, the tonfa hang unused and ignored. His hands flex with something like sympathy, prickling and aching still.
Honestly, he's a little disappointed to see Kyoya's back, but he won't gain anything by chasing after him, will he? If there's no time or interest for it, then he'll just be a bother. Come to think of it, had Kyoya ever before this year truly have the patience to apply himself to so much paperwork? It certainly seemed to Tsunayoshi that it had always been Kusakabe's job, taking care of the 'club' aspect of the Disciplinary Committee - although the Committee isn't really a 'club' per se. And now, if rumor is to be believed, Kyoya has been applying himself in difficult ways for Tsunayoshi's sake despite not showing a great deal of interest in seeking him out.

But if he learned anything from meeting with Saitoh again, it's that just because people don't seek him out doesn't mean that they don't linger on their memory of him or aren't happy to see him again.

'Happy' isn't how he'd describe the line of Kyoya's back as he pushes out of the gym doors.

Hana removes the hand from his shoulder, huffing. "It's just like that monkey to hover around in the background," she says, crossing her arms over her chest and watching after Kyoya. "But I guess if anyone could stop you from doing something completely boneheaded, it would be him." She looks down at Tsunayoshi then, mistrustful.

Although the embers have burnt themselves out from their own smoke, it doesn't seem likely that Hana will quickly forget whatever it was she saw on his face. Tsunayoshi guesses that she isn't what old man Yamamoto or Shioya would call 'unable to see what's in front of their face.'

Although she hadn't noticed his lapse of attention before he noticed Kyoya. Somehow, he expects that, as well. It's not surprising at all. Why would she have? After all, she isn't -

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No, the problem doesn't lay with Hana at all, does it?

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Chapter End Notes

Mochida: Yamamoto, as one ten to another -
Takeshi: haha! Actually, I'm an eleven, and I'm not interested in listening to you.

* Shoichi is not Tsunayoshi's Sun, even if Shioya has assumed so. Since Tsunayoshi can't really properly bond with his Guardians thanks to the seal, it's not like anyone would be able to tell the different anyway.

* I think Mochida Kensuke was meant to be Ryohei's peer (and thus Tsuna's Senpai), because for some reason guys in high school normally date downward when it comes to girls? But in this AU, Tsunayoshi, Kyoko, and Mochida are all agemates.

* While Mochida Kensuke is the kind of guy a bit separated from any retired assassins or mafiosi by a few generations, the Mochida family is still sizable in yakuza circles so he comes face-to-face with people with no compunctions all the time. It's why he fails
to pick up on the fact that he should stop poking Takeshi. After all, Takeshi is an
airheaded baseball idiot - that's not even a properly competitive sports club!! As I said,
someone like Mochida has no instincts.

* There's also a reminder that hostage-taking is a honorable Namimori tradition dating
back centuries lmao.

* Takeshi really was serious about the yubitsume, but he's an kind of amoral guy who
just got his morality chain yanked, so. Although using Tsunayoshi as a morality chain
is like the blind leading the blind lmao. Tsunayoshi! What were you just thinking
toward Hana just now?!

Yubitsume, also said 'yubi o tobasu' or 'finger flying' is the yakuza/bōryokudan
practice of chopping off parts of your littlest finger to atone for offenses. It's especially
bad for kendo users, since the little finger is important for gripping the sword. Oyabun
is literally 'foster parent' which accounts for Mochida's mention about being adopted.
Chapter Summary

the households of Kyoko and Tsunayoshi meet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16 : a house of cards

It doesn't happen for a while yet, but Tsunayoshi could hardly forget about the thoughts and concerns he's had. After some time, he'll approach Saitoh, and he'll approach Shoichi, and he'll approach Yekaterina the next time she comes back to Namimori, and he'll ask those people: what kind of place is the world outside Namimori? Who are the people that live there? What are they like?

And the answers will vary a bit. All of those people are very different from one another, after all, and Shoichi will think that for the most part, the people outside Namimori are a lot like the people inside it. There are good kinds and there are bad kinds, and it depends on the person themselves which that'll be. And Saitoh will say that there are a lot less evil people outside of Namimori than inside it. He'll say that he's a bit sad that he won't have Tsunayoshi around to help him decide, but that he'll do his best to live on his own from now on. He'll ask Tsunayoshi to please keep in touch, and to depend on him as his eyes and ears until Tsunayoshi himself can come and experience the outside world for himself.

And Yekaterina will tell him that the world is full of monsters much worse than anything that Namimori has to offer.

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All of them more or less speak the truth, or at least their own truth, and - remembering Yekaterina who took him aside and put a pie spatula to his throat and then eventually accepted him as a more or less harmless child: Tsunayoshi knows what he comes to believe for himself.

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Kyoko isn't the type to let things rest, so it's not long after that ill fated kendo match at school that Tsunayoshi, Haru, and Takeshi take off after school to meet with the others at the Sasagawa residence. Of course, Haru not having been involved in any of the excitement has left her a bit fretful over the whole matter.

"It's not that big of a deal," Takeshi says, waving Haru off.

"But-" she says, and bites her lip unhappily.

It's a big deal, although maybe not for the reasons that Haru thinks. The sling makes it look a lot worse than it is - it's just there to support the weight of his arm and keep it from straining his
bruised shoulder further. Nothing broken, according to the nurse and old man Yamamoto as well; it's only deep muscle bruising, but even if Takeshi keeps a brave face up, it's still pretty painful and nothing that anyone wants aggravated by straining it unnecessarily.

Given what time of year it is, Tsunayoshi will do his best to remain out of sight of Takeshi's baseball friends for the time being, although he doubts he'll remain 'out of mind' no matter what.

"It's a bit of a downer, not being able to play," Takeshi adds after a moment, a bit helplessly, as if he's sensed the direction of Tsunayoshi's thoughts, "but everyone understands. I don't regret getting this injury anyway, so don't worry about it."

Tsunayoshi wants to protest loudly about the part where 'everyone understands' but he's not really in the mood to holler and scream in the streets given the serious nature of their trip. Anyway, old man Yamamoto seemed to understand the situation more or less, and didn't hold it against Tsunayoshi, which was one of Tsunayoshi's main concerns once the matter of how serious the injury was got resolved.

Speaking of, Haru turns to Tsunayoshi with a scowl. It's by no means anywhere near as serious as the ones she's aimed at their enemies, but it's a bit unpleasant. "It's pretty careless of you, putting Takeshi-san in that position," she says unhappily.

"Please don't yell at me about it," he sighs, as it's not the first time she's brought it up. "You should know that I'm mad at myself, too."

"Now, now, I'm a warrior after all - or something like that," Takeshi says. "Even if it's the body that Tsuna asked me to take care with, sometimes I have to put it on the line and do dangerous things with it!"

"No one is arguing with that," Tsunayoshi says, cutting a glance at Haru when she looks like she might try; as if she hasn't been a hundred times more dangerous with her own on the streets with him and the Disciplinary Committee! Unlike those thugs on the street, Mochida really was trained not to cause serious injury, even to an idiot who refuses to wear armor! "But please be a bit more considerate about the situation and everyone's feelings. Even your honor can't be worth your body, you know?"

They both look at him a bit strangely, but it's Haru who scowls and says: "a body without honor is just a beast!"

"Well, if you're saying that it would make me like Kyoya-senpai, I don't have a problem with that," he says bluntly, just to see Haru fluster. She sure has strange reactions to Kyoya, even now. She should really decide if she wants to fight him or make him her knight, honestly.

Although, Tsunayoshi supposes that a knight can be used for fighting, too.

"That-! Tsunayoshi-san could never reach the same level as that shaggy beast," she protests a little shrilly, flushing, and Takeshi laughs.

Looking at Tsunayoshi, Takeshi says, "I didn't know you were close enough to be that casual when talking about him. Did the two of you get closer somehow when I wasn't paying attention?"

For the first time, it occurs to him to wonder if Takeshi is jealous somehow, since it took a request from his father before Tsunayoshi got comfortable enough to use his first name, but there doesn't seem to be any trace of it anywhere in his behavior. For a kid doing his best to present a certain kind of persona to the school, Takeshi is unexpectedly transparent in some ways; Tsunayoshi is
just glad that Takeshi seems to consider his friendship with Tsunayoshi to be a separate matter from everyone else's.

"Not really," he admits sheepishly. "I expect to get bitten to death when he hears about it, but after doing some thinking, I thought to myself that associating Kyoya with his family seemed a bit…"

"What do you mean?" Haru asks, eyes wide. "The Hibari family is well known and widely respected, isn't it?"

"I wonder," he says uncomfortably. "No - nevermind, it was just something I was thinking about, that's all."

But rather than let it go immediately, the way he would have preferred, Takeshi and Haru exchange looks. Takeshi's expression twists into a concerned look, despite the smile on his face. "I hate to think of something that could be bothering Hibari that even with the Committee, he can't take care of it, but…"

Tsunayoshi quickly waves him off. "It's only something I've been thinking about, it's not like I have anything to back it up with!" he protests. "You shouldn't take me so seriously. Really!"

Takeshi seems pretty amused by the protests. "But your instincts are good, Tsuna," he says. "They're really good! If you hadn't reminded me, I would have taken Mochida's head off that time by accident!"

Tsunayoshi wishes that Takeshi wouldn't remind him about that. Although of course Tsunayoshi can't allow Takeshi to instinctively endanger his own position and reputation by reacting out of reflex - if Takeshi had taken Mochida's head off, then at least he wouldn't have gotten hurt.

"Well, this time you managed to make your reputation better, if nothing else," he says.

After that tremendous showing at the Sports fest, Takeshi's popularity had gone up by a lot. Despite being the only one who had gotten hurt, the show of skill and composure had really impressed a lot of people - and Mochida is on the outs at the moment, a social outcast thanks to his lack of poise and striking an opponent without any armor… and though Tsunayoshi is sure that no one wishes that he had hit accurately, hitting a shoulder doesn't even count for a point, anyway, so Takeshi had gotten that third point, too.

"That's true! But the thing I was trying to get at was that when you decide on a path of action, let us in on it, too, okay?"

Haru latches onto Tsunayoshi's arm. "Hear, here!" she says. "I get lonely with the two of you going to school together! It's disappointing! It's really disappointing! Haru hates being left on the outside, let her come play, too!"

"Ah - sorry," he says, looking at her. "It's not like I meant to - of course I want to invite you along-"

'It's not a game in the first place!'"

"Well, it's not a fun game, anyway," she harrumphs, squeezing his arm a bit. "But even in life, there are things like 'points' and 'success,' so - if you don't use everything at your disposal, isn't that the same as forfeiting?"

'Forfeiting' sounds like something nice and easy, and the part of Tsunayoshi that followed Kyoko around and sat staring out windows and decided to become homeless or a NEET - that part of him really likes the idea. It's really appealing to just give up and let whatever happen. But the rest of
him points out that it's just too obvious that Haru and Takeshi and Nana won't let it leave at that, and he honestly doesn't want things to go badly for them, or for them to be unhappy. And in the end, Tsunayoshi's desire for them to be happy far outweighs his own self centered desires.

"Alright already, I've got it," he sighs. "Didn't I get you involved in the matter of the Student Council case despite you not even attending Nami Middle?"

"Interfering with a middle school is one thing," she scoffs. "If it involves that shaggy beast, I want in on that, too - especially if it involves cutting that beast away from his family."

"What kind of situation do you think is happening," he demands, harassed. "You were just saying that his family is upper class!"

"Well, we've noticed that you've been worried about Hibari for some time now - sorry, but I'm not comfortable with the idea of calling him by his first name yet - so we've been waiting to see where it goes," Takeshi says.

Just how transparent must Tsunayoshi be, he wonders, cutting Takeshi a look. "Is that why you've been asking me not to invite him to various places," he asks flatly.

"More or less, haha!"

Other than the fact that Kyoya wouldn't like it in the first place, it wouldn't do much good to try forcibly associating him with Tsunayoshi's other friends if they're scared of him in the first place. "He's really not that bad once you get a feel for his personality," he says reproachfully.

"No thanks - we'll leave his care to Tsuna!"

"Nm, but," Haru mumbles, refusing to look at him while she tugs on his arm, "Haru-chan wouldn't mind being bothered about it from time to time…"

What kind of reaction is that! Honestly, just decide if you want to fight him or what! Don't have some kind of weird backwards reaction while being unable to admit your own feelings to yourself!

Although he and Takeshi seem to be on the same page where Haru's feelings are concerned, judging by the look that Tsunayoshi gets from him, Takeshi relents. "Ah, well," he says, "Hibari is a comrade after all, so if he's in trouble, then count me in, too."

Nakamoto always accuses Tsunayoshi of being too relaxed about dangerous things, but - aren't the people around him the same way? If that's how it is, it can't be helped. They'll all just be too relaxed about awful things together, then. Although Tsunayoshi should probably associate with people like Saitoh and Nakamoto from time to time just to keep some idea of what's normal in mind. It'd be useful, since it's not like they can all just cut themselves out of society. Haru and Takeshi, as social people, would die because of that even if Kyoya and Tsunayoshi himself would probably be fine.

Well, neither of them would be entirely happy completely cut off from humanity, but at least a little bit would be fine.

"Thanks," he says, "I'll remember that. But - ah. For now, since we'll be intruding on the Sasagawa household, can we all try to get along with everyone?"

Of course, being good kids, both Takeshi and Haru agree to that much. In the first place, Haru must be curious about Kyoko, given what Tsunayoshi had shared regarding their history, and while Takeshi has no problems provoking someone once his blood is up, it's doubtful that anything will
happen to cause him to take offense. He won't strike the first blow anyway, so there should be enough time for Tsunayoshi to act in counter measure. Haru's temper is far less predictable, but no one in Kyoko's household is likely to pay Tsunayoshi a large enough offense for Haru to react to, either. Even if she's quick to pick a fight, Haru is unexpectedly sensitive to social matters.

Since this whole visit is in regards to Mochida's dishonorable actions at the Sports Fest in the first place, it'd be counterproductive for it to end in another fight.

After the end of the kendo duel, Takeshi and Tsunayoshi had been more or less banished to the nurse's office to assess the damage. Hana had caught up with them sometime later to express Kyoko's desire to meet with them at her own home. Even though they've been back to school a few times, neither Kyoko nor Hana had tried approaching either Tsunayoshi or Takeshi - something that Tsunayoshi is honestly grateful for, considering the increase of duties he's seen for the Disciplinary Committee, and then the increase in hostility from the baseball club.

Well, it's likely that it won't just be a matter of discussing Mochida's actions, but also probably the favor that Kyoko asked of him. Tsunayoshi is still a little anxious about whether or not the matter of the field trip will come out, and how someone like Kyoko will react to it.

Usually this would be a day for them to work together on their studying - or rather, for Haru to try her hardest to beat information into Takeshi and Tsunayoshi's head - but since this is an important situation, and also because he was out voted, they're going today. He doesn't mind much - as Haru has said, it's not nice if she's left out of everything just because Takeshi and Tsunayoshi have more opportunities to get into trouble together.

Actually, it turns out that Kyoko doesn't live all that far from Tsunayoshi. It's understandable that they haven't met until middle school, but he feels weirdly relieved that it had never occurred to him to follow Kyoko off school grounds. The house is a bit nicer than his own, with more of a lawn that has more plants in it. Tsunayoshi wonders who maintains them.

If Tsunayoshi had honestly stopped himself for a moment and wondered what Kyoko and Ryohei's mother was like, the woman who responded to the buzz at the gate definitely wouldn't have been it. Then again, there wasn't anyone else it could be: she shares Kyoko's kind, curious gaze, and the set of her shoulders.

"Oh," she says, as if she's somehow surprised by the teenagers at her doorway, even though Tsunayoshi knows she's not. She smiles and it's Kyoko's smile, warm and welcoming, but not overbearingly so: not in the way that had caught his attention about Kyoko. The way her attention locks onto Tsunayoshi is all Ryohei, though, as she says, "You must be Sawada Tsunayoshi."

"Uh," Tsunayoshi finds himself saying, wrong footed by someone who says something like that warmly. He blushes, ducking his head. "Ah - y-yes. I'm Tsunayoshi. You must be Sasagawa-san?"

"Sasagawa Naoko," she says kindly, stepping back a little bit and widening her attention to Tsunayoshi's friends. "We've been expecting you. Please, come in."

Maybe it's not albinism, the reason Ryohei looks the way he does, or otherwise it's a trait he shares with his mother. Kyoko favors her strongly in her mannerisms, but Sasagawa Naoko favors her son strongly as well. The parts of his face that are most strongly Japanese he gets from his mother, and they share the same stark white hair and steely gray eyes -

*(the boy with milkspill hair - although, no: Naoko's hair is flat and and fine and straight, nothing so unruly as to be called a 'spill')*
"Thank you," Tsunayoshi says, feeling awkward and fumbling as he tries to remember all his manners for a social visit. This isn't at all like going over to Shoichi Irie's house to shake him out of his room and make him go back to school. He uncertainly dips into a bow and then turns a bit to the others. "These are my friends, Miura Haru and Yamamoto Takeshi."

Naoko lifts one sleeve covered hand to her mouth but doesn't entirely manage to cover her entire gentle smile; her dark eyes are sharp, but far from unfriendly or wary. She's wearing the red kimono almost like a housecoat, too loose to really justify with company over, but by the way it hangs on her frame, she's definitely wearing clothing under it. "A pleasure. Please, call me Naoko." She drops the hand from her face and sweeps it out deeper into the house. "Kyoko and her friends are this way."

It feels an awful lot like being taken into the Yamamoto residence, Tsunayoshi thinks, even though the Sasagawa house is much more humble and favors the western style. Naoko guides them to a sitting room with poise and grace that reminds him a lot of when Takeshi had stepped into the ring; old man Yamamoto was accustomed to walking like an old man far beyond his actual age, stiff and heavy. Naoko moved as if she were ready to shift in any direction in an instance and doesn't even seem like she's exhausted by maintaining it.

Kyoko and Ryohei are both sitting on one of the couches facing the coffee table, which already has a tea set and snacks on it. There are enough chairs to go around, other than the empty couch opposite, and Hana and Mochida both are sitting on a few on Kyoko's side; they all look serious, other than Mochida who looks mutinous and Kyoko who smiles that same polite smile Naoko gave them in greeting.

Tsunayoshi's moment of hesitation allows Haru to grasp his arm again, guiding him over so that they sit opposite Kyoko, while Takeshi easily follows and drops himself into a chair opposite Hana, waving at her with a bright smile.

"Sorry I didn't ask you to bring along Hibari-san," Kyoko says, clasping her hands together. "But I thought he might be a bit busy and wouldn't really care about this much anyway."

"It's fine," Tsunayoshi says, having already wondered about it but discarded it for the same reasons. He can't imagine that Kyoya would have been pleased to be bothered with something like this anyway.

Naoko pulls a chair over to the side of the table and begins to set out cups and fill them before she sits down herself and smiles at Tsunayoshi. "Please don't mind me and only think of me as decoration."

"Mom agreed to mediate," Kyoko explains. "Although I don't think it will come to that."

"Mediation," Tsunayoshi echoes warily.

"Of course." The warmth goes out of Kyoko a little bit as she sighs, looking a bit annoyed and resigned. "My friends keep making trouble for your friends."

Mochida makes a dark noise of protest, but cows under the look that Hana and Kyoko both turn on him - Hana's harsh and threatening, Kyoko's reproachful and disappointed. He looks like he doesn't know how to cope with either of those things, subsiding. Well, it must be difficult for someone like Mochida Kensuke, who has been automatically treated with honors wherever he went. Taking over the Kendo club in his first year obviously showed that he wasn't afraid to work hard, but - no matter how good he was, if he wasn't Mochida Kensuke, there's no way it would have happened. And while he's aware that people must not like his personality, he's obviously never had to face
"Well, it is trouble," Tsunayoshi says, even though he doesn't hold Kyoko responsible for Mochida's actions, looking at her. "This is baseball season, you know, and Nami depends on their star batter. He's the captain, after all. And it wasn't a proper kendo round, either, especially since by the rules, Mochida-kun had already lost."

"Yes," Kyoko agrees, even as she watches him, seeming to examine his composure. "It's an extremely unfortunate position that I find myself in, after having asked a favor of you."

Tsunayoshi hums, remembering his thoughts about how to make that favor even; he's a bit relieved to hear Kyoko pitch it in that way, though, clearly aware that what she'd asked of him in return for Saitoh's information had been unfair. It belatedly occurs to him that maybe she'd meant for him to haggle, and that she'd put herself in an uncomfortable place when he'd agreeing without arguing about it.

How lucky for them both to be working together at this point.

"Favors have a way of working themselves out, I think," he says instead, dropping his gaze. "But you see, this situation is a bit troubling, not just because of Takeshi-kun's position within the school, and his duties and responsibilities to it. Mochida challenged his honor, which isn't something to be taken lightly, and then he dishonored himself."

This is apparently a straw too far for Ryohei, who only trembles briefly before he bursts. "Our comrade's behavior has been extremely uncool! Rest assured that steps will be taken to correct his behavior!" Mochida jumps at the shout, and then shrinks miserably in on himself, so he must really hold Ryohei's opinion in high regard.

"Is that so," Tsunayoshi says, looking between Mochida and the two Sasagawa siblings. Then he turns. "Takeshi-kun, it was your honor that was challenged. Would you like to say anything about this?"

Takeshi looks startled to be addressed. "Ah. Say something? Well, it's true that that it was a serious offense when Mochida slandered you the way he did, and more than that, it was pretty off putting the way he had one of his kohai go as far as to put their hands on you…" He seems to think it over seriously, although he's already dealt some heavy blows judging by the way Ryohei is scowling even more than before and Kyoko attentive expression is set over steadily thinning lips. He brightens at last, looking at Tsunayoshi. "Say! Why not make him my gofer for the time being? It's difficult right now with only one arm, after all!"

"What!" Mochida screeches.

Tsunayoshi would like to shout that, too, honestly. Further exposure to Mochida is the exact opposite of what Tsunayoshi would ask for, if it were him, but - ah, since this is Takeshi asking him, and it's true that Tsunayoshi won't be able to pick up the slack with his own hands given how Takeshi's friends feel about him right now… "Well, that seems fair, having Mochida-kun take responsibility for the damages. He'll have to put his club on hold for the time being, since the baseball club is in season."

"Hmm. Well, the council and the committee are currently reviewing the Kendo Club's internal affairs," Kyoko admitted, pressing her fingertip to her lip. "Since all kendo activities will be on hold anyway, I don't see any conflict in assign Mochida-kun to Yamamoto-kun in the interim."

"You want me to babysit that baseball geek?" Mochida screeches.
Kyoko looks at him with no particular expression on her face, and after a second, Mochida cowers again, going pale. Kyoko blinks twice and then looks pleased with herself, returning her attention to Tsunayoshi. "Then, with assigning Mochida-kun to Yamamoto-kun until his shoulder heals, the matter of the Sports fest duel can be considered resolved, yes?"

Tsunayoshi glances at Haru and Takeshi, but neither of them indicate otherwise, so he nods. "Yes, that will settle it."

The smile that Kyoko gives him is bright and warm and nothing at all like the glaring sunlight that flashes off windows to blind anyone. Her mother has a smile much like it as she pours fresh tea for everyone.

This seems to break the rest of the tense atmosphere and everyone relaxes. Ryohei starts shouting at Takeshi about what he's heard regarding the match, and though Takeshi looks taken aback, he responds gamely. Mochida is still busy sulking, but Kyoko turns to Haru with that same bright smile, and Hana is wandering over to stand beside her.

A hand settles on Tsunayoshi’s shoulder, and though he'd been somewhat aware of it, he still blinks rapidly at Naoko. She smiles down at him benignly from where she stands beside the couch. "A word?" she asks.

Even though everyone is distracted, Tsunayoshi trusts that Haru and Takeshi will notice on some level, and sets his tea down and stands as well.

It's not a threatening stride, he determines as he follows her out of the sitting room and toward the kitchen. She's not being tense and unfriendly, so despite the several times that Tsunayoshi has been cornered by his friends' parents and guardians, he doesn't think that it'll turn out the same way. Besides, Kyoko is the head of a household. It's not like she'll quit and join his, so this can't be about that anyway.

"I'm glad to finally meet you, Sawada Tsunayoshi," Naoko says warmly even as she bustles about, drawing down canisters for tea. Even though they've just left a warm kettle in the sitting room, she wastes no time in putting another on the stove.

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, "Sorry to keep you waiting?"

"It would have annoyed Iemitsu if I approached you on my own," she confides, finally coming to a stop as all that's left to do is wait for the water to warm. She turns to look at him, and seems content to only watch him, as if he's some kind of dear friend she hasn't been able to see in years and years and years.

Frowning slightly, he says, "you know Dad?"

"Well, we worked together back in the day," she says, glancing away and tucking her hair behind her ear. "Then I ended up going freelance for a few reasons."

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"Well, we worked together back in the day," she says, glancing away and tucking her hair behind her ear. "Then I ended up going freelance for a few reasons."

"In construction," Tsunayoshi observes flatly.

Naoko's smile is indulgent as she glances back toward him. "There are many different jobs to do with construction. Although I am very strong." When Tsunayoshi averts his gaze with a noncommittal noise, thinking of Iemitsu saying good job over something like that, she laughs gently. "I am glad about Nana-san," she says, "it seems like it was a good match after all, to result in someone like you. Although you're very much like my Kyoko. It's interesting to think of what Iemitsu would have been like in another walk of life. Like an artist, perhaps."
"I'm not really like Kyoko-chan at all," he disagrees, because it's difficult to think of Kyoko in the same realm as Dame-Tsuna at all.

"Oh, no, you really are," she disagrees. "And I think like Iemitsu as well. Oh - please excuse me. That expression you've made just now; there's nothing at all quite like the face Iemitsu makes when he hears something unpleasant. I was very touched when my own Kyoko would make one just exactly identical to it - although eventually she grew out of showing her emotions that way." She pauses. "I wonder if dear boss also grew out if it? We were younger back then, and a bit more honest."

It feels unpleasantly staticy in this room - like all of Tsunayoshi's nerve endings have lost connection with themselves and each other and Tsunayoshi. Is Naoko intentionally trying to make him show that face? He has to wonder. Ahh. What should he do? Everything is bad.

More than most things, he doesn't want to think of the reasons why any face he makes might be familiar because Iemitsu made it first, and so had Kyoko before she learned a girl's poise. The whole subject makes his heart thud unpleasantly in his chest and his skin prickle and something burn hot there. He fists his hands anxiously in the bottom on his shirt, listening for the sounds of everyone else carrying on in the sitting room. That he keeps getting taken aside for secret talks like this make him feel like he's being denied connections again.

He just wants to be happy with everyone else.

"Why would you tell me something like this," he asks, and it comes out strange and dull.

Naoko's tone isn't unkind when she says, quiet and gentle, "some things are better to know. Otherwise something bad would have happened if that child and you got too close - don't you think so?"

The angle of Naoko's concerns is absurd. Laughable. Ridiculous. As if Kyoko is the kind if person that the Tsunayoshi who stands in the Sasagawa residence today could connect with in any fashion considered dangerous in that way. 'The girl you like' had been a handy explanation for it, but in retrospect… Tsunayoshi easily understands that it hadn't been anything at all like that. He just hadn't known what else to call it and thought that given everything else, maybe that's just how people felt about others from time to time - right?

"Something like that has always been impossible," Tsunayoshi says, still strange, thick through the awful things that have filled the hollow charred into him. "With the way I am, it's bad enough for Takeshi-kun. Kyoko's reputation would be…"

"Iemitsu was rough around the edges, too," Naoko says easily, "but when he wanted something, there weren't many people he couldn't charm."

The person who has arrived to lurk around outside the kitchen finally steps up at that point. "To be fair," Shioya says as he steps inside, "he was mostly around idiots, anyway." He glances at Tsunayoshi and huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. "Is this why you wanted me out of the house? So those two kids could tussle over matters?"

Naoko smiles shamelessly as him. "Welcome back, Tada-kun," she says easily. "All's well that ends well, isn't it? There really wasn't all that much tussling involved. As Nana-san's precious child, Tsunayoshi-kun is obviously well behaved."

The look on Shioya's face suggests that he doesn't agree with that in the least. "While it doesn't surprise me that a bratty instigator like yourself would say so, it's specifically as Nana-chan's son
that I won't be fooled just because he's willing to humor people from time to time," he says, and easily transfers the look when Tsunayoshi frowns. "And don't argue, mini-Sawada. We never met before recently, but I heard enough to know her by reputation. You're fifty years too early to try matching her skill with deceiving others with a sweet smile, you know."

Tsunayoshi isn't so sure he appreciates Shioya talking about his mother that way, but - well, a lot of things are making more sense now that he knows that Shioya and Ryohei's mother live in the same house. It doesn't make him happy in the least to realize belatedly that Shioya knows 'Sawada' thanks to that, either.

"A sweet smile isn't a deception when it's an honest wish to get along well with others, I think," Naoko says, turning to retrieve the kettle and serve them all tea. Tsunayoshi reluctantly accepts his cup and settles down at the table in the kitchen, glancing warily between Shioya and Naoko. "I'll be happy to work with Tsunayoshi-kun and trust him to have Kyoko's best interest in mind."

"You say that now," Shioya says shortly, but then drops the subject in favor of saying, "we could get this tussle over with if you'd just let me beat a few lessons into that brat's skull. If he's so thickheaded he thinks striking Tsuyoshi's kid is a good idea, he's just going to break Kyoko's heart."

"Let Kyoko sort her business out herself," Naoko chides him. "Kensuke-kun isn't very likely to permanently injure anyone, anyway. A little rowdiness is to be expected at times like these. It's better to let the children sort themselves out and develop some skills while there are adults to come to their rescue and clean up the messes."

The hot cup in his hands seems strangely frail to Tsunayoshi, despite being the usual kind that one would expect to have at lunch; it's weird to hear such lackadaisical words from adults when didn't they know-? No. How could they know? They think Tsunayoshi is sweet. Kyoko's mother has just given him Kyoko's well being when it hadn't been that much earlier that he'd wanted to devour her whole-

(He'd only too easily recognized Takeshi's ambitions after all.)

"Ahh - no. That's bad," Tsunayoshi says into the hot steam. "I thought something like that, but-"

There hadn't really been a sound, but the impact of the bokken against Takeshi's shoulder had may as well have been a slap to the face. It'd been sulfur and hot burning embers flying wildly. Tsunayoshi had thought that he'd pop or explode somehow. Even with just a bokken - no, even if it'd been a shinai - he'd know just how and with what strength-

(If Takeshi hadn't taken Mochida's head off, then Tsunayoshi-)"Oh," Naoko says suddenly.

Shioya sighs. "There's a such thing as too much carelessness," he says to her. "If you're serious about it, someone needs to keep an eye on those kids, and I already have commitments."

"Stingy," Naoko says, pouting. "Why don't I take those commitments over for you? Dear boss was never yours, and technically it should be my responsibility anyway, since I'm the only one left. I would have done it myself, if I hadn't been forbidden to approach."

"No offense, aneki, but there was probably a reason for that. Besides, you already made such a splendid choice with that sword brat. He certainly hasn't increased frictions between that cute kid and this small brat, now has he."
That seems a bit unfair to Naoko. "It's not as bad as that," Tsunayoshi says, a little silted. "I never once thought that Mochida was acting on Kyoko's behalf to begin with? She doesn't have any reason to to cause problems. Besides, it was a bit obvious that he's not as close to Kyoko as he'd like everyone to think."

"But if he'd annoyed you enough for you to do something about it, it would have ended badly," Shioya points out, although his expression implies that he'd already guessed that Tsunayoshi had nearly done something bad anyway. "Then it wouldn't have really mattered whether he'd been acting on his own or not. Kyoko wouldn't have been able to let it go. At that point, it would be a matter of honor for her, right?"

Well - it's not like Tsunayoshi hasn't been dragged along by the willfulness of Haru and Takeshi before. If Tsunayoshi really had done anything, then Shioya's right: it would have been natural for Kyoko to respond regardless of her own feelings.

If that's true, then it's also true that someone's household might cause problems based on the whims of one person. Although Mochida did it by accident, more or less, apparently unaware of his own affiliations… it would be easy for someone to do it purposely.

Sighing, he says, "so even when small animals crowd together to pool their strength, there's weaknesses in that system as well… I guess it can't be helped." After all, if Tsunayoshi is left alone, he'll die. So, watching out for second hand threats like that... it's not as easy as just keeping an eye on people who can attack and kill them right away, then. It's also a matter of weak people scheming to get their stronger comrades involved.

"Do you feel as though an important family somewhere lost a prince or something?" Naoko says suddenly, looking at Shioya with wide, blinking eyes.

"Well, some people can't become princes if their lives depended on it, but something valuable was certainly lost," he says, standing. "It can't be helped if some families are so well-off that they'll toss away anything on a whim due to being selfish and short sighted. Anyway, thanks for the tea, but this is really a brat overload for me, so I'm retiring for the night."

Naoko's eyes are a bit dark as she watches him leave the kitchen. For once, there's not a smile or a pleasant look on her face, although she quickly looks to Tsunayoshi and corrects that. "Sorry that you had to hear all of that," she says. "Tada-kun gets cranky now and then about old history like that. 'Forgiving and forgetting is a thing for righteous people,' that's what he's always said."

"... like when you go freelance, in the construction business, for this and that reason?" Tsunayoshi wonders.

Naoko startles, and then she lets out a startling peal of laughter - just the same way that Shioya had once before. Even though they don't share blood, the relationship between them is pretty obvious, he thinks. "Well, you're really are dear boss' kid after all," she says. "Take care of Tada-kun for me, okay? I raised him to be a good kid, but he's never really learned how to trust people."

"Isn't he at least as old as Nana?! Just who should be looking after whom in this situation!"

Lurching to his feet, Tsunayoshi sets the cup down - a little too loudly and a little too hard, but although tea splashes, the cup doesn't break. "I won't take him into my household! Thank you for the tea, but please look out for your younger brother yourself!"

Before any other odd requests can be made of him, Tsunayoshi beats a hasty retreat back to the sitting room, where all his friends are waiting. As refreshing as it was for someone not to scowl
based only on his name - people looking to depend on him have their drawbacks, too.

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It's a scary thing when you're still accustomed to thinking of yourself as a child to be taken care of by your mother, but then you kill someone and that mother flinches away from you. Even if she comes back around and dotes on you again, it's not an easy thing to forget. It's a scary thing when the adults who always talked over your head about matters that no one understands begin to speak with you as though you've suddenly become their peer: in on some kind of secret that they all share. They single you out, and you alone, and take you aside, and say threats and make requests.

Although he doesn't understand the details of the things they say, he can understand the broad strokes of it. More than just speaking around the subject at hand while assuming that he's in on some kind of adult secret - they're intentionally too vague. It's too much like they're trying to avoid some kind of taboo that will summon a monster - or a hoard of monsters, an army of demons - if they break it.

Tsunayoshi isn't yet strong enough to protect himself and his friends and family from something like an army of demons, so it can't be helped. The outside world is full of terrifying things, isn't it? It's best to keep his head down and play along for now.

And if he has to burn alive from the inside out to achieve his goals, or become even worse scum, then he'll do it with his own hands and utterly crush all obstacles under his own heels himself.

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Chapter End Notes

* Just in case it wasn't clear, Naoko was telling Tsunayoshi that Kyoko is his half-sister without directly saying so giving that it's a delicate matter.

Also Naoko and Tadamasa were cracking jokes about Tsunayoshi's lack of ties to Vongola - in canon, he'd be considered a 'Vongola Prince' but since Tsunayoshi has gone unacknowledged and Nono's sons are still alive, he "can't become a prince if his life depended on it" but since Tsunayoshi has manifested such strong Sky characteristics, "something valuable was certainly lost."

* I'm not sure I really subscribe to flame alignments being genetic, although there seems to be a trend of it given mafia families in Italy! If they're not at least a little genetic, then it's hard to defend the idea that it just so happens that the Vongola operates like a monarchy, it's Xanxas' Wrath flames that specifically singled him out for as a candidate as Nono's kid, and in addition: the Luce-Aria-Yuni Arcobaleno dynasty.

I'm sure it's something complicated with epigenetics tho.

For now, I think I'll say that there's a somewhat-genetic marker that increases the likelihood of a Sky having a Sky child, but if certain environmental conditions aren't
met during childhood, that kid becomes some other flame. Kyoko met them mostly by
having an active sibling, but also because of that active sibling, she was never actually
forced online. Kyoko achieves things through social currency and manipulation and so
has never been so desperate that she thought she might die.

* Shioya said that Takeshi's first choice of Sky got screwed up. Well, he wasn't
etirely wrong, but he wasn't entirely right, either.

* Just like canon!Tsuna, Tsunayoshi is good at panicking but then repressing it and
acting strangely calm afterwards lmao.

* Sasagawa Naoko - The mother of Ryohei and Kyoko. Strongly resembles her son's
phenotype. A kind of airheaded but understated woman, apparently a single parent.
Also 'raised' Shioya Tadamasa into adulthood; Shioya calls her 'aneki.' The kind of
person who goes Freelance in the 'Construction' business and is 'pretty strong.'
Chapter Summary

Yoshiko and Kaoru meet Naito for a Skating Date. Hibari Kyoya crashes it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17 : not a man nor honest

There are certain things that a person shouldn't keep to themselves, don't you think? It isn't right. Why should he know these secret things about other people without their permission? And if they don't know it themselves? Don't they have the right to know? Regardless of whether or not it's some other family's personal business, Tsunayoshi stands with his hands clenched around the bottom of his shirt and-

Somehow the words keep failing to come out of his mouth. Nana keeps smiling at him, and he wants her to be happy. He remembers her face after That thing he did, and he remembers Iemitsu's hand on his head and thinking: isn't it obvious this isn't something to be praised? He remembers the way Kyoko saw him for the first time, and then put her own body between him and Ryohei. And treating him like something unstable and unpredictable that shouldn't be unwarily provoked.

That she's begun to look kindly at him now.

Somehow, he's too scared, and he can't force the words to come out of his mouth. Ahh. What should he do? It's no good, after all. Bad enough that they should come to know him, bad enough that Nana already doesn't have a choice, if they become associated with scum like him-

But holding it back is too much like That Man, and so Tsunayoshi keeps trying, for years and years and years. Tsunayoshi opens his mouth and will be on the verge of ruining everything-

(Is he really the one doing that though? Someone else committed those sins, and more than anything, he begins to understand 'Sawada' said with a curling lip. No matter how often Naoko says 'dear boss,' and smiles warmly, Tsunayoshi can't accept it.

Well. Hasn't it been proven that there's just no accounting for tastes?)

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But in the present time, regardless of the weight that has been placed on him by the expectations of others, Tsunayoshi still has the matter of Tomaso Nerina to deal with. The weight of his grudge regarding what happened the day of the Sports Festival is a surprisingly light thing - or no. Maybe it isn't a weight, but it twines tightly through his body, around his throat and lungs and heart; a vine with thorns, or a wire with barbs, or a string threaded through countless steel needles. It's quiet, and unobtrusive, and it digs into the soft, unguarded parts of Tsunayoshi and makes him bleed. Even if he'd never made a deal with Kyoko about it, Tsunayoshi thinks that he would easily take up the cause with his own hands and of his own accord at this rate.
Ah, no. With the additional weight that Naoko put there, the matter is all the more urgent, really. Those hot, smoldering embers in his chest remind him: we do not tolerate harm befalling the family. If that family has become so much larger than Tsunayoshi has ever imagined it could, then that only means that he burns all the brighter for it.

If he's already such scum that can so easily consider a human life forfeit, then dismantling the power structure that someone depends on is a comparatively harmless thing. Fooling himself by saying that 'at least they're still alive' isn't something Tsunayoshi can fall for, and leaving enemies behind him which will surely resent his actions seems foolish itself, but... in this case, even scum like him can't justify more permanent actions.

Still, he should pull his own weight, regardless of what other fronts he's enabled to fight in this power struggle. Although, he's not sure how 'pulling his own weight' has come to this.

"Of course I don't have a boyfriend to bring along to this, you know that, Longchamp," Nerina says as she approaches the group standing outside the Nami roller skating rink.

"Oh! Hahaha, I guess I forgot! I hope you won't feel left out!" Naito says loudly, his arm wrapped around the girl that he'd introduced as his girlfriend, Terumi. Despite that, she seems resentful of Naito somehow, and even now is stepping heavily on his foot, muttering about how he's an idiot. Naito's foot is probably going to break, Tsunayoshi thinks, watching them; how Naito can just withstand it without flinching is a terrifying question in itself. Anyway, can't he hear her being cranky the same way Tsunayoshi can?

If so, then - maybe this is what they call a 'tsundere'? But isn't it better to delay a relationship until everyone is mentally prepared for it?!

"Um," Shoichi says, clinging to Tsunayoshi's arm, "I feel a bit sick, so-

He's lying! Although they haven't really spent a lot of one-on-one time together, somehow Tsunayoshi has gotten a feel for when Shoichi really is stressed enough that his stomach is bothering him. He's just a bit uneasy and understandably nervous. Tsunayoshi used to be the same way until it got to the point that he'd had to put his own comfort aside for the sake of the people he's expecting to take care of. That aside, he's also never really noticed that Shoichi is actually slightly shorter than him; now that he's wearing the heels that Haru lent him, it really skews the situation.

Since Shoichi is already clinging to Tsunayoshi's arm, it's a fairly easy thing to just clasp his hand over Shoichi's to trap him there. Even if Tsunayoshi is the one wearing the skirt in this situation, it's turned out to be a bit handy.

"Hey," Mochida says in aside, "What kind of fucked up situation have you dragged me into? You really are shameless, Sawada."

Before Tsunayoshi can even respond to that, Haru turns to her 'date' with an awful kind of smile, clutching his hand so tightly that even from where he stands, Tsunayoshi can hear something crack unpleasantly. Mochida goes a bit white and begins to sweat, even as he gives Haru an evil stare.

"It's a bit strange to hear that from someone who bullies a 'dame' kid, you know," Tsunayoshi sighs. Mochida has made his own bed in this case, so he can sleep in it - or otherwise outside the house in a mud hollow, not even worthy of the dog house Tsunayoshi and Kyoya live in.

Haru had been the one to get the message from Naito inviting them all out - or, no, 'Kaoru' had, and the invitation had extended toward Yoshiko, and their boyfriends as well. Despite Naito's awkward
position in the Tomaso family, Tsunayoshi hadn't felt like it was an opportunity they could afford to pass up, so they'd accepted. And well - Tsunayoshi had been worried about the way that Naito had reacted to them last time, so he'd pressured Haru to figure out a solution to resolve this 'boyfriend' mess, and in the end, they were both reluctant to get Takeshi involved, for various reasons.

Despite the fact that Mochida had become a lot more tolerable in his position of Takeshi's gofer, Haru had leapt at the chance to take charge of him and 'take her revenge that way.' Whatever his other feelings about Mochida, Tsunayoshi has some concerns about how his health will fair this day. It wouldn't be good if they return him to Kyoko in bad condition, after all.

After that, the decision for Shoichi to accompany 'Yoshiko' had ended up being fairly simple: Tsunayoshi can't really do it for himself, but he knows how becoming friends with people works for others. An outing like this will be good practice for Shoichi, regardless of Tsunayoshi and Haru's more complicated intentions. Being straightforward about his expectations for Shoichi had done the rest, since Shoichi confided that going on a 'practice date' with a male friend was much less stressful than trying it with a real girl.

Tsunayoshi isn't sure what's so terrifying about 'real' girls when Shoichi has a mom and a sister and doesn't even seem to mind Haru, but Shoichi is a bit strange. At least Shoichi doesn't seem like the sort that will think anything alarming of Tsunayoshi because of this.

And as for Tomaso Nerina, she didn't bring a boyfriend - she brought Di Tella Arturo. Well, putting it that way is like denying that Tsunayoshi is aware of that man who had been with Naito before, lurking not far from them. There seems to be some kind of strange Lolita girl with him, too, which is a bit odd itself since Tsunayoshi can tell that she keeps eyeballing Naito's weakspots.

He should probably save Naito if a fatal threat presents itself, but hopefully that adult servant - or, probably Naito's bodyguard - will take care of the situation.

"Um, this is probably a bad time to admit this, but," Shoichi says as they head inside, "I… don't know how to skate."

The idea that Shoichi feels self-conscious admitting this to Dame-Tsuna is a bit funny. Tsunayoshi laughs a bit, admitting, "Well, it's a bad idea for someone who trips over absolutely nothing to add wheels to the situation." And yet, he's been doing a ridiculous amount of training with Shioya recently, hasn't he? A part of him hopes that maybe he can at least wear skates without killing himself on accident. "Let's figure it out together, Shoichi-kun."

Shoichi doesn't look relieved or reassured in the least. "I… I don't think it'll be that easy, but okay," he says doubtfully.

Tsunayoshi is a bit saved by the fact that a few of the others seem to understand how everything works. Naito does, as the one who invited them in the first place, but Haru and Mochida especially seem aware of how to go about buying admittance and other necessary steps. They're all in line at the counter, so Tsunayoshi pulls Shoichi over so they can all rent out skates.

Unfortunately, given the situation, Tsunayoshi has to rent a girl's model, and has to go up in sizes fairly far. He can feel the attendant thinking bad things about him; even though he doesn't actually care about whether or not 'Yoshiko' has huge feet for a girl, it still bugs him a bit.

That aside… actually putting the skates on takes a lot of wind out of Tsunayoshi's sails. Almost immediate, he realizes that despite whatever training he's been doing with Shioya, it's completely different from doing something like this spontaneously. Gulping nervously, Tsunayoshi tries to
stand once he's tied the skates on, but almost immediately: his feet fly out from under him. Luckily, all that means is that he drops back down onto the bench without cracking his head against anything.

Shoichi, sitting next to him and not even done tying up his laces, stares at him uncertainly. "Um," he says. Despite the sympathy on his face, he looks like he's just been completely discouraged from trying to do it himself.

Ahh. Does that mean that somehow, Tsunayoshi has managed to become someone's senpai? It feels a little like he should try harder in order to set a better example. Is that what a senpai actually does, though? He's not sure. All his senpai are various types of scum or demons.

Before Tsunayoshi can address that, Naito's admiring call from the edge of the rink draws their attention. "Wow!" he crows. "Those guys really are a pair!"

He's talking about Haru and Mochida. It seems that more than just renting out the skates, they actually know what they're doing once on wheels and with a little free space. Even the others who are making use of the rink fall back to make space for the two of them as they race around the rink at a frankly stupid speed. It's almost like they're competing against one another - or no, obviously that's exactly what they're doing! And they're doing twists and jumps, too!

It's a good thing that the other people who are using the rink seem to be fine with sitting back to watch. Those two really have very little self-awareness, and someone could really easily get hurt.

"It looks like they're working hard," Tsunayoshi says a bit awkwardly, since he doesn't really want to acknowledge that Haru and Mochida are more or less fighting with one another. He's not really sure what the point of it is, competing about their skill with skating, but although he's pretty sure that neither of them particularly specialize in anything that they're doing, given the slight awkwardness of the spins and poses they're trying to preform, it's undeniable that they're very capable people. "Watching that... I kind of feel like I should really try hard to skate myself."

"Ah - well, some things are impossible, but... if 'Yoshiko-chan' is going to try again, so will I!" Shoichi says. He doesn't sound like he really believes what he's saying, though. His ability to go along with whatever despite his feelings is kind of amazing.

Smiling sympathetically, Tsunayoshi says, "you can stay here if you want." It'll make him feel bad if Shoichi gets dragged along in his wake, even if Shoichi's inability to be firm about things is what led to them meeting in the first place.

Shoichi doesn't even get a chance to answer, since Tsunayoshi's next attempt at standing just plants him directly onto his face. Well, it can't be helped, can it? That's probably what would be called 'overconfidence' or hubris, huh. Luckily nothing else embarrassing happens other than skinning his chin a bit, and somehow Shoichi manages to help him back to the bench.

"Maybe we should stay here for now," he offers anxiously.

"I think you were right after all," Tsunayoshi agrees a bit wryly. It's just desserts for trying to overcome his own reality, probably.

It ends up probably being the smart idea given that Tsunayoshi hadn't been the only one who had felt a bit fired up watching Haru and Mochida skate - Naito and Terumi have entered the ring, and they're - they're - ... they're not very good at skating, but maybe they should get points for enthusiasm? No, only Naito really deserves that, since Terumi clearly hates every second of it, and Naito most of all. Still, they're both out there on the rink, and it's all very unpredictable… no, it
seems likely that the normal people here are going to end up getting hurt.

Before Tsunayoshi can do more than consider fretting about it, he becomes aware of Nerina approaching them with Di Tella lurking just a way past her shoulder; he keeps a distance that prevents his presence from being oppressive, but he must be a professional given that this entire time, he's maintained a top level of alertness. What an amazing person.

"Excuse me," Nerina says to them, never having even attempted to rent skates in the first place. "Can I sit, too?"

Shoichi startles and flusters and stutters a bit, so it falls to Tsunayoshi to say 'sure' and make some room for her. She's a bit of a different person away from school - even when she'd been fussing at Naito, there'd been an oddly quiet and subdued atmosphere about her. She's not a particularly striking or good looking girl, with large and wary eyes. No one would mistake her for a native, either, not any more than they would Tsunayoshi, which is even more odd given the position her family enjoys.

Even when Nerina turns to the two of them and smiles, there's a strained sort of weariness to it. "I'm a bit glad," she confides. "I had no idea that Longchamp knew how to make normal friends. Or well - I guess a pair of Midori girls and a boy from Yumei is about as 'normal' as he can get."

Tsunayoshi's heart thumps suddenly. Had someone looked into their backgrounds? There's no way that 'Yoshiko' or 'Kaoru' would have held up against that, unless Haru had gone a step further and stolen the identities of some of her classmates! Ah, but, somehow he doesn't think their identities have been compromised? That's not the feeling he gets.

Still, maybe Nakamoto was onto something when he said that Tsunayoshi was too relaxed. It's easy to forget when he's dealing with Nerina, but her family is truly on another level. The steps he can take against a peer… no. The steps he has to take against an enemy should definitely be more secure and thought out. Thoughtlessly risking himself and his cohorts is something only even worse scum would do. If he doesn't want to be that kind of scum, he'll have to work harder.

"Well, we met not that long ago on a class assignment," Tsunayoshi offers, "but an outing seemed fun so we agreed."

"I see. Longchamp gets carried away at times and forgets to invite people to accessible events," she says with a sympathetic smile, glancing toward the injury on his chin. "When he told me about it, I was just glad it was something like skating, but… well, he has a strange idea about what's fun sometimes. It seems like he's had to make his own amusement all these years."

"... are you two close?" Tsunayoshi wonders. Other than living in the same house, they don't seem to interact much, or even share a last name.

But if it's a sensitive matter, Nerina doesn't seem to think so. "We're family," she says easily. "Although we call each other 'cousins,' our blood relationship is more like uncle and niece."

" Eh? Uncle and niece?" Shoichi echoes incredulously.

Nerina seems to find it a little amusing. "It seems like my grandfather was a bit of a troublemaker before he died. Ah - but Uncle Longchamp, he'll be annoyed if he finds out I'm dragging up all this old history. He's sensitive to it, despite the fact that it's not like it's a lie or anything, I don't really understand why we have to keep secrets like this."

That's a strange thing for someone who embezzles funds to say. Although it's true that being that
kind of thoughtless idiot might just be a front, it seems equally likely that Nerina just doesn't see how the two subjects are related. Then again, it's not as though Tsunayoshi can really cast stones given the state of his own household and the secrets of people related to him, huh.

"I think it's about having respect for your ancestors, or something like that," Tsunayoshi ventures. "Or speaking ill of the dead, maybe? I don't really understand it myself, though. Everyone is responsible for their own actions, regardless of the circumstances, and lying about it or pretending that it never happened... even if the action itself is shameful, trying to deny it is even more shameful, isn't it?"

... ah. What is someone like him saying? Can't he unexpectedly sympathize quite a lot with the situation that Nerina is talking about? Even though that person is going under a different surname... shouldn't it match more with Tsunayoshi's? Although really, the person who is being hidden is the one who's feelings should be respected in this case. It's not anything that Tsunayoshi can decide on his own when it affects other people's standings.

"I think..." he says slowly, "that erasing history is probably a bad thing. In this case, although it would be convenient for Mayor Tomaso to forget about it, that leaves Naito-kun in a difficult situation."

But maybe 'forgetting about it' would be better for other people who would only be dragged down by being attached to that surname. Tsunayoshi himself has encountered a lot of problems thanks to it.

"So you noticed about that," Nerina says, and she looks a bit exhausted. "The situation at home is pretty bad for him, so I worry a lot. That's why I came along. It's not usual for people to try to take advantage of Longchamp, because he's easy to please and eager to prove himself. Even his own chaperon seems to barely tolerate him at times, and treats him more like something to be managed rather than a person."

But rather than thinking about Naito, Tsunayoshi is paying attention to the person in front of him; he isn't sure that he's ever seen Nerina with friends of her own. Despite being the Student Council President, aside from doing fishy stuff with the paperwork and funds, shouldn't someone else be staying late with her after the meetings to keep her company?

Ah. Despite the grudge he holds, sick and festering, some part of him is able to sympathize with her a bit. Tsunayoshi himself is not without sins. If one day, someone comes to take Tsunayoshi to task over his actions against those men that hit Nana, he won't be able to argue with them about it. He'll soon add more sins, for similarly selfish reasons.

But regardless of those sympathies, she's still responsible for her actions in the end, and unknowingly she's made some awful enemies. It isn't because of her sins that Tsunayoshi wants to dismantle her power base after all - it's because someone asked, and he stands to gain from it, and now he has taken an insult when she decided to make profit from Takeshi's feud with Mochida. He'll get himself in trouble if he begins to think even for a second that he has some kind of moral high ground over his enemy.

Tsunayoshi is already scum enough as it is. He can't become the type of scum that doesn't even realize his own nature.

"But Grandfather must have had some hope for Cousin Longchamp," Nerina muses. "After all, despite already naming his first son as heir by giving him that name, he also named his last son the same way. I wonder what he must have been thinking?"
Well, regardless of whatever hopes the late Mayor had for Naito, he sure has put him in an unforgivable situation. People who carelessly place their own burdens on children… those people are a type of scum, too.

_(then doesn't that mean that the people around him-?)_

Tsunayoshi's attention to Nerina and Di Tella isn't so complete that on some level, he was unaware of the group at the desk, but it's not until their voices start to get louder that he begins to actually pay attention. He isn't the only one - even some of the people who have been admiring Haru and Mochida's display are beginning to look around and wonder about the noise as well.

"Ah," he says, looking at the thugs at the desk. There's a reason he overlooked them after all. These are the kids that Hoshino beat down long ago. While they'd been a bit of a challenge for Tsunayoshi back then, ever since Shioya took over his training, Tsunayoshi has been aware of his capabilities increasing by quite a bit. "Those guys, huh."

"Is that all you really have to say?" Shoichi demands, and he's clinging to Tsunayoshi's arm again. "Those are some of the same people who go to my school! Not even the teachers will say anything to them."

It's a bit surprising that elite schools like Yumei have kids like those, but - if Tsunayoshi sees the children as a reflection of the adults that raised them, then it's likely that their parents are just as problematic as them. Still-

"I don't know what there is to say," he admits. "They're really not all that strong… I know some guys who beat them up easily and stepped on the leader's face. I guess you wouldn't have heard of it since they wouldn't want anyone to know, and Yumei is a bit isolated…"

"Just because your friends are strong doesn't mean they aren't strong themselves," Nerina cautions with concern, shifting a bit closer. Di Tella himself moves to stand pointedly closer to her, making no effort to hide that he's keeping a close eye on the boys at the desk. They're making a mess, and even though they haven't broken anything or reached across it to manhandle the clerk yet, it'll probably only be a matter of time.

Despite what Tsunayoshi was just thinking about regarding not taking a stance based on his morals, somehow it's annoying that they're coming in and causing a ruckus. Besides, this is still the Committee's territory; are they really trying to butt in while Kyoya's attention is elsewhere? Although, this would be the time to do it, after all. Maybe they thought that Kyoya had moved on to a new territory, since it's hard to know whether Kyoya holding himself back a grade would be common knowledge. But the lack of seeing Kyoya on the streets? That might be enough.

From a certain perspective those thugs must seem strong, or otherwise the clerk wouldn't allow them to behave that way, but Tsunayoshi only has his own perspective to act with. "Even if they're strong themselves," he says with some resignation, "I'm a bit troubled, since the reason they're here might be my fault."

"How could it be- you didn't invite - no, I mean, are they looking for you?!" Shoichi demands anxiously, one hand preemptively clasped to his belly.

If he had invited them, he wouldn't appreciate Shoichi calling him out on it, but: "ah, no. But I might be the reason that the people who normally subjugate them are distracted, so I wonder if I should take responsibility?"

No, he should definitely take responsibility, but it won't be easy since he's here as 'Yoshiko' rather
than 'Tsunayoshi' and that aside, Shioya never properly told him not to use his skills on other people, but he had cautioned him to restrain himself, citing Ryohei as an example to look up to. As if that were something Tsunayoshi were capable of doing!

"Please don't!" Nerina leans forward and grabs his hand, and she looks honestly worried. "You shouldn't put yourself in danger! Just - let them do what they want and leave, okay? Nothing good can come of putting yourself in danger."

Tsunayoshi stares. That's the same kind of look he remembers from Nana's face just a few weeks ago, when she was suddenly confronted with the memories of what they went through. Ah. There definitely must be a reason that the Tomaso children have bodyguards after all. She doesn't even seem to realize that Tsunayoshi's hand is large and calloused compared to hers.

Actually, come to think of it, doesn't she look rather tired, too? Unlike Nana, who had caught naps here and there as her schedule allowed, Nerina must not be able to do that between normal school work and her additional duties. Has anyone at home even tried helping her?

How annoying. Even though Nerina is first and most of all an enemy, Tsunayoshi somehow feels a bit of understanding toward her.

"If everyone keeps looking away and letting others do whatever they want, then that's just chaos and anarchy," Tsunayoshi says, but gently. "It's the responsibility of people who can do something to do that something, don't you think?"

That doesn't make her look happy, but he hadn't said it to make her happy. She has the ability to do things that she's neglected herself, after all. She bites her lip, looking uncertain, while behind her Di Tella looks on, a kind of readiness in his limbs as if he might step in and beat those kids if Nerina steps up-

A familiar, awful presence makes itself known at the door. Tsunayoshi already knows without having to look, although something pangs inside him as if to express how nostalgic it is. He'd almost forgotten what it feels like: the Demon of Nami Middle.

Ah. That means Tsunayoshi is going to get bitten to death, then.

He turns on the bench just in time to grab Shoichi and push him down; Di Tella doesn't do anything so crass as tackle Nerina to the ground as much as he scoops her up from the bench and twists to put his body between her and the commotion at the front door. The boy that had been sent flying over all their heads tumbles and lands painfully against the guardrail, making a deeply unpleasant noise.

"Stay down," Tsunayoshi says to Shoichi, even as he shifts up - but, ah, somehow the fight is already over. Well, of course it's over seeing that Kyoya hadn't come alone and also seems in fine form. Although when Hoshino had a moment to disclothe the biggest troublemaker and use his shirt to bind him on to his elbows with his hands bound around the back of his neck is a question that may be better unasked, especially given that he's taking pictures with his phone again and saying something weird like 'here, kitty, kitty.'

The people that Tsunayoshi has come to know have all kinds of worrisome sides to their personalities, don't they. But maybe this time these thugs will be properly subjugated.

Along with the usual menagerie of Committee members that accompany Hoshino most places, Nakamoto is present as well. That's a bit terrifying, because he's actually coming toward the benches quickly and purposefully. The whole aura that he has at the moment is a bit intense,
coming to a rocking stop before Tsunayoshi with a stiff back, a flinch away from saluting.

"I said not to take such risky measures with your safety!" Nakamoto says, almost sharply. "It's a good thing I ended up having you followed."

"Followed," Tsunayoshi says weakly, feeling his face and fingers suddenly go numb and cold. Ah, no. Had he really not noticed? It's true that he has brushed off the idea that some Committee members were around the neighborhood a few times, but his house is within Kyoya's territory so-

"Of course," he says, and at last seems to sigh out the last of his tension, taking no notice of how badly this information is being received. "Your attitude is too laid-back considering the dangerous things that you've been getting involved with, so I wanted to keep an eye on the situation for taichou's sake. Even if it was just for such a small issue, I put out a call and got a response."

Had Tsunayoshi not noticed at all because he's come to overlook the Disciplinary Committee!? If he had thought for even a second that anyone might have been keeping an eye on him, he would have never-!

As if he's followed Tsunayoshi's thought process easily, Nakamoto finally gives him a look usually reserved for small, starving animals. "I wouldn't have imagined you having this kind of hobby, though."

Before Tsunayoshi can adequately deny that he has anything approaching a hobby, especially a hobby that Haru tricked him into in the first place, a foot flies in from nowhere, and Shoichi is knocked skidding away from him. Tsunayoshi's startled reflexes can only belatedly throw his body at the still-extended leg, gripping on tightly above the knee.

"Senpai!" he squawks, looking up at Kyoya in a mixture of alarm and dismay over having an ally attacked unprovoked.

It's not as though he hasn't seen Kyoya from time to time since that first fight at the beginning of the school year, but for the first time he realizes that Kyoya is clearly on his way to growing into an adult: long and lean and feral with his lips peeled back with pique just far enough to show on sharp white incisor and his eyes glittering a bright and violent color. Beyond the reach of his leg, where he was kicked to, Shoichi scrambles to get further away and up onto his knees, clearly frightened out of rational thought - but he seems surprisingly unharmed for someone who was attacked directly by the Demon of Nami Middle.

Naturally, Tsunayoshi realizes after a second. Shoichi had been bent over near Tsunayoshi's thigh, and the position meant that Kyoya had only kicked the back of his shoulder, which wouldn't have even damaged the joint from that angle. Despite the sudden attack and the ominous atmosphere hanging around at the moment, Kyoya has frequently used much more force against Haru than he used against Shoichi just now.

Kyoya doesn't even so much as glance down at Tsunayoshi as he says, so sharp that it feels like the edge of old man Yamamoto's blade set to their throats: "don't reach above your station, bottom feeder. This prey animal belongs to me."

It takes a moment for Tsunayoshi to parse; that first of all, there's something even lower than an herbivore in Kyoya's eyes, so apparently Shoichi is a boy that gets fleeced even by other people who are normally fleeced themselves, and two: as far as Kyoya is concerned, Tsunayoshi is something to fleece but only by him.

He's just been declared property - or no, to Kyoya, maybe 'territory' would be a more accurate way
"No way! Senpai! Who are you calling a prey animal in the first place?" he protests in an embarrassingly shrill voice.

But Kyoya only clicks his tongue and without even glancing down at Tsunayoshi, goes to leave. In the interest of not being dragged around at the bottom of someone's leg like a bratty three year old, Tsunayoshi lets go and watches Kyoya stalk off, dragging the boy he'd knocked clear across the skating lobby behind him, dangling by his collar from one of Kyoya's fists.

Furthermore, maybe Shoichi had grabbed Tsunayoshi's knee while they had both ducked, but isn't kicking him going a little far?! It's not as if Shoichi was- they were on a fake date, that's true but-!

If it's between Haru and Takeshi and Kyoya, then Kyoya will win the fight without a doubt. Well, at least Tsunayoshi can trust that Haru won't give up easily in the meantime.

"Yoshiko-chan!"

Speaking of Haru, she and Mochida are exiting the rink in a flurry. Although he pauses to take his skates off, Haru doesn't bother, fumbling a little bit as she skids over to Tsunayoshi. "That shaggy beast!" she spits, even as she bends down and puts her hands on his shoulder, glaring in the direction of the doorway where the Committee members are leaving with their prey in tow. "Are you okay?"

Tsunayoshi is pretty impressed with her ability to maintain the fiction of 'Yoshiko' under the circumstances. "More or less," he says, and smiles to prove it. "Senpai didn't really do anything to me - ah." He twists around. "Shoichi-kun. Are you alright?"

There's definitely no lasting damage done, judging by how Shoichi is sat on the floor, looking horrifically shaken but otherwise fine. "Ahhh," he says shakily, and begins to pat down all of his limbs. "I - I think I am? I'm still in one piece… no, I'm even alive! I survived!"

"Get yourself together," Mochida says as he arrives, looking a bit like he's looking down on Shoichi for his reaction. Tsunayoshi kind of wants to see how he'd deal with being on the wrong end of Kyoya's temper. "Are you a man or aren't you?"

That of all things seems to snap Shoichi out of it, even if it's just to give Mochida such a deep look of resentment that Tsunayoshi is forcibly reminded of Tomoko trying to make Tsunayoshi out to be the 'man' of the household.

"... Yoshiko-chan is associated with those ruffians?" Nerina asks tremorously, looking pale and wild eyed as she stares at Tsunayoshi.

"Well, don't be mislead by her demure appearance, Tomaso-chan," Mochida says dryly into the pause of both Tsunayoshi and Haru trying to decide how to respond to that. "'Yoshiko' keeps some nasty company. But weak people often have to simper at the heels of their betters."

Whatever affect Mochida meant to have with his words, it's easy to tell by Nerina's face that she's not impressed. Tsunayoshi would honestly like to credit Mochida with the fact that she seems so unimpressed with him that she's forgotten a bit about the ruffians that 'Yoshiko' associates with, but that seems to be entirely a side effect of Mochida's bad opinion about Tsunayoshi combine with a total lack of self-awareness.

"Yoshiko-chan is stronger than all those people combined, blockhead!" Haru scoffs, her face twisting into the unpleasant, condescending expression she's been wearing on and off since this
fake date has begun.

"What was that, you harlot-harp'y!" Mochida demands, baring his teeth.

Tsunayoshi hadn't expected Haru to get along with someone who had hurt Takeshi badly enough to put his arm in a sling, but this is a bit ridiculous. Or rather: the tension seems to be about something else, and Mochida's bad attitude seems to be making it worse. Nevermind that, aren't those two supposed to be boyfriend and girlfriend? They've done nothing but fight this entire outing! Is that supposed to be normal in a relationship?! Not to put too fine of a point on it, but Tsunayoshi would rather get along well with the person he's dating!

That's perhaps the main reason why he can't really see himself dating anyone he knows so far, after all.

"Shoichi-kun," Tsunayoshi says instead, since it's that kid who wouldn't be used to such insanity, looking at him with concern. "Are you really alright though? Sorry for dragging you into something as crazy as this."

"Ah, no, I'm really fine after all," he promises, and even looks like he means it other than how anxious he now seems - but a level that seems natural for him. "Although - um, please don't involve me in any other things like this…"

Tsunayoshi smiles, relieved that Shoichi isn't cutting off all association with him. Maybe he himself realized that he'd gotten off lightly? Although that still doesn't excuse Kyoya's actions. "What a relief!"

He doesn't get any further than that, because at that point, Naito and Terumi make it off the skating floor and over to them. "Whoa!" Naito exclaims. "That was wild! Man, those kids from our school really go all out, don't they, Nerina?"

Di Tella looks on blandly as Naito leans over to repeatedly elbow his ward, who looks a bit annoyed but mostly resigned by the treatment. "They certainly do," she agrees, turning back to the others. "Please, Yoshiko-chan, Kaoru-chan, don't take this as representation of how the school is run."

Saying that after Tsunayoshi obviously is on familiar terms with the Disciplinary Committee is rather interesting, though. Exactly who does she think she's protecting that way?

As much as Tsunayoshi hates being taken aside and told secrets, watching Nerina go along with a fiction makes him prefer the knowing. Naito certainly is in an unfortunate position. Hasn't anyone tried taking him aside and explaining anything to him? Who exactly is supposed to be protecting and leading the Tomaso household? It isn't the Mayor considering how his own niece speaks of him, and Nerina's personality is too strange, and Naito being that way is just…

Is having a household like this one leading Namimori really okay?

-0-

"Although," Tsunayoshi says at one point as they're going home, "there is one question in particular I wanted to ask."

Shoichi, who has maintained a respectably distance from Tsunayoshi and has kept his hands to himself since Kyoya's words - although Tsunayoshi hadn't entirely minded having his arm clung to - blinks at him. "What's that?"
Tsunayoshi looks at him, and a little uneasily, asks: "Um. What is... having a sister like?"

The expression that Shoichi shows him doesn't make him feel better about the entire situation at all.

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Because Tsunayoshi has to carry his own weight, he goes to the office on Nami Middle grounds where Kurokawa Hana and Nakamoto Kei have made their war room. Even if he thinks his life would be easier if he'd just told Kyoko to her face 'no way' when she'd asked him to do this thing - ahh. It can't be helped. Tsunayoshi has no honor to offend, but he has been provoked somehow.

And yet, when Tsunayoshi makes his appearance, the first thing Nakamoto says to him is, "it won't be good for Tomaso-chan when she loses this election." He watches Tsunayoshi closely, along with Hana who still sits at the desk with papers strewn across it.

"I know that," Tsunayoshi says a bit blankly, blinking at the two of them.

That only seems to annoy Hana. "I shouldn't have to tell you this, but getting close to the enemy is stupid, Dame-Tsuna," she says bluntly, crossing her arms over her chest as she leans back in the chair. "I won't allow you to do anything that will jeopardize Kyoko's chances, understood?"

"Ah, it's just-!" Nakamoto says suddenly, shifting subtly sideways as if to stand between her and Tsunayoshi. "It seems like you might be becoming friends with Tomaso-chan, so - I mean! Despite everything, Sawada seems is a gentle hearted person, so - things will go badly when she loses, that's all we're saying! You should be certain that you're confident in your path. Although... it's a little late to turn back now, so instead maybe you should avoid becoming closer with her."

Tsunayoshi looks at him askance. Nakamoto really shouldn't try telling such lies if he's going to jump into the situation for Hana's sake simply because she said something that made Tsunayoshi taste sulfur at the back of his tongue. What part of scum like him could ever be 'gentle' in the first place? Especially his heart is selfish and greedy. It's full of devouring flames and soot and char. Only terrible things happen inside it.

Still, neither Nakamoto nor Hana deserve those things, so he says, gently, "I know where my responsibilities lay, Nakamoto-kun. It's a lot more complex than you think it is. I'm not just doing this for the sake of a favor after all."

Hana clicks her tongue. "If you're looking to get one over-!"

"I don't want to hear that from someone whose companion used me first," Tsunayoshi says bluntly, meeting her eyes, and Hana shuts her mouth with a click. She doesn't look happy about it, but it isn't as if she can argue about it. "Both our households are working toward a common goal that benefits everyone, you know. I'm only asking that the Committee gets a few extra resources, since bad things have been happening while senpai is busy."

Like annoying, yappy dogs who try to rise above their proper place in the pecking order.

"Ah!" Nakamoto looks fairly shocked, oddly young with his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. He presents such a serious aura these days that Tsunayoshi is almost startled to remember that Nakamoto is just a young kid Tsunayoshi's own age.

Hana isn't so easily moved, standing beside him with her arms still crossed and glaring at Tsunayoshi for a lingering moment. Reluctantly, she decides: "If it's for that monkey, I guess that's acceptable."
"Sawada," Nakamoto says, still staring. "Are... are you working hard for Hibari-taichou's sake?"

It sounds weird when it's put like that, with those kinds of words. Tsunayoshi uneasily averts his eyes, fidgeting a bit. "Ah - I guess? I mean, it's natural that if an opportunity to make senpai's burden lighter comes up, that I would try to do something about it, right?"

"Ah-! You-!"

'Ah, him'?!

Alarmingly, Nakamoto looks like he might faint all of a sudden, like some massive weight has been removed from him and the relief of it is so overwhelming he'll fall over. Whatever Hana's feelings about men in general and Tsunayoshi in particular, she looks equally alarmed as he feels as they both reach for Nakamoto.

"Let's get him in the chair," she says firmly. It's a good enough idea, so Tsunayoshi helps her stagger the boy over to the desk and into the only chair in the room. Actually, thinking of that - why isn't there two?! How is Hana going to pretend to be worried about his health at this point when all along, she's been making him stand?!

Then again, Nakamoto is an officer in the Committee after all. It's just as likely that he'd thought to impress her or look cool by staying on his feet.

As for the desk and the papers that cover it, it's clear that the two of them are still working hard on Kyoko's campaign. It's the final hours, he thinks - or rather, 'days,' but there's only so much work that students can put into this kind of thing. It isn't just the posters they've been making, or the 'incentives' they've been providing by selling home baked goods and wholesome school photographs of Kyoko's shining smile. This is the planning ground for the popularity events being held around the school to boost everyone's awareness of Kyoko - as if that's really a struggle.

Hana straightens with a scoff, leveling an unimpressed look at Tsunayoshi. "That kid has been stressing out over his divided loyalties for a while now," she says flatly. "This better put an end to it."

There's no way for him to appreciate her butting in, regardless of the fact that he hadn't realized Nakamoto was feeling conflicted in such a way.

"It's fine," Nakamoto tries to say, still a little shaken but quickly regaining his strength; no one who was incapable of rolling with the punches could have survived Kyoya for long, after all.

"It's not fine," Tsunayoshi disagrees, frowning. "Nakamoto-kun, Kyoya-senpai and I belong to the same household, you know. It goes without saying that we'd pool our resources and work together toward a common goal."

He still isn't entirely sure he believes that Kyoya is staying back a year for his sake. Various things might line up in support of that fact, and then there was Kyoya's own actions the other day at the rink, but - that's just a predator defending its territory, after all. Kyoya said it himself. The thought that Kyoya somehow considers him such a troublesome minion that he has to go out of his way just to make sure no one steals him is...

"No, I knew regarding the other day," Nakamoto says, waving him off even as he wiggles a bit in the chair, clearly uncomfortable to now be sitting while Hana and Tsunayoshi stand over him. "I just didn't know what Sawada's intentions were - ah."

"Well, you're a natural born subordinate, after all," Hana says dryly, causing Nakamoto to yelp and
fluster. She seems strangely sympathetic as she says, "It's only natural you wouldn't be able to entirely resist it. Too bad you attached yourself to Sawada first; I would have liked to snatch you up for Kyoko, but-" She glances sideways at Tsunayoshi and adds, "he's surprisingly loyal to someone he won't even call 'taichou.' Be more aware of the fact that you have that kind of vibe that drags unwary people along behind you."

As if Tsunayoshi could be so great of a person.

Nakamoto seems a little like he might spontaneously combust from a combination of things that have made him feel put on the spot and either teased or make fun of, so Tsunayoshi glances toward the desk and asks, "how are matters with the field trip going? Is everything we're doing going to be enough?"

It must be a somewhat transparent move since Nakamoto immediately fixes him with a look better suited to Saitoh - that 'benevolent devil' look. It's almost certain that only people who have lived near Kyoya long enough to come to survive that kind of reign of terror could ever make a face like that at *Tsunayoshi*. As if, as nice as they think he is, he's also some mystical force above mortal realization.

"Well," Hana says shortly, scowling, "it'd be for the best if something happened on the trip itself. Depending on that, the election could go either way. Kyoko never planned to try something like this, so for something we hastily started, just the fact that we've gathered this much support is amazing. Still, it might not be enough."

"I see…"

Doing something… if it were for the sake of his household, he could do something, couldn't he? 'Doing something' was kind of like when he'd 'done' something before for the sake of his mother. Those men he'd *had* to stop because they would not. They'd keep 'doing' and 'doing' and 'doing' until it became something unforgivable, and because Tsunayoshi was weak-

But Tsunayoshi is stronger now, and even he weren't, he'd still be stronger than Tomaso Nerina. There's no need to resort to drastic measures in that case, but - ah. There's Di Tella to consider, isn't there? That man has apparently killed for her sake before, and Tsunayoshi got some idea of his measure that day at the skating rink. Without hesitation, that man will certainly shield her from any danger with his own body if necessary, and he also won't hesitate to kill Tsunayoshi, even if he were wearing a skirt at the time.

Ahh. That's a problem. What should he do? It's bad. Tsunayoshi definitely can't die, since he needs to be around to watch out for the people who have chosen to come to his side and join his household. It was all pointless if he easily gives up here, or allows himself to come to harm. Whether it's for their sake or not, they won't appreciate it if he ends up getting hurt. What should he do?

Some of his thoughts must show on his face, since Nakamoto says, "Don't worry about it, Sawada." He's coming on a little strong, compared to his behavior before, but - ah. If he'd felt conflicted this entire time but suddenly realized he could freely commit himself to *Tsunayoshi* entirely? "We'll think of something."

*Tsunayoshi* would like to breathe out a sigh of relief and depend on him. Nakamoto is a reliable kid, after all, but. That reliability combined with Hana's ruthlessness is a scary thing, but. Even though *Tsunayoshi* has figured out about not keeping secrets and asking his household for help, it's not as easy as that. It's not exactly that *Tsunayoshi* had depended on his mother for three days and ended up having to do something himself - but it's a bit because of that. It's because of that, and
arriving to distract the men who'd meant to take Haru, and everyone taking him aside to whisper secrets in his ear and expect things of him.

Tsunayoshi says, "Thanks, Nakamoto-kun," and he even smiles about it.

But letting others do the dirty work for him? He's not that kind of scum.

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Chapter End Notes

* Without an adult around to guide them (in the shape of Reborn), Tsunayoshi has to be a bit more proactive than Canon!Tsuna. Canon!Tsuna definitely would have breathed a sigh of relief and depended on his subordinates. But Tsunayoshi's pivotal development moment was acting on his own in protection of an adult caretaker, so like. Tsunayoshi has a twisted view of himself and more advanced expectations toward himself because of it.

Never mind the fact that Tsunayoshi's situation and Tsuna's are completely different.

* the 'Yoshiko' disguise is plenty convincing, but Kyoya is incredibly sensitive to 'life energy'/will/flames and would recognize Tsunayoshi anywhere under any layer of disguise, possibly even through a mask of Mist flames; that's his territory after all.

* Literally no one is harmonized with anyone yet, because Kyoko is more or less still dormant/latent and Tsunayoshi is sealed so they can't? But if you have the ability to manifest your will, regardless of if you have, you still have a 'sway' as Hana points out.

Ryohei and Tsunayoshi are active; Haru, Mochida, and Kyoya are next in line to activate as they feel pressured; Hana is such a cloud that she refuses to manifest her Will until her sky does; Yamamoto Takeshi is too, too cunning and his father has trained him to an extent that the pressures that would be required to activate him are actually quite ridiculous.

Like probably Tsunayoshi harmonizing with literally anyone. That would definitely make Takeshi spontaneously burst into flames out of desperation and insecurity for sure!

After all he is the type that hurts his arm and tries to kill himself over it, so who is really surprised at that high maintenance child??
Chapter Summary

the first day of the Field Trip. Tsunayoshi meets a cute kid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18 : hushabye baby

After everything that's happened, it's starting to feel strange for Tsunayoshi to stand alone with no one at his side. He's gotten used to the idea that his friends have their own lives that they have to attend, even if he doesn't really have something like that himself, but to have nothing but a phone to connect them to him? He looks absently down at the phone clutched in his hand, his knuckles a bit white. That desperation feels oddly separate from himself, although he obviously feels it somehow.

Maybe it's for the best, though. Tsunayoshi hasn't been sleeping well at night recently, kept up by his troubled thoughts and sometimes drinking hot things with Nana when she comes to check on him and finds him still awake. What should he do? He can't let others carry the heavy weight of succeeding when it was his promises that put them in motion.

If he has to do something unforgivable, though, it's best that he does it with his own two hands and doesn't force anyone to stand by and watch.

So, as much as Tsunayoshi feels odd and unhappy with being left alone, he's done this to himself. Long ago he'd realized how this would come to play out: that Takeshi would be busy with his baseball friends. It's not good if Tsunayoshi takes that away from him. Away from them. That's just making enemies he doesn't need. And yet Takeshi himself had been somewhat anxious to leave Tsunayoshi by himself, and had only been set to rest by Tsunayoshi's smile and the reminder that Mochida is still catering to him, regardless of the fact that the sling has come off.

As much as Tsunayoshi would have liked to spend some time free of work, schooling, studying, and their household problems with Takeshi, Takeshi needs to spend time with his friends, and Tsunayoshi didn't arrange for this field trip to happen so that he could have fun. The crowds of yelling kids happily surging around him, organizing themselves according to class and into buses, excited to set off on their field trip into the mountains also comes at an odd distance, like Tsunayoshi is a little offset from this reality.

(Ah, no, he doesn't want to see this again-)

Anyway, Tsunayoshi doesn't want anyone to die. Not having Takeshi around if Di Tella tries is probably the best way to assure that. Er - well. Mostly. He's not entirely confident in his ability to survive Di Tella, but since he's not planning to hurt Nerina, surely it won't come to that. It's just, if Takeshi gets involved, then he'll either get threatened and- or otherwise, Takeshi won't stand for Tsunayoshi being threatened, and then it'll come to 'even if it kills him' for Tsunayoshi, and that's-

Well, he's probably just being a little dramatic about having to go alone with his schoolmates
along, he thinks, falling in with the streams of students lining up to leave their bags in the side compartments of the bus that will take them up into the mountains. After all, just last school year, Haru had left his side for some time. Besides, he was able to exchange emails with her and Shoichi both this morning, although he has it on good authority that the cellular reception in the mountains leave something to be desired.

"If it's just a few days," he mutters to himself, "I can do that much." No, more like he has to do that much. Yeah, mostly likely he's just having a tantrum for being spoiled at having someone by his side constantly. Thank goodness everyone seems too distracted to pay much attention to him, so-

Ah. Something ominous is approaching.

Tsunayoshi feels a little resigned as he turns and watches the happy third years part like the red sea - those who were too unaware or otherwise not paying attention being carelessly kicked out of the way. They seem annoyed up until they turn and see that it's the Committee parting the crowds, and even more that that: Kyoya in fine form like the days before.

Delinquents from Yumei weren't the only ones who had taken notice of the lack of Kyoya hanging around. Especially the fact that he no longer chases Tsunayoshi through the crowded school halls and out classroom windows. There had been a lot of rumors and whispering going around the school that Tsunayoshi had been forced to overlook because it wasn't untrue, but also because he himself had been too busy dealing with his own problems.

A fading sickness, perhaps?

His appearance now should put any of those rumors to rest. As Tsunayoshi had noticed the other day, Kyoya's had to get his uniform refitted: he stands taller than the committee members that crowd around him, a wall between Kyoya and the plebeians. Normally such a thing would be to protect the princely person they were escorting, but that's a fallacy in this case: if anything, they're protecting those kids from Kyoya.

Normally Tsunayoshi would turn and run along with everyone else the moment Kyoya's eyes connect with his. There's no particular look in Kyoya's face, other than the way his sharp, slanted eyes are narrowed more than usual, the way they glitter even from this distance. He's definitely some kind of apex predator that's been provoked; if Tsunayoshi didn't know better, then he'd think it was by something even Kyoya couldn't take on face-to-face.

Well, something other than whatever gave him those sore teeth he's been nursing, anyway.

But seeing Kyoya out and acknowledging him after so long holds Tsunayoshi in place. Well, also because there's something hanging from Kyoya's fist. It's a bit recognizable, but Tsunayoshi's brain refuses to accept what his eyes are seeing. That's the excuse that Tsunayoshi will use for why he stands there gawking like an idiot while Kyoya bares down on him.

"Here," Kyoya says flatly, in that Kyoya manner of his with which a low and evenly spoken word can sound like the wrath of a thousand demons. He doesn't so much thrust the kid dangling from his hand at Tsunayoshi's chest so much as he hands him off with the expectation that Tsunayoshi will naturally catch the boy without hesitation.

Which. Tsunayoshi does, after all, yelping and staggering a bit under the unexpected weight of a four year old. The child is strangely passive about all of this, accepting both the hand off by one fist from Kyoya and Tsunayoshi's awkward fumbling without a scowl or complaint. "Senpai?" Tsunayoshi demands, a bit shrilly.
Kyoya looks deeply unimpressed, already turning away. "Look after that thing for me," he says without even slowing down or waiting for a reply.

*Just because Tsunayoshi crossdressed the once doesn't mean he wants to babysit children!*

"That thing!" Tsunayoshi echoes incredulously, and then startles a bit because he's just reaffirmed some pretty unkind words. But when he looks down at the boy clutched awkwardly under his armpits, a face much like Kyoya's looks back at him... though with none of that quality of an animal decided whether someone was worthy of eating or not. The physical resemblance is incredibly strong, although if Tsunayoshi isn't mistaken, this child is not Japanese at all, but Chinese.

Ah. There aren't any Chinese in Namimori, but Tsunayoshi suddenly realizes that Kyoya himself is of mixed blood.

But then, who is this child to him? As a Hibari, Kyoya must be related on his father's side, which means that he and this child must be related on Kyoya's mother's side. "Um," he says to the young boy watching him - ah. Though, no. Tsunayoshi might not have been around a lot of small children, but this one is - Tsunayoshi knows suddenly that if at all possible, he doesn't want to fight this child.

Pushing past that weird thought, Tsunayoshi says, "Are you senpai's younger brother?"

The child blinks large dark eyes up at Tsunayoshi from where he hangs placidly from Tsunayoshi's hands. He's intensely cherubic, pudgy cheeks and surprisingly long sooty lashes - a feeling that increases as he smiles. "It's nice to meet you," he says. "I'm Kyoya's grandfather, Fon."

"I-... it's 'Tsunayoshi.' Ah-" His accent is so nonexistent that there seems to be a vanishingly small chance that Fon somehow thinks 'grandfather' means cousin or nephew. Tsunayoshi stutters over it anyway, faintly wondering, "g-grandfather, as in...?"

But Fon hardly seems inclined to answer his question, content to dangle from Tsunayoshi's hold and peer up at him curiously. He feels oddly like the boy is staring right straight through him, but - ah. It's not bad? Tsunayoshi can't say that Kyoya would never hand him something dangerous, since he just did, but rather that so long as certain conditions aren't met, he's not actually in danger.

It's so much the feeling that Tsunayoshi is accustomed to feel from Kyoya himself that it's a bit disorienting.

Eventually Fon hums, and his curious expression turns pleasant. The heart in Tsunayoshi's chests gives an unexpected thump - hey. Come to think of it, it's hard to notice with that awful aura that hangs around him, but isn't Kyoya actually pretty handsome? It's just not until Tsunayoshi has gotten a chance to see someone who shares a lot of facial features give him a warm look that he's noticed.

Kyoya has just been so skilful at being dangerous and becoming a demon that it seems that Haru is the only one who has ever noticed before now.

Before Tsunayoshi can make heads or tails of this strange revelation, he gets elbowed by impatient people who want to board the bus now that the danger of Hibari Kyoya has passed. "Move it, Dame-Tsuna," the guy says, a bit annoyed but not really all that meanly.

"Ah-" He manages to hesitate for a moment longer, because surely Kyoya's... nephew? Kyoya's family member shouldn't be brought along on a school field trip, but leaving a kid standing around
is - and it's not like Tsunayoshi can stay behind. There are things he has to do. Reluctantly, he pulls Fon a little closer and boards the bus with the child still hanging from his grip.

"Well," he adds as he picks a seat a bit separate from where other cliques were starting to form. "I guess you're stuck with me for the time being, so please bare with it. Although I don't know what Kyoya-senpai meant by bringing you along - ah, not that it's bad! But it's kind of a school function."

But Fon doesn't seem to mind the implication that he shouldn't be here. Even though Tsunayoshi hasn't exactly been around a lot of small children, he thinks that they're usually sensitive to rejection, but Fon just smiles at him from the seat next to him. "It's been a long time since I did something like ride on a bus or go camping," he says.

Come to think of it, besides calling himself Kyoya's grandfather, he has an unexpectedly old way of speaking, too. It's almost enough to decide that Fon is just a kid playing at being a grandparent, the way some kids pretend to be samurai or sentai warriors.

"I'm pretty much a homebody, so this is new for me, too," Tsunayoshi says with a smile, relieved that Fon is pretty easygoing. Even though he can't imagine that Kyoya would really care if Tsunayoshi was delicate with a child so carelessly passed off, upsetting Kyoya's family member would likely cause undue irritation. "It's only recently that I've started leaving the neighborhood around my house. Though, I don't know that a school field trip really counts. It's only going up into the mountains."

"... the forests are full of frightening things, sometimes," Fon says, even as he twists to press his face to the window.

The smile kind of freezes on Tsunayoshi's face before he lets out an uneasy chuckle, brow pinched. It would be one thing to try to reassure Fon, but - the kid really doesn't seem scared or worried about it at all. Ahh. What kind of terrible things has that kid seen that stories of monsters in the woods don't impact him at all?

Tsunayoshi grew up on those stories, too. Of wolves and worst things in the woods outside Namimori. It wasn't until he'd done something irreversible that they'd stopped being scary.

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Even if it's just a short trip from the school grounds to the hotel cabins in the mountains, it's still long enough that Tsunayoshi's young seatmate falls asleep. At first he collapses against the window, and then Tsunayoshi winces over his head bouncing off it every time the bus hits a pothole; Fon looks particularly cherubic asleep, and so Tsunayoshi carefully tilts him the other way.

Somehow, it ends up with Fon using Tsunayoshi's lap as his sleeping place, which had left Tsunayoshi paralyzed with fear and indecision for most of the ride. Just about the time that Tsunayoshi decides that having a four year old sleeping on him isn't nearly as terrifying as he'd somehow made it out to be, they arrive at the outpost.

It's not all that unsurprising. It's only a twenty minute ride all together - more than long enough that they'd needed the buses, but short enough that no one becomes overly restless about it. Fon wakes up easily enough to a shake of his shoulder, but seems generally useless in the aftermath of his nap, yawning and knuckling his heavy, sleep glazed eyes.

Tsunayoshi ends up waiting until the rowdier kids are off and then takes Fon by the hand. Exiting
the bus is when he runs into his first problem though. It isn't as if they can allow the third years to run about unsupervised, regardless of the presence of the Disciplinary Committee; of course, most of the third year teachers had been freed up thanks to the field trip.

So it's perhaps unsurprising that the moment that Tsunayoshi steps off the bus with little Fon in tow, a teacher spots him.

"Sawada," she says, unimpressed, "this isn't the kind of thing to bring your little brother to!"

\textit{What part of Fon and Tsunayoshi look alike enough to be brothers!} That aside, he actually agrees with her, but it's not like he had a choice!

"Ah, it won't be a problem, I'll look after him myself," he says. "Fon-kun is well behaved, so…"

"As if I could let it go at that," she huffs. "Think about someone but yourself for once! Bringing a child along to a school trip without even trying to get permission! It'll be a bother for everyone else. Hand him over while I call his parent-"

Fon's small hand grips around Tsunayoshi's, and some kind of switch flicks in his head and in his heart. Normally, he'd go along with something like that, and be relieved. He has no experience himself looking after younger children and he doesn't really want to. Surely something like that should be left up to the adults? Nothing good is meant to come of this field trip, but, \textit{ahh…}

In the first place, this is Kyoya's family member whom Tsunayoshi was entrusted with for whatever reason. He's already suspicious toward the Hibari clan. And although Tsunayoshi feels that Fon falling asleep on him has more to do with Fon than anything like trusting Tsunayoshi to look after him… Fon has made his wishes known.

And if people wish to be at Tsunayoshi's side, then he makes it possible.

There is no fire or char or ash, no embers or bitterness or sulfur. There is no clarity or strange slowness or paths of destruction that end in blood. Tsunayoshi simply looks her in the eye, and says firmly, "I already said that it won't be a problem. It's an internal matter between this child's family and mine." The teacher blinks at him, and belatedly, Tsunayoshi remembers to reassure her with a smile.

For a long, bothersome moment, it doesn't seem to impact her at all, except that she doesn't keep speaking after he interrupted her. Then, gradually, a strange look crosses her face and her confidence wavers. "AAlright," she says, like she isn't sure why she's agreeing, "but I'm keeping my eye on you."

There's no way he can be bothered with some adult keeping an eye on him, but if that's how it has to be, then he won't complain for the time being. Relieved, Tsunayoshi dips into a shallow bow.

"Thank you very much for understanding," he says.

"Yeah - well, don't make me regret this," she huffs, crossing her arms across her chest and turning her attention back to the other kids coming off the bus. She resumes the head counting, as if someone could have gotten lost between the headcount they took before leaving the school and now. Well, they're probably sending the buses back to town, so making sure everyone gets off is important, too.

Tsunayoshi glances down at Fon, who is still clinging to his hand but now looking much more awake than he did earlier. Still, the child doesn't seem very perturbed about their run-in with the teacher, solemnly watching the other teens laughing as they collect in their cliques and start toward
the outpost office to sign in. Fon glances up as if he senses Tsunayoshi's attention and he's clear eyed and untroubled; he smiles, as if to reassure Tsunayoshi. It's a little strange to be on the other end of that.

"Well," Tsunayoshi says a bit dryly, glancing around, "I don't see Kyoya-senpai at the moment, but he's around somewhere." That much he knows without having to see evidence of it; there's a difference in how the third years behave when they know that Kyoya's around. It's not really a 'nervous' energy even as they get along with one another so much as it is a slightly tense and watchful one. "If you're coming with us to the cabins, then it's something like a ten minute walk from the check-in office to there."

It's only when Tsunayoshi goes to pick up the weekend bag that Nana had packed that he encounters the second problem.

"Um, Fon," he says, as Fon doesn't seem to be the sort of kid that he'd used '-chan' with, no matter how young he was, "did Kyoya happen to bring a bag for you as well?"

The look that Fon turns up at him is strangely knowing. "There's no need for him to," he says. "It's not Kyoya's place to look after me, after all."

Tsunayoshi really doesn't particularly care for the picture that's forming in his head regarding the Hibari clan's inner workings. He hums in reply, uneasy, because while he'd already decided for himself that Kyoya's parents weren't looking after him even as far as Nana looked after Tsunayoshi himself… "Kyoya's self sufficient, too," he mutters, "but that doesn't mean he shouldn't be looked after himself." Glancing down, he says, "It's the same for Fon, too, you know. Having someone to back you up is…"

Well, it's kind of a strange conversation to have with a kid. Instead of 'back up,' it really should be 'taking responsibility for' and 'looking after.' Sure, Tsunayoshi has the opinion that no matter how strong someone is, or how capable, they should have a place where they don't have to worry about that kind of thing, but for a child? They shouldn't be worrying about who that person is who is responsible for them.

And as little as Fon seems to need anyone to look after him, he still hasn't let go of Tsunayoshi's fingers.

Still this is a weekend trip out in the woods, and it'll cause problems if Fon doesn't have a change of clothing or a toothbrush. Come to think of it, his hair is a bit long and tied back into a braid, so a hairbrush will be necessary as well. Although Tsunayoshi had packed a comb for himself… in either case, handing Fon back in less than pristine condition after being entrusted with him sits poorly with Tsunayoshi.

Well, the threat of being bitten to death has something to do with it, too.

It turns out not to be such a large problem, since the check-in desk also has things like toothbrushes for sale. They don't have other amenities, like night clothes for a child Fon's size as they're cabins in the woods and not a hotel with a public bath. Apparently there is a separate 'bath house' but it's just showers with no actual bath to be found. It was the best way to provide so many people with a chance to be clean, apparently.

Although coming here is Tsunayoshi's own fault, he despairs a bit. Public bathing of any kind fails to appeal to a kid like him.

"Apparently you're assigned to Cabin C-2," the slightly harried girl at the check-in counter informs
him as he applies his name to the form. She gives him a tense smile as she hands over something that looks like a pamphlet, and then takes notice of Fon. "Um, since it seems you're the responsible one out of that cabin, please take responsibility for your cabin mates."

"What?" Tsunayoshi squeaks in shock, and then takes another look at the sign-in forms. Compared to the others, it really does appear that someone has arranged it for him to be the one who represents C-2! His cabinmates don't seem to be anyone he really recognizes, so they can't be kids who really bothered him much, but all the same-!

Her smile is slightly sympathetic, but unwavering as she hands over a few things from the gift shop. "Here, complimentary for your small guest."

He fumbles the lot and then blinks in bewilderment at the coloring books and activity kits, and then the impatient students behind him elbow him out of the way. Somehow Tsunayoshi doesn't have the feeling that Fon will be entertained by coloring books or children's activity kits at all. He's already too calm of a child, too confident. Weirdly mature, and no one Tsunayoshi wants to fight. But even so, how is Tsunayoshi supposed to look after Kyoya's family member, look for opportunities for 'something to happen,' and also wrangle his cabinmates?!

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Luckily, Tsunayoshi's impressions of his cabinmates was accurate. They're faces he sort of recognizes, meaning that he's seen them around campus, and while the boys don't seem impressed with having Tsunayoshi as their head, they don't really confront him about it, either. More or less, they seem pretty convinced that Fon will take up all of his time, and aside from complaining about being assigned to 'Dame-Tsuna' and not having agreed to sharing a small space with a kid, they more or less subsided and decided to enjoy their trip without causing problems.

Well, part of that is likely that they think Tsunayoshi will sic the Disciplinary Committee on them. He wouldn't. He hasn't once asked the Committee to come to his aid, but they don't know that. Actually, it's better that they don't know that, but it bothers Tsunayoshi a little to rely on his reputation. Rather than being afraid of whom Tsunayoshi might call on, if they could all get along honestly from the start…

"I guess Kyoya means for you to stay with me," Tsunayoshi muses as he looks at the beds. They're all western style, just like the ones at his house, but they're kept in a collective dorm room inside the cabin, fit for allowing the five of them to coexist more or less comfortably. Thankfully, there is a small kitchenette type area inside the cabin, although Tsunayoshi is pretty sure that they're meant to join up communally to have their meals. Still, the presence of running water inside the cabin is welcome.

There's only one bed left, in the darkest corner of the room, as the others have been claimed by the overnight bags the other boys have left before leaving to poke around and meet up with their friends again. Tsunayoshi drops his bag on it and looks down at Fon, who is no longer clinging to his hand but standing just as close as if he were.

Although Tsunayoshi has been an only child his entire life, and had lost his friends shortly after his fifth birthday, he bites his lip and looks down. "I guess that means Fon will have to share the bed with me."

Fon gazes up at him for a moment and then smiles, soft and grateful. "I don't think that would be appropriate, as we are not blood relatives, Sawada Tsunayoshi-kun. Although my body and my heart are that of a child, this one is a grandfather, after all." He clasps his hands together, one a fist and the other wrapped over it, and adds, "I will leave you to your rest."
After that intensely formal declaration, the boy turns his back and clearly means to leave the cabin entirely. *Is he trying to get Tsunayoshi killed?*

"Ah-! Wait a moment!" Tsunayoshi yelps. "Even if I heard you out, I can't really agree to that! I was the one entrusted with your care, after all!"

Fon pauses, glancing over his shoulder. "Perhaps you misunderstood to whom those words were being spoken," he suggests, a humorous quirk to that smile.

Well, that's-

"Th-that aside, then the best place to look after me would be at my side, wouldn't it?" Tsunayoshi asks quickly. Although he doesn't want to fight Fon, he can't imagine a *four-year-old* being effective in a battle to the death or anything, and if it's not to the death then Tsunayoshi would always find a way to come out on top for the sake of the people depending on him in the first place, Kyoya should understand him at least that well.

"Is that really how you feel about it, even after hearing that I'm a grown man?" Fon asks curiously, blinking.

He looks too cherubic, but - weirdly, Tsunayoshi's gut instinct hasn't really said a lot about it. It's a bit like Kyoya himself - it's a dangerous situation, but it's not exactly a danger that Tsunayoshi needs to take seriously. Feeling strangely harassed, Tsunayoshi says, "The fact that you're worried about it at all - or no, that you confessed like that, that means you're honorable, right? So there's nothing to worry about after all."

For a long moment, the child simply gazes at him with dark, secretive eyes that seem to see right through him. Regardless of what he says, there's no way that Tsunayoshi can see him as a grandfather, but - as someone who has seen a lot of terrible things? Who has gone through awful experiences? The same way that Tsunayoshi acknowledged himself as scum, but not the worst kind of scum: he recognizes that Fon is the same way, too.

What kind of awful things has a child of four years seen that he feels like someone with more life experience than anyone else that Tsunayoshi has ever met?

"In either case," Tsunayoshi adds gently, with a reassuring smile, "won't Kyoya rest easier if we're together the way he put us?"

After a moment longer, Fon heaves a surprisingly heavy sigh for a child. "You're right, of course," he allows with a pinched brow. "That child is certainly more anxious than he lets on. I'm grateful that you've noticed."

That's not a word that Tsunayoshi would have ever used to describe Kyoya on his own; but Kyoya certainly does expect things to remain in a certain order. He's just relieved that he's managed to convince Fon to stay without having to do something dangerous like trying to restrain him. In the first place, restraining someone that young and cute would make him feel like the worst kind of scum! On the other hand, he's really not all that confident in actually trying to restrain Fon. As much as his eyes tell him that Fon is just a cute four year old, his gut instinct is that something else entirely is going on here.

Luckily for everyone, even though it was far too early to sleep, one of the Disciplinary Committee kids came by with an overnight bag for Fon. Even though Tsunayoshi's just relieved and not annoyed by it's late arrival at all, he bows a lot and apologizes and seems uncomfortable with
Tsunayoshi trying to say that it's fine. Hopefully Kyoya won't be rough on him when he returns.

He brushes away the uncharitable thought that if Kusakabe were still around, the pack would have found its way into Tsunayoshi's hands almost immediately. It can't be helped if Kusakabe is working hard on his own in order to make Kyoya's life easier in his own way. Tsunayoshi should figure out some way to do something nice for him, too. Kyoya isn't an easy person to look after.

Tsunayoshi does think about the things that Fon has said, though, later that night after Fon is already curled up under the blankets and having stolen the single pillow and his cabin mates themselves have been tucked in for the night. Everyone is asleep aside from Tsunayoshi, who stares into the moon-stained darkness and wonders at the idea of someone with a hateful burden of experiences fit into the body of a child, so that when they say they are an adult, he can't find it within himself to argue with that.

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After their words with one another last night, Fon seems to have decided to give Tsunayoshi a break, and so he's a biddable child the next morning; he follows Tsunayoshi around peacefully, and they have breakfast with the other students without complaint, and he even finds the packet of activities that the girl at the check-in desk had given Tsunayoshi, and has taken up with a coloring book.

"It's not that you can't," Tsunayoshi says, bemused while watching him color, "but is it fun for a grown man?"

"One meditation technique is much like another," Fon says with a pleasant smile. It's still a strange thing to see on a face so much like Kyoya's. "But my heart is also that of a child like this, so it's simple enough to be pleased with such things. Being this age can sometimes come as a relief."

To go with his old man way of speaking, Fon also has a pretty amazing vocabulary, doesn't he. In either case, his amazing composure makes Tsunayoshi feel bad. A kid that young being haunted by those kinds of memories and experiences should be acting like the worst kind of brat. Tsunayoshi himself has behaved embarrassingly from time to time because of his own experiences, although for the most part he's managed to keep his head down, and he knows already that his life hasn't been nearly as bad.

"I-... is coloring really that good for calming down?" Tsunayoshi wonders, giving the other books a lingering look. Then- "Ah, no! I don't have time for that!" He can't just get caught up in Fon's pace, as pleasant as it is! This field trip is all his fault in the first place, so he should be trying to figure out a way of either ruining it for everyone or convincing Nerina to drop out of the election!

Fon peers up at him. "Getting desperate or in a hurry is a good way to make irreparable mistakes, Sawada Tsunayoshi-kun. Take a deep breath and consider your options calmly."

"I've been considering my options," Tsunayoshi says dryly; he's being coached by a kid! But although it's strange, he's a bit grateful that Fon has thought to try to help him. "It feels like I've done nothing but think things over and over and over again for weeks now."

"But have you done so calmly, or have you been feeling the pressure of making a decision this entire time?" he asks, blinking at him before returning his attention to the coloring book. "Even if there has been nothing immediately pressing you into a decision, the pressure that one exerts on oneself, through fear, through desperation, or through anger… it's just as likely to lead to a wrong choice."
"Ah."

Is Fon really a kid? He gives advice just like a knowledgeable adult, Tsunayoshi thinks, staring at him. He's received advice or admonishment from a variety of sources, but Fon doesn't sound anything at all like a child or a peer, even. He sounds more like Naoko, or Shioya, or Hideki up until that last man threatened to become a tyrant against Tsunayoshi. Is it true? Has Tsunayoshi up until this point been driving himself forward with nothing more than desperation and fear? From someone like Fon, that advice might have more merit than he'd normally credit it with.

Yeah, that might be true. Someone like Tsunayoshi can only do what he can in a cowardly way, frightened of everything and of losing things the most. Fear of his mother being hurt or killed, fear for himself, fear of himself, fear of getting close to others and of losing them at the same time. Fear of the people around him, fear for the people next to him, fear of the world outside Namimori and fear of being trapped inside these city limits.

Then what should Tsunayoshi do?

Although what Tsunayoshi has to do hasn't changed, there's a slight sense of relief at taking a second look at his choices. Regardless of being prepared to become capable of anything for the sake of his household - and getting Kyoko elected will avail him of the resources necessary to lighten the burden on Kyoya and strengthen his position - he still honestly doesn't want to do anything bad to Nerina. She's not a good person, but she's not a bad person either. If he has to… well, he won't have a choice. He can't let others suffer for his own weak convictions.

"Your mind and your body are fighting each other," Fon observes, having looked up from the book again. Tsunayoshi blinks at him, but Fon continues to watch him with eyes that seem to see right through him to the heart of the problem. After another moment, he sets the crayon aside and stands. "In order to bring the heart, the mind, and the body back into harmony…" He straightens. Despite being a child, he uses his body with grace and dignity, using controlled breaths as he guides it through what is unmistakably a martial arts kata, recognizable even to someone who doesn't know the art at all. "One must pull oneself into the center, and become the axis on which the world turns. Master that skill, and even with an underdeveloped body, one may become an irresistible force. The eye of the storm, so to speak."

He sounds a little amused to say that last line.

"That's great, ah - but I don't think I'm really suited to becoming an irresistible force that way," Tsunayoshi says dryly.

"Hmmm. Perhaps you are correct. Or rather, you will be correct so long as you hold that opinion," Fon says, coming to rest and looking at Tsunayoshi plainly. "But unless you try, you will never know if you are suited or not. I came all this way because I thought that child would have lived a lonely life without being able to gain comrades. Though it has prevented me from achieving my goal, I am not unhappy to be proven wrong."

"Those aren't the same things at all," Tsunayoshi huffs. "Besides, senpai only sees me as territory."

And territory that has been equally neglected as the rest of it.

Fon merely looks at him implacably for a long moment until he feels pressured to give in. After all, despite the appearance of his teacher, he's being given some valuable information, isn't he?

His stance is corrected and even though he wobbles and falls over a few times, Fon seems endlessly patient in guiding him through the kata until Tsunayoshi can do it himself. "Even if you stumble or fall," Fon says, "don't give up or start again. Even if you stumble a hundred times,
That's easy to say for a brat that's going back to the activity books! However, by this time Tsunayoshi has already passed through the hands of a few trainers, and Shioya's demand that he comply without complaint, so despite his ill humor about the whole thing, he decides to at least try. It's not as easy as it should be, though. Shioya has congratulated Tsunayoshi on becoming a worthy opponent, but there's a surprisingly large difference between boxing and whatever martial arts that Fon has been trained in. The slow shift between stances is where Tsunayoshi really struggles - he can move fast and precisely by thrusting his entire being into it, but force isn't really the aim here. He keeps at it until his frustrations with being so entirely clumsy drive him to distraction, and even - or especially - Fon scolding him doesn't help the matter. Perhaps sensing as much, Fon relents in time for the bell to ring, alerting the students that it's lunch time.

_Why am I even listening to some kid!_ Tsunayoshi howls in silent exasperation, yanking on his hair. But no - whatever Fon looks like, the thing that is seeing the world through his eyes isn't a child at all. Or at least, not any more so than Tsunayoshi, who has come to determine the cost of a human life based on his own choices and values. If doing something like that has made adults treat him like a peer who will understand their demands and threats, then Tsunayoshi can probably justify that Fon is much the same.

Or rather, that Fon is far above him, as he's doubtlessly seen and decided much more terrible things than Tsunayoshi alone.

He'd be happier knowing that Kyoya had someone like this involved if he had the impression that Fon's been involved in Kyoya's life at all, instead of saying things like 'come all this way' and not even knowing that Kyoya has managed to count the Committee and Tsunayoshi and his household among the people willing to back him up.

For all that Fon seems to love Kyoya, Tsunayoshi has his own ideas about how that even counts for something, and not being there makes it not count at all.

It's at lunch that Tsunayoshi overhears about the 'test of courage' that Nerina is organizing. His stomach falls a bit and his appetite is more or less ruined; it's a popular activity, especially in Namimori. There's an annual test of courage based out of Kokuyo Land ever since it got abandoned and no one has made use of the land since. Thank in part to delinquents who had frequented the place immediately after it was shut down, the entire place had an eerie atmosphere and going there near dark was sure to have everyone hearing inexplicable noises. No one had thoroughly investigated it at night, and during the day time it was too difficult to sneak past the patrol of officers.

Obviously having a test of courage in the woods run by students would have a lot of people completing it, and feeling good and happy about themselves. Nerina's popularity will increase by quite a lot in the wake of that.

Tsunayoshi feels himself beginning to panic and tries to force himself to breathe normally, clenching his fists in the bottom of his shirt. Fon is right; he can't just pressure himself into acting out of desperation. But neither can he easily figure out what to do about this on his own - the weather seems like it'll stay clear, and being a warm night, there won't be anything like that to disrupt the test.

… there are the stories that everyone always tells about the forest, and the things that live there. But Tsunayoshi won't be able to figure it out on his own, so this calls for back-up.
Despite the plan being that he'll be alone for the duration of the field trip, it only takes a few moments after he's determined that Fon is sufficiently distracted for him to catch Takeshi's eye. Takeshi's entirely too reliable. If Tsunayoshi's instincts are good, then so are Takeshi's, because he manages to shake off both his baseball friends and Mochida and meet up with Tsunayoshi in the privacy of the surrounding woods.

Takeshi's arm has finally come out of the sling, although Tsunayoshi is able to see that it's still tender and being used cautiously. Takeshi seems to take no real notice of he as he eagerly approaches, ducking tree branches and grinning.

"Tsuna!" he greets, and immediately slings his arm around Tsunayoshi's shoulders.

Tsunayoshi startles a bit before settling under the weight. He's spent years only getting the occasional kind touch from his mother, so even just the slight lapse of a day is enough to make him uneasy about it. But in the end, there's nothing scary about Takeshi clinging to him.

"You've heard about the test, right?" Tsunayoshi asks, peering up at him.

"I have! It sounds like a lot of fun," Takeshi says brightly, but immediately gets serious. "But it's more like 'it'll put a cramp in our goals,' right? I thought so, too."

It's not that sharp, wild look of the Sports Fest, when Takeshi had suddenly turned into something feral and provoked, but it's a serious look all the same - the one he might wear for a game. Tsunayoshi suddenly thinks that he and Haru should go to all of Takeshi's games, and see him off to bat. That's something to look forward to in the future.

That he's taking this matter as seriously as that makes Tsunayoshi relax. "Yeah, more or less," he agrees. "Come on, let's find a spot with some reception and give Haru a call. Maybe she'll have some ideas about what to do."

In the end, Takeshi is the one that points out a likely place for Tsunayoshi to be able to receive a signal on his phone, but even then, he has to hoist Tsunayoshi up on his shoulders. Any concerns about Takeshi's shoulder are easily laughed off. "It's my legs doing the lifting," Takeshi says from between Tsunayoshi's knees.

That doesn't sound entirely correct when regardless of what's doing the lifting, Tsunayoshi is sat upon his shoulders, but he holds the phone up and puts it on speaker when he realizes he can get a signal out. The quicker they're done with this, the quicker he can get off Takeshi's shoulders.

Unfortunately, the call doesn't do much good. Haru's idea is more or less to throw out fresh meat and attract some dangerous predators, like the wolves or bears said to inhabit the forest - where would they get fresh meat?!

The communal meals are mostly vegetarian and fish! - or otherwise dress up as monsters and crash the test of their own accord.

Tsunayoshi is far from convinced of his ability to do costuming on Haru's level. It'll be too embarrassing because he'll end up dressed in a sheet and shouting 'boo.'

Her third suggestion to sabotage the cooking of dinner by puncturing the propane used to cook everything is so utterly alarming that Tsunayoshi shuts that suggestion down point blank. "We'll think of something, Haru," he promises instead. "Thank you very much for the suggestions!"

Thankfully Haru doesn't seem to sense this as the brush off that it is. If she were here herself, then Tsunayoshi is certain that they would have done either or both of her first two suggestions, but - well, thankfully it's just the two of them who understand just what it is that death is. They won't be
careless with the lives of their year mates.

"We should get back before we're missed," Takeshi observes, his eyes sharp as he looks the direction of the communal lunch. Looking back to Tsunayoshi, he adds, "We'll keep thinking about it and regroup before the test, okay?"

"Alright," Tsunayoshi agrees, because Takeshi is right after all, but somehow he just doesn't feel optimistic about the whole thing.

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He's right not to be optimistic about it. Ahh. His ears are ringing, his hands are numb, and Tsunayoshi realizes for the first time that conflagrations are not meant to be caged by bone and blood.

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Chapter End Notes

Fon: I'm Kyoya's grandfather

Tsunayoshi: that sounds wrong but I don't know enough about children to dispute it.

* Fon's sense of propriety is kind of weird. Although he really is an man with a grandchild he's looking after, he's also four. Even if he were inclined to be a pedophile, at four anyone else just wouldn't be interesting that way. The theoretical knowledge of sex is there, but like?? it's?? weird and gross and boring?? It should come as no surprise that Fon was a serious child, though.

* After wishwashing over the age that the Arcobaleno should be, I settled on 'four.' In canon, they're toddlers at around two, and that remains true for CanonVerse, I had to think of what I found to be most realistic. A four year old is mostly able to do things for themselves, but would be interfered with by adults in the area for sure, so that's what I went with.

But yes, please accept that this is an AU~ and what happens in CanonVerse is not necessarily connected to ChromaVerse! Like flame techniques, for example!

But also: please take the time to imagine Chroma!Reborn sassily telling Canon!Reborn to call him senpai lmao.

* I-Pin totally exists, but she fails to meet the requirements for coming to Namimori so she had to stay behind.
"A few months ago," Kyoya had said, "you were willing to die for it."

And he was, he has been, he is, but what no one - not even Tsunayoshi himself - has cared to acknowledge is the fact that Tsunayoshi is even more prepared to kill for it.

No.

Kill for the sake of the people he can't live without. Say, Kyoya-kun. You should know that I like you. Won't you treat yourself well with that in mind and be more considerate of my feelings, too? Look at this color that's become painted on for your sake.

But - ahh, no, Tsunayoshi knows the only one responsible for putting that shade on his hands is himself. The one who is scum is him, after all. But wouldn't he be even worst scum if he held back? Or is he just making excuses for himself and making himself out to be better than he is for the sake of his own weak, pathetic heart?

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Despite going aside with Takeshi and trying to find a solution with him and Haru, the time still manages to get away from Tsunayoshi. There's still Fon to look after - or be looked after by - and somehow he manages to keep Tsunayoshi occupied until dinner. By then, it's too late to interfere with the Test of Courage with any kind of plan - the council members who have come along, as well as the teachers who are involved, have already done their part in setting it up.

The rest of the third years have all grouped up in a clearing not far from the cabins, before a path that leads deeper in the the woods. It's notably in an area they were told to avoid when they first got here, so - that Nerina has been planning this for some time. Of course someone like her would have people she could talk to and depend on in times like this.

Obviously calling Haru wasn't enough. Tsunayoshi really has to reach out and make full use of everything he has at his fingertips to further the goal of protecting the people who have come to his side.

Even though it's easier to give a halfhearted effort and then say he did his best and 'oh well'... whether people know they're depending on him or not, he hates the idea that he's let them down so easily. Isn't that why he started to reject others in the first place? If he can't even help them to begin with, then he should let them know quickly so they won't waste their time and be disappointed with
"There's no reason to be anxious," Fon says at his side. "It's just students and the staff in the woods, after all."

"Ah - that's not… thanks, Fon," Tsunayoshi mutters, because while it's true that there are eerie noises like screams and hoots and howls going on in the woods, both of the strange sort and the kinds of shrill cries that girls and less composed boys would give when startled… that's not what has his stomach hurting and his palms sweaty.

Tsunayoshi really has been skating by easily this entire time - thinking that he has time, that so far he's managed to more or less protect his friends and shield them, that he can figure out what he means to do in life to become worthy of someone they want to stand besides. The idea that they'll some day look at him and think that he didn't do his best… that he failed them somehow… that fills him with an icy terror.

… wait, no. That icy terror … that's his gut instinct acting up again. Tsunayoshi blinks, and realizes that while he was sulking, Fon has left for - what purpose? He thinks he vaguely remembers Fon saying something after Tsunayoshi had weakly accepted his attempt to reassure him, but -

"Tsuna!"

He looks around at the familiar voice of Takeshi using that name. He looks anxious, too - more than can be explained by the fact that neither of them had been able to do anything about the Test of Courage. Somehow, Takeshi has managed to escape his underclassmen from the baseball club, who would normally be the ones to accompany him and Mochida into the walk.

"Takeshi, what's the matter?" he asks, hoping somehow that Takeshi will be able to dispel the anxiety trembling through his limbs as usual.

"Me? You mean that's not you?" Takeshi asks in disbelief, his amber eyes wide and eerie in the odd lighting.

Before Tsunayoshi can adequately address that weird question, past the weird howls and screams and moans coming from the test in the woods, Tsunayoshi hears a popping, barking noise that suddenly hushes the uneasy winds that have been stirring the pine forest inside his chest. There are needles on the ground, sodden but disturbed, under which something smoldering lays.

And for whatever reason, Tsunayoshi turns toward the noise that still haunts his uneasy sleep, and then he runs toward it. Ahh. Of course it would be something like this that makes him feel so awful. How had he not realized that something like this would happen?

"Ah! Tsuna!"

Of course Takeshi is quick enough to catch up with him - he has longer legs and he's fitter for running to boot, given his homerun streaks. Of course he'll catch up to Tsunayoshi, even though Tsunayoshi is running with terror in his heart and smoke in his lungs that can't even choke him.

"Tsuna sure is interesting," Takeshi says between breaths, "running towards gunshots instead of away from them!"

He'd like to wait for a moment and demand to know how Takeshi knows what a gunshot through a silencer sounds like, given that his family seems to deal mostly in swords and even when the men in police uniforms corner thugs on the streets, there aren't a lot of gunshots, but reaching his
destination is the more important problem. That and the icy terror.

It's pretty obvious when they're coming upon the scene of the crime, as Takeshi and Tsunayoshi are running through a dark forest at night, away from where the trees had been lit up. Thankfully, the moon was bright and the skies were clear enough that even Tsunayoshi doesn't trip badly enough to topple him. Those troublemakers had managed to corner their quarry more than far enough away from the noisy students that the flashlights wouldn't be noticed, or the shots, really, but - ah.

Tsunayoshi has experienced something like this once before. The world sharpens, the shadows of the nights pale, and then-

It's a handful of men - one, two, three, specifically for Kyoya who stands between them and Nerina and Di Tella who lays on the forest floor, bleeding. Kyoya only has one tonfa, his left arm hanging uselessly. There's blood - on his hand, dripping from limp fingertips, glistening almost black where it flows down the side of his face thanks to the poor lighting, his teeth bared. Another man to hold onto Naito, a fifth to keep beating the man that follows that kid. Six, seven, eight with his back to where Tsunayoshi stands, and the gun held laxly, confidently, in his hand beside his thigh.

The smell. It's definitely that smell. That bitter note of a fired gun, and iron, and salt. Nerina in tears. Di Tella unmoving. Naito too scared to struggle while something cracks. And Kyoya, who even shot, tries to shield that useless person.

The ember that's been threatening to burn this whole world tells Tsunayoshi now: harm has befallen the family.

Take your retribution.

If the only thing standing against a fire and the world it wants to ravage is bone and blood, then it, too, is consumed.

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It's awful what has happened to Nerina. It's awful what has happened to Di Tella and the man that follows Naito. "We knew you'd come to his aid," the man with the gun on Kyoya is saying, and then: "We knew that your safety would be that man's first priority." How awful to be attacked like this, to have friends and family hurt for their sake.

Ahh. But as much as Tsunayoshi feels sorry for them, he only cares about one thing: that family member of his that has put himself in danger's way simply because it's his desire to ride herd over the herbivores in his territory.

"This is a Hibari brat, isn't he?" the other says about that family member of Tsunayoshi's that has caused him to get involved.

"That thing? He's a rotten, unsightly branch sticking off the main tree," another says, smirking. "We're practically doing them a favor."

And well? Well? Well? What should Tsunayoshi do about that? Ahh. It's bad. Everything is bad. It's so bad that Tsunayoshi's badness is just such a small, pathetic thing, barely noticeable beside it. What he should do... well, that's obvious, isn't it.

Kyoya is a wild, feral thing, injured, its leg stuck in a trap that has crush the bone, without even the chance to chew it off and escape of his own accord. Back in a corner. Blood, blood, blood. He resists looking beyond those men for a long moment, but the hateful violet gleam of his eye when
his resolve wavers is obviously meant to tell Tsunayoshi to get himself out of here, but - ahh. Tsunayoshi is awful, hateful scum. If that guy wanted him not to get involved, then he should have kept his nose out of it first.

He takes the hands that Shioya taught to guide and misdirect force and strikes, and he seizes the man's hand around that weapon and turns it against its wielder. It's different when it's a weapon and not a fist, but ahhhhh, this is a kind of weapon that Tsunayoshi has handled before. He already knows how it works. He would have fumbled and failed doing this the first time, but with Shioya's training, it's a simple thing to aim that weapon upwards and force the trigger to pull.

All of this, he's already done it before. It's a familiar feeling, the recoil, the crack of the gun, loud despite the silencer. The dead body's muscles spasming and then relaxing all at once. Foul, foul, foul.

(People who attack the tender, vulnerable members of a person's family to get to them are less than scum that isn't even worthy of being stepped on.)

Just like the ones that forfeit their lives before, these scum are too stunned by the source of the danger to react quickly when Tsunayoshi twists that gun free and then without hesitation lifts it again. The mess of bone and hair and skull that erupts from that man who has Kyoya at the wrong end of his gun - it's too easy of a passing for scum like him. Everything is happening so slow, and yet - there are a lot of them. His awareness stretches. Tsunayoshi stretches. The sudden explosion of a raging forest fire in his head and in his heart has blanketed the world in a heavy coat of gray ash, and against that the targets of his retribution are bright and hot. His eyes throb. His stomach churns.

Tsunayoshi casts his body to the side and mostly evades the gun aimed at him, although something bright sparks across his face. There's Kyoya to consider, too, who has thrown himself back into the thick of it the moment that man's head exploded into gore.

But surprise or not, there are six more men with guns, and Tsunayoshi has to choose between saving his own life and Kyoya, and falling prey. And so he dodges one way to avoid a gun aimed toward him, and gets pistol whipped for his efforts. It feels like the world explodes in hot white shards, shattering. His already throbbing head cracks. His neck gets worse, when his head snaps back, already in too much agony to really register the strike that knocks it back.

His brain feels like something liquid and loose to slosh out of his skull as he struggles back up onto his hands and knees. There's shouting, but it comes at a distance. A body hits the ground next to him, and it's one of the men, although even if Tsunayoshi had seen their faces, he wouldn't be able to tell which this was with only a bloody ruin to show for it.

Tsunayoshi's hand goes out for the gun when the clearing explodes - or something does. There's no force to the sudden blossom of hot fire that bursts in, licking hot and hungry through the fight and making the skin on Tsunayoshi's face feel as though it's cracking and peeling. Or no, though it seems like it should be hot, but there's no smell of smoke or burning though the flames consume all the same.

Although his body feels as though it's barely holding together, as if all that makes Tsunayoshi himself will slip and pour out of him like an upturned glass, he forces him to rise and meet this new threat. It doesn't matter who he has to kill, or even if he has to die himself so long as Kyoya has no guns aimed at him and Takeshi isn't noticed in the confusion.

But for a split second, when he sees from where the flames originated, he almost mistakes that person as Kyoya. The man's expression is utterly impassive, and almost entirely serene for all that
he has his hand gripped tight around the throat of one of the thugs. Many times have people called Kyoya some kind of Demon, as if he's some oni or spirit, although Tsunayoshi himself has never really believed it. This man, however; the feeling that he gives off is definitely that of a higher existence. He could easily be a kami.

Even if he is a kami, if he is a threat then Tsunayoshi will also kill him or die trying.

He says something soft in a sing-songing language, and though his hand, which holds the man by the throat, does not so much as tremble, though he does not scowl or snarl, there is the sense of an undeniable towering rage barely held at bay. Almost immediately, he follows up with, "These are people who are under my protection. The ends of the earth will not shelter you should another attempt be made on them. Please. Go back to your leader and inform him. Doubtlessly, he will not recognize my name. Think deeply as to why my enemies do not speak of it."

At that, he lets go of the man, who stumbles and falls to the ground and immediately flails and struggles to escape. There are only two false starts before he gets his feet under him and charges blindly into the forest, in the opposite direction of the campsite that the Chinese man came from.

"Oh? That's lenient, isn't it?" Kyoya asks, tense and sharp enough to slice open any number of throats on the edges of his words. "You gave such a grand statement for a flashy bit of doing nothing."

The man so full of devouring fury that blossomed such a deep, beautiful red glances at Kyoya, and the same light glimmers deep in his eyes for a long moment before smoldering to charred black. He smiles, and says, "but Kyoya and his friends only left the one, so settling for a message will have to do. If that leader of theirs gets no information whatsoever, then they'll grow curious and send someone else." He glances around the clearing, and then goes to Nerina's side. She still clings to the fallen form of Di Tella. There's a growing black patch on his white shirt.

It seems as though that man isn't an enemy after all, and what little flagging strength that Tsunayoshi had managed to gather collapses. Not far from his side, Kyoya stands, ragged and injured and wild and feral under the moonlight, his eyes burning bright violet. No longer with a gun aimed at his face, he doesn't look nearly as dire, and so Tsunayoshi looks onward. Beyond him is Takeshi, chest heaving and a branch from a tree clutched in his hand. It's nothing at all like the way he would hold a baseball bat. It looks freshly torn, and there's something matted on the thick end where it connected to a trunk. He's still standing over the fallen form of a man, but his eyes are clear and bright. Nearby, Naito is checking on the unconscious form of his fallen bodyguard.

"You guys," Naito says, but only that, lapsing back into silence.

"This one will survive if he's seen to immediately," the Chinese man says, even as he rips open Di Tella's shirt and knots it over the place where all the blood seems to be coming from. The moan that Di Tella gives is sick and hurt and Tsunayoshi's breath catches in his throat, remembering- "Hold this down tightly," he instructs Nerina, who hiccups, and then does as she's told.

He turns and meets Tsunayoshi's eyes directly. The resemblance between Kyoya and this man who is only a few years older than Tsunayoshi's senpai is truly uncanny, except that Tsunayoshi can't ignore that this man's eyes once shone a red far more hungry than the fire that burns in his own chest.

"Your phone," he says. "Take your friend Yamamoto with you and call someone. Even your mother will do. If this man doesn't get an ambulance quickly, he will die."

Nerina sobs at that, and Di Tella makes another small hurt noise under the force with which she
"Tsuna," Takeshi says, and when Tsunayoshi looks at him, he's reaching out with his free hand. The branch is still clenched tightly in the other, as if at any moment more enemies will show themselves and Takeshi will have to kill again. Tsunayoshi is one big awful mess, but he reaches out and lets Takeshi haul him to his feet.

"I guess it would be bad if that guy died," Takeshi says as they quickly leave back toward the camp site. That place they found that had good cell reception is closer to the campsite than the secluded area that those thugs had managed to corner Nerina and Naito in.

Ahh. She really is the worst. Tsunayoshi keeps seeing it: that moment he came upon them, those guns aimed at Kyoya but specifically that one level directly at his face. Kyoya's moves had been ragged compared to how he usually was in a fight. Why had he been alone in the first place to put himself in between a student of Nami Middle and a threat to their life?

Maybe it wouldn't have been so awful if his first time seeing a gun pointed at someone he cares about hadn't come long after he'd used them himself on another human being.

Kyouya is capable and strong and independent and self-sufficient, but he's not 'immortal' or a kami, after all. Or no, even a kami has things that they'll struggle with and get defeated. No matter how strong a person is, there can be times and places where they'll be overcome. That's why small animals have to band together so they can pool their strengths and watch each other's back. That's why wolves hunt in packs.

Even bears and tigers, who are able to hunt alone, often die at the hands of humans.

Thank goodness Nana is home to pick up the phone when he calls. Thank goodness that she keeps her head and instructs him firmly. Thank goodness Takeshi is there so that in the aftermath, when Tsunayoshi's aching, throbbing body and loose and sloshy insides give out on him, he doesn't topple from atop those shoulders and break his neck hitting the dirt. Thank goodness he's caught and Takeshi doesn't drop him when he vomits everything he's ate out onto the ground.

"Ah," Takeshi says only, moving his foot a bit to make sure it doesn't splash on him. "Jeez. Dad said some people would react like this. It's okay, Tsuna. Those guys were definitely bad. We'll have to do something about you recklessly running in like that - I mean, my own temper didn't hold when that guy hit you, so-"

Tsunayoshi gags on bitter bile and excess saliva. "Sorry," he says, thinking now of how Takeshi must have felt. Even if he'd moved against Mochida in such a way because Mochida insulted his honor regarding his feelings toward Tsunayoshi… "Sorry. I didn't mean to worry you, it was just-" he gags, seeing it again. It feels like something is hammering away at his flesh and bone and skull and self. The kind of inferno that churns inside his heart and inside his head was never meant to be contained by bone and blood, he knows this now. It's going to kill him.

"It's just," Tsunayoshi says, feeling his heart hammer through him and shake the whole world with it, "if they'd killed Kyoya, I don't think I would have ever stopped."

Takeshi's hands, which are holding him up, don't flinch or even twitch or tighten.

"Is it really okay," he says, sniffling, leaking tears and mucus and bitter, burning bile, "for me to be this way?"
If someone takes the people close to him away from him, then there isn't anything in the whole entire world that Tsunayoshi would hold himself back from destroying. Isn't it true that the heart that beats inside his chest is twisted and sick and dark? It certainly seems that way to him. But he can't help it. It has to stay being there if he is to survive, and he has to survive because otherwise—

"Well," Takeshi says after a moment, "whether it's okay or not, that's how you are? So if you're aware of it, let's work hard together to not let things come to that, okay? That's what you said when it came to me, so it's only natural…"

His knees knock and then give out from under him, and a fresh flood of tears pour out as he is pathetically clutched close. Ahh. He's bad.

But the people who are close to him are bad, too, and after all: they deserve a home to return to as well. So then. That's just how it is.

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At some point in time, Tsunayoshi seems to come back to himself. It's not like he actually went anywhere, but… the entire time, all he did was cling to Takeshi's shirt like a little kid while Takeshi did all the hard work of letting the teachers know that something had happened and the authorities were coming. He managed to even talk to Hoshino and get the Disciplinary Committee on the case, going out into the woods to catch up to their taichou.

And after that, he took Tsunayoshi back to his cabin and left him on the bed while he runs interference. That's where Tsunayoshi has been all this time: sitting alone in the dark. Or not alone, he realizes suddenly. At some point in time, although Tsunayoshi isn't sure when or from where, Fon has shown up. He wasn't in the cabin to begin with, and Tsunayoshi barely even noticed Takeshi himself leaving, but - ah. That's good. Tsunayoshi had forgotten all about Fon. Thank goodness that kid hadn't found his way into the woods where he might have seen something that can't be forgotten.

He's fiddling with something in his hands, Tsunayoshi realizes, and then with eerie precision, Fon seems to sense the weight of his attention and looks up at him with those dark eyes, like cold coals. Like charcoal and soot.

The cherubic face of Kyoya in miniature sends tremors through his charred bones, and for a moment all of Tsunayoshi rings with the echoes of *take your retribution*. But he has, it's done and gone and there's nothing left for him to bother with.

"They're saying there was a hunting accident in the woods and someone got hurt," Fon says.

"A hunting accident," Tsunayoshi echoes, and yes, he supposes so. Thinking back on the thinks he'd heard but hadn't paid attention to, those people… they'd baited Nerina out by going after Naito. That's certainly a kind of hunting, hut, *ahhh*, Nerina isn't the type that should be getting hunted. "More like poaching," he says.

Fon looks at him for a moment, and then he smiles, soft and secretive. "Yes," he agrees, "a poaching accident. I'm sure the appropriate authorities will follow up on that." Then he holds out his hands and says: "here. For you."

What Fon hands him is a bracelet clearly made from a crafts kit for children, but it gives the impression if having a lot of skill put into it, with an unexpected eye for color composition and tight, neat little knots. It's just plastic and elastic, but somehow it's beautiful.
"Prayer beads have some connection with religion, but you might find it more helpful to count them one by one in times when you are fearful or under pressure so that you can easily find your center again," Fon says, smiling. "It's only a crutch, or a training wheel, so don't become too reliant on something that will come to hold you back."

This would be the time that he would normally admit that he's never managed to learn how to ride a bike without training wheels, but instead he just stares at the bracelet clutched in his shaking fingers. His hands are clean and pale despite the color he knows is there. The flesh still throbs from the kick back of the gun, and the bone trembles from the awful beat of his heart.

This had not been a matter of Tsunayoshi being too weak to stop someone from doing something terrible without going to such lengths. He had simply thought: they pulled a gun on Kyoya and so they don't deserve to live.

And because of that thought, it had been an easy thing for him to do. It had been easy. It's always been so easy, he thinks, and that's what shocks him so badly about it. Just like before, the fact that those men have bled out and died - or no, at least two of them didn't have to bother with 'bleeding out.' That third one might have. And he doesn't care, because they'd made their own bed, but he's startled himself quite badly over being able to do this kind of thing without hesitation. It needed to be done, or rather he'd wanted it done, and then this dame kid had done it.

He's no good for anything, not even as the butt of a joke, but when it comes to this? Ahhh. His hands shake and he even threw up about it, and if he were to be allowed somehow to make that decision again, not a single thing he did would be different.

Regrets are pointless for something like him.

Shakily, Tsunayoshi smiles back. "Thanks, Fon-kun," he says. "I'll treasure it." The band is elastic and it stretches over his hand to fit his wrist neatly. Even if he were to manage to grow huge, he'll be able to wear it.

Fon blinks twice, like he's been taken aback. "It's merely a trinket," he points out.

"Ah - even so," Tsunayoshi says, his heart and bones and blood wobbling, like nitroglycerin ready to pop at the slightest disturbance, "it's the first time a friend has ever given me a gift, and you worked hard on it, and thought about me and helped, so... a small thing or not, it's something important."

That kid's expression is strangely blank, even as he stares up at Tsunayoshi as if seeing him anew. And then Fon rapidly begins to resemble a tomato. Reaching up to grasp his red cheeks in both hands, he seems put out over his own reaction. "I forgot how soft a child's heart is," he says, peeved.

There's no way that Tsunayoshi can laugh so soon after what he's done, but a single hiccup shakes him like he'd tried. Fon's scowling, pouting face really is a lot like Kyoya's. It's cute. "The people you spend your time with should learn better manners," he says, shutting his exhausted eyes, "if they've been neglecting to say 'thanks for your hard work.'"

Soon enough after that, the authorities arrive, and Takeshi tattles on him so that Tsunayoshi is taken along on the ride - not the emergency vehicle that takes Di Tella, who might be dead, but the one with Kyoya himself, and Naito, and Naito's bodyguard ride back in.

It's only at that time that Tsunayoshi realized that before being smashed in the head with a gun, a bullet had grazed his face. They stick plasters on his face and where his lip has split and swollen,
and give him a cold compress for the way he has a black eye. They try to do the same for Kyoya, but he's still feeling cornered and harrassed and more feral than usual, so he keeps making frightening faces at them. Apparently the bullet is still in his arm, and he'll need surgery at the hospital to have it taken out.

Naito sits too quiet and too still, looking at not much of anything.

At the hospital itself, they shine lights in Tsunayoshi's eyes some more, and then stick him through a machine. Nana is waiting when he gets turned loose in the waiting room, and the awful, drawn look on her face is quickly erased when she sees him. The hug she wraps him in is crushing, but if anything… it seems to soothe the way his body has continued to shake in the aftermath. It feels like Nana's hug smothers it until it's bury deep inside him and no threat to anyone anymore.

What a foolish thing to believe in. Even after months of silence, it only takes a split second for it to flare back up, and there's nothing growing inside his chest to hide it from the wind again. It won't take much to send it into a towering blaze again.

"I had a feeling you could handle anything that you had to face since then," she says, "but seeing you… I'm glad. I'm glad you're okay, Tsu-kun."

Tsunayoshi thinks about what Takeshi said after that phone call he made to her, and relaxes. "I'm okay," he says.

Since it seems to be convenient, the men in police uniforms take his statement at the hospital. Mindful of what Fon said about the situation, Tsunayoshi gives some kind if confused story about hearing something strange in the woods and maybe scaring off the poachers. None of it makes any sense, probably, and he's not even sure if it matches anyone else's story, but it's the one he gives and the one he sticks with. The men in police uniforms eventually get tired of listening to his pathetic story and leave it at that.

It's only been a few hours since it happened, so it's probably too soon to know if Di Tella will be alright, but Tsunayoshi finds himself wandering around the hallways all the same, looking for any sign at all that such high ranking individuals are here.

He finds Naito first.

"Ah, Naito-kun," Tsunayoshi says, seeing him in a hallway with his back to the wall. It looks as though he's been stuck in a corner, although certainly no one would have told him to stay there in the hallway where he might cause blockage if someone needed to come through.

The boy startles, looking around at him. "Ah, Dame-Tsuna," he says reflexively, and then seems to hear what he's say and throws his head back and begins to cackle. The noise crashes and shatters and breaks in that echoing hallway, empty for the time being except for the two of them. Tsunayoshi should feel more disturbed by the scene except that he recognizes it. This could have been him if Nana hadn't been there for him. There's no one here for Naito.

"What the hell is that," Naito says, covering his face with his hands and sinking down the wall. His knuckles are white. "Tsuna wasn't useless or good for nothing… that was me."

"In the first place," Tsunayoshi says, "I was only able to do something because they were surprised." He stares down at Naito's long form, hunched into a crumpled ball of misery at the bottom of the wall. "Secondly, I've already done this before, anyway." Looking around the
hallway, he recognizes that they're in the hall where long-term patients are kept. They really had been beating that adult servant of Naito's when Tsunayoshi had come upon the scene. He hadn't really taken note of it, honestly. He can't guess at how severe the beating was. This location certainly doesn't seem promising, though.

The crumpled form of Naito shivers and shakes. His breath is harsh and jagged. There's no mother to come and hug and reassure him, and thinking about the Tomaso family in general, Tsunayoshi is sure that goes for the rest of them regardless of if they appeared. If anyone were going to come to Naito's rescue, it would be Nerina, but Nerina is undoubtedly more concerned with the fate of her bodyguard - or no, she probably needs soothing herself. There's no way anyone can expect her to soothe someone else with the situation being what it is

Honestly, he's in no shape for it himself, but Tsunayoshi steps over and bends down and awkwardly pats the wild, twisted style that Naito keeps his hair in.

"It's not that you weren't capable of doing anything," he says, thinking back to that moment when he'd first done That Thing. "But that no one should expect you to do anything, Naito-kun. Those were adults. They were meaning to kill someone. It's the fault of the selfish adults who are supposed to be looking out for us that it happened at all. 'Doing something' isn't supposed to be the responsibility of kids like us."

"But isn't that how it is," Naito says, hiccupping into his curled arms and knees. "Aren't we always the ones who have to do something? Even Hiba-chan…"

It takes Tsunayoshi a moment to recognize that as Naito probably talking about 'Hibari.' How far below bottom feeders does Kyoya consider Naito to allow that kind of nickname to go unchallenged? That's more or less calling him a tree for things to roost in.

But Naito is right, after all. Tsunayoshi has seen it up close. There's some reason why the adults in Namimori stand back and watch the children the way they do. Ahh. Something like that can't be allowed to continue. He's not sure what kind of pressures that it is that keeps them sitting on their hands, but that, too, is probably something he needs to crush, like a bug under his shoe. It's not fair when systems put undue weight on certain individuals for the sake of the community.

Harm befalls the family that way, after all.

"Well," Tsunayoshi says, standing straight again. "That's true, but then… if they're going to sit back and watch, then they have no right to complain about whatever we end up making of the situation." His head feels strange, and stuffy. Rubbing at it, tugging his hair, Tsunayoshi vaguely thinks about how his heart has become sick and twisted. He's a bit stressed out - anxious. It's fine if they want to sit back, but people who sit back and let others do the hard work… well, they've forfeited the right to complain about what's made of it.

He vaguely registures that Naito has uncurled a bit, and is staring up at him. His face is a flushed and pale and twisted mess, tears and snot carelessly smeared all over it. There's an odd light in his eyes.

(For a split second, Tsunayoshi's fingers and knuckles itch. Something in his sick heart hardens. The inferno in his chest remains smothered while some kind of pressure builds against the confines of bone and blood, unyielding and cold, and tells him: bend forward and snuff that out.

Tsunayoshi, already accustomed to the awful things inside his heart and inside his head, barely gives this reflex passing acknowledgement.)
"You mean… change it ourselves?" Naito asks, sniffling.

"Like you said," Tsunayoshi says, looking down at him. "We're always the ones who have to do it anyway. If the generation before us is all rotten, so they refuse to lift a finger themselves, then shaking this town up is the only thing we have left to do." He tilts his head. "Maybe it's fine with you, but the thought of growing up and becoming rotten just like them? I can't tolerate that. I'll change this town by force or die trying."

"Dame- … no, Sawada-chan sure is amazing," Naito says. He wipes his face off on the arm of his shirt, still sniffling and hiccuping a bit. "I've hated this place my entire life, but… I'm just me, you know? I'm annoying, and I'm hated, and I've always failed at everything I've ever done, and I couldn't seem to change it, so I started taking pride in that… my life is the worst. I thought I was already at rock bottom, so it's fine, right?"

Naito pauses for a second, the palms of his hands pressed tight against his eyes.

"I really thought I could keep living like that. At least I'm the annoying Naito, and not known as something like Dame-Tsuna, right?" he says, muffled into his knees. "I hate the part of me that thought that the most. Who cares about the opinion of people who can think that of someone else? Even Hiba-chan couldn't do anything against those guys, but because of him, you showed up, and Yamacchin, and Mangusta might not wake up." He sucks in a wretched, quavering breath.

Tsunayoshi remains silent, listening to the awful crack of a poorly built dam bursting. Something like that will destroy the cities made below it, he thinks. Countless lives would be lost that way.

"If Sawada-chan is going to change it, then I want to support him," Naito says, and sucks in another breath, and finally lowers his hands from his face. "The support of someone like me might not count for much. I don't have any sway with my family, even though I'm on the Tomaso registry, but - the people they're associated with, and their business. I know about all of that. If Sawada-chan needs it, I can do that much."

Is it really okay for him to accept something like that? Although he could, he doesn't want to become the kind of scum that misleads others into trouble without them knowing what they're getting into.

"I appreciate it, Naito-kun," he says, "but before you hand over something as precious as that, you should know… nothing that I did back there was for your sake. Although it was awful, I only lifted a finger to help because Kyoya was in trouble. That's all. That's the reason why I did it."

"I know," Naito says, but Tsunayoshi wonders if he really does. Although he's still shaking and there are still tears stubbornly leaking out of his eyes, he forces himself to his feet. That kid really does tower over Tsunayoshi. "That's fine. I can also be useful and prove myself like Hiba-chan. I'm a proud bearer of the Longchamp name, after all."

Tsunayoshi should probably be feeling something in response to having someone more or less swear fealty to him, but his hands keep feeling wet and there's iron in his nose and bitter bile and ash in his mouth. He makes himself smile anyway. "Thank you, Naito-kun. I'll work hard to be worthy of your regard."

Naito's head bobs. He keeps scrubbing at his face with the sleeves of his shirt like a little kid. That chaperon that treated him like something less than a person really was that important to him. Or maybe he's still scared because he hadn't been able to do anything - although it's probably not that. After all, Naito talked at some length about how he's never succeeded at anything in his entire life before. There's no way he's unfamiliar with that feeling, if maybe not in such dire circumstances.
Tsunayoshi can probably find some task where he'll perform well. It'll be good for him.

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The boy with milkspill hair laughs, and laughs, and laughs, sharp and painful. Those thin arms, nothing but skin and bones and painful scars where needles were pushed in again and again and again and left there for countless days or weeks, twine over Tsunayoshi's narrow shoulders so that the spider lengths of his finger tips pitter patter over the breastbone.

"There it is. That's it," he says, hateful and gleeful all at once. "That's the power that she's seeking from you. I wonder how many different worlds also got this far but it just wasn't enough?"

"Shouldn't you of everyone know that best?" Tsunayoshi wonders.

"Even I'm not omniscient," he huffs. Though his face presses in where hair meets neck, there is no breath to prickle Tsunayoshi's skin. After all, that kid isn't here at all, is he? "Certainly, it's my mind alone that's capable of grasping the nature of reality without snapping entirely, but - it's not as though I've been allowed to look around as I please." The words drip and drop, viscous and drenched in bitter, spoiled honey.

Something like that could easily poison a person who listened to it for very long. And yet it doesn't trouble Tsunayoshi in the least. His heart is made of fire. There's not enough bitterness and bile inside this child to douse that flame out or sway it.

"With this," the boy says, the uncut points of his fingernails biting into the shirt, slotting into the hollows between Tsunayoshi's ribs, "we might just be the one that makes it. Survive, Nayo. If you have to cling to life with broken nailbeds and chipped, teeth, survive. If you can, you'll be saved, and maybe you can meet that child. It'll be plenty amusing, I think! How would you like to make this reality one in a hundred billion? Hmm?"

Tsunayoshi is left alone in an empty hallway with one hand grasped to his chest, feeling the hollow thump of his sick heart beneath charred ribs. Although smothered, the inferno is only banked. It won't ever become embers again. He feels a little like he'll really choke on the poisonous ash, but - somehow, he thinks he'll survive somehow no matter what.

He doesn't have a choice. There are people who depend on him, after all.

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By the time he catches back up with Nana, she's looking anxious again, and only manages to barely cover it when she spots him again and stops bouncing on her toes about it, rolling down to rest her heels on the ground and giving a beaming smile as if she'd never been doing something so embarrassing in the first place, surely he was mistaken.

"How are your friends, Tsu-kun? Are they okay, too?"

"Ah," he says, because he'd more or less delayed them leaving the hospital that way, but - he'd only managed to find Naito. He can more or less guess at the fate of Nerina and her Di Tella, but as for Kyoya - Tsunayoshi is the worst! Never for one moment had he thought about Kyoya after seeing that the paramedic would look after him!

Tsunayoshi has every confidence that he could more or less tell Nana that and she'd patiently wait longer, or perhaps even go with him to meet a 'new friend' of his, since he's so far failed to properly explain the situation with Kyoya, or even mention him at all. But though he's anxious to see Kyoya, and will probably be bitten many more times to death over the upcoming months due to the
likelihood of him crowding, Tsunayoshi doesn't quite say that he's overlooked someone.

In the next instant, his gut proves correct by a wall of black coming down one of the other hallways toward the lobby, with white fringes of doctor's coats. The Hibari clan has a certain distinctive look to them, although Tsunayoshi has become intimately acquainted with how little Kyoya, the most familiar Hibari face to the general populace (of Nami Middle, anyway) resembles them at all. Still, they all have that dark hair and black eyes and aristocratic bearing, like something out of a feudal fairy tale.

Though those people ignoring the fretful doctors shouldn't be painted with that brush. Most of them are bodyguard-escorts of some sort, although they have the look enough. But it's the man that's obviously the nexus of the group that immediately catches Tsunayoshi's eye, that makes him round his shoulders and duck his head, even as he glances past him to where Kyoya stalks along with the group. Well, a little along with them; somehow he manages to be within a foot and a half of that man while appearing to be completely uninvolved with anything going on immediately beside him, his face impassive. The wound that had bled down the side of his face has been bandaged, and then strapped to his head with white gauze, and though a sling hangs around his neck, he's refusing to use it.

Tsunayoshi can't exactly help the minuscule step he takes that direction, wanting to say something about it. His shoulder is shot. Even Takeshi, who only got muscle bruising, diligently used his sling! There had been a bullet in there! Demon or not, Kyoya should take care with himself or otherwise there's no way that Tsunayoshi is going to rest easy about it!

Kyoya gives him such a sharp, forbidding look that Tsunayoshi's mind blanks out, and then the man with him says, "Ah." He stops, and Nana's hand lands on Tsunayoshi's shoulder, and the other people with that Hibari clan member fan out. It's not that Nana and Tsunayoshi are immediately surrounded, but it suddenly feels that way.

There's a strange pressure against Tsunayoshi's eardrums as the man looks at him and says, "I see. Things are starting to make a little more sense now." The set of his shoulders are familiar. The line of his jaw, and the shape of his ears. Kyoya very strongly favors the blood he shares with little Fon, but there's a resemblance enough to this man too that he has to be family. "This is really interesting," he says, and Tsunayoshi wants, a little, to work his jaw so the incredible pressure in his ears lets up, and then that man looks at Nana.

As anxious as it makes him, Tsunayoshi is a little grateful that Nana is beneath this man's notice. There are too many of them, and he can already tell that Kyoya won't move with him against these people, and it's a hospital besides. That man smiles and says, "It may be a little late, but won't you come over to Lark's Haven for a while?"

Nana's hand doesn't tighten even a fraction on Tsunayoshi's shoulder as she titters, "Thank you, Hibari-san, but it's been such an upsetting day-"

And he says, "Please. I insist."

There's a slight pause, because both Nana and Tsunayoshi know that despite his polite words, it won't last if they refuse again. Then Nana says, brightly, clasping her hands together, "Well, I've always wanted to visit the old parts of the town!"

"The Hibari family would be honored to have you," he says, but his gaze falls on Tsunayoshi most of all, and ahh, but Tsunayoshi doesn't care for it, not at all. He wants to go back to his house with just himself and Nana, and he wants to sit down and have snacks with Takeshi and Haru again, and go to TakeSushi and get yelled at while Shoichi has a snack at the service bar, or if none of those
then to give Saitoh Itsuki a call and let him ramble on about this or that from the class he's taking.

Instead, Tsunayoshi searches for the second wind inside his heart. Fine. If the Hibari Clan wishes to push, then Tsunayoshi will face them and steal Kyoya away from them in one fell swoop.

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Chapter End Notes

* Tsunayoshi manages to both have a worse reaction to murdering people this time, and to be like "Oh well! I yam how I yam!" And Takeshi's first kill had like. No fanfare at all, but like to him, it's a complete nonissue.

I love how Omerta is a thing, but Tsuyoshi is over there, "Takeshi! A normal person will react badly to death!" and Takeshi was probably like, "oh, what, really? How weird, haha."

* That's how the Tomaso family ended up allied with the Sawada family tho lol. The Tomaso family actually don't have flames of their own, but Naito got them from his mother.

Also, a taste of Tsunayoshi encountering another sky who isn't related to him and experiencing that 'Skies eat their own' phenomena. The primary danger to a Sky is another Sky, after all. They can certainly coexist if properly socialized, of course, but even Dino in the canon universe probably felt at least a little of that when he met little brother Tsuna. Though, naturally, you don't attack a young Sky a powerful guy like Reborn is being broody over lmao.

* Naito Longchamp is only 6cm taller than Tsuna in canon, which is about 2in for imperial unit scum like myself, but he really gives the impression of being a lanky beanpole.
Chapter Summary

ashes~ ashes~ we all. fall. down.

Or Tsunayoshi tells Clan Hibari to Go Fuck Themselves, Honestly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20: those whom the sun sets upon

There's an older hospital in the part of Namimori where Lark's Haven resides, nestled into the wooded hills at the foot of the shrine. As Namimori grew, it slowly became overburdened, and unable to expand due to the buildings around it, eventually a new hospital was built further away from those old parts of the town. There are a dedicated few who still reliable visit that old hospital, but for most of Namimori, if they don't go to their local clinics, they go to the large, modern hospital in the middle of town.

In other words, when Nana and Tsunayoshi leave the hospital in the company of Hibari and his men, and Kyoya, it's to a car to be driven all the way across the town to Lark's Haven. Tsunayoshi, who has only at best ridden trams and buses, is reluctant to get into the cab of the car that waits, shining and expensive, outside the hospital. Inside even smells odd and fancy, and he is all the more painfully aware that he's still dressed in clothes that are stained with his own blood and the blood of others and worse things.

That Hibari man that has Kyoya come to heel stands outside the car for a while. He's on his phone and talking too quiet to overhear, while the bulk of his men scatter to other cars - there are other cars! Really! The extravagance of the Hibari family certainly knows no boundaries! He's fairly sure even the Tomaso family wouldn't go so far. This one is larger and fancier than the others, since the back seat isn't just the usual bench for two or three people like Tsunayoshi has seen in movies, but boast a second bench turn to face the other.

While Nana goes along with her usual aplomb despite the situation, Tsunayoshi's eyes are on Kyoya. It's worse than 'weird' to see Kyoya so subdued as if he's coming to heel. His eyes are flat like no one is behind them, his hair a mess where the bandages were hastily applied, as if he refused to sit still for it or the doctors rushed through it in order to get away. His uniform overshirt is missing, and the white button up under it is bloodstained like a murder scene, still with a strange shade that suggests the worst of it hasn't even dried yet. It's only loosely buttoned back on, so there's a long stretch of Kyoya's neck and shoulder and collarbone visible, and strips of white where the gauze is tapped on over the wound.

The bandaged that had been applied to Tsunayoshi's busted lip tastes awful as he chews on the edge of it.

"Oh my, this is so fancy," Nana says lightly, covering up her own nerves with effortless flutter.
"Where's Fon, senpai?" Tsunayoshi asks.

The facade shatters immediately in the way Kyoya looks at him like some annoying, yappy dog. He doesn't really make much of a face over it, but his eyes are sharp and narrowed just so. "That guy went ahead," he says evenly, and then glances at Nana.

Nana beams at him. "So you're Tsu-kun's senpai!" she says, as if she actually knows anything at all about Kyoya, which she doesn't. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for taking care of my son."

Kyoya looks incredibly nonplussed by this, a bit like he's never had a parent say something nice to him. His mouth actually opens slightly, and his shoulders tense like his fight or flight instincts are kicking in - although Tsunayoshi hadn't even realized Kyoya had such a thing. To see Kyoya react to Nana like she's something he needs to run away from is so ludicrous that Tsunayoshi feels like laughing - the same way Naito laughed earlier.

Nana looks at the blood staining Kyoya's shirt, and the sling that's laying abandoned around his neck, and she adds, gently, "It seems that you got caught up in something dangerous… I'm not sure what went on during that school field trip that should have been safe, but… thank goodness you made it out alive."

"I won't be killed that easily," Kyoya says in rebuke, but - ahh, as close to adulthood as he's getting, Kyoya's still more or less a kid, and for the first time, he looks like it, too.

"Of course not," Nana says, touching the tips of her fingers to her mouth and tilting her head. "I know my Tsu-kun won't either, but it's difficult to be left behind and not know if something might happen, or if everyone will be okay. If you ever need some place to stay, our house has a few extra rooms. Please intrude at any time."

It's hard to apply normal emotions to Kyoya's expressions to begin with, but in this case 'appalled' and 'uncomfortable' seem to be the closest to it. Before Nana can harass him further, the door opens and the Hibari man gets into the back of the car with them. He takes a lingering look at Kyoya's disrupted poise and then looks to Tsunayoshi with an unreadable expression.

As if Tsunayoshi could have ever affected Kyoya that much.

The way that man settles in beside Kyoya only serves to wind the uneasy knot in Tsunayoshi's stomach tighter. He hates it. It feels like a threat, or a point, and something dark flashes across Kyoya's face like he's reading the situation the same way.

Hibari looks at Nana and smiles. Nana smiles back.

The ride itself isn't a long one, but the awkward silence inside the car makes it feel that way. Tsunayoshi sinks into the seat, rounding his shoulders and lowering his eyes. He doesn't have the self control to avoid causing problems for Nana, and for now she seems to be handling the situation, so he'll leave it up to her for the time being.

They finally arrive at Lark's Haven. It's a massive, sprawling compound that's easy to believe to be the founding family of Namimori. It towers, despite the feudal architecture. Over generations the Hibari family has lived inside those walls, and a chill goes up Tsunayoshi's spine when he sets foot in that ancient ground. He flinches, and looks over his shoulder - but there's nothing there other than those people in suits who escorted them this far.

Tsunayoshi and Nana are ushered inside, mostly by those men and then what Tsunayoshi can only identify as servants after his turn in the Tomaso residence. Despite that, the two places aren't alike
at all - and it goes further than just the western-eastern divide. The elegance of Lark's Haven is understated compared to the rampant luxury of the other.

The way that Hibari moves with them, as if they're equals instead of 'guests' is a bit unsettling more than reassuring, and although Tsunayoshi doesn't want to see it any longer than he has to, he's unhappy to watch that man send Kyoya away to get washed up. It makes him even more aware of the state of his clothing.

Self consciousness hasn't completely set in yet when a woman arrives, neat and poised in one way, but practically vibrating with excitement otherwise. "Uncle!" She greets, bright and attentive - eager. "We have guests?"

Hibari looks at her with no particular expression on his face. The resemblance is enough - the shape of their ears and eyes. His hair is cropped too short to know of it matches the flat, silky curtain of blackness she sports, loose and pulled over her left shoulder. "Ikumi-kun," he says, "those guests are standing before you."

She looks first to Nana, and then her gaze turns to Tsunayoshi, uncomprehending for several brief seconds before she looks back to her Uncle. "But," she says, the excitement fading from her expression, like biting into a piece of cake to find it stale, and just so: her face turns to something unpleasant. "That's a child."

Hibari sighs and looks away from her for a moment, turning to the servant who had greeted them at the door. "Please see to that child and the mother's needs," he says, to which the servant bows and immediately moved to Nana and Tsunayoshi's sides.

"Please," he says, bowing shortly again and gesturing.

"Thank you," Nana says pleasantly, and then pauses and turns slightly. "there's no offense that's been taken," she says to the Hibari man, "Ikumi-chan is basically a child herself, right?"

"Thank you for your forbearance," he says, not looking at her or anyone in particular.

Nana hums, a bit dissatisfied and concerned, but - it's not really their place, is it? And so she goes with the servant with one hand in Tsunayoshi's shoulder. He's thankful for it. It's becoming increasingly clear that this visit has everything to do with him and his connection with Kyoya, and he really can't relax about how everything has been going.

Even worse: they seem to expect him to bathe, and by the time he finishes that, his clothing is missing and Ikumi is there, subdued with a kimono for him. "Please forgive the unworthy behavior displayed earlier," she says, eyes lowered as she dips into an embarrassingly deep bow.

"Ah!" he flusters, clutching the bathrobe he'd reluctantly put on, "there's really nothing to forgive!" Or rather: she should be asking for forgiveness regarding barging in on him when he's not dressed. And the sudden shift in her behavior has every last hair on the back of his neck standing on end. "Then, please," she says, straightening, the kimono in hand. It's black and dark gray and purple, silhouettes of birds cutting across a night sky, and-

Some part of Tsunayoshi deeply rebels at the idea of clothing himself in anything linked to the Hibari name. He doesn't like how Kyoya acts at times. He doesn't like Ikumi's Uncle, and how his mother is being treated, and these immediate circumstances set his teeth on edge. Regarding every
time he's met anyone's parents ever - compared to them, the picture that's coming into focus is making him anxious.

"Um," he says, and rounds his shoulders and ducks his head into the perfect picture of a useless kid, "sorry, it's just - something more comfortable? I still feel a little sick, so-
"

"Of course," she says, and the sight of a grown woman flustering that way doesn't settle his nerves at all. It's only a few minutes wait for Ikumi to come back with a more simple kimono - still elegant, but undecorated.

The less said of the helps he needs to actually put it on, the better.

His skin crawls a little as he settles into the final layer, and not just because of Ikumi's behavior - a fine sense of dread settles into his gut, and when Ikumi answers the door - it turns out to be because Kyoya is standing behind it.

Tsunayoshi flinches. It's not right. This isn't Kyoya's aura at all, his eyes shards of onyx that stare Ikumi down, face impassive, his arm finally resting in the brace and tucked inside the housecoat he's wearing over his own dark kimono. There's only barely no water dripping from his hair, hanging heavy in unbrushed disarray that appears to be bristling.

Ikumi's hand comes down on Tsunayoshi's shoulder, and Kyoya's eyes grow even more flinty than before.

"That's behavior unbecoming the Hibari name," Kyoya murmurs, a flat and even tone that nonetheless sounds like the distant howl of a descending army of demons.

"Is it?" Ikumi asks, an ancient blessed blade forged particularly for slaying such things drawn over raw silk. "Isn't it a forgone conclusion, already? What does one such as you even have to offer?"

Ikumi, he thinks nonsensically, could easily destroy threats to Tsunayoshi and his family. Easily, easily, easily. It's in her voice and in her manner and her resolve - it's strong. Somehow, despite their meeting getting off on the wrong foot, and her storming the room to clothe him in traditional cloth, he thinks they could get along and she would be a fine tool with which to strike at threats and destroy them utterly. All these times Tsunayoshi has thought of making himself into whatever weapon necessary to face those things himself for the sake of his family, and here is something foraged specifically for it, already having decided of its own accord to rest in his hand so he doesn't have to do it himself.

And yet.

Standing before him and not even looking at him, Kyoya's narrow eyes hood into dangerous slits. Forget whatever words that he spoke to Shoichi over territory, Tsunayoshi thinks: to Kyoya, the largest threat stands before him, and yet there are no tonfa in his hands nor any aura of any demons. There's no violet in his coal black eyes. But his resolve is-

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, ducking out from under Ikumi's hand and sidling sideways between them. "Senpai. Do you know where Nana is?"

The tension between Ikumi and Kyoya doesn't do anything as crass as 'crackle' - Ikumi's eyes flash unpleasantly, and she stands even taller than Kyoya, who is just barely not a 'kid' anymore and still far from being an 'adult' like her. Ahh. It's stressful. Neither of them acknowledge him for a long moment, barely breathing themselves over their staredown, before Kyoya finally grunts inelegantly and tips his head.
Eagerly assuming that he's being gestured onward, Tsunayoshi swiftly ducks from between the two even if his final destination is uncertain. For once, he's not unthankful that he's in the short side, since it makes the maneuver very easy.

It feels like Ikumi's feelings are going to peel the skin off his back. It's a very similar feeling to that man back at that clearing in the mountains, but at the same time very different. There had been something beautiful about that hot red light that man had wielded. A bit wistfully, Tsunayoshi thinks he'd like to meet that man here again if only to break the stalemate.

Kyoya hadn't been happy to see the man, but more or less, he'd accepted that man stepping in on the battle, and even so injured hadn't been on the defensive. Seeing someone's eyes literally glow red should have been scary, but more than anything else, Tsunayoshi had felt safe. He wonders if that's what a trusted adult is supposed to feel like.

Kyoya doesn't put his hands on Tsunayoshi, but he's skilled in scattering and herding herbivores, and so he effortlessly herds Tsunayoshi down the hallway to room much like the one that he once met old man Yamamoto in. As stressful as that was, this is a hundred times worse for the elegantly dressed couple who sit at the head of the table - one of whom Tsunayoshi somehow recognizes from years ago when his father had taken him out for ice cream. Neither of their faces so much as flicker as Tsunayoshi is herded to the side opposite them, where Nana sits in her own fine kimono, dove gray and cream with a neutral sable accent.

There are no larks on her either, he's somewhat relieved to see.

Ikumi moves to sit at one side of the table closest her mother, while at her side sits another boy, some years older than Tsunayoshi - older yet than even Kyoya, he notices uncomfortably. And then is distracted when after depositing him at the table, Kyoya leaves it completely to join the woman seated beside the opposite doorway. She's-

Tsunayoshi feels incredibly awkward and cheap just being in the same room as this woman, dressed in a kimono that's humble for all it is elegant. She's so obviously Kyoya's mother as he settles in beside her, impassive and unreadable. Her face should look the same, like a stone wall with no give, but there's something at the corner of her eyes that Tsunayoshi thinks is a dark, vicious amusement. Every inch of her is polished like a finer blade can't be found in all of Japan, more so than any words Ikumi could use or even Takeshi dreamed of being; she is a weapon and takes pride in being a weapon and only doesn't gladly wear the blood of her enemies because it's a bit crass, isn't it?

"Thank you for accepting our invitation, Sawada-dono," the man at the table says while his wife smiles pleasantly.

"Oh, not at all," Nana titters, waving them off. "We were honored to be invited to such a beautiful home. It was very kind to allow us to freshen up and lend us such nice clothes."

"It's our pleasure to have such honored guests," the Lady Hibari says, and allows her gaze to fall to Tsunayoshi.

"As we are to understand the situation," her husband continues, "your family has done a favor to us, in protecting one with our name. We would like to repay our debt to you."

Ahh. He'd thought so this entire time, and based on the way that Nana doesn't falter for one second beside him, she had more or less figured out the exact same thing. He's done something troublesome and brought the attention of this ancient and honored family down on his newcomer mother. It's making him anxious.
"In order to show our gratitude," the wife says, "we would extend the companionship of our son, and our daughter." She gestures to either child, who both look to Tsunayoshi. They're both undeniably Hibari children, and it only makes sense that of course they're the heirs, more or less. Ikumi's eyes gleam triumphantly, and the son makes a smile that is more unpleasant and smug. Though their eyes are aimed in Tsunayoshi's direction, the truth of it is that neither of them are really paying Tsunayoshi or Nana any attention at all.

It's much more obvious that instead, they're paying attention to how those words affect the mother and child at the doorway.

The dark, vicious amusement around the corner of Kyoya's mother's eyes has disappeared, and now she gazes into some kind of middle distance with what could be boredom or finally trained apathy. Clearly anything further that happens here is far beneath her attention, and at her side, Kyoya may as well have been an inhuman statue formed of fine silk and marble. There's still no recognizable aura whatsoever from him. Tsunayoshi's stomach ties in anxious knots. It's bad. It's too bad. Ahh, no.

"There's no need to concern yourself with that further," Lord Hibari says, seeing where Tsunayoshi's attention has strayed. "It would please the Hibari clan to find you companions much better suited for keeping your company."

Tsunayoshi's limbs seem to jitter from the stress, his lungs trembling. His palms are cold and damp. His head aches and the burnt bones in his chest seem fit to burst between the heavy squeeze of his muscles and the inferno that churns inside him, devouring everything. Kyoya faced that thing down and fanned the flames even though his instincts should have sent him running for the hills: even apex predators are at the mercy of something like that which cannot be reasoned with.

"Abandon senpai?" Tsunayoshi echoes faintly, turning to look at the two heads of household before him. Ah, no. Although technically they're definitely running this clan, they aren't the same as him at all. This is a situation more like Naoko and Nana herself, isn't it? Why are they getting involved in it, then?

"It's not abandoning," Lady Hibari says gently, kindly, and Tsunayoshi thinks of Kyoko gently shutting the door on his muddy nose; "It's 'setting free.' Something like that child prefers not to be weighted down and hampered by such tiresome matters. The companionship of Ikumi-chan and Sozui-kun would be a better fit."

That's not entirely wrong, Tsunayoshi thinks. It's the efforts of Kusakabe and now Hoshino that allow Kyoya the freedom to move as he wishes while still attending to the responsibilities he himself has sought out. Naturally Kyoya requires his freedom. He needs to be allowed to make his own decisions and do as he feels necessary without having to worry about coordinating with others. But Tsunayoshi doesn't see what that has to do with him. Haven't they worked this all out themselves? Hasn't Kyoya allowed him to be around, and haven't their subordinates helped them coordinate it all without interfering with one another? Isn't Kyoya already the kind of person that Tsunayoshi will kill for, and doesn't Kyoya already return that regard?

Tsunayoshi looks at Ikumi, and he looks at Sozui, neither of whom seem troubled or even very invested in all of this going on at the table. Kyoya is already at least a year older than Tsunayoshi, maybe more, and that sits between them as it is. Sozui is at least a few years older than that, and Ikumi is already an adult, and neither of them are being prevented from sitting at the table. The weight of everyone's eyes here makes his head throb, like this is already a forgone conclusion. He thinks of Ikumi facing Kyoya and saying: *what does one such as you even have to offer?*

All these assumptions that Tsunayoshi has made all along, while maybe not entirely right, were not
all that wrong, either. Kyoya's toothaches. The way he goes so far and yet hangs back and refuses to get close. Fon himself saying that he'd never thought that Kyoya would come to have friends, and Kyoya declaring Tsunayoshi his territory.

He thinks of meeting Saitoh and Saitoh asking for Kyoya's character reference, and how on Tsunayoshi's word, he'd give Kyoya a chance. How, after that, the more that Tsunayoshi visited Saitoh on the Committee's behalf, the more that awful fury seemed to drain out of him like a lanced boil.

All the Committee members who gathered at Kyoya's heels and Nakamoto Kei who calls him 'taichou.'

Tsunayoshi is far from the first person to take notice of Hibari Kyoya and think him worthwhile. He wonders if Kyoya will ever come to believe it himself, regardless of whatever shielding his mother must have done for his sake so far. Tsunayoshi's instincts are good, after all. That sister and brother are strong, and they're good to have around, and even if they're still not thinking about Tsunayoshi's part in this, or their own part in regards to Tsunayoshi: he could get along with them.

But the fact that the thing that they're both focusing on the most is *taking this thing away from Kyoya?* Well. The stress of that makes him feel like he might shake and fall apart.

Yes. Already there is a forgone conclusion to be had here.

"In the first place," Tsunayoshi says, looking across the table at Lady Hibari, "I did no such favor to Clan Hibari and so there is no such debt. The only thing I did was move to aid one of my own. If Clan Hibari benefited from that at all, it was merely by happenstance. And secondly, even if such a debt did exist, the idea that I would ever willingly surrender anyone who belongs to my household for the sake of gaining two such self-absorbed people who can't even see what's in front of their faces..." It feels like looking through a window wet with condensation, but there are two ways that walls like that work, and he looks at the Lady Hibari and feels troubled with something that's not worth the breath it's taking to shoot it down: "Isn't that a bit of an insult?"

It's already stressful, but the sudden tension that twangs through the room and then seems to crackle? It feels bad enough to suffocate on, Nana's hands on her knees beside him tightening until her knuckles are white. Tsunayoshi dies a hundred million deaths in the eyes of Lord and Lady Hibari, but though his palms sweat and his muscles tremble and shake, he meets those gazes directly. Their composure holds, as he thought it might after they treated him and Nana with such high honors.

If adults persist in dealing with him as if he's a peer, in on their secrets with them, then Tsunayoshi will behave as a peer and not a biddable child.

Somewhere, that guy that has been accusing Tsunayoshi of this and that must be sneezing himself into an early grave.

"You-!" Ikumi says sharply, raising up on her knees with a hot flush of anger in her cheeks. Something surges and in response, something rattled down through Tsunayoshi's quivering limbs but-

"It would be like spitting into the wind, I told you."

Back the way that Tsunayoshi had entered the room with Kyoya and Ikumi, it's the man from the woods with the glowing eyes. They aren't glowing now, though, and instead of wearing clothing that matches the air of the occasion, he's dressed in a thick red cotton long-robe. In the lighting of
the room, instead of the distorted shadows of the clearing in the mountain, the resemblance to Kyoya and his mother is truly disorienting.

He leans against the doorway, gazing at Lord and Lady Hibari with slanted eyes fit to slice them painlessly from throat to gut and leave them guessing for at least five seconds before the pain sets in and everything peels apart.

"Perhaps it's because you are unaccustomed to meeting a person of this quality," he continues in a gentle, measured voice at odds with the danger radiating from him, "but this child could no more leave Kyoya than you could leave Namimori. Or rather, another way of saying is it something like... if this child so readily abandoned one, would he really be so reliable that you'd lend your children to him?"

"I don't recall it being your business," Lady Hibari says, and it is only not frigid because there is already no warmth to the room to contrast it.

The man smiles, small and insincere. He dips his head and peers through his lashes at her, saying, "those of my blood are of my blood. How fortunate that in this situation, our families are joined. Is this not enough to satisfy you?"

By their white knuckled silence, Lord and Lady Hibari are not satisfied in the least.

He leans off the doorway and moves into the room, inclining his head briefly to both Tsunayoshi and Nana before going to the side of Kyoya's mother and settling there beside her on the bare floor. It's quite the stunning array, those three lined up, even though Kyoya's mother has turned just the barest fraction in a snub toward that man. Who is he? An estranged brother? Fon's father, perhaps?

He's young to have a four year old son already, but-

"I won't mind sharing," Sozui says suddenly, and Tsunayoshi blinks to realize that the youngest Hibari son has focused on him at last. As sharp as Kyoya's eyes are, the softness of their angles is definitely his Hibari blood, as is the roughness of his hair compared to his mother and her brother(?). Though Sozui makes large eyes at him - not rabbit eyes, but deer eyes, perhaps, Tsunayoshi can't bring himself to trust the light that glitters inside them. "Forgive Mother's rash words, Sawada-kun. If you're that attached to Cousin Kyoya, then I've shared a household with him before."

Across the table, Ikumi lets a slight breath escape her in fury, trying to stare down Sozui who ignores her effortlessly.

His close attention makes Tsunayoshi's skin crawl in a deeply unpleasant way. Although he's come down from the formal way of talking that his parents had used, to match Tsunayoshi's own uncultured way of speaking, it doesn't put Tsunayoshi the least at ease. It's his own fault for forgoing the traditional structures, maybe, but - there's no way he can maneuver around them without knowing what the rules are in the first case.

Tsunayoshi, with rounded shoulders and tipped head, reaches up to rub uneasily at the back of his neck. "Well," he hedges, "it's not rash words that are really the problem here, you know?"

Nonplussed for a moment, Sozui says: "Then what?"

Hedging some more, Tsunayoshi fidgets. His breath quivers in his lungs. He hums, tugging at the longest spikes of his hair, still drying from the bath. It won't be manageable if he doesn't take a comb to it soon. "It's not like I'd hate it, I think," he says vaguely, because it's true. Part of him says that Ikumi and Sozui could be good to have around. And yet- "It's just that other than Nana,
Kyoya-senpai is more important to me than anyone else in this room, so expecting me to abandon, or do anything to inconvenience senpai- how you run your household is how you run it, but for me, my primary concern before anything and anyone else is the happiness of those who are already reliably beside me.

"Ahh." The breath rattles out of him tight and tense and weirdly aggravated and worn, like he's on his last nerve. It's hard to breathe, a bit, with how the stress keeps tying his muscles in endless twisted knots, and he shifts uncomfortably. "Thinking that I'm the kind of person to be swayed just because I've been brought to the table," he says, avoiding looking at anyone in particular, "as if no one has ever taken me aside before… doing it this way, and trying to make a point by not letting those I've already come to care about and rely on come, as if they aren't worthy of sitting there? I'm just going to wonder at the thickheadedness of the people who've decided that in the first place."

"That's obviously because low-borne trash like you doesn't understand the first thing about worth," Ikumi says, trying for speaking evenly - but her voice shakes and trembles with insult and rage. Those words of hers - that ancient, blessed blade that she's aimed what seems likely to be a hundred thousand times at Kyoya - that becomes leveled directly at Tsunayoshi's heart.

Infernos were never meant to be contained within a human body, but then: Tsunayoshi, too, just as easily becomes a demon - a spirit - a kami. The charred bones that have been scarred and destroyed and turned into carbon simply compress into diamond. There is no smoke, nor soot nor sulfur for him to choke on as total clarity descends - it burns too hot and too cleanly for that.

It'll melt that sword of hers in an instant if it makes contact.

It's been scary all along. There are parts of Tsunayoshi that don't work the same as a normal person's, or at least like he thinks one should. It's too calculating. It's too cruel. It's too hungry and hot and cold and it will destroy the world and consume everything if given the slightest excuse. It says things like gather power, and ready your positions, and we do not tolerate harm befalling the family.

Though at first, family seemed to mean 'blood,' Tsunayoshi has learned better than that. Every precious connection he has is worth more than anything else the world could offer him.

Staring at Ikumi, Tsunayoshi feels his brow pinch. "Just because you were born as the first child of the Lord and Lady Hibari - doesn't make you worthy," he says. The word drip and drop and roll in an unfamiliar way. "There's nothing to like or find inspiring about someone who squanders that to simply satisfy their own ego. I feel sad for the Hibari family having such a stain on their name."

Ikumi is incandescent. A little bit literally. Her eyes lens crimson and cherry and something surges, hot and hungry, like lava or the roiling rumble of a volcano or the churning of a massive cloud full of fury. It isn't anywhere near as pure or as beautiful as that power of the man related to Kyoya, though. It's strangely thwarted as she glares at him, and only for the briefest moment does she look at Nana, but then her gaze focuses on Kyoya who still sits, impassive and unmoved, at the doorway with his mother and that family member of his.

Tsunayoshi smiles even though it splits his torn lip wide open, because it's better than becoming the kind of scum that would reach for the pin that's swept Nana's hair up off her neck and put it through Ikumi's skull. She dies, and dies, and dies, in so many different, horribly ways. He keeps seeing it: Nana struck down, and her eyes. Kyoya standing, blood soaked, one arm hanging limp. From there, it spirals wildly out of control: visions of Haru, of Takeshi, of Nakamoto and Kyoko and Ryohei and Shoichi.

Ikumi's attention comes back to him, her eyes wide, her already pale skin the color of sour milk and
turning gray, gray, gray, like soot. Like fine ash. The heart inside him burns so pure and clean that he no longer has to deal with the bitterness himself, but there seems to be a fine dusting of it on other things around him.

"I would really rather get along with the Hibari family," he says, but gently, evenly - as if to avoid jarring the way he feels all his limbs and soul tremble, ready to messily explode with something awful at the slightest disturbance, "because I'm not the kind of person that likes fighting. But - it seems like the Hibari family hasn't been behaving in a way that I can rest easy with. Getting along with someone who attacks my family leaves a bad taste in my mouth, after all."

"Hibari Kyoya is still Hibari Kyoya," Lord Hibari says, drawing Tsunayoshi's attention away from his daughter.

The clean-burning firestorm in Tsunayoshi's chest surges and roils and claws at the confines which is Tsunayoshi's own body. Their resolve is a bit pathetic, like Ikumi's, like Sozui's. His head throbs. His limbs shiver and shake. The soft organs inside him, and his brains, and his heart, have long since become dust which has been annihilated and made atoms and energy. Does Lord Hibari mean to forbid it using that as leverage? Or to change the circumstances to his advantage? If he's trying to say that because of that name, Tsunayoshi has no business sticking his nose into it-

"Ahh, even if you say it that way, your actions speak even louder," he says. He feels fuzzy and dizzy with exhaustion, sick with the endless, toxic churn of the thing devouring him. Planting his hands on the table, Tsunayoshi rises to his feet, wobbling slightly with exhaustion. It's been a long night, or rather morning at this point, he thinks. He doesn't mind if it shows on his face.

Looking down at the adults still seated at the opposite end of the table, Tsunayoshi takes pity, and kindly points out: "You already rejected all claims on Kyoya-senpai when you refused him the right of sitting at the table when you already knew he was important to me, right? So. The way I see it, there are only two distinctions that senpai has - that as the proud taichou of the Disciplinary Committee, and that as the Demon of Nami Mino, the Demon of Namimori. How long do you intend to argue this in circles? Bringing me here, and forcibly involving my mother was a waste of time, you know? It only confirmed what I already thought: "I have no interest nor intention of entertaining the whims of the Hibari clan."

A yawn cracks his jaw, because this has all been a bit ridiculous in the wake of him killing three men and going to the hospital and accepting a vassalage and declaring a silent war on all of Namimori anyway. Nana rises beside him, and though her hands shake and she's pale, she smiles at Tsunayoshi as if she has no problems with anything that he's decided tonight, which is - it's not as though he forgot for one moment that she was here, but since it was all a problem caused by him-

As a person better suited to be a weapon than a human being, Kyoya's mother rises to her feet, followed by both her family member and her son. "We will see you to the door," she says. She has a very slight accent. Her dark eyes glitter with something vicious and pleased.

What would have made Tsunayoshi more stressed out from the Hibari clan only flusters him coming from Kyoya's devastatingly exceptional mother. "Th-thank you very much," he stutters, dipping into a quick and awkward bow that would have sent him swooning into the table if Nana hadn't set her hand on his shoulder to steady him.

Nana turns and smiles at the two adults, releasing him as he rights himself and finds his feet again. They move to bracket her and then leave Tsunayoshi to Kyoya's 'tender' mercies - only: Tsunayoshi is too exhausted to be afraid at this point. He feels like he's running entirely off the inferno that's churning away inside his chest, flushing through his limbs and narrowing his focus
so that all he can do is rise, rise, rise upon the relentless heat of it.

The door behind them closes crisply under Kyoya's careless hand, and then he turns to stare down at Tsunayoshi, eyes glittering just as his mother's had, although the emotions there are more difficult to discern. "Those are some annoying enemies you just made," Kyoya observe flatly.

Tsunayoshi wilts a bit. "I know, I thought so, too." He bites his lip and winces at the hot, swollen tear in it bleeds into his mouth. Seeing that the adults aren't waiting up for them, he quickly moves to follow, trying to read the tensions in Nana's back. "Sorry," he adds as Kyoya keeps pace. "It must have been annoying to have to listen to people bicker over your head that way."

Kyoya grunts, and Tsunayoshi revises his impression - for Kyoya, who grew up in this household, perhaps he's too accustomed to listening to people argue over his head about him without being able to do anything about it. A glance shows that he doesn't look annoyed, since he still has no aura for Tsunayoshi to easily read at this point, and - actually, he looks pretty amazing in the kimono beneath that housecoat. It's different when he's not terrorizing the kids at school: here, in this house, he has the same flawless poise of his mother.

Tottering along beside him, flat footed, his jaw cracking in a yawn, Tsunayoshi feels a bit self-conscious. "It seems that I caused a lot of trouble and drew some pretty heavy attention," he says uneasily. "But... thinking back on it, I don't see how I could have done anything else. I guess I'm not very obedient." He cringes with a nervous chuckle, because this is probably the last time he'll be able to speak with Kyoya. Well, the first and last time, after that introduction where Kyoya had threatened him.

Ahh. He promised to unwaveringly let go of anyone who asked it of him, although it seems a bit weird to expect Kyoya to ask to be let go rather than just leaving on his own. What should he do? Kyoya is the first of his household that he's killed for the sake of, he's not sure how he should behave in the aftermath when Kyoya will want nothing to do with him.

A flicker of that familiar aura puts a stop to those thoughts, and he looks over to see Kyoya no longer impassive, but annoyed.

"Heh?"

Kyoya shows his teeth then, all sharp white points under the violet gleam of his eyes, pausing next to Tsunayoshi to seize him by the shoulder with his good arm. "Thinking troublesome things," he says irritably. "A king-sized herbivore like you should learn his place as my food source."

And then he bites Tsunayoshi's broken lip.

Well, it's true that his teeth close on it and press the blood from it, and he sucks like some kind of western horror movie vampire, and that's his tongue on the wound, stinging and hot and weird. The inferno inside Tsunayoshi burns even hotter, if that's at all possible, like its twisting and struggling to escape the diamond-clad cage that traps it inside him. And then something awful happens.

The world stretches. It keeps stretching. The inferno inside him roars as it burns away at Tsunayoshi and it feels like something is shredding him apart, like he's an egg that will crack wide open and the yolk will come out and break and everything will be thrown away. He's not in the Hibari residence. He hasn't been there all along, and he's alone, and the world shudders and shakes and something is pulling all his insides out of him.

It hurts far too much to even scream. It paralyzes him. The world turns white.
Survive, he remembers the man with endless long lank locks of hair and thin limbs and needle tracks on his arms saying. And so he tries. He tries. His very soul is being ripped from his body. The world keeps stretching.

Tsunayoshi sees himself and Nana leaving. He sees Kyoya's mother, Nuo, saying that she'll be going away with that family member, since she's become a hostage against Kyoya and can no longer protect him. I'll leave him to your care, she says, ignoring Tsunayoshi's bleeding lip and the smudge of blood at the corner of Kyoya's mouth. He sees returning to the hospital several times. He meets a girl there with shy eyes, who is always carrying a bag. She's sad and her eyes see too much and Tsunayoshi would like to keep her around, but he introduces her to his sister instead as to not be unkind. The situation with the Hibari family gets worse. Ikumi gets worse. His hands. They become sticky all the time, then.

Tsunayoshi can't really focus on all these things as the world stretches and he stretches with it and then it begins to fracture, to change into-

"Bare with it," the boy with milkspill hair says urgently, but he's not a boy, he's just a few years shy of being an adult for how awful he looks. His eyes are frenzied. "Is your will this weak? If you're going to die anyway, then live through this, at least!"

But he's being scooped out or torn into a million tiny pieces, or forcibly squashed into a pancake - it's like all of those things, but happening all at once, and the some terrible weakness is coming in over him. Something vital is being drained out while all of everything else is happening.

"Don't you want to meet that child?" that guy demands, clawing at Tsunayoshi, but somehow not being able to touch him. "Hey! Don't be ungrateful! Yuni and I picked him out especially for you to make up for everything! Hey! Tsunayoshi! Hey! Wake up!"

But as stressed out as Tsunayoshi is about all this screeching while he's being ripped apart at the molecular level, he does precisely the opposite and blacks out.

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"Hey," somebody says, or seems to say, but he has no ears to hear them with. "Hey! Are you okay?"

The blackness swims. It's interrupted by a gentle white glow next to him, and there, kneeling beside him is the guy with the milkspill hair and faded pressed flowers in his eyes. "Thank goodness," he sighs, wane and exhausted himself. "That makes the odds of us surviving this roughly eight hundred trillion to one. Thank goodness. What a relief." He seems to shake, and then he clutches at his face with thin, trembling hands that are barely skin over bone, and sobs.

"Hey? Come on," that someone says again, and then sighs, short and aggravated. "I can't just leave you here…"

The sobs hiccup and begin to turn into something else. It's some kind of horrible, jagged laugh. The hands clutching his face shift and begin to claw and pull at his hair and he throws back his head and laughs in harsh jags that sound ripped right out of him. It comes to a sudden, awful halt. The bones of his expanded chest seem to press out through the hospital gown. "Nayo-kyun," he drawls, still bent backwards from laughing, still with claws full of his own hair. "Zunetto is waiting for you."

"I'll take you with me, so just - wake up."
And since it's not that guy who has been laughing over his body this entire time, Tsunayoshi complies.

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Chapter End Notes

* Clan Hibari aren't bad people, but they've been living away from the Sky-Guardian structure for a long time. Well, I say they aren't bad people, but they're a wee bit racist, RIP Nuo and Kyoya :(

* Fon throwing shade by showing up uninvited to their super formal meeting in an everyday cotton changpao lmao. But given the way they're treating his daughter, you can't be surprised? Nuo is stubborn and likes to fight her own battles, but Fon is easily provoked.

* Don't expect Canon!Tsuna's tolerance for people who hurt his family if they only repent for it. Tsunayoshi doesn't have time for that. His primary concern is as it always will be: the happiness and security of his own family members. People who disregard that are lucky to survive his retribution.


**Before Proceeding, Please Consult "HOW TO READ: The White Orchid Protocol"**! It's a recap for all the foreshadowing during the Byakuran scenes and should help the transition into the main story arc.
the house of the rising sun

Chapter Summary

a stranger in a strange land

Chapter Notes

Before Proceeding, Please Consult "HOW TO READ: The White Orchid Protocol"! It's a recap for all the foreshadowing during the Byakuran scenes and should help the transition into this main story arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21: the house of the rising sun

There's the awful sensation of being torn in two, piece by piece, muscle, nail, tooth-hair-bone, skin layers peeled and then muscles, strand by torturous strand. Shaving fragments of bone, and marrow. Perspective halving, separating, shattering. And the process of being pulled. It's nothing gentle, or slow. The molecules, the atoms that make him up aren't drawn anywhere. It's an awful wrenching. Like someone grabbing his wrist and twisting and heaving him to the floor and into submission if he doesn't want to dislocate his arm.

The process of being put back together isn't any more pleasant. It's worse. It's worse because everything is happening in reverse then and something is happen as it reverses, and- blackness.

Tsuna wakes up.

It happens sluggishly. There's no definitive point at which he goes from unconscious to conscious: at some point the world around him resolves and he realizes that he's flat on his back and he should be choking. His throat feels broken and sore. His body feels broken and sore. Training makes him calm the panic starting to rise in his chest, as his lolling head catches sight of what's unmistakably a vital monitor. It doesn't beep. They rarely do outside of movies.

Tsuna lays still, staring at it until the numbers begin to fall again. While he's doing that, the world continues to resolve itself around the bed. He's been kidnapped, is the first thing he realizes, which means it's even more important for him to stay calm and assess the situation. He's never been kidnapped before, but he's heard about it. Tsuna isn't important enough to kidnap in this way, although he's been approached and harassed thanks to the connections he has - if only they knew.

But sedating him, and putting a feeding tube down his throat and oxygen down his nose and an IV in his arm? That's new. That's not the kind of kidnapping he has any experiences with. This is - this is Estraneo Famiglia type kidnapping. Except that he thinks the Estraneo Famiglia don't keep their subjects in such clean rooms.
He blinks heavily as the sedative continues to burn off, unable to keep a foothold now that he's awake. Who is so stupid as to sedate someone like him? And then leave him alone with only velcro straps to hold him to the bed?

It's a struggle to sit up. He's still weak and shaky from whatever - whatever awful thing it was that they did to him after they kidnapped him. The first thing he does is switch the monitor off, and only after he's accomplished that does he get to work removing the IV. Then he turns to the more disgusting and difficult chore of trying to dislodge the tubes in his nose and throat.

Both times, he gags and his stomach heaves to throw up, but there's nothing in his stomach. He sits, weak and shaky for a moment, before forcing himself to slip off the bed and onto his feet. The hospital gown he's wearing is the worst, but he has bigger problems than drafts to-

Upright and wobbling, Tsuna stares. Although he'd already sensed that 'hospital room' was the wrong impression to have of this room, now that he can see what was behind his bed, it really strikes home. There's some kind of machinery behind it, with a dozen cables coming out of the top like something hastily assembled and left wide open in case of emergency.

Yeah, the more he looks at it, the more it definitely looks like something the Estraneo famiglia would get up to. The room itself seems made out of some strange kind of material, but in the center where his bed is, and it's head rests against the back of that strange machine, and thick cables sprawl over the floor like it takes some kind of massive amount of energy to run.

What is it? Some kind of - of CAT scan machine?

Tsuna's hands are sweating a little bit, his fingers cold. He feels vaguely dehydrated, and he looks to the monitor on the other side of the hospital cot that he'd been restrained on. It's turned at a weird angle, as if someone meant to stand next to his bed and observe both it and the vital monitor across the bed from it. He can't really convince himself to look at that machine that is set opposite the head of his bed, so he wobbles around the bed to look and see what the monitor says. Maybe he can figure out who has kidnapped him, and what they want with him.

After all, despite the horribly nightmare that happened while he was sedated… Tsuna feels fine other than that. There aren't any marks on his body at all. And the sedation… it just seems unlikely that they've managed to confuse him with illusions. What then?

There's his name in full, all written out in plain sight, as well as his age and date of birth. Blood type. And - what's this? Tsuna frowns and squints at the screen. What does this mean, 'World'? That blank is just filled in by a short, seemingly random series of numbers and letters. He'd understand it if it said 'Family' or something like that, or if this didn't been to be something the Estraneo famiglia would cook up, because if it's them, then they'd have no reason to go after people who weren't part of the Underworld.

None of this is making any sense.

Tsuna looks around the room uneasily, taking a second look at the air vents and the door. No, come to think of it: the Estraneo famiglia would never be this lax about their security. Someone should have been monitoring his sedation levels and immediately come the moment he began to metabolize them. Or have strapped him down better, so he couldn't pull lose. They'd have known that someone like him wouldn't be kept down with drugs alone. If it's not the Estraneo famiglia, then who?

He looks at the back of the pod behind his bed, and what looks like a monitor there, too. Well, there's nothing for it. If he wants to escape, then understanding the enemy is the first step.
The legs that should be feeling stronger by now, if Tsuna weren't so scared, wobble a bit as he makes his way around the monitor with his information on it, slowly approaching the side of the pod. Twitching, Tsuna can't stop the uneasy noise that escapes his throat when the clear dome clearly shows a person's feet from this angle. Right. Well. That's already the worst of it, isn't it? And thinking so, Tsuna steps firmly forward to look down into the pod.

The first name that pops into his head is 'Iesada' despite the fact that the boy inside the pod is too old, and a brunet, and actually has the wrong jawline and brows and - well, okay, he doesn't really look like Iesada at all, the more Tsuna studies him. The second name that Tsuna had thought is equally wrong or worse, given that Dino lacks even a scrap of Japanese blood, and is twenty-five years old, instead of Tsuna's age or younger.

And yet, despite not being able to put a name to this person, Tsuna really feels like he should recognize him, regardless of the pale and strangely diminished state he's in. He looks at the monitor. His own name greets him there, as well as his own age, and his birthdate. The 'World' blank, though. That says, plainly: Alpha.

Then, where there had been just more blank space on Tsuna's monitor, here's more information. There's a 'Rating' blank that's set at eight hundred and fifty six 'ig' and ninety-seven percent 'cl,' whatever either of those units mean. Below that there's a comment section, mostly written in shorthand that Tsuna mumbles over for a few seconds before giving up on, focusing on 'unexpected difficulties' and 'threshold crossed' and 'upsurge.'

Tsuna takes a second look at the boy laying inside the pod, with all those cables that came out of the strange array around his head and chest. Now that he's read the name, that weird sensation of recognizing him make sense. He's…. He's a Tsuna from another world?

"That doesn't make any sense!" Tsuna complains, grasping his head for a moment in frustration before jumping and cutting an anxious look toward the door, then making another sweep for any kind of security cameras. He comes up empty on that one, too. Oh, now that it's been brought to his attention, he can see where they have the same hair color and general style, but this seventeen year old in the pod is insanely pale, as if he never leaves the house, and as much as Tsuna has been teased for being a lean person, he's even more slight than Tsuna! Although, looking at the limbs sticking out of the hospital gown… Tsuna really wouldn't want to get into a fist fight with this guy.

"There's only one Sawada Tsuna, and only one world," Tsuna says, even if it sounds more like he's trying to reassure himself. Accepting that the Bovino family can violate time by swapping out present selves with future selves is one thing! Having two Tsunas is something different altogether! Shouldn't the world be collapsing at this rate?!

What happened to the world that Tsuna left behind if this Tsuna's world is 'alpha'?! Tsuna knows at least enough to realize that this means that he himself is the traveler in this case! That probably explains that awful nightmare about being pulled to pieces…

"What should I do?" he mutters to himself, and then finds himself looking to the unconscious Tsuna for answers. He's an idiot! He should be finding out more about the situation and the people that have taken him, and to do that-

In the middle of heading to the door, Tsuna freezes. Is it really okay to leave the other Tsuna where he is? He glances over his shoulder at the pod, from this angle only able to see the bare feet sticking up. The bones look strangely delicate.

If whoever took him came back to find him missing… they'll definitely realize something is wrong regardless. This may be his only chance to save anyone, seeing as how he doubts that the Tsuna in
the pod wanted to be there. Something as scary as what happened to him... there's no way any Tsuna of any world would agree to that.

"Ahh. Alright, fine," he mutters, circling back. "Don't worry, me. I'll get you out of there."

It's a bit weird, though. Although this is supposed to be him, he doesn't really recognize the other guy as himself? Although maybe that'll change when the sedation wears off - speaking of, how are these guys keeping him sedated? Or if they have a sedative that works reliably, why didn't they use it on Tsuna instead of the crappy usual stuff that of course can't keep someone like him down?

At least the pod seems comfortable, he thinks as he gets it open. A lot more comfortable than the cot that Tsuna woke up on. The set up other than that is much the same, though: he removes the IV, and then the tubes in the guy's nose and throat. His fingers are a little cold. His hands are calloused, like a fighter's, with scarred fingers and knuckles. There are needle marks in his arm, though they're all fairly recent... so probably, these people have had this guy for a while.

Tsuna gathers the limp body up, and bends over, preparing to throw the unconscious guy over his shoulders. His legs are already more than steady enough to carry them both safely, after all, and- but when he does that, the guy's head flops forward as Tsuna scoops his arm behind his back, and it falls on his shoulder, forehead against the bare skin of his neck. He freezes and his heart thumps hard.

Unexpectedly, he feels like he's just been entrusted with something precious. Which is weird. He's hauled his friends, drunk and unconscious, before. That part of this isn't unfamiliar in the least.

"Um," escapes him, his arms wobbling strangely despite not even carrying any weight yet. Cold fingers aside, the skin of his face is warm. It feels weirdly like someone has tipped an entire saucepan of hot chocolate directly into Tsuna's chest, almost uncomfortably hot but not scalding - weirdly soothing. Energizing. His heart pounds harder, eyes widening, because that's certainly not the first time he's felt something like this.

Releasing his grip on the other Tsuna's knee, he catches his face and pulls back slightly to stare at the slack features. That's why he'd thought Dino there for a moment, he realizes in shock. The other Tsuna doesn't resemble Dino at all, but-

The other Tsuna's face twitches, and his lashes flutter. Just barely, between them, Tsuna is witness to the brief flicker of orange that shows through before the other subsides. His heart hammers double time, and some kind of awful certainty comes over him then:

He's going to kill every last one of them.

-0-

A bit expectedly, Tsuna's instincts go a little haywire. No one could possibly blame him. Even Lazzero would cut him some slack for that. He can't be blamed if he unexpectedly stumbles across a vulnerable, unconscious Sky in a scary situation. Anyone would have reacted the same.

If he tells himself that enough, maybe he'll even believe it.

"I'm an idiot," Tsuna mumbles miserably, thumping his head against the wall.

Okay, he's not a total idiot. So what if he'd responded to that flicker of Flame by clutching the other Tsuna to his chest and carrying him off right then, immediately, all plans thrown to the wayside? Or no, he'd put the Sky on the hospital cot, and then utilizing the skills that Lazzero had taught him, had wheeled him directly out of that room as if he belonged there. Even if all the acting in the
world wouldn't convince anyone who could clearly see that he was dressed in a hospital gown and carting off someone who looked exactly like him!

Luckily, for whatever reason that he was left in that room with a Sky - which idiot was dumb enough to snatch Tsuna from another world and then leave him with a Sky! - must have been the same reason the facility seemed a bit vacant. Tsuna had encountered no one and no resistance in his short flight, and had even managed to locate a supply room which at least had scrubs and jackets inside, along with various other medical gear.

Unless this is all part of their plan, he thinks, grinding his skull miserably against the brick wall. He doesn't know why any of this is happening in the first place - maybe they'd intended to see what would happen when someone met themselves from another world who was a Sky, or something like that. In which case he hasn't escaped anything and definitely hasn't protected the Sky, who is still unconscious on the cot although now dressed in scrubs as well.

That's not really all that surprising. Skies tend to be susceptible to sedatives and downers in general. Tsuna tilts his head to eye the guy, now with both of their hospital gowns as a pillow and a laboratory coat as a blanket. Obviously they can't hide in this supply closet forever, but it's not as thought Tsuna can just keep wheeling the other around everywhere. They'll be discovered if they stay here, and if Tsuna is planning to do any reconnaissance, then he needs to be able to move around quietly and quickly.

Also food and water. He's starting to feel a little shaky, like his blood sugar is crashing, and he's not sure when the last time the other Tsuna had something to eat. The IV kept him hydrated, and judging from his muscle tone, he's been active up until he was taken hostage or at least confined to a bed, but his cheeks look a little hollow.

Then he flinches. Is that normal behavior? Would he even care if this wasn't a Sky? Tsuna would like to think that he's the kind of guy that would care about someone else who was being held hostage with him, but the fact of the matter is that he's already had a taste of this Sky's Flames. Since Tsuna lacks an allegiance to any particular Sky, he's vulnerable to his natural instincts.

"Stupid Dino," he grumbles, pulling away from the wall. It doesn't really matter, does it? Obviously whatever sense the Sky got from him, he'd decided it was safe enough, and besides: there's no way any Tsuna could ever be a more compelling Sky than Enrico, Xanxas, or Dino. It doesn't particularly matter. It's fine. Of course it's fine.

He slaps himself with both hands to his cheeks just to make sure, though.

Then he pulls out the medical face mask and the hair net and pull them on himself and the unconscious Sky, and checks the coast before pushing forward. He definitely needs to scout the situation, but better not to hide him there, so close to the room that Tsuna got him out of.

The facility is nice - not new, but well maintained. Despite that, Tsuna is able to quickly locate a room that isn't often used, thanks to the training Lazzerio gave him long ago. It's some kind of small office, or maybe an examination room. There's a desk and a computer, but Tsuna knows better than to attempt logging onto it when no paper with username or password immediately presents itself. There's a padded counter covered with a paper sheet. It disconcertingly reminds him of butcher paper at the market.

In a corner between the desk and the wall that isn't immediately visible from the doorway, Tsuna pads down a rough nest before lugging the unconscious Sky over and tucking him in. It still makes him endlessly anxious to leave him there, but- he hasn't seen security cameras anywhere yet, and he still doesn't know how to escape this building with the Sky in tow.
This isn't even his world.

That thought alone threatens to send him into a spiraling panic, but Tsuna harshly slaps both of his cheeks again and forces himself to breathe through it. He doesn't have time to sit around panicking. He has a Sky depending on him.

"Remember what Lazzero told you," he says, muffled and strange into the face mask, and then he gets to work.

-0-

Reconnaissance takes longer than he would like, but it also takes longer than he'd thought for them to notice that their most recent experiment has gone missing. In the meantime, Tsuna has confirmed that whatever kind of operation this is, it's definitely not Estraneo. No, that aside: he's not even sure if it counts as mafia. Human experimentation like this seems like it would be something the Underworld would definitely be involved in, but they're hardly the only ones.

Tsuna successfully located the in-facility cafeteria. He addresses his own concerns first: juice for sugars, bread rolls for substance and to keep the sourness of his stomach down. He confiscates some kind of cream soup and cookies for his fellow hostage, and carries and the knowledge if the building's layout with him.

It doesn't feel like he's been gone long at all, but when he gets back to the room, it's to find the Sky awake and sitting at the computer. Tsuna's heart thumps harshly with sudden anxiety, unprepared to meet this stranger face to face so suddenly.

The Sky blinks at him, heavy eyed and still woozy from sedation - the fact that he's even awake and moving is impressive actually, let alone able to move onto the chair without hurting himself. He's pulled off the hairnet and the mask hangs beneath his chin, and one of the hospital gowns is clutched in his lap like he'd been studying the subtle pattern of the fabric.

"S… sorry," Tsuna says awkwardly, and the Sky blinks slowly at him, brown eyes lensing orange for a second time. His brow wrinkles. "Ah - here!" He thrusts the soup and cookies forward only for his fellow hostage to shift ever so slightly back, tensing. The hairs on the back of Tsuna's neck stands on end.

"Wait, no," he says, abruptly realizing that he's still in disguise. He searches fruitlessly for a place to set the food for a moment before he ends up having to choose the floor; better not to come further into the room and trigger some kind of response. Straightening, Tsuna pulls off both the mask and the hair net, and gives his fellow hostage a hopeful look. "I woke up here suddenly," he explains. "I think we must have been taken hostage for - for experimentation, or something like that."

Some of the wooziness has faded, apparently from nothing more than pure determination. The other Tsuna examines him carefully for a long moment while Tsuna's own smile falters and he begins to anxiously fidget.

When at last his fellow hostage speaks, Tsuna is shocked to hear something other than Italian. It's still a familiar language, though.

"Ah, Japanese," Tsuna says fretfully. This will definitely make things difficult - he hopefully switches and says, "but what about English?"

Some recognition flickers across the other's face, but it turns apologetic. "Sorry," he says in
sheepish Japanese, "but I don't speak English."

But he's relaxed, which is the important thing. He's still clutching the hospital gown and still seems uncertain of Tsuna, but he doesn't look frightened or anything like that. Fine. Great! Tsuna can work with that.

"Um," he says, the first Japanese words that comes to him easily enough. "I - no, 'I'... I haven't spoken Japanese in a long time. Please bare with me."

It's not surprising that it takes his fellow hostage a moment to puzzle through the words, given that it's been more than ten years since Tsuna spoke the language, but the warm smile that blossoms across his face makes it worth it.

"It's fine," he says, waving his free hand. "Please take care of me."

*What a dangerous thing to say!*

"'Take care of him,' he says!" Tsuna can't quite help but to sputter in the tongue he's more comfortable with. Does he even realize what it is he's saying! It's a turn of phrase, of course, but *still*. Running his hand through his hair, he notices the food again and stoops. "Here," he says, picking the cookies and soup up. "It's food. I don't know how long it's been since the last time you ate, but... it's probably been a while."

It's probably been longer than that, given the off look his fellow hostage gives the food, as if he doesn't understand the need for it for a moment. It hurts Tsuna's heart a bit. How badly has his stomach withered that he isn't even hungry now?

The other allows him to come to his side so that he can set the cookies down beside the keyboard and pry the soup open. "Sorry that it's cold," he says, wincing at the shop inside the can. Being heated up would make it *marginally* more palatable, but he hadn't honestly expected the food to be eaten immediately when he got back and lingering in the food storage had seemed like a bad idea in general.

His fellow hostage hums a negative, accepting the plastic cup and raising it to his mouth. Tsuna kind of expects a more intense response to it than the mild grimace that he gives. Turning, Tsuna hops up to sit on the table and pries the cookies open. He's already hungry again, and judging by the reluctantly way his fellow hostage is eating and the disinterest he shows in the cookies, he can have at least a few.

"So, what's your story?" Tsuna asks curiously. He's never met someone from a different world, after all. "Do you know who these guys are at all? It seems like they've had you a while."

"Mm." The other Tsuna cuts his gaze away and downward, considering. "No," he says at last. "I don't remember them at all. I don't remember even being kidnapped, though obviously I have been." He pauses and frowns. "I hope everyone is alright and not too worried about me."

It's only natural that a Sky have Guardians, but Tsuna grimaces anyway. Of course he'd have Guardians already - it always happens quick. A Sky manifests, and the first of their Guardians would be at their side within the month. It's only natural. And yet.

Ah, no, what's he thinking?

"Well, they obviously can't help but worry," Tsuna says, rather than lie about it. "But I'm sure they're looking for you." The other Tsuna hums again, but rather than being reassured by that, the idea seems to trouble him. Tsuna tries again: "anyway, I'll definitely get you out of here and back
to them."

His fellow hostage smiles, but wanly. "Thanks," he says, glancing up at Tsuna. "You, too. I mean, I'll see to it that you also get back home."

Tsuna chuckles nervously. "Ah - that might be easier said than done," he admits. "I'm not from this world, I think."

Normally someone would shout or complain about whether or not something like that even makes any sense, but the other Tsuna just looks at him with a gaze that seems to already know everything about the subject, like he's been aware of it for some time. There's no surprise or disbelief, and while Tsuna naturally has to think for a moment that this other Tsuna is in on it with the people who took them hostage in the first place… that's also not the sense he has of things.

"I didn't think so," his fellow hostage says with another smile, this one smaller and more secretive, pressed into the corner of his mouth like it's a bitter chocolate dessert he's savoring. "Even that useless father of mine couldn't have yet another bastard child that resembles me so much. Our faces favor Nana too much. No, I already noticed that." His grip on the hospital gown shifts slightly, along with the pressure of his attention. "Anyway… I have a precious comrade who is trapped here as well that I need to see free before I can rest easy with being rescued."

Tsuna stares. Well, he's a Sky, after all, and hasn't Tsuna himself seen Iemitsu seem to pull intel out of thin air before? For a long time, Tsuna had assumed that was due to being the head of the CEDEF, but it happened often enough that he's even seen the surprise of Iemitsu's treasured underlings. For a first-born who turned out to be a Sky as well… it's only natural that the other Tsuna would get training like that.

His stomach hurts, somewhat.

"So Basil really is," he mutters instead, scowling and stuffing an entire cookie into his mouth. He and Iesada had their suspicions all along since the first time they'd met Basil, already familiar with Iemitsu's stupid style of parenting, but they'd never been able to confirm it. Or, no, they'd been reluctant to confirm it, actually, since Tsuna has had ample opportunity to get hairs or whatever from that Rain kid and get them tested against his own DNA. Basil is too stupidly trusting for a kid so deeply involved in the Underworld, really.

"Eh? Who is 'Basil'?"

The other Tsuna blinks up at him somewhat blankly, and - he's right, after all. That expression is almost entirely Nana, although it startles Tsuna badly to see it on anyone's face other than his mother. It's her coloring that they favor, and that's her expression, and something strange happens inside Tsuna's chest. Some kind of strange notion forms.

I don't have to be alone anymore.

Wo-w, Skies really are crazy, Tsuna thinks, rubbing at the back of his neck. He should already know this - he's been to Nono's house and met all of Nono's sons. There's no way a kid like him could get along with those older boys, but Enrico had been nice enough, and even though Xanxas was scary - and Dino, of course. Dino has always been the most welcoming Sky that Tsuna's ever known. That's why he's been living at his house for so long, even though it's impossible for Tsuna to stay there permanently.

And of course there's Iesada, but that's different.
"You know," he says, "Basil. The kid about our age that works with Dad."

The other Tsuna watches him with a faint frown. "So you've met with that person recently," he says, almost completely neutral except for the faint hint of distaste. "I wonder. Iemitsu's construction business has been keeping him busy in my world. He did visit the once, a few years back, but - well, it was the usual, of course. He drank everything in the house and left a mess to be cleaned up." He presses a finger to the same corner of his mouth that had savored those bitter words earlier, like he's checking to make sure it's stayed flat and neutral this time. "I didn't know how to face him, or rather: what might happen, so - instead, I continued work at TakeSushi and made excuses to avoid him."

Tsuna stares. He supposes he should have figured that much out himself. After all, he himself had been born in Japan and raised there. Technically, his first language is Japanese, even though it doesn't exactly come naturally to him anymore and some of the other Tsuna's vocabulary goes over his head. But what in the world would have changed that Iemitsu had never called his family in and brought them into the Family? Especially with Tsuna himself being a Sky with Guardians?

It's hard sometimes for Skies to sense other Skies, Tsuna remembers suddenly. Although naturally, it's dangerous for them because of territory issues, if neither of them are on their own territory, then as a natural defense they don't really make a point of showing themselves. It's not as if they really can help each other - if a person is offering shelter, then they have nothing to gain from getting close to someone else who also has shelter to offer.

"You live in Namimori?" Tsuna says in slow, horrified surprise.

The other Tsuna blinks at him. "I do," he says, and then he cocks his head. "I suppose you've gone into work with Iemitsu, then."

There's something sharp and uncanny about the gaze that peers at him from under those lashes, but it's hard to tell. Tsuna doesn't know what to make of that given that not only is his fellow hostage a fully Active Sky, but a civilian to boot. This is a complete and utter disaster! Regardless of his civilian status, the Mafia Underworld won't hesitate to drag him in if he has flames! And being a Sky? It's just about the worst outcome possible. There are hundreds of other flames for every Sky born into the world. Getting their hands on someone like this - no, even though Iemitsu is only the CEDEF, if someone had managed to get their hands on Iesada, that's more or less the same as gaining control of Vongola.

"S-something like that," Tsuna stutters, staring. What kind of guardians has this guy managed to have! As if Tsuna can just easily leave things like this after finding all of this out! He'll have to see for himself that none of those guys are Vongola's enemy, or otherwise this will immediately become a disaster for this world!

Well, he says that, but… honestly, it's for the sake of this world's Tsuna, too. Of course he's been trained to think of Vongola's sake first and foremost. He's even more or less aware of having been taught to be that way. That's fine for them and anyone else who lives in the dark Underworld of the Mafia, but… for a civilian like this? That's not fair at all.

"Mn. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that man has another bastard child where he works," the other Tsuna says. His tone is mild, almost absent minded, but the hair at the back of Tsuna's neck prickles. "After all, that precious sister of mine, she was born for similar reasons."

A sister! No, wait, there's no time to worry about these kinds of things, Tsuna reminds himself. "We'll worry about that later," he says. "Our first concern should be getting out of here. How are you feeling? Do you think you can walk?"
His fellow hostage exhales, closing his eyes like he's exhausted. "Well, it's not as if there's another option that's acceptable," he says, and smiles at Tsuna. "But as I said, there's someone I have to find and rescue first."

A Guardian then, probably, Tsuna thinks with a sigh himself. It's the only explanation for a vulnerable civilian Sky being so careless with their own safety. Shouldn't his self preservation instincts be kicking in? Tsuna's grateful that he's been accepted, of course, but the rest of this situation is troubling. "In what kind of way would that person be trapped?" he asks instead. "I was able to find a map, more or less, so I can probably guess if I know how they're being held."

In a closet, he suspects, honestly. It would be the best place to stick an agitated Guardian.

"Hm. I wonder." His fellow hostage sets the empty soup container down, gazing into the middle distance with a frown. "That guy is most likely the one looking through worlds, so some kind of navigation hall? In whatever set up would have been the most like where I was, I'd think. He always ran away when I asked too many uncomfortable questions."

To hear a civilian who doesn't even know about Flames talk so comfortably about other worlds is a bit disorienting. "Wait, what do you mean, the one looking through worlds?"

The other Tsuna gazes up at him, eerily calm despite everything. "I don't exactly have the full story myself," he admits, "and for much of our association, I don't think he realized I could hear him. At least not until the end, when she finally got what she wanted from me." Reminded of it, he frowns, looking away and rubbing his chest uneasily. It's obvious that he's remembering something unpleasant, eyes going unfocused and his mouth opening slightly. "-well, anyway," he says, abruptly breaking away from those thoughts and looking back up at Tsuna. "I think we're part of his escape plan. And it might be an escape plan for two."

For two! This is just getting more and more complicated. It's bad enough just trying to plan to escape himself, and bring this civilian Sky with him! But a Guardian, and whoever else? Tsuna rakes a hand back through his hair, grumbling with displeasure, but- "Ah, well, I can't expect to leave anyone behind," he admits.

Wait, what is he thinking in the first place? He's never had a problem before now with thinking only of himself!

"What a relief," the other Tsuna says, beaming a smile at him - but those eyes are a bit too sharp, like they've seen right through him regardless of any warmth his mouth shows.

Is this guy really a civilian!?"

A look like that is to be expected, even from a civilian if their precious Guardians are under threat - or at least, that's what Tsuna thinks. He can't really get along with Xanxas' way of doing things, and Enrico's relationship with his is really too formal for his tastes. It's why he likes Dino so much: Dino always is at his best when working for the sake of his family. That's the kind of ideology that Tsuna can admire.

Hopping down off the desk, Tsuna brushes crumbs off the scrubs and hands his fellow hostage the last three cookies in the pack. "Think you can handle eating these, Tsuna?"

They both cringe at the same time - Tsuna, because it feels weird to call someone else by his came, and the other - wait, why is he cringing?

Looking slightly put upon, his fellow hostage accepts the cookies, and sighs. "I'll do my best," he
says, "but could you see your way to using 'Tsunayoshi' - ah." He pauses himself, a bit consternated. "No, wait, that's your name, too, isn't it?" he asks. "Then-" Then his expression takes a strange turn, a bit like savoring bitter chocolate, a bit thoughtful. "Then," he says again, tilting his head and looking peculiarly at Tsuna, "How about using 'Nayo?'"

"Nayo?" Tsuna echoes, taken aback. It fits strangely in his mouth. He doesn't think there's a such thing as a name like that. "Is it an inside joke?" he wonders a bit incredulously.

Belatedly, Tsuna wonders if that's a little harsh toward a civilian in a scary situation like this - he can be a bit abrasive and off-putting, practically everyone tells him so - but the pleased smile that crosses the other's face makes Tsuna's heart thump unexpectedly. "It is," he agrees.

W-... well, it's a small thing to make him happy, so Tsuna can probably use it regardless. And though he hasn't tolerated it from anyone since that day - "Um, in that case, you can use a nickname for me, too: it's 'Zunetto.' I got it because 'tsu' is difficult and there's honestly a limit to how much I can stand being called 'Tuna.'"

It ends up being easier than he thought to allow that. No, actually, it also makes him a bit happy to think that someone will know to use that nickname with him again. It sounds a bit weird coming from the other Tsuna - or no: Nayo - because he has less practice with foreign tongues than Tsuna himself, but - it's not bad. And the careful dedication to getting it right by sounding it out carefully a few times makes Tsuna feel more confident with his choice.

"Okay," he says, feeling uncharacteristically optimistic, "It's great meeting you, Nayo! Please ta-... ta... take...! ...!

There's no way that Tsuna can say something so embarrassing regardless of being a meaningless turn of phrase!

Nayo looks a bit indulgent as he says, easily, "Ah. I guess I'll be responsible for you from here on out. Please feel free to call me 'senpai.'"

"There's no way I can do that either!" he screeches.

There's several false starts. However well Nayo had shrugged off the effects of the sedative, his body is still weak and faltering, which - is about right from what Tsuna had guessed about how long he's been held by these people. He's been laying strapped down in that pod for weeks, maybe as long as a month, and in that time his well trained body has withered a bit. It's obvious in both his unsteady stance and his quiet frustration over it. He tries his best to hide it, and Tsuna tries to respect his pride by not concerning himself, but-

Rather than retrieving the bed again, or finding a wheelchair for Nayo to use, they settle on using Tsuna as a beast of burden instead: Nayo reluctantly puts his arm over Tsuna's shoulder and trusts his weight to him. It's a bit awkward, but the act of being relied upon is- Tsuna can't quite bring himself to argue about it and come up with another solution.

It's distracting in various ways. Weirdly enough, Nayo is actually noticeably shorter than Tsuna, to the point that if Tsuna hadn't seen the data himself, he'd think that Nayo was probably a lot younger than seventeen - or would, but Nayo's face would fit in just fine at Dino's stables late at night when the drinks and cards come out. It happens occasionally, that a kid with eyes older than their face would be there, playing for keeps because they haven't come to trust that Dino is reliable yet. But even then, the sort of self-awareness that Nayo shows is something Tsuna has only seen a
few times before, in the others Skies he's met and Lazzero.

A civilian like Nayo has no reason to carefully think out and measure himself and others in every breath and heartbeat after all, regardless of whether or not he's had Guardians. There's that, and the casual way he talks about things like other worlds, and takes his kidnapping in stride, and sets the hair at the back of Tsuna's neck on end, and his Sway, which is an oddly quiet thing that Tsuna doesn't notice up until Nayo is leaned up against him, and then it feels although he's being flooded with light and warmth.

Nayo is unsettling in countless ways that would normally send Tsuna running for the hills. He can't quite explain, even to himself, why he's enjoying being relied upon a bit more than he probably should. He's the son of Vongola's CEDEF. He's been trained against this kind of thing, And yet-

"Zunetto," Nayo says quietly, flicking a glance up at him. "We're almost there."

Tsuna blinks around for a moment to find that he's faithfully lead them both down toward the central hub of the facility. Why Nayo and himself had been held upstairs - or no: why being upstairs had been necessary to rip Tsuna out of his world of origin… from what he'd been able to tell from the building maps, most of the serious work occurs downstairs. It seems like whoever these people are, who aren't Mafia: they'd expected to be able to show off their findings. The whole building has been made way too accessible to unfamiliar people. Figuring out that there was some kind of power generator down toward the center of the facility, in order to keep it off power grids and call attention from authorities had been easy, as well as figuring out that with all the cables that had been attached to Nayo's pod that a reasonable person would place them near to that powersource.

Between Tsuna's own gut and however Nayo himself was able to tell, they'd managed to avoid the few cameras and guards and people in lab coats that were still roaming the facility. Tsuna had said that he was sure that him being brought to this world was definitely something they showed off to someone. Nayo had agreed.

It's not just the bloodied Underworld of the Mafia that's filled with despicable beings.

"You're right," Tsuna says, and then takes a deep breath. "Alright, so… then how should we do this? I'm strong, but I can't carry everyone out of here with just my arms, you know?"

"If I lean on a cot, I should be able to move under my own power," Nayo says, a vague expression crossing his face, like he's looking into the distance. He bites his lip. There's a faint scar on the bottom on, just to the left, that one particular tooth digs into perfectly.

The plan of wheeling one or more people out of here leaves something to be desired. But, it's what they have. "Well, let's see what we're dealing with," Tsuna sighs, moving forward again.

These people must be doubly secure in their containment methods, which begs the question of how Tsuna managed to beat it so easily. He's still not sure what they wanted with him, ripping him out of his home world - just because they could? There are no locks on the door, though, so the vetting process to begin work here… it must be something amazing. It's like it never even crosses their minds that someone might find experimenting on human beings distasteful.

That kind of thing is more or less a given in the Mafia world, of course, but Tsuna… Tsuna had always thought better of the world outside that darkness. They won't all be like this, he tries to reassure himself - tries to look to Nayo and think of the world outside the Mafia as being more like that. You can't judge the people of Italia as the rest of the world, when they all grew up under the
It's more or less exactly what Tsuna assumed. They're close to the power source - he can feel it humming in the back of his teeth - and so if they are to be more pods like the one that Nayo was in, they'd connect here. And there are. There are... far too many of them. Dark, most of them. Nayo's hand clenches in the front of Tsuna's scrubs, scarred knuckles pressing briefly against his ribs.

"I thought so," Nayo says faintly, not surprised but still deeply disappointed. "The things that kid said... he was desperate to escape. Enough to make a plan like this, and beg me to live."

Tsuna glances down, and Nayo looks up, and civilian or not: this is a Sky at Tsuna's side. "Zunetto," he says, soft but with such a tone of expectation that Tsuna's spine straightens, "these people... we have to help them. Whatever it was about me that she could use to bring you here... it happened to these people, too."

A cold chill goes through Tsuna. He'd wondered, but - even if Nayo doesn't know about Flames, he's sharp, and the idea - the idea that all these people were *Skies* - if they had thought that *Tsuna himself* were a Sky, and that's why they hadn't prepared for him to burn through the sedatives so fast, and why they seemed to have been willing to risk Nayo's health to do it... too bad they never realized that a Tsuna being a Sky is the weird thing, not the other way around.

He nods. "Of course we'll save them," he says, although he doesn't feel optimistic about it at all. If he were the type that could allow it, he'd say something about saving them even if it kills them, but - haha... it's ironic to think there are Skies trapped here, depending on a civilian and a worthless kid like him.

"Thanks," Nayo says, takes a deep breath, and then pulls away from Tsuna.

He can't help but to grasp Nayo's waist in both hands, and Nayo's own hand briefly closes over one of his, like he means to throw it off - but after a moment, his legs firm up. "I can do it," he says, glancing over his shoulder with sharp eyes.

Well, he's a Sky. Even a civilian will get an attitude about it.

"My body moved on it's own," Tsuna says, half in apology and feeling disappointed in himself. Putting his hands so familiarly on someone like that! It's one thing when he's helpless and unconscious and no one else is there to save him, but obviously Nayo can do it on his own now.

They split up - Nayo seems attracted to one lit pod in particular, but Tsuna turns to investigate the nearest dark one. That they're even bothering to have those pods plugged in... Tsuna doesn't trust it one bit. Although, speaking honestly... he isn't sure he really wants to find out why that is. But it's not as if Nayo will leave his comrades behind easily, and it's not as though Tsuna can actually hold that against him, so he edges closer. The inside of the pod is dark, but he can definitely make out some kind of vague human shape in there, but - ah. It makes him uneasy. A cold chill goes up his back.

Unlike Nayo's pod, these have tiny readouts that are a part of the pod itself, and - it seems although these aren't meant to open, either. He touches the screen, which brightens, and sees that there's similar information there. He recognizes the name of some small-time family, even less impressive than Dino, who is more Vongola's vassal than some allies, such as the Giglio Nero. He recognizes the name of their Sky.

Pressing his hand against the darkened glass lid, Tsuna doesn't feel anything at all. He hasn't felt the Sway of a single Sky here, not even Nayo who is so politely held to himself the way only a
civilian would be interested in. That shape under the dark glass is-

Nayo makes some kind of noise from the other end of the room, and Tsuna's head snaps up to look. He's standing over one of the lit pods. His feet and shoulders look odd and set, chest still, back straight. "Nayo?" Tsuna says, but the other doesn't so much as twitch. The hairs on the back of Tsuna's neck stand on end, but - it doesn't seem dangerous to approach.

Still, he does so cautiously, worried about what it might be inside the pod that Nayo is resting his hands on.

"Nayo," he says again, not wanting to startle him as he comes up, but then - then Tsuna sees what is inside the pod - who. It's not anyone that he recognizes personally, but at the same time: well, it's terribly unmistakable, the look of that bloodline. An awful, cold feeling sweeps through him as he looks down into the glass pod to see the tiny, ten year old figure of what is obviously a Giglio Nero heir. She's so small and fragile, and she's ten years old. A child. What have they done to her?

"Ahh," Nayo breathes, a tense noise that trembles, anxiety and something deep and fathomless, like staring into what should be empty shadows to find unexpectedly: something that is staring back. Tsuna stills, and looks up with wide eyes, and worse than simple lensing, which is something anyone with Flames can do: the hot amber burn of an advanced Flame technique like the Hyper Dying Will Mode lights his face with eerie shadows. His head cocks and he looks to the side where Tsuna stands, eyes no longer brown but the shattering clarity of a Sky pushed beyond their limits.
"I knew it," he says, the placid tone at complete odds to the kindling, towering Flame that is burning inside him. "They're all scum, too contemptible to even be worthy of stepping on."

"Nayo," Tsuna says in alarm, because regardless: it's obvious that his Flames are untamed and untrained, and something like this will kill someone who doesn't know what they're doing, and he doesn't want that. He doesn't want that, but he's not fast enough, he can't break through in time, because then-

It's awful. The contempt of this light-and-warmth-and-thick-hot-chocolate Sky? It's frigid. It's unrelenting, a sucking bitter void that stretches as it crushes: an emptiness with no warmth nor compassion nor kindness. It feels endless, fit to lock the entire world in a whole new ice age, and it pierces Tsuna's chest and his heart and suddenly he thinks: if someone like this thinks this world is not worth saving, then-

It's bad, isn't it?

-0-

Chapter End Notes

* RIP Tsuna.

* It might not be clear, but the people experimenting on Tsunayoshi forcibly shattered his Seal without realizing what or why Tsunayoshi was having a response like that. So, when Tsunayoshi has the usual reaction, it ends up going a lot further than he means for it to go.
* This POV's Tsuna starts out using 'boku' the way Tsunayoshi did, as that's what he would have used back when he was speaking it as a child, but corrects himself to 'ore' - Tsunayoshi mostly only uses 'boku' with his Guardians, and 'watashi' with everyone else. The more pissed off Tsunayoshi is, the more formal and polite his speech is regardless of what he's actually saying.

This is mostly in response to his heightened awareness of his precarious position. Regardless, he comes off as a very stilted, awkward person due to these speech quirks.

* Tsuna sees this guy with scars all over his hands and lip and is like: wow, a completely helpless civilian. Tsuna you're fucking wild. Listen, even a Tsuna who has gotten to be older and was taught to be more aware of things and people… is still a fucking idiot sometimes. Tsunayoshi is the same way.

* Lazzero (technically not an OC) - Some old guy with high standards that mentored Tsuna enough to care if he survives or not. Would be at least a little disappointed by such a clueless student.
* Iesada - Tsuna's younger Sky-type brother. They both hold extensive grudges against Iemitsu and suspect him of being unfaithful to Nana, but neither of them have brought themselves to confirm this.
Chapter Summary

Enter!! Bronco Dino!!

Tsunayoshi wakes up (again), but at least he gets an explanation out of it this time? Zunetto continues to be hella dame.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Two: in the absence of breath

This time when Tsunayoshi wakes up, it's to a ridiculously opulent room and bed, instead of being hidden away in a corner in some kind of office. His heart jumps and races like a rabbit trapped behind bars while a dog snaps and snarls and bites that cage, trying to chew it into and rip him into nothing but blood and fur. His hands sweat. His limbs shake. The vastness of the bed terrifies him for a moment - the utter certainty of being a frail child and struggling so hard to make it through every day while unseen shadows lurk and threaten him and his friends and family in ways he couldn't begin to understand.

Turning his arm, he stares at the familiar needle marks in his arms. There are only a few, but it's a pattern that he's seen before. How could he have seen them before? He-

He forces his panting breath to slow, sucking in as deep of breaths as he can and holding them until he can't, and the next breath comes deeper. Tsunayoshi flings the blankets and sheets back and rakes his shaking hands through his hair, and with every quivering breath he takes: that ember inside him that never extinguishes like a guidelight on a cooking range: it begins to kindle and spread fire and light and certainty through his bones until finally quiet and conviction soothe his frantic thoughts.

That's a bit strange, isn't it, though? Shouldn't his head be aching and his stomach clenching in the face of it? Shioya's breathing exercises - every time he's had to use them to calm himself down, they've always made him crushingly sick in return. Actually, come to think of it: Tsunayoshi feels kind of great regardless of his weakened state. Without his fears clouding it, he can tell that his ability to think has gotten a bit more streamlined. He feels - warm.

Not unusually so - or yes: unusually so in that Tsunayoshi only rarely feels like this. Feels truly comfortable inside his own skin. He'd thought until now that the only way to feel anything was to burn alive.

Judging from the state of his body, his conditioning has slipped somewhat, but - ahh, that's to be expected, isn't it? That guy with the milkspill hair had tried to warn him, to let him know. Tsunayoshi is no longer trapped in some kind of hellspace where he's thirteen again and being chased through the streets of Namimori - he can say this with confidence. There had been a slight uncanniness to the dreaming that he'd slowly become aware of, and besides: he hadn't been thirteen at the time of Nerina's Sports Festival in real life.
But like in a dream, going a year and a half without celebrating anyone's birthdays hadn't seemed like an odd thing. As if Haru or Takeshi would have ever left it at that! They've celebrated every year: everyone's birthday without fail, although Tsunayoshi had always been made the delivery person when it came time for Kyoya's.

He still doesn't remember being abducted, though. 'Other worlds' - huh? Well, meeting another person with his name and some uncannily familiar mannerisms is pretty strange, but that person had been oddly transparent. Not 'incapable of duplicity' but 'flying in the face of it'… maybe.

He can only hope that everyone behaves themselves while he's gone and don't come running in after him like a bunch of troublesome idiots. Although of course they will. And Kyoya will bite him to death for being an idiot who can't even rescue himself.

"It shouldn't count if I'm being used as an escape route, though," Tsunayoshi says, shifting to sit on the edge of the bed. Amazing. He doesn't even feel weak - it feels like of course his legs will hold him, no matter what. Although he won't be kicking anyone in the face soon. Everyone will be disappointed about his conditioning for sure. He'll have to work hard to become the kind of person that can continue surviving on his own again.

Ah, no, wait: 'used as an escape route' - why had he thought that? No, hadn't he thought something similar the first time he woke up, all dizzy and sick with whatever sleeping aids or drugs that he'd been kept sleeping with? It's just that the guy with white hair had made such a big thing about meeting someone, and even called that guy by that nickname before Zunetto even have a chance to say it himself. And Zunetto was the one who got Tsunayoshi out, so. That had been the feeling he had about the whole thing.

So are they saved, he wonders? It'll trouble him if they're not.

He's not some helpless thirteen year old kid, and the ember inside his chest that refuses to be put out: it crackles and dances along his carbon bones. He swore to become a kami once - not at the time that he'd felt like this: but the current seventeen-year-old him who had been forced to look back at the stressful, scary things he'd had to face when he was a kid, all by himself. The person he is now had been looking back at then and decided at that point: if the situation is impossible to survive as a human being, then surpassing that- or failing that, and becoming inhuman, that's fine.

There were so many things about his youth that he'd wanted to forget about.

People aren't bonsai, content to be trimmed and forced to grow into certain, squat shapes for other people's amusement, and they're certainly not finely burned bits of charcoal to be used as fuel for machines, either. Whatever terrible purpose 'she' had to do that thing to him that had caused him to suffer like that - 'she' had done that same thing to the guy with the white hair, and to that little girl, that child, hadn't 'she.'

Something like that is unforgivable. Becoming 'capable of anything' for those children's sake - well, they're all comrades in this anyway. Tsunayoshi can be good for this, at least.

First thing first, though: Tsunayoshi smothered his hand over his uncomfortably hot breastbone, looking around the room. It's still as opulent as ever, although there isn't much furniture: the bed that he's sitting on, with a nightstand beside it. He wishes there were a glass of water waiting there, maybe an aspirin. A chest of drawers. A painting of some kind of rolling countryside, with some kind of crops, although Tsunayoshi isn't familiar enough with farming to say with any confidence what it is. A table with some chairs, as if it was expected for whomever had these quarters to have visitors to entertain in their bedroom, or - possibly a place for everyone to wait while someone slept, sick in bed?
Tsunayoshi remembers that the inferno inside him had subsumed him, but hadn't there been something?

Obviously, his attempts at taking retribution had been halted, but - if the current reality isn't a dream (and it's not, he knows it's not, he won't ever be fooled by a dream ever again) and this obviously isn't the facility where he woke up last… then where is he, and with whom?

Whoever it was dressed him in some pretty fine pajamas, he notes. Cotton, but soft, and not from age and wear like his sleepwear at home. Tsunayoshi resists the urge to be embarrassed about it, given the fact that he's fairly certain that the guy who resembles him had taken him out of that hospital gown that matched the one he always saw the white haired boy in, and put him in those medical scrubs. As he expected, his legs hold him without complaint as he stands. There aren't any windows in this room, and though there's another doorway, Tsunayoshi chooses the one that he suspects leads to a hallway.

He doesn't quite hold his breath when he tries the knob, but some kind of tension eases when it turns without resistance in his hand and the door opens onto the hallway he expected. So. Not tied down, not sedated, and not even locked into the room he was left alone in.

Either he's in the grasps of someone truly unpleasant, or somehow he's managed to catch a break.

Tsunayoshi pauses as he steps into the hallway, shutting the door carefully behind him. There's the distant sound of angry shouting, but he makes note first of the fact that there aren't any windows on this hallway at all, although it's lined with doors. This kind of place… it's a lot like the Tomaso residence, isn't it? It has a very similar style and aesthetic. So this must be some kind of resident wing.

He thinks briefly of Naito Longchamp and the wing that isn't shared with anyone else, so Naito had gradually taken up all of the rooms and filled them with this and that and made Tsunayoshi heart hurt for some reason. Naito isn't the kind of person who'll die if left alone, but Tsunayoshi is well aware that his own friends have a difficult time being around him. Hopefully he hasn't been lonely.

As for that shouting… Tsunayoshi looks that direction, listening for a moment. Although it sounds angry, it's hardly urgent; or at least that's not the feeling he gets. Still, it sounds a bit familiar. Ah - that's right. It sounds like that him from another world. That's the sound of his voice, and that language he'd first tried speaking to Tsunayoshi. Italian, right? Tsunayoshi has heard it from time to time. It's not uncommon in Namimori, although everyone more or less behaves themselves and appropriately speaks Japanese as they should.

Ahh. He probably should have tried picking that up, but for a kid like him who can't even string together a single sentence in English?

Instead of investigating that immediately, Tsunayoshi takes a moment to check the nearby rooms, which are also unlocked. They're all a match to his room, and they all lack windows, too. So. There's not an easy escape route, even though Tsunayoshi isn't inclined to try running away quite yet. Just recklessly doing that when he doesn't know the situation… of course he can't.

There's still that matter of the white haired boy and that child to see to, after all.

The shouting is louder already, and not quite as one-sided as it had sounded from further away where the room Tsunayoshi had woken up in is. Tsunayoshi can hear that someone is snarling replies right back, with a deeper, harsher voice than the higher, sharper quality that Zunetto has. Even at seventeen, Tsunayoshi's voice hasn't gotten very deep, he reflects wryly. It suits his purposes from time to time, but…
The larger part of Tsunayoshi would prefer not to open the doorway into whatever lobby it was that those two are arguing in, but - well. He can't stay here forever. The sooner he has the lay of the land, the sooner he can address the matter of those comrades of his, and get back to his household; hopefully before any of them commit to anything dangerous. The heat in his bones stills the tremor of his hand, and so Tsunayoshi turns the knob and slowly cracks the door open, peering through the gap.

**Wow,** he thinks first: the hallway and rooms he came from are nice, but this lobby? It's a little - ah. Unreasonable in its excess. Although more important than the room design, as dazzling as it is, are the people in that lobby. There are the two who are arguing in vicious Italian, of course - that's almost escalated into a physical disagreement. Some boy with black hair and red eyes that literally snap red like Hibari Ikumi's eyes do has Tsunayoshi's look-alike by the collar of his shirt. Unlike himself, those two and the blond boy they seem to be fighting thanks to, are dressed in day clothes - pants and shoes and button up shirts. It's only barely not a servant's uniform, isn't it? It lacks the finishing touches of that.

Across the room, there's an adult man who looks way too much like the blond boy for it to be pure coincidence, considering Zunetto. He's dressed in expensive, fashionable clothing - or at least, Tsunayoshi suspects it's fashionable **somewhere.** It's not fashionable for Namimori, though Tsunayoshi imagines that his long legs and exotic looks would draw plenty of positive attention regardless. There's a seven year old kid beside him, who looks like a perfect little doll made out of flesh and bone, dressed to the nines in a a schoolboy uniform that could have come out of some kind of questionable comic.

Sitting at a table at the opposite side of the lobby is a man, tall and lanky and exhausted, with heavy bags beneath his eyes that aren't quite hidden by his glasses, and dark hair that shimmers green like a duck's feathers. He's wearing a white lab coat. He's the one that notices Tsunayoshi first - or the one that acknowledges him first, anyway.

"Hey, you," he says, sitting up slightly and losing some of the weary irritation he'd directed at the two bickering boys in the center of the room. "What are you doing on your feet, you troublesome little monster? You owe me a free examination."

Of everything that Tsunayoshi imagined might be aimed his direction, that hadn't even appeared anywhere near the list. "Eh?" he says, caught flat footed. Come to think of it - doesn't he recognize this guy a little bit? Isn't he the slightest bit familiar?

"Nayo!"

Tsunayoshi is still blinking in shock at his reception when Zunetto carelessly shoves his opponent away, staggering him as he hurries over, hands already thrust forward as if Tsunayoshi will topple over at any minute. Tsunayoshi kind of remembers something to explain that kind of reaction, but - he feels fine now?

At the last second, Zunetto seems to manage to get his initial reaction under control and doesn't actually grab him or anything. He comes to a stop just a step too close and seems to vibrate in place, wringing his hands and peering down at Tsunayoshi with wide brown eyes. "You shouldn't be up yet," he says anxiously. "After everything that happened at that facility-!"

It's so much like Haru getting in his face about something that Tsunayoshi already has his hands splayed out and is saying, "I'm fine, I'm fine," soothingly before he can think twice about it. The tremble threatens to come back into his hands, so he breathes to fan the flames that will steady them, held out on display the way they are. "Sorry that I worried you over something like that," he adds with a smile to distract from it. "Flipping out so easily... I guess I still crack easily under the
slightest bit of stress."

The look that Zunetto gives him is a bit complicated and disbelieving. Tsunayoshi isn't sure why. He saw the same things that Tsunayoshi did. What the hell was Tsunayoshi trying to prove by losing his cool so dramatically? He can't just blow up and expect to achieve anything the way he had as a child. The drugs and those memories must have really messed with his head.

Still - in this scary situation, not knowing where he is or whom he's with and for what reasons… the way that Zunetto has come to his side again: it definitely gives the feeling that Tsunayoshi can at least rely on him, no matter how comfortable he is in the presence of these other people that Tsunayoshi doesn't know. Being under their eyes is making his stomach cramp a bit, but it's such a minor discomfort compared to his usual episodes that it's easy to ignore.

"Even though it's a bit unexpected," the older blond says, looking at Tsunayoshi with a surprisingly gentle expression, "it's good to see that you're well! There was some question about that."

"Don't dismiss it as a done deal," the man with dark hair says, a bit sharply. "Just because he's stable for now doesn't mean that it'll stay that way. Hey. I said to come here." He points expectantly to the floor beside where his feet are carelessly sprawled. However exhausted or drained that he seems to be otherwise, his eyes are sharp and alert enough to be troublesome as he looks at Tsunayoshi. "This is your doctor demanding your compliance."

"No way!" Zunetto barks, scowling at the man in the lab coat. In two steps, he has physically taken Tsunayoshi's side, going so far as to reach across him with his own arm the way Tsunayoshi himself might do with Haru, including the light touch to the far forearm as Tsunayoshi still has his hands up. As if such a blatant display of his loyalties was really required… although it does make Tsunayoshi feel a bit better. "After everything, you really expect to be trusted like that?"

"Ah," Tsunayoshi says at last, blinking at the man in the lab coat. "Weren't you - someone we met there in the halls?"

Only now that Zunetto is bristling that way against him does Tsunayoshi remember something like - he was burning inside, but the world beyond him was freezing, and then there had been a man and something like a clap of thunder. Or maybe a nuclear detonation, which had snuffed the greatest part of the inferno out, down to the unsteady flicker of the guidelight.

"You can't really call a knockout like that a 'meeting,'" the man scoffs. "You've been fighting below your weight class for so long that you never stood a chance. Now, come here. You owe me. If I hadn't gotten involved, you would have killed everyone in that place."

Brow pinching incredulously, he huffs "As if I could have," even as he thinks: *so what if he'd had?* It's true that his response had been a little ridiculous when there weren't any enemies standing right in front of him, but that had rather been the idea. Scum like that had definitely happily forfeited their right to live as human beings.

"I don't really understand," he adds, "but - if I could have done something like that, I wouldn't have been taken in the first place, I think. This isn't a movie where one person can just fight their way out, you know."

"And just where do you think the people making those movies got the idea?" the man in the laboratory coat says, unimpressed. "But in real life, recklessly slaughtering lackeys is something you have to answer to, you know? Or didn't you realize that there's no way that normal people could survive being stuck in that ice? What did you think happened to all those people you froze solid?"
Tsunayoshi says: "What?"

That's justified, he thinks, because what. What is this guy even trying to say, but - no one is looking at that man or reacting to what he's saying as if he's crazy or being nonsensical, no matter how exhausted he looks. What does he mean? What is he talking about, that it's such a reasonable thing to say, and-

But maybe it's not as crazy as that. Tsunayoshi's memories of that part, they're a little bit disoriented, but even Zunetto himself doesn't seem this man is really being all that unreasonable in asking something like that. And Tsunayoshi remembers then, that the inferno inside him? When he'd woken up, it was suddenly acting strange. And he certainly hadn't meant to overreact the way he had. And he remembers burning, but the world outside him was freezing, and-

He feels the blood drain out of his face, and the flames feeding on his bones flicker, and his hands begin to shake. "What are you talking about," he adds.

"Hey, let's stop," Zunetto says, suddenly anxious, and all Tsunayoshi can think is that he was right there beside him that time it happened. Even as Zunetto's hold makes a shift from shielding Tsunayoshi to becoming a bracing grip, he thinks: that must have been scary. To the others, Zunetto complains: "You think they could have done any of that without drugging everyone enough to keep an elephant down? That he was even as capable as he was is amazing, Verde! Expecting him to know or remember something like that-!"

"Ice?" Tsunayoshi's mouth says from a hundred miles away. He remembers something like that. Maybe. It doesn't make any sense though. "What are you talking about? I don't understand. What do you mean by 'froze solid'? How could I have - I really don't get it. Did I - did I break something?" He doesn't remember breaking anything, let alone something as dangerous as - what? Dry Ice, maybe? Were there pipes? Chemicals? He doesn't remember anything like that, or doing anything that could have-

There's something sharp and sneering said from the direction of that dark haired guy with the eyes like Ikumi's, and Zunetto protests sharply in Italian more to the room in general than to anyone in particular. It all filters in from a distance as Zunetto pulls him insistently away from the door and toward the chairs by the table Verde is at, while keeping himself between them.

"Are you okay? Are you sick?" he asks, awkward and urgent and frustrated with his own limited vocabulary made worse with worry. "Drink? Food?"

"It's not his health," the doll-like boy says, "he's in shock. Being accused of witchcraft by some stranger he's probably at the mercy of would do that."

"Witchcraft?" Tsunayoshi croaks, barely feeling the way his body falls into the chair. His fingers tingle as if thawing from some terrible cold in Zunetto's hands, although there's no ice. There's no ice. For the first time in Tsunayoshi's life, he thinks, he's not numb at the core of himself and so accustomed to it that he didn't realize to think it should be different, but he knows now. He knows, and the room looks strange - unreal, in a very different but no less upsetting way than the dreaming.

"Hey now, this is getting way out of hand," the blond man says, raising his hands. "No one is accusing anyone of witchcraft. There's no such thing as witchcraft in the first place. Have a little consideration for the person whom you're dealing with here."

Though he says that, the boy standing beside him coughs suspiciously, head dipped just so that the sailor hat falls over his face and hides his expression.
"That's a strange personality for the person I met in those halls," Verde says. He hasn't sat up so much as he's redirected his slouch over the edge of the table between them, remaining in his chair but still studying him closely. "There's no accounting for how you were raised, though. It's interesting."

What does how Tsunayoshi was raised have to do with somehow killing a lot of people on accident? What happens when he takes a knife or gun or something heavy in hand, that's a forgone conclusion whether anything happens or not, but he hadn't meant - but he doesn't even remember.

He doesn't remember, not clearly, but - all those people in that room? What about them? Isn't it there that he- turning his attention back to Zunetto, he says: "it wasn't suspended animation was it? Those people in the pods - that girl. Everyone is okay, right?"

Zunetto blinks down at him in surprise, and then his worried expression blossoms open into something gentle and a bit warm. "The others that were also taken? They were saved."

"Thank goodness," Tsunayoshi says faintly, and finally finds the strength to tighten his fingers around Zunetto's. Whatever he'd done when the inferno inside him had become him, he hadn't managed to do something as terrible as hurting anyone he hadn't meant to - or at least, anyone that inferno hadn't meant to, anyway. And - and Zunetto seems to be okay, so, maybe it's not an indiscriminate kind of thing. Or maybe Zunetto is just strong that way. "But - 'ice'?"

He looks to Verde then, though his glasses are reflecting the light in a way that keeps Tsunayoshi from being able to see his eyes clearly. "Perhaps I misspoke," he says, although the feeling that Tsunayoshi has is that he's not a person who is as imprecise as that regardless of his familiarity of the language he's speaking. "Still, for the sake of your health, an examination is paramount."

"I'm sure it's fine," Tsunayoshi immediately demurs. It's a mixture of things that keep him from correcting himself once it's out - he doesn't want to cause a bother, but also - he isn't confident of this person's intentions. He feels fine, anyway, and between old man Yamamoto and Shioya, he's experienced a wide array of different problems, so he fairly confident in his own assessment.

"It's against my ethics to leave it at that," he insists.

"You can trust Professor Verde," the boy in the questionable uniform chirps. "He has a doctorate."

Is Tsunayoshi really supposed to take health advice from a child? But it's quickly becoming awkward to refuse, with everyone leaning on him this way. He casts a look at Zunetto, who quickly bolsters his support.

"Don't worry, Nayo," he says earnestly. "I'll be here the entire time."

That's - well intended, but the opposite of what Tsunayoshi wanted from him. He's feels a bit more calm now that he's been promised that the others are okay, even though there's still this matter of the 'ice' that was mentioned a few times, and the alarming new way that awful mess inside his head and heart is behaving. Somehow he has some terrible worry that Verde will manage to sense something about it.

If anyone back home had been able to tell about the way he is, they were at least polite enough to speak around it in vague terms without causing him problems. He has it mostly in hand, anyway.

"Saying he has a doctorate is fine, and all, but," he hedges, "I still don't know who any of you people are, or what's going on."

"Ah, I see," the boy says, a bit smug and condescending; he doesn't quite clasp his hand over his
mouth, but that's the manner of the gesture. "Some people are still cautious of a strange old man putting his hands on them."

What kind of alarming things is this child trying to say?!

If not for the artifice of the gesture, Tsunayoshi would be a lot more alarmed, but - he's really only noticing it now that this kid has a similar air to Fon, despite being at least a year younger since Fon must be eight by now. That, and the adult that the boy has been remaining beside has a look on his face as if he's being tormented, and not in a way that suggests that he's hiding something shameful. And somehow Tsunayoshi is pretty sure that something as despicable as that is far beneath that blond man's capacity to tolerate.

Zunetto doesn't get the message since he responds by unconsciously gripping Tsunayoshi's hands too tightly. "What," he says, twisting awkwardly to stare. "Kid…"

"Don't pay any attention to him," the blond man says firmly, and Zunetto's face twists in some kind of crushed betrayal with big kicked-puppy eyes. He clearly means to have some kind of big blow up about it, but despite sympathizing with the obvious - if mistaken - conclusions that he's drawing about the situation, Tsunayoshi tightens his grip on Zunetto's fingers and ends up nearly jerking him a bit off balance.

The blond man seems to take no notice of the byplay, saying, "My name is Cavallone Dino, and this is my house. You and the others that were rescued were brought here, since there wasn't anywhere else to take you and the facility wasn't stable anymore. There was an internal reactor that they were using to power it, and I guess it wasn't properly maintained, since it blew out that way."

"Although I wasn't working with those people, I was present in the facility," Verde adds. "Following a lead when I got side tracked by everything that happened. Since it wasn't likely that anyone would get you guys out, I stepped in and lent my aid. So. About that examination?"

What a relentless guy.

Still, that 'child' has a point about being at the mercy of these adults. Even though they haven't really satisfactorily explained the situation, Tsunayoshi doesn't want to make enemies if he can avoid it. Giving Zunetto a glance to determine that he'll stay put, Tsunayoshi releases him and gets to his feet so that he can go where Verde pointed to earlier.

He feels steady again, anyway. Even if the inferno inside him, which has recklessly altered his configuration on the inside and blackened his heart with soot, has begun to do something unpredictable and scary - even if this is so much like being thirteen and suddenly realizing just what lengths he's capable of: Tsunayoshi still has a household he needs to get back to, so he has to find some way of surviving no matter what.

This close, Verde looks really, truly exhausted: drawn and worn thin by something or another. It takes effort for him to sit up out of his slouch against the table and lean forward, and he's such a tall, gangling person that even though he's seated and Tsunayoshi is standing, he meets Tsunayoshi's gaze without having to tilt his head all that far back.

He squints at Tsunayoshi from various angles, and then reaches out and makes Tsunayoshi move his head or arms in this or that way. Zunetto makes a noise of protest at the manhandling, but doesn't actually say anything, thank goodness. It's not as though Tsunayoshi hasn't ever been through school examinations anyway, so this isn't too uncomfortable.

At last, Verde taps one long, strong finger against the center of Tsunayoshi's breastbone. "What a
true monster," he muses, lifting his glasses off his face to rest them on his hair.

He doesn't look at Tsunayoshi's face; it's almost like he's not looking at Tsunayoshi at all, his eyes drawn and squinted. He mutters to himself in some language neither Italian or Japanese, making some kind of observation - it's troubling to be talked about when you're the only one who doesn't understand. Verde taps him again, this time as high as the dip of his collarbone, which is bared by the pajama top. It's much more personal than his breastbone, and Tsunayoshi flinches away.

"This part here is troubling," he says. "You broke through at vishuddha, instead of ajna, and the part where anahata is? That's weak, too."

Sitting back as if to see Tsunayoshi as a whole, Verde says, "that's a very unstable configuration. I'm really quite curious as to how something like you was raised. It's considered bad form to try raising anyone without using the ajna gate, so for something like this to occur... how old are you, by the way?"

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, taken aback. Isn't gathering patient information something that is done at the start of a meeting, rather than this late? Although he's really not all that fooled on the subject, it's just - appearances are usually important, aren't they? "Seventeen. I think, depending on how long it's been."

"I see. Considering your age, and physical development... without knowing your original state, I'd say three to six weeks." He glances to the side suddenly. "And that's your age as well?" he asks of Zunetto, who gives a startled affirmative. "Hm. If we use this other you from another world as a baseline, given his more average health compared to the signs that you were held to peak physical performance before this... then it's obvious that somehow, your physical development was hampered. That's likely connected to the nonstandard gates you have open. In collaboration with data that's already been collected..." Verde trails off with a vague look on his face.

"So, it's not going too far to say that those useless pieces of trash are involved with my father," the guy with the dark hair says, bitterly amused. "After all that idiot mouthed off about, and considering that... the old man in this world must be really desperate to make something like that."

"Hold up," Dino says. "Let's not be hasty. That's presuming that Timoteo is involved in this at all. The circumstances here could be very different than your world. It's obvious from the start that they don't even share a time frame."

"Time is a relative term," Verde says, waving the protest away. "It hardly flows in a line. There's nothing wrong with the rest of what was said, however. Although that's the obvious answer at this time, there may be more data to gather."

They're being far more straightforward than most of the conversions that Tsunayoshi has had to sit through for years - they're actually giving relations, and names, instead of saying 'that person' or other such vague terms. Maybe it's just because they're not accustomed to the structure of Japanese, but- "What are you talking about?" he asks, looking between them - Verde, and those two boys, and Dino and even Zunetto, who uneasily and guilty looks at him. "Who is Timoteo, and why would some Italian's father want anything to do with me?"

"What are you, an idiot?" the dark haired boy demands, the reflexive way his classmates would when he misses an obvious answer to a problem and they haven't quite reached the stage of sneering at him or taunting him about it. "Our world is dangerous. Even an old, aging out snake like him wants to diversify his investments. If it would be to his benefit to cultivate whatever it is that has to do with you, then he'd do everything he could to secure it."
And, ah, but that way of thinking is familiar to Tsunayoshi. He'd grown up with adults treating him the same, cultivating his good will for some reason that as a child, he couldn't really understand. Looking at Dino, and this boy who said 'my father' and talked about diversifying his investments… Tsunayoshi is starting to fathom the shape of it.

Hadn't that guy said this and that about a bloodline that had abandoned Tsunayoshi, and that he understood it better than those born into it?

"…that's not a bad guess, probably, from what you understand of the situation, but," Tsunayoshi says, thinking that, "you're likely wrong."

"And what would you know of the situation," he says, and this time he sneers about it and then turns his back, dismissing Tsunayoshi from the conversation entirely.

"No, wait, I want to hear this out," Verde says, slouching back into his chair. Folding one arm across his chest, he braces his chin between forefinger and thumb, squinting at Tsunayoshi and actually looking at him this time. "What is your take on this? As a brat who almost faints when accused of witchcraft."

As if that had been the problem. "Um - no, I think that's a normal response," Tsunayoshi says doubtfully, giving him a reproachful look. He hesitates, though, now that he's been invited to share his thoughts. He doesn't know what Verde or Cavallone Dino want from him, is the thing. He doesn't know how to safely navigate this situation in order to be returned home to his household the fastest. He's being treated as a guest, and not with honors, and not as a peer to these men, so he's not sure how much is safe to say.

He has no wish to drag down an army of demons on his head, honestly.

"Well, based on what's been said so far - you seem to think there's something weird about me, but it's not something that could have happened by accident," he says slowly, avoiding looking at anyone in particular and anxiously pressing on his scarred lip. "If it's not 'by accident' then it has to be done 'on purpose'… following from that, it's somehow stunted my physical development-" He does glance at Zunetto then, who stands a few inches taller and broader than Tsunayoshi does. "And also somehow made some part of me unstable."

That part of everything, Tsunayoshi doesn't really understand, except that his gut says that it's true. And well - not everyone can possibly have a heart as sick and twisted as his, isn't that right? Charred into soot and tar the way it's been, devoured again and again to feed that relentless inferno inside him that won't die or kill him.

Following from that: it's not weird that there's parts of Tsunayoshi that are scary.

*You must have felt it start to happen,* the guy with white hair had said, and: *your instincts are quite terrifying.*

"That Italian guy somehow seems to think that his father is involved, but - ahh, being approached on some foreigner's behalf was never a thing that happened to me, so," he says, "supposing that it was him that did this thing to me, then it had to be for someone else's sake, right?"

It's true that it's not rare for there to be people who speak Italian in Namimori, but they're not any more unusual than anyone else who arrives as a newcomer. But no one has ever paid Tsunayoshi any special attention until he 'saved himself' - not after that first time, but only after he'd managed to bring Haru back to his side. He never would have remembered it so clearly if he hadn't just relived all of those bad memories.
No one had ever tried cultivating Tsunayoshi until he'd run into Shioya Tadamasa, sworn brother of Sasagawa Naoko, who had been in a certain line of business with Iemitsu. After that, everyone just took it for granted that Shioya was the one guiding his growth - 'raising' him, so to speak.

But even so, that's not what Verde and that dark haired guy mean at all.

"But even though you guys seem to think that I was made into some kind of dangerous person to be used for one reason or another, that's - not right," he says. "Although 'something' was done on purpose - I think that 'something' was done for the sake of cultivating another person. In other words: at that time, I became 'payment.' Ah." Something about that fits, like some piece of a jigsaw puzzle locking into place even though he hadn't thought the picture matched until it fit. "Yes. Putting it that way - that's definitely how it was."

"No way!" Zunetto protests loudly, startling him. He turns, seeing just how incredibly unhappy he looks about that statement, which is - Tsunayoshi isn't sure what the problem is with that. He's right, but - well, actually, looking at the others, they don't seem pleased either. What did he say or imply?

"That's bad," the young blond boy says when their eyes meet; he's been quiet all this time, standing back from everyone like he's been trying to merge with the walls. His expression looks remarkably like Zunetto's. Kids like those two being upset, and for what reason?

That boy's older self, that Cavallone Dino, gives a somewhat incredulous, somewhat uneasy laugh. "Wow," he says, impressed in a bad way. "That's a really calm way of saying something as shocking as that. Is it really okay? Calling yourself 'payment' so confidently."

A bit nonplussed, Tsunayoshi blinks at them for a moment. "Well," he says eventually, "there are worse things to be called, I think. I'm not sure what one person's low opinion of my worth has to do with me, really, so getting upset is…"

"As if I can accept that!" Zunetto bursts out, upset. "I don't really get anything anyone has been saying, but - basically, you're saying that to form an alliance, the price was doing something bad to you? And you're really okay with that? I can't leave it at that!"

"Ehh? But what could really be done about it at this point?" Tsunayoshi wonders, a bit bemused. It's not as if he's suffering anymore; it was never an urgent issue, since he's managed to live well up to this point. "I think the matter of this 'other world' business is more pressing than something that must have taken place a long time ago. It's been bothering me, after all - the question of how I ended up in this situation, I mean. I still don't remember that, or the time around it very clearly."

"There are various kinds of drugs that could interfere with the formation of short term memory or lead to memory loss if used carelessly," Verde offers. "It might bother you, but it's not surprising at all that you don't remember that event. Actually, it's great that you were willing to show that your brain is still working in peak condition just now, since there was some question of it thanks to the techniques used at that place."

"A guy that almost faints at witchcraft but accepts the ideas of other worlds - this sure is getting interesting," the boy at Cavallone Dino's side says. He really does look like a perfect doll that some rich widow would commission out of the best materials just to dress and tend to it carefully each day, but it's obvious some kind of horrible spirit has possessed it.

Or to put it in the way that Tsunayoshi feels most comfortable thinking it: he's clearly some kind of demon.
"It makes everything a bit easier to explain, at least," Dino says. "There's not much for you to do though. Before we can send you back to where you're meant to be, those specialists that we called have to arrive. Unfortunately, the machines and the data that were used… well, they were destroyed, so we'll have to figure out a way of sending you home from scratch."

"… I see." It suddenly occurs to Tsunayoshi that he doesn't actually know whether or not the world he's currently in is his own, which… that complicates matters, doesn't it? Zunetto had figured out that he'd arrived from another world by himself, but also: he had just arrived himself. There had been no dreaming for him.

Actually, thinking of that- "Professor Verde," Tsunayoshi says, turning back toward him. "Could you explain a bit more about everything that happened there? It's just - it's a bit disorienting, because I don't clearly remember the events that lead to me being there, and then while I was there - and then being here…"

Verde observes him with those sharp eyes for a moment before reaching up and lowering his glasses over his eyes again. "Think of this as the plot to a comic book," he says. "That place was harvesting people's 'life energy' - although some people have much stronger 'life energy' than others. With something like that, miracles can be performed, so it's natural that people will get greedy." He pauses and adjusts his glasses, which reflect the light. "Understand that this is merely speculation on my part. Although they wished to recruit me, I wasn't actually involved in anything there. In moments when a person's life is in danger, that life energy becomes even stronger. Impossible feats become possible - mothers lifting cars off their children, defeating wild animals like lions or bears without a weapon, surviving plane crashes without a parachute or a parachute that fails…"

"Of course," he continues, "gaining the resentment of a person capable of scary things like that isn't desirable. So it seems like the solution that was arrived upon was to construct a 'false reality' through the use of some kind of virtual reality component, coupled with some scary cocktail of drugs that would work despite that 'life energy.' You had some kind of unhappy dreams while you were there, I bet. Upsetting things that would provoke your 'life energy' to increase in order to protect yourself.

"The thing is, though, that people with strong 'life energy' - they tend to be well looked after, for the most part," Verde adds, crossing his arms over his chest. "That's where this mess with 'other worlds' comes in. The disappearance of many people with strong 'life energy' would attract the attention of people whose job it is to monitor them. Allowing people capable of miracles to run amok is impossible after all. The solution to that seems to have been to use those she could get from this world to summon those from another world which wouldn't be able to fight back against the theft."

"Spending a lot at first in order to gain more power faster for later," Tsunayoshi says, "like a game. Using VR - ah. I see." Hadn't that white haired guy shown up then, too? Ahh. Unexpectedly, his home town has had a lot to do with that scary outside world full of monsters that Yekaterina had warned him about. No. If he takes the example of Yekaterina, and Naoko, and various other things… "Zunetto-kun said that those people were saved, so… I'm curious… would it be possible to meet everyone?"

It really is as he thought. He has to meet with that white haired guy if he wants any real kind of answers. That guy also sucks at being straightforward, but Tsunayoshi thinks that's not a willful decision on his part like it is on these people's, and even Zunetto's, although that guy probably thinks he's saving Tsunayoshi by keeping him in the dark.
As if anyone could be saved that way, stumbling around where they'll break their leg or their neck tripping on unseen things.

"Well, you already met most of them," Cavallone Dino says, a bit amused. "Xanxus of Vongola, and that kid who I used to be over there, plus yourself and Zunetto Tsuna - that's the bulk of the people who were saved. The other two aren't conscious yet."

"Ehh? Are six people really the only ones who could be saved? But there was that big room, full of those pods - it's true that they were dark, and their pressure was strange, but…"

Dino blinks. "Pressure, you say? I'm not sure what you mean about that… but those dark pods. They couldn't really be helped. It wasn't anything to do with the rescue procedure, or the collapse of the facility, though. The things inside those pods arrived into this world that way."

"Those weren't people," Zunetto agrees cautiously, his brow still troubled. "I mean, they may have been people at some point, but - ah, you'd probably call something like that a 'ghost' rather than a 'person.'"

"The process of removing someone from their own world into another isn't an easy feat, even if you gathered a group of people and thought that calling them the 'World's Strongest' was appropriate," the demon child says, the sudden shift in his manner startling but - appropriate, given the subject. "Perhaps the success also depends on the strength of the 'life energy' of the person being summoned. Well, since that place was destroyed before we could look at the information, perhaps we won't ever know."

Tsunayoshi has the feeling that he's being scolded for the actions that they're saying he took, but from what he understands of the situation, he'll stand by whatever they were. It's best for certain things to be left a mystery. Even if more than most things, he wants to return home to his household and that facility had the possibility of getting him there… there's no way that Tsunayoshi could have left it at that. A child was used for it.

Not a single member of his household could expect him to put himself before the good of a child. No, wouldn't they lose respect for him if he did? Well, in the first place, it's not something he could do, so there's no point in worrying about it.

"I'm glad to be alive, but then… I have to wonder if that guy I was looking for made it out okay?" he says, looking to Zunetto.

"Ah - I don't know," Zunetto says regretfully, looking almost miserable about it as if he's taking the failure personally. "The only people who were saved were the ones in those lit pods, like the one that girl was in. There wasn't anyone else to find."

It's a bit of a surprise that Zunetto is already making that kind of face when Tsunayoshi hasn't even done anything worthy of it; that's a bit troubling. Is it really so easy for him to get attached? He doesn't even know what he should say to put that fretting to rest.

"Then - the guy that I'm looking to meet," Tsunayoshi says, returning his attention to Cavallone Dino, who is giving Zunetto a complicated look. "There should be someone there who was important to the operation of that process of looking through other worlds. Although I haven't seen him in person, I think he would have been thin and badly mistreated, with pale hair - maybe something you'd even call 'white.' Perhaps albinism?"

"And what would you want from someone like that whom you've never even met?" Dino asks, looking slightly amazed in a bad way by Tsunayoshi's request.
It's a bit embarrassing to be looked at like that by someone that Tsunayoshi thinks is probably a reasonable adult, so he smiles self-consciously "It's not that big of a deal," he admits. "I only wanted to ask him a question or two. Ah - although, he seems to have some kind of business with me, and I'm curious so I want to hear him out regarding those matters."

"Are you sure you really almost fainted over witchcraft?" he asks incredulously, laughing a bit. "You keep saying some crazy stuff with complete sincerity, you know."

"Those two things have nothing to do with each other," Tsunayoshi protests, a bit resentfully. He's slightly tired of the weird way these people keep responding to him. "Obviously I won't be happy if I'm accused of doing something I don't understand. But if it's a matter of hearing someone out and considering their requests, or sharing information and helping each other out, then isn't that just business as usual?" He reaches up and uneasily tugs at the hair behind his ears. "I don't get the feeling that you're a bad person, so despite having a precarious position at this point, and no power of my own or influence to bargain with, I'd like to work together with everyone to reach a satisfactory solution, you know?"

"Are you for real?" Cavallone Dino sputters, his expression really, honestly shocked.

"Well, he said it sincerely, didn't he?" the demon child says, patting Dino's thigh. "Let's get along well, then."

"...you know," that blond ikemen says, glaring down at the child, "you're not my tutor anymore, so you can't just go around accepting alliances on my behalf."

"Oh?" The child tips his head back to peer up at Dino. His eyes are large and black and ringed with long lashes. "So you were planning to reject such an earnest appeal? After he even said that you're not a bad person."

Dino doesn't look at all impressed with that argument, nor with the blatantly transparent manipulation. "It's a bit early to be talking of alliances, you know - although," he amends, glancing at Tsunayoshi; his brown eyes are sharp and intelligent and focused in a way in this moment that he usually doesn't bother with, "I'm not against forming a temporary agreement for the purpose of getting along. But as you said, there's not a lot I get out of it in the end, right?"

"That's right," Tsunayoshi agrees promptly, blinking. "The current me has nothing to offer you. I guess it's up to you if you want to risk making an investment. I can't promise it'll pay off or anything, but I'm not so troublesome of a person that it'll cause problems. I think."

"Haah. Well, that clarity sure is nice," Dino says, by which Tsunayoshi supposes he means 'honesty.' He looks a little troubled, raking his hand back through his wavy hair. "Well, if you're really okay with waking up suddenly and making an alliance with a person whose name you didn't know an hour ago, then I'll accept making a temporary agreement to work together with you, Nayo-kun."

Regardless of how he puts it, that's the way Tsunayoshi feels about it, so he dips into a brief bow. "Thank you very much," he says, since that won't hurt either.

"There's no need for that, but thank you," Dino says. "In the meantime, you wanted to see those other two, right? As I said, they're unconscious, but if it would help you relax, then I'll be willing to show you the place where they're resting. Before that though... if it's fine with you, we'll have you dressed in actual clothes." He smiles wryly. "It's a bit strange to conduct business with someone in their pajamas."
"Ah." Tsunayoshi glances down at himself, all the way to the floor where his bare feet anxiously twist toward one another all of a sudden. "Yes, please, thank you very much."

"Zunetto Tsuna, you seem to know your way around, so please take care of that while we deal with the matter of my younger self and Xanxus of Vongola," Cavallone Dino says.

"I will, thanks!" Zunetto says, seizing Tsunayoshi by the arm and tugging him back toward the door he entered the lobby from. It really is like having his household around, he thinks as the door shuts behind them and they start down the hall.

"Ah - I wonder," he says, earning a curious look from Zunetto. "I don't mind, but - do those people even know my name beyond 'Nayo Tsuna'?

"I wouldn't!" Zunetto protests, shooting him a startled look with wide brown eyes. "Even if you think they seem like good people… they're actually really dangerous, you know? It's not that they're bad guys, but - ahh, how to say it?" He frets and worries at it a bit.

"But," Tsunayoshi says, "they have a way of living that makes it dangerous for me?"

"Yes! That's it!" he agrees brightly, apparently relieved enough that he flashes Tsunayoshi a surprisingly bright smile. For some reason, Tsunayoshi suddenly remembers Haru meeting him for the first time and going on about some kind of Prince.

Haru honestly has the worst tastes in men.

In other words though, this is more or less like Namimori all over again, with people talking over his head about things that - well, after a while, there's enough context that it's impossible not to figure it out no matter how many times a blind eye is turned.

Zunetto seems to be in a good mood, so Tsunayoshi lets it go for the moment while he's escorted back to the room that he woke up in. Actually, it's a bit worrisome how directly Zunetto arrives at the right door and carelessly barges in, pulling Tsunayoshi with him. "Dino has allowed us to have this wing for the time being," he says, going immediately for the chest of drawers that Tsunayoshi had disregarded the first time. "And he even lent us some things for while we're here."

"That Cavallone Dino sure put himself out," Tsunayoshi says, "taking in a bunch of kids who got snatched from different worlds. If there's not a way to get back home, then I wonder what will happen to everyone."

"Don't say that! Of course we'll get everyone home!" Zunetto protests, straightening with a shirt grasped in his hands. It's the same kind of shirt that he and the others were wearing. Generic copies, more or less, but - well, depending on how long it's been since they arrived, or: no, the fact that they're even getting clothes at all is generous. Expecting anyone to cater to personal tastes is too much, right?

"I'd like to think so, too," Tsunayoshi says, stepping over to take the shirt away from him. He bends to take a look into the other drawers, and comes up with a pair of identical pants. "But that's just a best case scenario. It's a bit short sighted to focus only on the desired outcome and be caught off guard, I think."

Harm befalls the family that way. It's Tsunayoshi's job to think carefully of all outcomes and be prepared as much as possible. None of these people are his family, but - well, they're comrades of a sort. The moment that Tsunayoshi had stepped into that room and felt the pressure of all those people… it's not like they're his or anything, but they're all in this together, after all.
"Speaking of things that are dangerous for me," he adds, straightening and pulling the pajama top off over his head. "That person who caused me to be like this - what are the chances you think of it being that useless man you went into business with?"

"W-well! In the first place I don't know that I really understand what those two were trying to say," Zunetto says, sounding weirdly flummoxed and suddenly like he's some distance away - which turns out to be because he's trying to give Tsunayoshi some privacy by turning his back. Tsunayoshi's not sure why, nor why he seems tense about it, but there's no point in dragging things out. "Um... that thing that you did at the facility - the 'ice' I mean..."

Tsunayoshi straightens from putting on the pants. "The 'witchcraft,'" he says, watching Zunetto's back closely. "Which no one in that room seemed to think was an unreasonable thing."

"I - I can't really talk about something like that with you," Zunetto says anxiously. "It's dangerous. Besides, just because it's known that Timoteo of Vongola can do that doesn't mean it can't be a set up. Even Xanxus thought of him first, which means that it's a good way of pointing the finger, you know? But saying that 'absolutely no one else can do it' seems like a good way of distracting ourselves from the possibility of a 'true culprit' - and anyway! Even if That Man is an idiot, there's no way that he'd stand for someone hurting us!"

Force of habit has Tsunayoshi saying, "that's some sharp thinking," even though he's a bit distracted by the borrowed manner that Zunetto used to say it.

It's only when he ends up on the wrong end of a surprisingly sharp, interrogative glance from over Zunetto's shoulder that he realizes what he's done, and well - no wonder. Now he can recognize that Zunetto does bare more than a passing resemblance to those hapless cases that Kyoya prefers to dump on his doorstep like a particularly overachieving tiger with hunting skills that are far too proficient for his needs. It's not a happy thing being the dumping grounds for Kyoya's castoffs, but it's not as if Tsunayoshi hasn't dealt with the situation to his satisfaction.

Ahh. It'll trouble Tsunayoshi to leave things like this, he thinks, watching how quickly Zunetto shunts off his shock for the sake of being relieved that he can safely turn and face him properly. Yes, that particular way that his eyes skate downward to avoid meeting gazes - he recognizes that look only too well. What should he do?

Well, that aside, Tsunayoshi is stuck in a fairly difficult position. He can't learn more about this 'witchcraft' situation, nor does Zunetto hold any answers for his problem regarding whatever was done to him that caused him to be like this, or for whom he was made this way. Furthermore, there's definitely no point in stressing Zunetto out by arguing with him regarding their differing opinions regarding That Man.

"Who knows, I guess," Tsunayoshi sighs wearily. "I just hope that guy wakes up soon. I'd like to hurry up and resolve our business."

He'd like to hurry up and go home, if only to get bitten to death, and go and see Takeshi's baseball games, and eat Nana's meals, and have cake at a cafe with Haru while she talks about some scary subject or another, and go to TakeSushi and listen to the troubles of all the people there who will call him 'senpai' and 'taichou' and 'niisan' as they please. Although he normally hates that, at least it's something he's accustomed to and their problems are something he can do something about.

But he can't just leave Zunetto alone, and that guy with the white hair who clung to him so much and wanted to be peers and join his noisy world, well - he can't ignore that either. So.

"It's only been a few days," Zunetto says, obviously wanting to reassure him. "If he's in the
Cavallone medical ward, then it might be pretty bad… I didn't know, but sleeping for weeks on end seems like it's bad for the body. Even the younger Dino and Xanxus had a hard time of it."

He hadn't even seen those two being held. Ahh. That place had definitely been bad. It's one thing to abduct a seventeen-year-old, but the younger Dino - he was only a bit more than a child himself. That could have been Tsunayoshi those years back, except that it's a bit hard for him to accept that he'd ever been so baby faced and small with such big eyes.

If only it had been a matter of getting rid of those scum with his own two hands instead of doing something scary that he doesn't know how to use or control.

"I see," he muses, reaching up to touch at his breastbone, even though the place Verde had indicated was a bit higher; it doesn't feel particularly hot anymore, but he can sense the guidelight which continues to burn inside him. "I'll try to wait patiently and find something to pass the time with." And then he looks at Zunetto and smiles his best 'getting along' smile. "Say, Zunetto-kun, you'll help me get back into shape, right?"

For some reason, he finds this incredibly alarming, jolting back an entire step while flushing and shouting: "As if I could!"

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No sooner does the door close behind those two identical kids than does the fifteen year old Xanxus turn on Gherardino with a snarl. "Did some Vongola peon really just make a deal with some no-name idiot?" he demands harshly.

Gherardino sighs heavily. He'd forgotten what a massive brat Xanxus had been at this age, and before certain unfortunate events took place. He deeply pities his younger self, especially since his hatred of his job had persisted up until he was sixteen or seventeen and Reborn had beaten it out of him. Or, actually, Reborn had really only managed to beat the complaining out of him.

"Do you really want that a guy like that running around stressed out?" Gherardino asks him evenly. "The report you gave made him sound a little bit scary. For all that he's pretending to be level headed at the moment, going on a rampage isn't exactly what a reasonable person would do, right? It was a very small concession to make him feel better without obligating me to do anything I wouldn't anyway."

"I see," Verde muses. "Yes, pacifying a monster like that is a smart move."

"It's not as though he's immune to sedation," Xanxus says darkly.

Ah. The simple solutions of bratty mafia princes, Gherardino thinks wryly. He can't be happy about everything that's happened since the Decimo Vongola was so young, especially since it's made things difficult for himself as well, but it certainly led to Xanxus growing up a bit and controlling himself better.

"Even though I'm a Vongola ally, I won't drag that house into this mess if it turns out badly," he promises easily. "Vongola will be spared any fall out."

That just earns him Xanxus' signature 'lower than trash' look. "Even if the Cavallone house is so weak it can't do anything by itself, its strength still belongs to Vongola."

Behind Xanxus, hiding back toward the shadows, Gherardino's younger self grimaces miserably. Although he's a bit jealous of his position, having somehow managed to snare someone like Xanxus as a Guardian… the person he was a thirteen is the least capable person for handling
someone as rebellious as that.

Although Gherardino isn't sure that at any stage of his life would he ever have been able to cope with the situation those two are in. No one would blame Xanxus for hating the situation - as a matter of fact, he's shouldering something that unnatural - that abhorrent - incredibly well. At least he's able to relax a bit while everyone has been pretending to ignore it, and that Tsuna Nayo hadn't blundered into it, so they'll keep on that way for a bit.

If they put it off long enough, Gherardino wonders if they can just wait until they send those kids home again and let their world worry about it. Ah. Too bad for that world's Vongola. Will the Cavallone Famiglia survive when its shelter has been demolished?

Gherardino is not so encompassing a Sky that he could save both Families himself.

"Well, for the sake of Vongola, let's hope that temporary agreement works out then," Gherardino says dryly. "Now, I promised to take care of you two, so Ghera - the kitchens or the drawing room will be fine while I take care of the other two."

His younger self startles a bit at the name before quietly agreeing, "okay."

"Well, he's not wrong," Reborn acknowledges after those two kids have left as well. "Cavallone is only supposed to use its power for Vongola's sake."

Waving the remark off, he says, "the way that you and Verde made it sound, that's exactly what I did."

It's been about a day and a half after the impromptu rescue from the alarmingly well build facility that Verde had called Reborn about. It has been difficult for Gherardino to find a moment to sleep - though of course, much easier for his new wards to do so. Between their efforts to stabilize the less well off abductees, and recover something from that place, they really hadn't had a moment to sit down and discuss what had actually happened there. Now that the most troublesome of the abductees is awake and wandering around so quickly after being subdued by an Arcobaleno, the chances of them finding time now are nearly none.

Granted, a Lightning's Will isn't something that can really be used to subdued someone, let alone a Sky, but it's alarming all the same.

"It's true that Timoteo is the only known user if that technique, but while a canny man, he's no inventor. He lacks the imagination. He would have learned it from someone else," Verde adds, looking to Reborn.

But Reborn only shrugs insolently. "My honor requires me to keep Vongola's secrets," he says. "Even so, it's not as if I've had a chance to study that technique. I can say that the use of it at that place was sloppy - so even if I had, I wouldn't be able to say who taught it."

"The thing that worries me the most is that the kid is definitely a civilian, just as his counterpart said, so what business does he have knowing or using a technique that could have been Timoteo's signature, and - why is it that his Will has become deformed that way," Dino says, cutting in before Verde and Reborn can get into yet another fight over knowledge and who has the right to it.

"If it's what we think it is, then that technique is a bit crazy," Reborn says easily enough, but he quickly sobered, growing a bit grim. "He's not completely clueless, but he's definitely no mafia brat. The idea that maybe he figured it out on his own..."

"The Harmony aspect may be in play regarding that," Verde muses. "Depending on how it was
done. That part of being a Sky tends to get downplayed in the Underworld, and given how it seems like that brat has decided to champion the others…"

It certainly can't be dismissed. Reborn did his part in hammering a Sky's duty into Gherardino's head, but to be honest… as clever as Reborn is, he's not a Sky. He knows the habits of a Sky but not the *whys*. Gherardino had been left confused and in the dark many times, knowing that he felt a certain way but not knowing how to answer to it. But it's become increasing impossible over the generations for Skies to tolerate their own children as everyone continues to grow stronger than their parents and their grandparents before them, so people like Reborn are in high demand.

"I did wonder about that a bit," Gherardino admits. "After everything, I half expected to have a fight on my hands when he came in the door, but I don't think he even took notice of anyone at all - and now that I think of it, I didn't sense him coming, despite you saying that he was at full power." He looks to Verde.

"There's no doubt about that," Verde agrees. "He more or less showed up ready for a fight himself."

"Perhaps, but the rules of the surface world are different than here in the Underworld," Reborn says, tugging thoughtfully on a curl, his head tilted in that annoying artificial way. "Although both might strive to avoid coming to blows, in the Underworld if you show weakness it's a death sentence. It's not strange that a civilian from that more gentle surface world may choose to humble themselves and take a weaker position as a show of good faith."

"Can I really trust something like that, I wonder," Gherardino says, but he's thinking more about Reborn at the moment, who likes to play tricks.

"Well, he's not yakuza, so he probably hates confrontation," he answers, giving a sly look. "He's two-faced, but he's small fry on our scale. Besides, there's only one of him. Are you saying the Cavallone Famiglia can't handle one super-powered brat?"

"One, perhaps," he says dryly, although he's not so sure as that. Even though Reborn had seen the facility right alongside him, the idea that any *one* Sky would be able to do something so massive with just his own Will? "But that double of his is certainly acting like an insecure Guardian with a new bond and no comrades to back him up."

It's just a joke, but now that he hears it out loud, an awful jolt goes through him and his hand flies up to his head. "Please tell me those two idiots-"

"It's impossible for a Sky with that configuration to make anyone into a Guardian," Verde says, unconcerned. "Even if it weren't, his Flames couldn't sustain a bond. There's no way he's newly emerged, but the edges are too soft and new. It's like a lizard, constantly shedding its skin. It has no time to harden before it peels off again."

"Hmm." Reborn twirls the curl he's been playing with around his finger, appropriately childish for his appearance. "As for that double, he's Sky-shy at best, but I'd put money on late term Flame Rejection. There's no way he could get on the same level as a pet rock, let alone anything as demanding as a Sky." And then he glances over, expression blank and eyes dead: "You'd know that already if you were wake for my lessons, stupid."

It's probably a sign of how twisted Gherardino has become during their association that the idea of Reborn revising some of his lessons just causes him to laugh the idea off. "I thought better of testing the Flames of those kids. I didn't want to trigger some kind of belated fight-or-flight reaction, after all."
"It might be interesting, though," the thorn in his side says with a smirk. It would be more worrisome if hadn't already been made plenty obvious earlier that Reborn isn't interested in scaring the kid off quite yet. If the biggest prank he pulls is the usual gags and convincing the kid that Verde is in any way educated in biology or human health, then he's being practically obliging.

It would take a person far more stupid than himself or far less familiar with Reborn to feel any jealousy of that. It would be like feeling envy of a cat's favorite toy: it may look cute that the cat carries it everywhere, but no one thinks of those needle-like teeth or those claws and how they dig in for countless hours upon hours. Over the years of their association, he's become reluctantly fond of Reborn like one does any generally well meaning but incredibly annoying family member.

Or it's stockholm syndrome. It's almost definitely stockholm syndrome, come to think of it. Gherardinoc is self-aware enough that even though he can't complain of Reborn's presence, he'll be happy to see his back at the soonest convenience.

"I'll trust you to keep the carnage to a minimum, given the circumstances," he says dryly. "Go ahead and play to your heart's content. Just try not to break the boy, you know?"

"Don't alter the boy at all," Verde says sharply, sitting up and exerting his Sway. Even in his adult form, and having been drained by his activities a few days ago, it's impressive: a crackling tension that physically makes Reborn's curls tighten enough to snap free of his finger. "I'm still interested in him as a test subject."

Gherardinio laughs, only partially out of nervous energy. "What an unfortunate child he is," he mutters, since Reborn just gives Verde a deeply unpleasant and smug look.

"I don't intend to train him, if that's what you mean," he says. "I'm interested in what he's made of himself, that's all."

The look that Verde gives him is justifiably distrustful, but he doesn't pursue the subject. "Then, I'm off to bed," he announces. "I want at least a little sleep before having to deal with that lot."

"Ah. Good night. Rest well," Gherardinio says, since as far as he's aware, this is the first time that Verde will have slept since this whole fiasco has began. Verde moves like his entire body aches, heaving himself to his feet and making his way gingerly toward the guest wing - separate from the wing that was given to the children.

… what an ugly mess this is. Will Timoteo's sins never stop revealing themselves?

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Chapter End Notes

Tsunayoshi: *Does the Hyper Intuition thing*
Xanxus and Reborn: aw, iemitsu reproducing, no :(  
just to give you an idea of how much obfuscating Reborn does in this chapter, while Xanxus just refuses to participate on principle
Here we have Tsunayoshi just having relived his entire life in the space of a month, putting that Hyper Intuition (advanced pattern recognition) to work. Also, having been raised in Namimori, doublespeak and talking around the subject are native languages.

Anyway basically I got sad about things, deleted 40k of work I'd done on this fic, and tried again. I'm still not thrilled with this chapter, but it's out of the way now.

* don't think too deeply about the chakras. It's appropriation.
Chapter Summary

that child who sleeps and dreams of worlds less cruel, the child who misses the world which tried to kill her, and the one who has at last found a home.

OR: ENTER! THE POISON SCORPION!! There's no way Reborn can surpass Fon for cuteness!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty Three : seeps through

Over the years and without really meaning to, Tsunayoshi has become quite familiar with the general size and shape of the Tomaso house in Namimori's center - one of a kind, and unique. He often got invited over thanks to Naito and Nerina in... various guises, and had the dubious pleasure of meeting a great deal of their family; though only some of them were actually family. He'd never gotten used to how many of the occupants were simply loyal servants for what amounted to a very small family, mostly there to keep the place clean and otherwise be readily available for every passing whim the family itself might need.

Most of his peers were in a similar situation as Tsunayoshi himself - one parent, sometimes both, and themselves or maybe a sibling or two. There were certainly well established families of course - Kensuke's had a rich Namimori history, though only half as old as the Hibari clan's, and it seemed like Kyoko and Ryohei had some well-to-do Uncle who had supported them when they were younger and Naoko hadn't been able to take whatever job came her way.

But well, the scope of those households, of even Lark's Haven - it's not really comparable at all to the Cavallone estate. 'Wing' this and 'wing' that! And there are plenty of servants that Tsunayoshi would find troublesome to deal with. It's as if Cavallone Dino expects to be attacked at any time and those people would be expected to defend themselves or provide defense.

Or - it's possible that the people of Italy were simply scary, though even if that were true: then Tsunayoshi would set up his house like this, especially if it were a similar size. He'd make sure that there would be no one there who couldn't look after themselves in case something dangerous came up.

Honestly speaking, Tsunayoshi would put Haru and Kyoya up to the task of finding the bodies to fill those positions after he'd made his requirements clear. As much as certain people who associate with him prefer to depend on his sense of a person, Kyoya and Haru certainly have a unique outlook, and Kyoya's ability to sense weakness far surpasses Tsunayoshi's ability to judge a person's sincerity.

Sincerity is good and all, but if a person means the best and still crumples under pressure, then putting them into a dangerous position is stupid, right?
"It must be rough to run a place like this," Tsunayoshi says as the four of them exit the stairs into a hallway notably less opulent than the ones they've just left. Which isn't to say that it's not a beautiful hallway! It is. It's just that the rich, thick carpet has given away to some kind of stone floor that's sealed with something that makes it glisten like glass, and the wallpaper looks less textured and more like plastic than paper, which means that this place would be very easy to clean and nothing would soak into either walls or floor.

… the less said about how Tsunayoshi knows to notice this, the better probably.

"It is, but it's rewarding in its own way," Cavallone Dino says. "Well, I should say it's a full time job, more or less, but I still can make excursions to come to helpless people's rescue."

"Ah," Tsunayoshi says, suddenly wondering just who is going to pay for all of this. Come to think of it, it's couldn't have been easy getting involved in a kidnapping case on this scale! Even if Dino has money to spare on such flights of fancy, the situation must be incredibly complicated! Besides, someone should think of the law! It's obvious that they can't simply get the government involved given this situation involves 'other worlds,' but retrieving them, and then calling in specialists?! This isn't some kind of paradise where money isn't a concern! A place like that doesn't exist unless you die to reach it!

But Cavallone Dino easily brushes over the matter, as if he doesn't expect Tsunayoshi to address something like that the way that old man Yamamoto would. They've moved on from some sort of interior wing - the one where Tsunayoshi and the others are living for the time being, the one without any windows - to a ground floor part of the house that Tsunayoshi thinks must also be a little centralized. That's the sense that he gets: that is must be equally accessible from all areas of the house, and the outside, in order to get any injured people to the ward as quickly as possible.

"For now," Dino says, "we've been keeping those two in the few ICU rooms we have stocked. It's fine for the time being, as things have been peaceful and there haven't been a lot of accidents recently." As if he suddenly realizes that he can't just say something like that without an explanation, or that it might seem weird, Cavallone Dino gives a little start and turns a bit to fix Tsunayoshi with wide brown eyes. "Ah! You see, I raise horses for a living! But well, horses are large, powerful animals, and they have their own likes and dislikes and the such. Thanks to that, injuries are fairly common when a stallion or a mare with a foal gets anxious."

Cavallone Dino smiles then, and it even reaches his shining eyes, and oh: this person likes animals quite a bit, doesn't he? He's a bit like Kyoya in that way, minus the endless enmity toward people. "It's not foaling season right now," he finishes easily, "so it's no trouble to keep them there until they wake up. It might be the safest place in the house, actually."

"That's amazing," Tsunayoshi says. They even have ICU rooms? This place is already looking a lot like a better, fancier version of the room that Kyoya always arranges to have available to care for his underlings with. He can easily already spot a few machines that he suspects are pretty expensive, just based on the differences between the Old Hospital and that fancy one that the Hibari Clan are involved with.

The ICU rooms are more than just one or two - it's a whole wall of this ward full of windows and doors. All but the two are dark, and though it strongly reminds Tsunayoshi of the room with all those pods, the quality of the pressure here is completely different - and even that ebbs after a moment. Tsunayoshi presses his knuckles against his breastbone in reflex.

Zunetto, on account of being more familiar with the place, goes ahead of the group and immediately attaches himself to the window of the closest occupied room. "Ah," he says. "It's that
Tsunayoshi blinks and with a cautious glance at Dino and that child, he moves to join Zunetto. Even though he only vaguely remembers her, the sight of a ten year old child laying on the ICU cot, connected to monitors and an IV and all of that - well, it should probably upset Tsunayoshi except for the fact that she's obviously sleeping easily. She's even smaller than the younger Dino, with dark hair that isn't quite black. There's a warm flush to her cheeks, even -not feverish or anything, but healthy.

Yeah, it's easy to see how that was the trigger for Tsunayoshi snapping entirely. More rotten adults depending on children... ah, he had kind of hoped that it was an affliction that only Namimori suffered. Is it this entire world? What if the world this child comes from is also like that? Is Tsunayoshi really supposed to accept that? Could he really send her back to that?

"Her name is Yuni," Dino says as he and his watchful companion join them at the window. "That was a shocking discovery to make at that facility! It's one thing to kidnap teenagers, you know? Teenagers tend to have incredible 'life energy' - but it's not something for a child to be involved in. If she hadn't survived the extraction processes..."

That matches Tsunayoshi's thoughts so well that he looks over and up. There's no way that anyone could be such a good actor that they'd be able to mimic that kind of face, he thinks: Cavallone Dino honestly, sincerely hates that this Yuni was caught up in it. This might be an incredibly dangerous person in various ways, but Tsunayoshi's instinct really was right. He's a good person who cares about the well-being of animals and children. Tsunayoshi isn't either of those, but he thinks he might be able to trust Dino a little bit, at least.

"Don't judge by her appearances," the demon child rebukes. "This young girl is actually very powerful, you know. Even a scary monster like Nayo-chan wouldn't want to tangle with someone like her."

... that kid really called him '-chan' at the same time as calling him a scary monster, huh.

Anyway, it's not as if Tsunayoshi would fight a child to begin with? And that's a bit suspicious to dismiss witchcraft and then talk about how some young girl is 'very powerful' isn't it? He's really getting jerked around here. Then -

"Wait," he says suddenly. "Did you say this was 'Yuni'?"

Dino's expression is a bit interesting as he looks down at Tsunayoshi curiously. "I did. Those pods had their own databases with relevant information on the occupant attached to it. Hopefully that will make it easier to get everyone back home, even though the names of the worlds they came from were a bit arbitrary... but yes. This girl's name is Yuni. Do you recognize it?"

Yes, but not for the reason that Dino likely thinks. Tsunayoshi was suffering a lot at that time, but that white haired guy had been supporting him a bit, and he'd said something about a 'Yuni' - hadn't he? Yuni and Zunetto were the names he mentioned. "Maybe," Tsunayoshi says. "Someone must have mentioned it to me, but ah - if you're asking if I've ever seen this person before, then no."

"I see," he says easily. "Yuni isn't a person who exists in our world either, although I recognize the family she comes from."

"Or mine, but she's obviously a Giglio Nero family member," Zunetto says.

So there will be someone to take care of her if they can't get her back to her home. That's a relief,
Tsunayoshi thinks. Although naturally, the best outcome would be getting her back home, but depending on only one possible outcome is dumb. "We can get her back home, right?"

"That's impossible for some low level lackey like me," Dino says without hesitation; it sounds more like he's stating an obvious fact rather than putting himself down - which, at least he understands his own position, Tsunayoshi supposes. "But we won't know that it's completely impossible until we've asked everyone who knows even a little bit about this matters."

"Those specialists you mentioned," Tsunayoshi says, and Dino agrees.

"They're comrades of Verde and myself, so they'll come at once when we call," the child says. He's just tall enough to be able to look in on Yuni through the large window. Despite his remark earlier, his face is a bit complicated, and Tsunayoshi doesn't have the feeling that it's because Yuni is stronger than a 'scary monster,' either. It isn't a look precisely as if he hates the thought of a child going through something scary, but - like he somehow thinks something terrible of the whole situation anyway. Such a serious expression is much different from all the faces he's used so far, and some weird thought intrudes that Tsunayoshi would like to set a hand on his shoulder or something like that.

As a person who still doesn't really get along with children very well, whatever that situation with Fon had been all those years ago, he absolutely does no such thing. "It would be nice if everyone could go home safely after everything," he says, but - well. Yuni is about as healthy and as safe as she can be until then, so his concern with her swiftly fades.

No one moves to stop him from stepping by them and going to the next window over. There's a weird prickling at the back of his neck, but it's different from what had pressed on him just a bit earlier. This feels a bit cooler. A little vague and changeable.

Tsunayoshi almost expects the world to stretch oddly when he lays his eyes on the guy laying in the bed, but - he's no longer stuck in the nightmare of being thirteen. This world is the real world, so it can't distort, and this body is Tsunayoshi's real body, so he can't either. And that guy - it's a bit unpleasant to see him, because his appearance later had obviously been the most true to reality. Someone has washed and brushed his endless lengths of white hair, but the way that guy looks? Not a bonsai at all, but something left sprouting in the dark, forgotten until long after it's become twisted and strange.

"Something's wrong," Tsunayoshi says vaguely. "I thought his pressure was warmer than this. Can I-" he looks over, and registers the odd way that he's being looked at, but: "can I go in to meet him?"

Dino seems a bit uneasy about it. "He's unconscious, so I don't know that it would do any good."

"Even if he's in a coma, people can still hear things said to them sometimes," Tsunayoshi says, although it's not really that he wants to say anything to that guy so much as he needs to check on him. "I can't go in?"

For a long moment, Dino simply stares at him, eyes sharp and assessing and a bit glimmering while that demon child and Zunetto watch on, the latter more anxiously than the former. "Alright," Dino relents at last, a bit reluctantly. He comes over so that he can punch a code into the door and then scan in his fingerprint.

What a strange length to go to, Tsunayoshi thinks. "Thanks," he says with only half his attention, slipping inside the moment the gap is large enough.
It kind of reminds him of stepping into TakeSushi a bit, honestly, except it's much less soothing than that. With the unpleasant episodes of fragility that had plagued him, Tsunayoshi had often retreated to TakeSushi just so that he could feel comfortable breathing, and often found himself napping in the living quarters at the back of the restaurant under his household's watchful eyes.

Ah, no, doesn't the way this clings to him remind him of going around Lark's Haven? Or no, the pressure generated by Hibari Sozui felt similar, except that it lurked in dark shadows and behind walls and under rugs, while this tries to cling while it also hides, like a needy housecat that has been abandoned and made mistrustful the rough treatment it had suffered. Not hostile, nor mean, but wary and more than willing to strike out with lethal force to protect itself.

This white haired guy is tall, or will be if he ever gets back on his feet. Despite the ravages of his awful neglect, Tsunayoshi can still see the edges of who he might have grown into - some super exotic ikemen. His eyelashes still cut across the sharp shelves of his hollowed cheeks like moth wings made of razor blades. His scarred arms are nothing but skin and ligament and bone.

Tsunayoshi's fingertips find the needle marks in his own skin, along the veins. Although he hadn't meant to come in here and say anything, his heart pangs. "You've lived a hard life so far, huh," he says, and then he reaches for the places where those painfully thin arms are marked with many, many, many more scars than his own. His skin is so thin it could be butterfly wings or dried flower petals disrupted by knots of flesh like the heads of pins used to put his limbs to corkboard.

"It must have been scary. You were lonely, right?" A little deprecatingly, he adds, "why else cling to a dame kid like me, who can't even make people call him by his name?"

Even though he looked right into Tsunayoshi's eyes and said called his bloodline blessed.

This guy's hands are rather large, his fingers long. They look a little wretched and frail: long, cracked fingernails and knobbled knucklebones. Even so, they dwarf Tsunayoshi's hands, as calloused and scarred as they are.

Tsunayoshi reaches upwards and rests his hand on the guy's hairline. It's about as close to patting him on the head as he can get at the moment. He didn't quite crush the system abusing this guy beneath his shoe like a bug, and he didn't 'teach them how to burn,' and in the meantime, that guy begged him desperately to live and drained out all of his own warmth to make it so, and wanted to make things up to him.

As if Tsunayoshi wouldn't have heard him out and done his best if he'd just been asked. Obviously allowances would be made for his situation.

"What's this guy's name?" Tsunayoshi asks, aware that he's being closely watched.

"The data on his pod only said 'Narcisse,'" Dino answers. "It's a bit odd, since even the ghosts had more information than that. There was no family name included, and unlike Yuni, he doesn't bare any particular resemblance to anyone we know. It's worth mentioning though that with a name like that, he's probably not Italian, so… it's not as if we're isolationists, but that naturally makes identifying him harder."

Tsunayoshi turns with a helpless frown. "Na- it's what?" Dino repeats himself, and Tsunayoshi stares. This isn't an unconventional cluster of sounds that he can nonetheless fit through his mouth like 'Zunetto.' Couldn't this guy have a more reasonable name?!

Actually, isn't Zunetto's face being a bit annoying right now - the expression he's making? Just because it's not a name he'll be struggling with doesn't give him the right to look like that…
Tsunayoshi would like to know how his first couple of years in Italy went. As if he senses Tsunayoshi's ire, Zunetto startles and then guilty enters the room to come see to Narcisse, for whatever reason. Something under Tsunayoshi's ribs prickles and spits sparks, but since Zunetto is more or less within immediate arm's reach and doesn't actually put his hands on that comatose boy, he decides it's probably fine.

Though it does remind Tsunayoshi that he probably shouldn't touch someone who is unconscious himself, so he lifts his hand away from that guy's head; it's not like he's helping the situation with it.

Actually, he's a bit disheartened, he realizes. "I guess we won't know anything more about the situation unless he can tell us when he wakes up."

"If there is anything for him to tell us," Dino agrees. "You yourself don't remember much, and it seems like he was stuck there for some time."

"No kidding," Zunetto mutters in dismay. "Hey, is this really a person? Is this the guy you really were looking for, Nayo? Doesn't he seem more like a lich?!"

"Aha." Well, Zunetto really isn't wrong. Maybe it's a good thing that Tsunayoshi got a completely different impression during the dreaming, since he surely would have run screaming the other direction if Narcisse had shown up looking like this rather than the squishy-faced youth. By the time he had hinted at the truth, he'd said too much for Tsunayoshi to let him go, or be troubled by his appearance. "He is worse off than expected," he allows. "Although - you shouldn't call him the undead, you know? He worked hard."

"Could it be that you feel responsible for him?" that demon child asks a bit slyly from the doorway, like he's the second coming of Shioya or something come to harass him on the matter of Ryohei or Shoichi.

"No way," Tsunayoshi scoffs, turning away from the bed to show his pinched brow; it's not entirely off base, but: he looks down on this wretched little creature that isn't nearly as cute as Fon, despite whatever other similarities they may have. "What are you trying to imply? Isn't it a bit rude to take responsibility for an unconscious person without consulting them first? I have enough trouble as it is without asking for more that way."

Dino sputters and breaks into a sudden laugh that he quickly clamps down on with his hand. It's not a particularly mean laugh or anything, but there's something a bit unpleasant about it no matter how handsome Dino's face looks flushed with sparkling eyes. "What's this," he asks, amused. "I'm not sure I should be surprised, but - Nayo-kun, could it be that you're actually a kind person?"

"Ehh." It's not something he really minds from allies, but the fact that he's getting it over this from that person - Tsunayoshi cuts a heavy look down the side of the hospital bed to where Zunetto is still hovering over Narcisse. "Say, Zunetto," he says flatly, and doesn't flinch in the face of the stunned-fish look that gets turned on him. "Aren't you supposed to be shielding me from something like this? Those guys are making fun of me."

Yelping at the accusation, Zunetto says, "What kind of weird - no, actually, it sounded more like praise, so-" He cuts himself off with a flail, as if Tsunayoshi's outright annoyed expression is an indication of real threat.

And in what way had Dino's statement been praise, anyway? Admittedly, at thirteen he had even accepted sexual harassment as praise, but surely that's no excuse for Zunetto? In the end, Tsunayoshi is a guest, so it's not like he can just come out and say that all Dino is doing is
congratulating him on not stooping to some shitty expectations that were formed before they even met.

"Ah - more importantly than that," Zunetto says in a hurry, looking to Narcisse, "isn't there anything that can be done to help this guy? With the condition he's in…"

"It's because of that condition that we can't," the child says bluntly, "although someone like you should already know that."

As easily as that, every scrap of simpering behavior is ripped out of Zunetto's posture. Only because Tsunayoshi is standing where he is can he see the edges of something awful in the expression on his face. Without looking up or over, Zunetto grumpily demands: "how should I know that?"

That demon child's black eyes are sharp and pitiless over that weirdly cold smile. "You have that sort of inclination, don't you?" he asks.

Though his sightless expression doesn't change, there's something about the set of his feet and his fingers on the blankets that suddenly seems a bit violent, and Tsunayoshi isn't the only one to think so; Dino cuts in swiftly, quiet but firm. "The ICU isn't the place to have an argument. Take it outside if you mean to continue."

The child grunts, displeased, but folds his arms across his chest and concedes. Zunetto's comparable grace about backing down is probably only thanks to that familiar distaste for fighting, and while he would normally forget about whatever ugly feelings…

"Thank you for thinking about it," Tsunayoshi says, and smiles when Zunetto glances up at him from his hunched position. "But I think he'll be fine. After all - he's made it this far without giving up, no matter how much life energy they took from him." Reflexively, he grimaces, and knuckles his breastbone, remember that awful feeling of being scooped out of his own shell. "For that guy… he'll refuse to die until he's been able to take his revenge, at least."

"Revenge," Zunetto echoes in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Ah - well," he says, since he doesn't think that mentioning the talks he had with Narcisse during the dreaming will exactly go over well. "His resolve is kind of scary, isn't it? If I'm remembering that room correctly, then they must have used him, again and again and again, to summon people from other worlds."

And then - oh, but Tsunayoshi realizes something. Being turned into a ghost must be an awful process. Narcisse must have listened to every one of them. They must have screamed. Narcisse had panicked when it was Tsunayoshi. He'd been desperate. He'd begged, and then he'd drained out all his warmth for the sake of-

Something cold slides right up Tsunayoshi's spine and he slaps a hand to his neck and glances upward, even though it was the reverse of what a drop of water would do - but ah. Of course there's that strange pressure in swimming eddies around his ankle.

"Nayo?" Zunetto asks, and Tsunayoshi blinks to find himself of the interrogative stares of three people, because - of course.

"Condensation, I think?" Tsunayoshi says, even though that's not what it is at all. His concentration had slipped and his guard had gone down a bit, but he has to remember that no matter how these people act: they're not trusted adults from Namimori. He's glad that someone thought to remind
him. If he intends to get everyone out of this situation safely, then he can't be getting distracted or relaxing like that.

Showing his true face or baring his heart is absolutely prohibited, no matter what they thought they knew of him based on weird accusations of what he did while dizzy with sedation and hallucinogenic drugs.

"From where?" Zunetto wonders, sounding baffled even as he straightens to look at the ceiling.

"There shouldn't be," Dino says, also glancing that way. "The ICU should be more or less perfectly sealed. We can't have dampness in here or otherwise people won't heal, or they'll get worse."

"Maybe it was just a chill then?" he says vaguely, but the demon child gives him a long, blank look that feels very skeptical.

"Even if it's just that," Dino says. "I'll have someone look into it, though. The obvious aside, Narcisse is just resting rather than sick, so it should be fine for now."

"Thank you very much," Tsunayoshi says, anxiously touching his bare wrists. His restless fingers settle for circling the knob of bone there since there's nothing else, but it doesn't exactly help. "Without you, I don't think everyone could have left that place, or would have been recaptured…"

"Just because you woke up first doesn't make you responsible for everyone else," he says a bit dry, his smile a strange mix of tolerant and bemused.

Tsunayoshi stares at him for a moment. "No, but," he says, confused, "someone has to represent everyone's interests, right? No one else is really suited for it, unless Yuni has some hidden depths," or Narcisse, but from what Tsunayoshi has come to understand of him, he's pursuing his own interests and has no time for everyone else's, "but - she's ten. You can't put a ten year old in charge of her elders. She should be able to rest easy while her seniors take care of everything. So, ah-" he glances at Zunetto, but it's not like that guy's going to step up. "The only one that can do it is me, right? Instead of dealing with everyone individually, dealing with one person is…?"

Culture clash? He has to wonder, watching the others' faces. Well, that demon child seems to understand it well.

"Somehow I don't think Xanxus will agree to that," Dino says dryly.

"The one with the dark hair and the red eyes?" Tsunayoshi asks, thinking back to earlier in the lobby. "I see. It's fine. I can handle that much."

Zunetto sputters. It's hard to tell if the noise has roots in amazement or horror. "You can handle Xanxus of Vongola?" he demands shrilly.

Tsunayoshi glances pointedly at Narcisse, at which point Zunetto sheepishly allows himself to be herded out of the ICU room and into the hallway. He gives a moment to allow for Dino to shut and secure the door again before he says, "I don't care who his family is. On his own merits, he's an overzealous brat who thinks that going at full strength is worth respecting. There were dozens of people like him I've met, and probably over a hundred million in the world."

Dino laughs in disbelief. "Wow," he says. "You should worry about who his family is, though. They're scary people."

"I'm not sure what people in another world who I'll never see have to do with me," Tsunayoshi says mildly. "Unless the Xanxus in this world will have a problem with it?"
The question seems to catch Dino somewhat off guard and he actually has to think about that for a second before - "Haa. No," he admits. "I think the Xanxus of this world wouldn't care at all. But without knowing that, you should be more careful about rushing ahead. You can't try taking responsibility for a group of people and then drag them into some mess without knowing who is allied with whom."

"Dino, are you thinking of taking someone under your wing?" that demon child asks, snickering into the palms of his hands. "It's good to see you've grown so much, but starting out with a guy with no connections of his own, I'm not sure what kind of little brother he'd make."

"Um - I've already been raised, so I don't need it," Tsunayoshi says, especially since Dino looks like he's going to deny it.

"No, but - normally that might be the next step, after an agreement like you made," Zunetto says, "if the relationship is good. Although it's really way too early to decide something like that, and - ah, Nayo really doesn't have anything to offer the alliance."

"It's just a bit of handy advice," Dino says, waving them off, although he seems to be thinking something of it. "There's no way I could become someone's mentor anyway."

Even if Dino were inclined to try something like that, it's not as if it's something Tsunayoshi can decide on his own, anyway. His own household would probably be more or less happy to go along with it, but there's another household to consider. So far everything has been going well, he thinks, and he and Kyoko have managed to work together to seek the changes they've wanted to see all along - the changes which please them most - but Dino exists outside of Namimori and Tsunayoshi can't tie his household to that without consulting everyone, since it'll naturally split his power between those two places.

Besides that, the last thing that Tsunayoshi would want is to lead anyone from the outside world back to Namimori. There may be newcomers all the time, but highschoolers like him always manage to slide beneath the radar, and the newcomers are always too leery of TakeSushi to come in and discover them anyway.

Or, well. They're leery of old man Yamamoto, which is the same thing more or less.

"Speaking of home worlds," Dino adds after a second, apparently just having remembered this issue, "Nayo-kun, there wasn't any information on you that we could find, which could cause a lot of problems when it comes to getting you home. Thanks to the way the facility was set up, all the information that wasn't isolated to the pods themselves was purged, and - well, even though the storage room where everyone else was didn't get destroyed, Verde said that your pod was removed from that room in order to call Zunetto to this world. The naming conventions of the worlds everyone came from is a little hard to understand... but we don't even have that when it comes to you."

"Ah," Tsunayoshi says. He'd wondered, given that they don't even know his last name.

It's a bit awful to think that he's separated from his household not by an ocean or continents, but by something as huge as worlds. It feels a bit awful. That charred out hollow in Tsunayoshi's chest has nothing to gorge itself on.

It's not as if he can replace those people in his household. He could never, never do that. It's no good if it's not them. What should he do?

"If you're sad about being so far away from home," the demon child says, and even though he's
clinging to the fluffy fringe on the bottom of Dino's jacket, he looks up at Tsunayoshi with glittering black eyes - the normal kind of shine. "I'd be willing to comfort you."

So that's just the kind of personality this person has, Tsunayoshi thinks dismally. "Thanks," he says, "but it's no good after all."

The head tilt is perfectly angled to emphasize his lashes, the cute curls of his hair, and the childish, put upon pout. "You think I can't?"

This is definitely some kind of twisted game of this kid's, Tsunayoshi thinks, but before he can make any headway toward deciding just what this demon child is truly aiming for while distracting with strange implications, Zunetto sputters loudly.

"You can't!" he yelps indignantly. "Or no: I mean, you shouldn't! That kind of thing isn't good for kids!"

Ah - right. Zunetto keeps taking it at face value. Maybe Tsunayoshi is less shocked about it having remembered about four year old Fon being concerned about sharing a bed - say, though, hadn't Fon also said something about having an adult mind despite his childish heart? At thirteen, Tsunayoshi had written it off as some kind of strange roleplay, but after earlier when Tsunayoshi was accused of witchcraft and no one had debated the rationality of that-

That aside, Tsunayoshi says: "well, I guess it's true that children shouldn't have too many sweets, but - in this case, he can keep them, can't he?"

"Eh?" Zunetto blinks at him. "What are you…?"

Tsunayoshi smiles - the one borrowed from Nana for the sake of reassuring parents and older siblings. "That's usually what a child means when they want to comfort someone," he points out. "Haven't you ever been offered a favorite sweet or plush before?"

Zunetto looks uncertain of his intentions, as he might given what he thinks is going on - for Nana's son, he's surprisingly underestimating her techniques. "I'm not normally sad around children," he says doubtfully, and then at the last second seems to shake the distraction off. "No! Nevermind that! Is that even a normal child?!"

He points aggressively at the boy in question, who is still hanging onto Dino's jacket and looking singularly unimpressed with Zunetto. Dino laughs, but it's a bit nervous and strained. "What do you mean?" he asks. "Of course this is a normal child!"

If Tsunayoshi hadn't already decided it for himself, he would have known immediately that there's no way that child is normal. "Only - you called him your tutor," he points out.

"It's - ah, a game of sorts," he says a bit nervously, as if children with awful eyes roleplay as grandpas and tutors all the time.

"That aside," Zunetto continues flatly, unimpressed. "Isn't this kid Lazzer0's?"

For whatever reason, more than weird invitations from that kid, or Zunetto's accusations regarding those invitations, or comments regarding the games that kid plays - this is the one that brings Dino to a suddenly halt. His surprise is too complete and too genuine to be artifice as he turns to give Zunetto a confused stare. "Who?" he says.

"La-ze-ro," he repeats impatiently. "You know. A sadistic meddler who resembles this kid a lot." His fists clenched and his brow furrows down deep, and suddenly Zunetto who has been more or
less pretty harmless this entire time really does seem like someone to reckon with. "If it's him, I
could understand it - I get it, he probably has a massive target on his back thanks to that - but
raising him in such a way-!"

"Hey, now, hold on a minute," Dino says quickly turning to them completely and holding up his
hands in surrender. "Whatever it is you're thinking, you're wrong, you know? I don't know any
'Lazzero' - this kid's name is Reborn, and… honestly, I'd probably sooner run screaming for the
hills than meet his blood family."

The demon child snorts at that, but his expression is a bit smug.

"Am I really supposed to believe that?" Zunetto asks darkly. "This world… it's not that much
different from mine." But in the face of Dino's honest confusion, his resolve starts to waver,
glancing between Dino and Reborn. "You … really don't know Lazzero? The resemblance is…"

"Um - it's not really any of our business in the first place," Tsunayoshi says, deeply uncomfortable.
"I don't think Dino is doing anything bad to Reborn-kun, even though you were lead to believe
something like that. Do you really think… that if I had the slightest impression that he wasn't being
looked after, I would tolerate it?"

Zunetto wavers further, looking a bit baffled and troubled as he glances between Dino and
Tsunayoshi - and then his eyes round with surprise. "Oh!" he says. "I wonder what it was about
Yuni that made you so angry that you - I mean. I thought maybe it was because she's a girl, but…"

"I'm not sure what her being a girl has to do with it," he says, a bit confused. "But that place was
awful enough as it is - she was in one of those pods, so… she'd probably been through the same
thing at least once. There was no way to keep my composure after that, when a ten year old who
should only be worried about school work and game releases and catching shows on the TV is
having to go through something unforgivable."

For a moment, Zunetto continues to look like he's been struck in the head, and then again in a
different way - some kind of head injury that's made his face go slack and strange. "Yeah, I got it,"
he says, and even sounds like he means it despite the expression on his face. "Even if it's not
something I think is possible for a lot of these kids."

Tsunayoshi already well knows it, and he knows who he blames for that. "Well, it's more or less an
'idéal,' isn't it?" he allows. "But even if it's just a lofty dream, that's the thing I strive for, so - it
makes me a bit anxious when reality falls short."

Dino snorts. "Fighting the entire world for not matching up to your dreams is a bit of an extreme
way of going about things."

Tsunayoshi can't help the laugh that comes out. "Sometimes I'm a bit of an 'extreme' person," he
admits. "Or so I get told from time to time." But - well, will he ever get told that again? Even if
there's a Yamamoto Takeshi, or a Miura Haru, or a Hibari Kyoya of this world… it won't be the
same. Even if Kyoko and Ryohei exist, even if he meets them and Ryohei gets impressed and calls
him 'extreme,' won't that just hurt?

Ahh. Tsunayoshi hopes that the him of this world can meet them and make them happy, too.

An unexpected, sweet voice calls out to them, then. They haven't yet made it back to the stairs
given Zunetto's accusations, which only means that the group is treated to the full effect of a leggy
woman with long reddish hair descending them elegantly, yet with transparent pleasure as she
focuses on Dino. She has a lovely, throaty voice as she greets him, and though Dino seems taken
aback, it's obvious she isn't unwelcomed.

Which only makes Zunetto's sudden shriek of alarm all the more startling, and then he latches onto Tsunayoshi as if he's not sure if he'd rather hide behind him or hide Tsunayoshi behind his own body. All he manages to really do is nearly yank Tsunayoshi off his feet while chattering his teeth. "B-bi-bianchi!" he manages in shuddering terror.

Although the woman only has eyes for Dino, it's obvious that Dino is aware of Zunetto's reaction, but he ignores it in favor of taking the hands that the woman, Bianchi, holds out to him. She smiles beatifically and gazes up at him in adoration even as Dino clearly questions what she's doing here, too honestly confused to have ever considered her presence a possibility.

Tsunayoshi twitches when he feels a weight on his pants, and glances down to see that Reborn has relocated himself to Tsunayoshi's far side, transparently trying to hide himself behind him and clutching onto to the loose leg of his pants. Really. Isn't seven too old to cling this way?

Tsunayoshi isn't a giant of a man like Dino or Takeshi.

There's a second person following more sedately after the woman, and if not for Bianchi and Dino's obvious youth, Tsunayoshi might have guessed that he was their son on some level - the tolerant look he gives the two of them speaks of familiarity and affection. But for all that he's only about Yuni's age, he's about Yuni's age, so unless Bianchi was more or less a child herself there's no way she's his mother.

An older sister, then, probably. His hair is a darker red than hers, though subtle compared to some redheads that Tsunayoshi has seen, and his eyes are more gray than green. He seems to suddenly remember something as he comes off the stairs and gives a quick look around; his eyes completely ignore Tsunayoshi and Zunetto's existence as if they're furniture, and he spots Reborn.

Reborn grunts, sounding a bit smug at the sullen look of abohrance that crosses the kid's face.

"These are two of my new wards," Dino says, abruptly switching from Italian to Japanese, turning toward them. "This is Zunetto and Nayo. We were visiting the others in the infirmary. I - see that Zunetto is already familiar, but Nayo-kun, this is Bianchi Isabella-san."

Wow, her eyes look at the two of them like they're furniture as well, if unwelcomed furniture her fiancee has brought to their new joint home and she'll need to find a reason to throw out. "There's no need for '-san,'" Bianchi Isabella says. "Aren't we closer than that?" Her Japanese is even more perfect than Dino's, who is fairly conversationally fluent himself. She leans in more toward Dino, giving Tsunayoshi in particular a sharp look beneath the blade of her long lashes.

"Haa," Dino breathes, and under his breath says something in Italian for her ears only. Bianchi Isabella barely blinks at it. "Of course, to me this is Isa-chan," he allows toward Zunetto and Tsunayoshi, and she smiles, coldly smug.

Ah. A household member then. Tsunayoshi has been a bit puzzled about it all this time, but he supposes that it makes sense that Dino wouldn't willingly involve his household into a situation with other worlders. Then again - someone of Dino's age should really realize that there's no way his household could possibly leave him to face this situation alone.

Because Zunetto is too busy clinging to him so tight that his arm will bruise, and Reborn is sullenly trying to avoid detection, Tsunayoshi does his best. "Sorry to be an inconvenience, Bianchi-san, but for the time being, we'll be depending on House Cavallone."

For a second, it looks like Isabella might take umbrage at that, but her eyes sharpen and she studies
him for a moment longer - perhaps realizing that he's taken note of her position within that	household and has acknowledge it. It's then that Tsunayoshi graduates from 'unwanted furniture' to
'disgusting housepet' - which is at least a living creature that Isabella doesn't look inclined to cause
harm. Her gaze drops at this point and her entire expression goes from cool disdain to warmth, and
she cooes to him in lilting Italian.

Tsunayoshi had already more or less thought so, but it's a beautiful language. Reborn answers to
her without any sign of his previous reluctance or sulking, even though he stays put. Isabella
doesn't quite frown, but she doesn't look pleased. Some kind of endearment crosses her lips, and
she reaches out, obviously calling Reborn to her side. At her front, Dino looks uncomfortable with
the whole charade - so whatever it is about Reborn that definitely isn't 'normal,' Bianchi Isabella
hasn't taken note of it and for whatever reason, neither Dino nor Reborn have been moved to
inform her otherwise.

Obligingly, Reborn releases his hold and goes to her side, patiently accepting the maternal caress
she gives his cheek before patting his shoulder, obviously dismissing him from the situation. Up
until now, even when he was being unobtrusive, there'd been a certain complexity to Reborn's
presence, but - as simple as that woman paying attention to him, it was almost like he's nothing
more than a well-behaved seven year old. He even has a bit of a hop to his step as he crosses over
to the older looking boy who had followed Bianchi in.

"Greetings, Ladi-kun," Reborn chirps, and then a bit of his usual aura seeps into his face as he
smiles at the older boy. "Can you come play?"

Ladi recoils, fear and abhorrence visible on his face - but the usual kind, Tsunayoshi notices, that
he's seen children give each other before when they don't get along. He burbles out some horrified
Italian, but Isabella is quick to reassure him. Ladi hesitates, grimaces, and then swallows down his
grievances for her sake.

"Um - why don't you boys keep busy until dinner," Dino suggests glancing at them. He doesn't
seem unsympathetic to Zunetto's plight, but obviously matters with his household will come first.
And well - obviously, removing Zunetto from Isabella will fix that problem nicely anyway.

Tsunayoshi holds his peace until he manages to get Zunetto up the stairs. He halfway expects to
run across the boys in the hall upstairs, but they're nowhere to be seen, nor can he hear anything
indicating that the boy, Ladi, is being tortured or anything. He spends a spare second wondering if
he should take that to mean something sinister, but - well, Ladi hates Reborn a normal amount for a
child, so it's probably fine.

Zunetto huffs an exhausted sigh as he loosened his grip on Tsunayoshi, allowing blood flow to
return. Tsunayoshi winces slightly and rubs at the tender flesh. Bruises for sure, but - well, he's had
worse.

More importantly: "Who exactly is Bianchi Isabella?"

"Only the most terrifying woman in the - well, Italy, at least," Zunetto says, still a little too wobbly
to properly guard his words. He seems to sharpen up and focus a bit, looking first at Tsunayoshi
with concern and then over his shoulder to where the stairwell is. It doesn't seem like Dino and
Isabella are coming this way, though. "Come on, I'll tell you a bit while we catch up to the younger
Dino and Xanxus to warn them."

"I see. She's quite the dangerous person, then," Tsunayoshi observes, readily falling in step with
Zunetto. That guy's a bit transparent - Tsunayoshi has his protection and sympathy based entirely
on his own ignorance of the situation, but as for everyone else? Zunetto wouldn't hesitate to leave
them to the wolves, even if he wouldn't go as far as tripping them. For him to be willing to seek out Xanxus, who he's already gotten bullied by, the threat of Bianchi Isabella must be overwhelming.

"...well," Zunetto says after a second, frowning slightly, "yeah, but... maybe not so much in this world?" He seems to be thinking back, either on the scene they just left or older memories. Whatever it is causes him to subside for a bit with a troubled look on his face.

"Aha... somehow I don't get the feeling that she's very gentle," Tsunayoshi says. Certainly, she'd been docile enough toward Dino, but Haru had disabused him of the notion of a girl's gentle side being her only side. And Kyoko's gentleness has only ever been a thin layer of benevolence over her own unrelenting convictions. Tsunayoshi fully trusts Bianchi Isabella's determination that he's barely worth the position of 'disgusting housepet.'

"Well, she can be, to people she loves... in a way," Zunetto says, shaking off his dark thoughts. He sounds a bit doubtful. "But - ah, how to say this... well. She's definitely a person worth of respect? Um. No one to start a fight with? Ah - because of her excessive love toward the people she cares about, though, she can be a bit overprotective."

"O... kay? Um," Tsunayoshi says. Is there anything really unusual about that, he wonders? It's natural that if you love someone, or even if you're like him and can't properly connect your feelings to theirs... if it's someone whose happiness you want, you do anything to protect it, right?

Zunetto looks at him a little desperately. "If someone takes their attention away, it'll annoy her," he says. "And her- she-" He struggles a bit with himself, coming to a halt grasping at his hair, muttering before giving a frustrated growl. "She has witchcraft!" he bursts out urgently. "If she gets angry, all kinds of food items nearby will become poison!"

Tsunayoshi stares. But the fact of the matter is: it doesn't sound like Zunetto is lying. It doesn't feel like that at all, even though he's using 'witchcraft' instead of being upfront about it. No, it'd have to be 'witchcraft' to affect objects around them without their own hands, wouldn't it?

"I know it sounds crazy," Zunetto says miserably, desperately, lowering his hands. "But please keep an eye out, especially at dinner tonight! Anyone distracting or 'taking away' Bianchi's favorite people... she'll try to eliminate them!"

"No, it's fine," Tsunayoshi says immediately, and then reaches out to settle him. "I know you didn't want to talk about it, but you warned me anyway, so - Zunetto. Thank you."

And just as easily as that, Zunetto comes to a rest under the hand he puts on his shoulder, wilting with relief and giving Tsunayoshi that 'benevolent demon' look. Ahh. If even he himself is going to make that kind of face, then shouldn't Tsunayoshi just hurry up and become a kami already? Surely that would simplify his life.

Smiling, he suggests, "Let's go warn the others already, okay?"

As he falls in a step behind Zunetto, allowing the one more familiar with the layout to lead the way - Tsunayoshi reflects that he really doesn't fit in here at all. Although he'll certainly do his best in the meantime, if feelings like Bianchi Isabella's are things to respond with fear to instead of being met with the understanding that he had back in Namimori... worse than not being able to meet with his household again, Tsunayoshi will definitely be left all alone.

There's no way to protect people if the one terrorizing them is him.

-0-
* Somehow I really feel like Tsunayoshi, who has spoken nothing but Japanese his entire life and may be able to generally recognize the sound of a language, would find a name like 'Narcisse' impossible. Zunetto, who is fluent in Italian, has much better luck with a French name.

Not to worry. For now, Byakuran is being called 'Narcisse' but he'll correct them on his preferred name when he wakes up. Who knows which Byakuran was the first to come upon the name, since in most worlds, he steals it from himself and it continues to ripple outward from there.

* I literally didn't think about until I was thinking about Bianchi from Xanxus' perspective (his intermission coming up; it got quite long), but she's almost certainly a Cloudy Storm. It's probably the source of her Poison Cooking - the mix of Cloud Propagation and Storm Disintegration.

Also 'Bianchi' is a fairly common Italian surname, which is why it became her Family name. Doesn't she seem like an Isabella tho? 'Gokudera Hayato' is obviously not Hayato's birthname in Italy if his half-Japanese mother was supposed to be a secret, but likely an identity he created to be free of his household when he ran away. Supposing that Lavina's Japanese parent was her father, Gokudera might even have been her surname.

* That aside, Bianchi as a Guardian would be at least as terrifying as Bianchi in love. Despite styling herself as a 'mother' instead of 'big sister' in response to what she sees as Dino and Reborn's guardian-ward(foster child) relationship, she's not romantically interested in Dino which is why he can respond to her the way he does. She's become one of his precious family members. What a hilarious disaster!

* This chapter ended up dumping a lot of exposition. I went back and forth a lot, but in the end, I left it this way.

Despite having two yandere sharing space, don't expect a showdown between Bianchi Isabella and Tsunayoshi unless something unpredictable happens. There's just no reason for them to come into conflict. Unless Reborn provokes them. Which he might, being that kind of troll.

* Reborn strikes me as the kind who has that 'chivalry' notion of never making a woman feel unwanted or like she's done something embarrassing or awkward. It's even more important to him than his own pride.

** In case there's still some confusion: Before the start of the story, Tsunayoshi, aged 17, was kidnapped off the streets and smuggled out to the facility in Southern(ish) Italy. Chapters 1-20 were 17yo!Tsunayoshi remembering being 13yo!Tsunayoshi thanks to the VR and drugs, which accounts for the odd narrative. I forgot to mention it, but I intentionally had a line in the 'field trip' chapter of Tsunayoshi 'not wanting to see this again' - since we were almost to the part of the story where he would wake up. We caught up to the present day in Zunetto's intermission, and have continued in the
present during those intermissions and 'in the absence of breath' and this chapter.**
shadows fall

Chapter Summary

BLACK BIRD, BLACK MOON, BLACK SKY, BLACK EVERYTHING
carelessly, confidently rejecting people will leave you alone, you know?

Chapter Notes

please be aware of Xanxus' Intermission all good devils masquerade. It's not necessary to the story, but it might help explain some of Zunetto's reasoning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Four : shadows fall

That first night, Tsunayoshi nearly spirals his way into something drastic. In retrospect, he should have expected it.

After all, when it's time for all good otherworlders to go to bed - that's the first time Tsunayoshi is alone, with nothing to draw his attention and no immediate goal to work toward. The bedroom, as massive as it is, well: its walls begin to close in. His hollow, hungry heart aches. He hasn't been alone like this since he was thirteen, with no friend nearby and no phone to call them with. He begins to feel like a hot coal, swiftly burning through - a fine line of fire, and then nothing but carbon. And iron, of course.

There's always so much slick, wet iron smell.

At some point he must fall asleep since he wakes up with his teeth chattering and the bed sheeted in ice.

-0-

There's very little for the otherworlders to do while they're waiting for Verde's specialists to show up. Understandably, that Cavallone Dino has them take their meals up in their own rooms - as much for their own sake as to keep the peace, Tsunayoshi thinks, given Bianchi Isabella's witchcraft and general temperament. They're not given much reason to cross paths, not with her and especially not with her young companion.

For similar reasons, Tsunayoshi doesn't try to come around the younger Dino or Xanxus.

But at least they aren't held prisoner in their wing. There's always this or that servant around no matter where Tsunayoshi goes, which he accepts as natural. After all, Dino doesn't really know anything about them, even if he came to their rescue. They're in the heart of his home. Of course they're not trusted yet.
But there's nothing to really do or accomplish now that he's established ties with the more concerning players on the field - and Tsunayoshi isn't entirely sure he wants to establish any ties with Bianchi or Reborn just yet. He doesn't mind distracting one, but actually getting involved might become dangerous, and as for the other? Reborn is unsettling in various ways. Apparently Cavallone Dino established ties with him, and Tsunayoshi clearly sees where that landed him - because it's certainly not Verde who is involved with him, and apparently those specialists also have ties with Reborn.

So.

Tsunayoshi and Zunetto more or less spend the first full day they're there forming a kind of map of the Cavallone mansion and working on Zunetto's vocabulary, which by nature ends up with Tsunayoshi being taught one or two rudimentary Italian phrases. It's a bit frustrating just how much easier Tsunayoshi finds it to pick up than the multiple years of English classes he took - up until Zunetto tries that out, and Tsunayoshi finds equal eases with that. Apparently despite the fact that he'd seemed to learn nothing in the classes, he'd absorbed some familiarity with how to make the sounds and fit the words together coherently after Zunetto provides him with the right ones.

He knuckles the hungry, devouring hollow under his breastbone: the open, yawning void of his heart - and thinks about Verde speculating that something had been done to him, purposefully. His head has been feeling more clear. Shioya's breathing exercises don't pain him anymore. He wakes up with his bed sheeted in ice-that-isn't and thinks about those accusation that first day as he feeds awful memories to the ember inside him and it thaws his bed out.

What kind of ice doesn't even melt into water, Tsunayoshi wonders as his thoughts race fast enough that the ticking of a clock feels like it takes hours.

(The desperate, empty void inside him gnaws at the carbon cage enclosing it. Where-oh-where-oh-where are the companions he had that could numb the stabbing, clenching pain?)

After Tsunayoshi thaws out his bedding, he finds he's not inclined to roll over and try sleeping more the way he did the first night. There's no point when all those awful memories will just haunt his dreams and he'll end up shivering awake again. Nana would always be downstairs in the kitchen with something warm to drink when he woke up, he remembers, and so he gets out of bed.

Something about this whole situation feels a little too relaxed for Tsunayoshi's nerves, he thinks as he heads down to the kitchens that Zunetto had shown him earlier. Viewing it from what he understands of Dino's perspective, he supposes there's nothing inherently suspicious about a group of teenagers who had been kidnapped and are more or less dependent on his good nature, so - then it's probably that Tsunayoshi is accustomed to being viewed with a lot more suspicion.

Still, it is a bit stressful to be allowed to wander as he pleased, even in the very early morning in the dark of night. Tsunayoshi spares enough attention to the servants moving around even this late that they know he's awake, but not enough to make it look as though he's deliberately drawing their attention.

Not making the servants nervous had been a vital lesson at the Tomaso household. While most of them were fairly harmless, the ones that weren't were of the 'attack first, question later' nature. As many servants as Dino has that are not one Tsunayoshi would want to fight, he does his best and seems to succeed since he makes it all the way down to the kitchens without being attacked.

Of course, his good luck comes to an end there he discovers, standing in the doorway of the already lit kitchen. Although he'd never seen what the kitchens at the Tomaso house looked like, he imagines that they probably looked similar to this - more like the kitchen at TakeSushi than the
kitchen inside a home, with a much larger fridge and plenty of counter space. There are actually multiple fridges in this kitchen, which given the size of the mansion and Tsunayoshi's estimates regarding the number of servants, that's perfectly reasonable.

What's not perfectly reasonable is the center table, obviously meant to aid with plating food - or in this case, being the throne of some kind of demon prince, cross legged in pajamas with a plate of cookies and milk sitting in front of him.

Though there's no obvious sign of Tsunayoshi's presence being noticed, he isn't foolish enough to believe that a lack of acknowledgement means a lack of awareness. The thing is - isn't Reborn supposed to be seven? He might not know a lot about children, but this is definitely a child some years younger than that… and yet, the resemblance is far too strong for something like 'siblings.'

It's… probably none of his business, really, he decides, and steps into the kitchen.

Unfortunately, all the tea that Dino stocks isn't tea that Tsunayoshi is familiar with, and it seems in bad taste to fool around with his spices to try creating something reasonably similar, so hot chocolate it is. Luckily, he has some idea about that kind of thing thanks to helping Kyoko squash the last holdouts in the Home Economics class, so it's not like it's difficult.

Although he'd had some idea of sitting in a dark kitchen with a hot drink in order to soothe his nerves, it's looking like he'll be quickly drinking his treat at the sink so that he can wash the mug with the other dishes. Or that's the thought he has, but - ah. There's a black gaze watching him appraisingly, even though its owner has had to twist his head disconcertingly like an owl.

"You can sit down, at least," Reborn points out.

Well, the sink is just out of his line of sight, Tsunayoshi rationalizes. "Thank you very much," he says, and picks a seat that's not so awkwardly positioned, even though this apparently gives the child a reason to eyeball him closely.

Which Reborn does at some length, even as he continues to stuff cookies into his mouth - well, no. 'Stuff' is wrong. Although he's very determinedly eating the cookies as if he hasn't had a meal in some time, it's hardly a messy affair. In a second's notice, the glass of milk and cookies could be put away without a sign of anything amiss.

If Tsunayoshi were the sort to be troubled by being blamed for things he had nothing to do with, then he'd be anxious about noticing that, but - haha, well. He's been held responsible for the sins of That Man who never comes home, so.

Apparently having looked his fill, Reborn says, "There's no need to be so troubled by things that you hide it like this. It's true that there's nothing for anyone to do about it, but you could at least confide in that annoyance that's growing like mold on the back of your heels."

"Zunetto isn't mold or a fungus," Tsunayoshi says, frowning a bit. It is annoying, but it's because Zunetto is trying to protect him, or something like that, so getting offended is a bit thankless, isn't it? "Calling him 'annoying' is fine, but - he's been treated a bit badly, so don't call him mold."

Reborn cuts him a look that's alarmingly serious, as if they've ever had such a history of solemnity between them.

"You should be careful about what kinds of mangy mutt you decided to feed out of the kindness of your heart," he says, voice devoid of the standard mockery. "There's usually a reason dogs end up abandoned on the streets - being too shy so they bite every hand that offers itself, or having caught
some kind of sickness that could spread to any owner that might pick them up."

Even though showing his true face is absolutely prohibited, Tsunayoshi can't help but to sober a great deal as he meets Reborn's pitch black gaze over the lip of his steaming cup. That's a strangely serious warning from this kid who has seemed content to let everyone do whatever they pleased so long as he's allowed to make fun of it. And yet-

"Ah, you're definitely not cute at all," he sighs. Compared to the advice that he got from Fon, this isn't inspiring in the least.

The look Reborn levels at him is almost indiscernible, outside the part of it that's clearly demanding to know if he's trying to start a fight. It's surprisingly scary. A chill rattles down Tsunayoshi's spine: the certainty that even if this is a five year old, he can squash Tsunayoshi in an instant.

Rounding his shoulders and ducking his head, Tsunayoshi smiles at Reborn; nothing more than an utterly harmless, useless kid. "Even if we're from different worlds, I know what it's like to be treated like a mangy mutt, so-
"If it were you in that situation, even that pipsqueak Dino would have killed you before you'd woken up," Reborn says so sharply that despite his childish appearance, Tsunayoshi becomes very still and that hollow heart of his cracks with a spit of sparks and snapping ice. "As perverse as he is, Verde would have also crushed your skull rather than subdue you with such halfhearted measures. You're a kind person, Nayo - in spite of the cruel things you suffered or did, maybe - but don't be full of yourself and get involved with something better left alone."

Isn't that too astute if he's supposed to be five? Of course, Dino who is a fully grown adult called this kid his 'tutor' and it was this child that everyone listened to when he told them to back off and called what Tsunayoshi did 'witchcraft,' so he shouldn't be surprised, should he?

"Ahh, I wonder," Tsunayoshi says, dropping his gaze to his steaming cup: "what kind of cruel things you think went on, since we aren't even from the same world."

From the edge of his vision, he sees the way that Reborn smiles. Despite his doll-like appearance, or maybe because of it: it's incredibly unpleasant.

"The particulars aren't important. I've already seen some of your work, and unlike those two, I'm familiar with the technique. No one at the age of seventeen has a resolve as severe as yours unless they've been tested and forced into it. I'm a tutor, after all - I wouldn't be the best if my ability to measure my students didn't surpass their own self-awareness."

"Don't be proud of that," Tsunayoshi says, wetting his dry mouth with the hot chocolate. "I've been reliably informed that my self-awareness is especially pathetic."

"That's something that has already been taken into consideration," Reborn says dismissively. "It's your awareness of others that I find more interesting, really. You must have someone you want to protect quite badly to have sharpened your ability to read others to that extent."

And Tsunayoshi easily says, "honestly, it's probably because my mother's self-awareness is even worse than mine."

"I see," he says, and then that demon child just as casually continues: "and so from a young age, you were forced to step up and look after her because no one else was there to do it to your satisfaction, is that right? And since you made yourself into a sword and shield for the sake of an
adult, you easily extended that consideration toward your peers. After all, they are even less capable of looking after themselves than someone fully grown who should be taking care of you. Am I wrong?"

The spitting sparks inside him threaten a raging firestorm - his palms itch, his lungs tighten; his entire body threatens to erupt, ablaze. In retrospect, Shioya has been trying for years for this kind of response, and it's because of that realization that Tsunayoshi wrangles it back down behind walls of shuddering, hissing ice.

His fingers don't so much as tremble around the mug in his hand.

"Right or wrong, I have to wonder how you came to those conclusions," he says, glancing up toward the ceiling and very thankful that his voice sounds normal.

Reborn doesn't answer until his gaze drops again, sitting cross legged on the table and clutching the tall glass of water with one hand, a cookie in the other. His black eyes are sharp and even at such a close range, there's no color to soften the look of them: just like the button eyes of a doll. Or a shark, for that matter.

"Oh," he says, and then smiles as if he's read every thought kept secret in Tsunayoshi's heart. " Didn't anyone tell you? I have ESP."

… what. Really?

There's no helping the frown he makes. "Wait a moment," he says, "wasn't it 'witchcraft' just the other day? You can't say witchcraft and then add ESP! Those are two different genres! Although I guess it's easy for the powers of one to seem like the powers of the other…" A power like 'clairvoyance' might easily seem like mindreading, after all.

On second thought, he can easily see how Reborn might reach those conclusions without anything as weird as mind reading being the answer; he's fallen back on a lot of his bad habits, after all. With what Tsunayoshi has said and how he's behaved, without regard to the adults around him since they hadn't seemed to be his enemies and this kind of behavior was always more or less expected out of him anyway - everything that Reborn said was pretty obvious, right?

Reborn grunts, unimpressed. "Life doesn't get filed into strict 'genre' sections, stupid. Or is yours supposed to be a slapstick comedy?"

He's rude! "This kind of crankiness is exactly why you're not cute," Tsunayoshi points out crossly.

"Is the opinion of someone who can't even button their shirt straight supposed to have weight?"

"I wonder what Bianchi Isabella would think if I told her about your midnight snack."

Reborn's face goes creepily blank. There's not an ounce of tension anywhere in his frame. "Nayo-chan," he says, never resembling a cute doll possessed by the worst kind of demon more, "you should really be more aware of things like 'home ground advantage.'"

"Ah." Without realizing the situation, Tsunayoshi really has escalated to the nuclear option, hasn't he? It's already obvious by the size of the plate and glass that Bianchi hasn't kept a lid on her witchcraft, probably, and - more than that, he doesn't want to make an enemy here. "I see… please forget my rash words," he says, a bit uneasily.

Some life seeps back into Reborn's expression, but it's hardly a hopeful sign since it doesn't appear very forgiving. "That aside," he says, apparently willing to drop that subject for now. "If it's just
because you're lonely or missing someone, then there's nothing so pressing that I can't keep you company - if that's why you're allowing that Zunetto to be close to you. Calling it a 'disease' is apt enough - he won't mean to make you sick, but if you're weak to it, then it could kill you anyway."

Oh - so, Reborn's offer to 'comfort' him the other day was actually honestly given, is that it? Tsunayoshi supposes that his actions in Narcisse's room did betray him a bit, but he'd dismissed the offer as just another method to tease him and make him uncomfortable, since Reborn seems like the type that enjoys putting people outside their comfort zones. To better understand them, maybe. Or just to have fun.

"And if I become 'sick,'" Tsunayoshi says, "then even Cavallone Dino, who likes animal and small children, will be forced to turn on me, and that Professor Verde will crush my head like a melon, I guess. I suppose that Xanxus is also worried about something like that, so that's why he can't relax when Zunetto is in the room?"

"Dino is the kind of person who is easily led and influenced, especially at that age, so it can't be helped," Reborn says. "Though even Xanxus would be in danger from something like that, despite his willfulness. It's the darkness in his heart. It would be easy for him to go down that dark road."

Well. He'd told Zunetto that he'd sensed that he and Xanxus had certain things in common, hadn't he? Tsunayoshi, too, has darkness in his heart - so why is it that Xanxus is in danger, and not him?

"It's not that I hate your company or anything like that," he allows, "but - ahh, how should I say it? I'd like to keep you around, however: speaking honestly, I have nothing to give you back, and you haven't asked to remain at my side, so… I'd rather not have such a one-sided relationship."

For a long moment, there's no real reaction from Reborn, and then he slowly raises another cookie to his mouth and chomps on it so carelessly that crumbs get on his face. He then turns his attention to draining the entire glass of milk in one go, going so far as to hold the glass in both hands to tip it all the way up. He sets it down, scrubs off the milk mustache, and finally says, "it wasn't that kind of offer in the first place."

Then why does he seem so completely annoyed about it right now?! Tsunayoshi wonders in something like a panic. Actually, despite the fact that he isn't even frowning, it feels a bit like Tsunayoshi should be worried about whether or not he'll get to see the sun rise in a few hours! Why is he throwing a temper tantrum over something he wasn't even offering in the first place!

Didn't he explain himself correctly?!

Wait, no, if this child is anything like Fon, who claimed to be a grandfather despite having a child's body and heart, and flustered when Tsunayoshi was honest about treasuring the gift he was given, then-

"Well, you've been informed, and after that it up to you. Maybe you're still thinking like a kid since you haven't reached your majority yet back home, but in our world even Xanxus is expected to make decisions for himself and deal with them." Reborn gets up, brushing away crumbs that only existed with that last cookie, and stalks away over the table top leaving his dirty dishes behind.

It's a short distance from the table to the floor - for someone like Tsunayoshi. At five, it's almost as high as Reborn is tall - but he's nimble and doesn't falter, landing on his feet without even a grunt from the force. That leaves Tsunayoshi all alone in the kitchen the way he'd wanted, except he's wide awake now and hasn't resolved his concerns and now - ahh.

He wonders if he should have acted a little suspicious over the fact that Reborn had been younger.
It's just - witchcraft, and other worlds, and that ice on his bedding, so: it's a bit hard to be shocked about something like that at three in the morning while he's sleep deprived, is the thing. Besides, he'd known it was Reborn, even if Reborn was acting different than usual due to the pressures in his own life at the moment.

Anyway, supposing that Reborn has the mind of an adult and the heart of a child… then even if Tsunayoshi's logic can reach the adult brain, then the unprovoked rejection probably got to him all the same. This is why Tsunayoshi is no good with children. Even if Reborn obviously agreed since he wasn't asking to join Tsunayoshi's household in the first place, the fact that Tsunayoshi denied him without hesitation…

Well, it's not like Haru hasn't told him he's an idiot plenty of times.

"It's not like I can carelessly increase the size of my household, though," he sighs dismally, getting up from his chair and taking all the dirty dishes to the sink. "So it's pointless to worry about in the first place. It's not just myself I have to worry about, but whether or not they can get along with the others - ah."

He'd forgotten again, somehow. This isn't even his world, so taking responsibility for people is no good regardless. Hey. He can make it back home, right? It's no good if he can't even make it back home. He's been trying hard not to think about it too much, and trying to make alliances with people who will also want that outcome, but… ahh, ahh, if even Verde's specialists can't do it, then what should he do?

_Tsunayoshi will die if he's left alone._

After a moment, he takes a few steadying breaths, thaws the strange ice on the mug, and goes back to bed.

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Honestly, honestly, honestly. Tsunayoshi really thought he was done with this, but ahh, no. Wasn't that more of a matter of the others simply noticing and refusing to leave him alone? Takeshi got mad when they were kids and killed a man for Tsunayoshi's sake, all because Tsunayoshi lost his temper because someone threatened to take Kyoya away from him. And so had clan Hibari. A 'rotten branch that they'll be grateful to have removed,' isn't that what those people said? And hadn't he come to see that it was true?

Kyoya had started to keep an eye on him early on, hadn't he? And after that, Nakamoto Kei was never far from him, and Kyoya began to leave those kids he couldn't use himself on Tsunayoshi's doorstep. Everyone had worked hard to see that he was reassured and could rest easy.

And now he's been stolen from their side and it's to find out that he has no methods of coping with this. With all of this information clearly laid out, it's only natural that Tsunayoshi can't turn Zunetto aside, even if it's annoying.

"... Um," Tsunayoshi says eventually as he slowly left his thoughts, "would it be okay if I put my shirt back on?"

It took a few moments longer before his request seemed to penetrate Verde's intense focus. He still doesn't get much of it as Verde glances up with a vague look on his face - actually it was a bit like he hadn't realized that Tsunayoshi was still around. "Yes, that's fine," he says and immediately returns his attention to the computer screen.
Tsunayoshi waits a second, then sighs heavily and starts pulling off the weird sticky pads attached to wires that Verde had stuck to his body in various places - the awkward one in the center of his forehead, between the eyes so that the wire bumped his nose repeatedly, and then the several scattered over his breastbone and his heart. It's obviously related to those 'gate' things that Verde talked about when Tsunayoshi first woke up, though Tsunayoshi isn't sure what kind of readings he thinks the machine will give him.

Apparently Verde had woken up from his prolonged rest a bit after Tsunayoshi had gone back to bed. He's also not the type to really respect others' schedules or social conventions since it wasn't long after that when he came to fetch Tsunayoshi from his bedroom. Thankfully, Tsunayoshi hadn't started dreaming again, so there was nothing unusual about the situation, but-

Even though it had been early in the morning that Verde stole him away to run tests down in Dino's infirmary, it had taken long enough for the house to wake up, and Zunetto to come looking for him. Tsunayoshi gets why discovering his empty room would be alarming, but he has mixed feelings about how that discovery probably occurred.

At least he seemed to have quickly grasped the situation and figured out where they'd gone, because it would have been embarrassing for him to have turned the whole mansion on its head in an uproar.

Now Zunetto is sitting on the floor by the doorway and sulking about it, though, after having gotten scolded by Verde for interrupting, disrupting the tests - apparently the readings he'd been taking had been disrupted when Zunetto came in - and causing the whole thing to take even longer. Honestly, if this is the kind of face that Tsunayoshi showed everyone back then, it's not hard to understand why he'd been picked on so much. It definitely provokes some kind of reaction, although he's hesitant to try labeling something he doesn't entirely understand.

Like now, when Zunetto is making a kind of strained, uncomfortable expression. Tsunayoshi has to wonder if maybe his careless attitude toward his clothing really bothers everyone here. It's true that they're all presenting themselves flawlessly, but after seeing that Xanxus hadn't bothered with buttoning everything entirely - at the neck or wrists either one - he'd thought his own general discomfort with fitted clothes wouldn't be disruptive. Well, even so, he won't bother with it anyway.

They've already seen him unconscious and dressed in scrubs, so retaining his dignity has no meaning.

"Well, this certainly is interesting," Verde says, drawing Tsunayoshi's attention. He doesn't look up from the computer. "There's no way you should be regulating this well. Some stabilization is to be expected after exhausting yourself that way, but - hm."

That seems to be enough to draw Zunetto out of his sulk, since he sits forward. "Is Nayo okay?" he asks worriedly.

"More or less, I should think," Verde says. Where's the patient-doctor confidentiality?! "I had some concerns after that initial examination, but it seems as though his 'life force' is still adjusting. Well - the results are still scary, but they're less scary compared to the first set." He looks to Tsunayoshi. "I won't say you're 'getting better' since you weren't exactly sick in the first place, but more like your 'disability' is transforming."

"Ha, 'disability' you say," Tsunayoshi huffs, "in what way? I think I'm a pretty normal person, all things considered."
"It's because of that - there's no way for a normal person to notice it."

"But in what way," Zunetto insists, coming up off the floor to anxiously join them. The look on his face is - not unfamiliar, although that's because Tsunayoshi last saw it thanks to that temper tantrum over him thinking Reborn was some Lazzero's kid.

"In the obvious one," Verde says in a blunt fashion, even though he's actually speaking around the subject again. "Clearly there are still some inexplicable things that he can do, but the obvious ones are unlikely to ever be possible."

Zunetto frowns deeply, glancing at Tsunayoshi with a troubled expression. It's a bit embarrassing for someone to look at him with such clear eyes - Zunetto has made himself so sick at heart that he seems to resent more or less everything, so how he can have such pure resolve when it comes to Tsunayoshi? Even Takeshi is greedy about it, and he comes closest to this.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?" Zunetto asks, looking to Verde with determination. "A treatment, or physical therapy or something - though, ah, not 'physical' but-"

Verde looks back for a moment, his narrow eyes squinted and drawn into something that doesn't comprehend the drive behind those kinds of questions. Verde's bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired, Tsunayoshi thinks. "No," he says.

That's not an answer, Tsunayoshi thinks, staring at him: that's a guy forbidding something instead.

"But-!" Zunetto protests with his heart in his throat.

"No," he repeats again. "I'm surprised you'd ask, since it's the only thing saving him from you."

Zunetto recoils, flinching back from them with such a wounded expression on his face that it could flay anyone's flesh from bone. It's only there for a split second, only barely long enough to be recognized before it hardens into resentment - not aimed at the two of them, or at least Verde where it belongs, but: at himself. And well, from what Tsunayoshi can tell, he's actually done this thing to himself that makes Reborn and Verde try warning Tsunayoshi off from him, but-

The starving, sooty heart inside of Tsunayoshi's chest stirs, and the embers in the ashes glimmer and threaten to smoke.

Ahh. It's bad.

It's two steps away from the cot that he'd been sitting on while measurements of his twisted heart were taken, and Tsunayoshi latches onto Zunetto's elbow. Zunetto gives a startled 'ah!' even as Tsunayoshi cranks up the charm he'd learned at his mother's elbow from every time she had to step in and interfere thanks to adults becoming too insistent.

"We're done here, right, Professor Verde?" he asks, casually leaning his weight into Zunetto's side, his own elbow butting lightly into those sensitive, flinching ribs. He's no Takeshi or Haru or Nana, but he can do at least this much. How would he rest easy otherwise?

"We're not," Verde says, turning that same narrow, squinted stare on him.

Under Tsunayoshi's fingers, Zunetto has stiffened into something a bit like a statue, making small stuttered noises even as Tsunayoshi cranks up the charm he'd learned at his mother's elbow from every time she had to step in and interfere thanks to adults becoming too insistent.

"But, isn't the data you got already enough? You said I could get dressed, so - already having missed breakfast, if I don't at least eat lunch, then my blood sugar will probably drop and I'll pass
out,” he says, already pulling Zunetto toward the door.

The professor scoffs, but makes no move to stop or hinder them, although the weight of his gaze is an unpleasant pressure on Tsunayoshi's back. He'll probably end up paying for this, but - that's just how it has to be then.

No sooner are they at the top of the staircase that leads to the rest of the house than Zunetto shakes him off his arm. Tsunayoshi is too well trained to stumble at the unexpected move, automatically shifting to defend himself, but - Zunetto is too tense and stiff to be trying to pick an actual fight.

"Listen," Zunetto says, low and guilty with his eyes aimed at the floor and his shoulders hunched. Braced. "Maybe - d-don't ask why, but maybe we should stay away from each other from now on."

Tsunayoshi sighs heavily. "It'll just stress me out if you try using me as a whip to flog yourself with."

"What," Zunetto blurts, startled into looking at him. His defenses really are the worse: still inviting that blow that will shatter him into too many pieces to fit back together. Tsunayoshi should probably have some idea of how to get through to this guy, except - everyone that he's helped so far has wanted to be helped, and asked him for his aid. All he had to do was support them until they could get themselves to where it was they wanted to be.

That approach won't work here, however. Tsunayoshi shoves his hand back through his hair with another sigh before he puts his hands in his hips and meets Zunetto's startled gaze directly.

"I won't ask," Tsunayoshi allows, "but listen to me without running away for a moment, okay?"

"I'm not running," Zunetto says a bit indignantly, tightening his hands into fists. On a lot of people, that's anger, but Tsunayoshi recognizes it for the anxious, cowardly gesture that it is.

"What do you call this," he asks doubtfully, gesturing between them. "You've been fine going along with me all this time, and now just because the Professor said something unnecessary, you're splitting away from me?"

"How was that unnecessary?" Zunetto demands; the scowl on his face is just a thin gilding over the distress he feels. "He has a point, you know - I shouldn't hang around someone like- in your condition, I mean."

"Why?" he asks, carefully making his tone completely neutral. "If you're worried about hurting me - just don't?"

"If it was something I could control then I wouldn't, but I can't!" Zunetto shouts. The carpet prevents it from echoing in real life, but it echoes inside Tsunayoshi, even as Zunetto clasps his hands over his mouth, paling. His brown eyes are wild and frightened, chest heaving with panicked, furious breaths.

"Ah," Tsunayoshi says, and it comes out annoyingly mild. Understated.

This isn't the time for such a weak reaction, he knows that, but - he doesn't know what to do, and knowing what not to doesn't help. If he could figure out how to express the genuine sympathy he has for a feeling like that, he'd be able to connect with Zunetto in a way he's failed connecting with anyone else, ever.

But knowing how to say that - it's not something he had ever been able to learn in the first place, and then? There were endless eyes that watched him, more and more as he grew older, and
Tsunayoshi had been forced to hide his true face from them to avoid calling down danger on his household that he had no way of dealing with yet.

(Becoming cornered or caught is absolutely prohibited. He can't protect anyone if he's kept apart from them, just precisely the way he is at the moment—)

The stalemate ends before it can really begin thanks to the fact that Dino's men are so well trained. The shout brings first one and then another immediately to investigate, a little suspicious even though it's obvious it's just the two of them having an argument. The first one stubbornly remains, eyeballing them until Zunetto finally drops his hands and proves that he's not hiding an injury before he's willing to be waved away.

"Come on," Tsunayoshi says, unwilling to continue the conversation in the hallway. "I said it was time to eat, right?"

Zunetto still won't let him touch him, not that Tsunayoshi tries very hard - there's no point in forcing himself where he isn't wanted - and they make an excursion to the kitchens where Zunetto begs a meal off one of the cooks. He still looks pale and troubled, but not too much to be polite to the man in charge of the smaller dishes, though his smile is a bit wane and he's reluctant, dragging his feet as he follows Tsunayoshi back up to his room.

"Let's eat a bit first," Tsunayoshi suggests.

"Okay," Zunetto agrees, though he doesn't look hungry at all. He probably also wants to put this conversation off as much as Tsunayoshi, but - it's important.

They sit at the table in his room and pick at the food for a while. It's more like a picnic, really, except with sandwiches instead of bento - and inside, rather than on the grass. It's also sadly lacking in sweets or something fun to drink, like cold tea or coffee.

It's not really a picnic at all, honestly.

"I don't really get the sense that you're a threat to me," Tsunayoshi says at last, abandoning all attempts to eat. "But I understand why you might not be satisfied with just me saying that."

Of course he wouldn't be. Despite everything, despite going along with him and listening to him: Zunetto doesn't trust him at all. It's not really something Tsunayoshi can hold against someone he himself doesn't trust.

"I really don't want to hurt anyone," Zunetto says dismally as he picks at a bread crust, his head bowed and eyes hidden behind sullen lids and long lashes. "It's - just me. Just by existing I do that. The fact that I don't even seem like a threat? That's the worst."

"Ah, you're misunderstanding, I said you weren't a threat to me, not that you aren't a threat at all," he corrects, sitting back in the chair and folding his hands into his lap where he can twist his restless fingers together in peace. "You're a dangerous person regardless of everything else - such as the resolve that you kept squashing down until it had no choice but to become twisted."

Jerking upright with a sputter, Zunetto waves his hands around as he obviously tries to decide which part he's more offended by - the 'dangerous' or the 'twisted."

"What kind of weird impression do you have of me?" he demands at last, aghast, staring for a long moment with wild eyes before he despaired: collapsing onto the table, thumping his head face-first into it and knotting his hands into his hair. The noises he makes are kind of pathetic for how frustrated and unhappy they are, until at last he says, muffled: "and how can you say someone you
see as dangerous and twisted isn't a threat?"

There's no way to avoid laughing at a question like that, considering. "Sorry," Tsunayoshi says, stifling his amusement, "but - ah, my senpai of the last three years is known as the Demon of the town, so maybe my sense of danger is a bit skewed?"

"A demon," he moans in despair. "You can't calmly say weird things like that, Nayo! What sort of people have you been hanging out with all this time?!"

The dangerous kind of twisted person that could survive being near scum like him, really. That's probably the main reason Tsunayoshi hasn't minded being near Zunetto even once no matter what.

"I'm still a highschool student, so my classmates mostly," he says - the ambiguous sort of answer he habitually falls back on even though it's not as if anyone can hold his house hostage at this point, stranded as he is. "Although some of my senpai have moved away and gotten jobs abroad and things like that."

Zunetto echoes that to himself before he lifts his head to gaze at Tsunayoshi, something a bit wistful and something a bit resentful in his eyes. "Being a highschool student must be nice," he mutters. The longing wins out over his discontent there, at least, and Tsunayoshi smiles.

Maybe it is. Tsunayoshi wouldn't know. He's a fragile, useless kid who can only successfully fulfill one goal, and that's not homework, so. It's a bit funny that he's coming to realize that to Zunetto - who hates everything that he's been forced to become to this extent - he's somehow become the symbol of a 'normal life' - the person that he might have been able to become if he hadn't been moved to Italy.

That's a complete self-deception, and it'll continue to cause problems in the future but... well, it's also a bit cute? It's a bit like those guys that insisted on calling him 'taichou' and 'aniki' even though he's just Tsunayoshi and only good for that one thing. He'd grown to accept those titles, so perhaps he can come to accept this, too?

It's not like trying to convince him otherwise will work, since he knows how stubborn he himself can be about certain things.

"Yes, but - being a highschool student in a foreign country," Tsunayoshi says, "I need someone to back me up, you know? So instead of splitting from me because the Professor became annoyed that you wanted to help... couldn't you consider my circumstances a bit?"

All the work he'd down to make Zunetto feel comfortable immediately flies out of the window, but - well, he does know what a difficult thing he's asking. "I am!" he protests. "I'm considering the circumstances you don't seem to be aware of! It's not just the matter of being in a foreign country! It's lucky enough that we landed in with the Cavallone Famiglia, but there's a lot more going on that I can't tell you about!"

As if the biggest threat to Tsunayoshi's safety could ever be the person who broke him out of containment in the first place without knowing anything about him and has always quickly capitulated to his requests and moods.

Well, that's how Tsunayoshi sees things, but given the decisions that Zunetto is making, it's obvious he sees them differently.

"Okay, okay, I get it already," Tsunayoshi says wryly, holding up his hands in surrender. "I said something troublesome about you calling me 'senpai' and 'taking responsibility,' but I take it back -
If you're this determined to part ways, then I won't bother you further than this."

"It's not like that!" Zunetto protests, sitting back and blinking rapidly. Fidgeting, he quickly adds, "you weren't bothering me at all! W-wasn't it the other way around, actually? I kept getting in the way and being annoying, and on top of that-" He abruptly bites his tongue, wilting and looking grim.

Tsunayoshi watches him for a moment, but it's obvious he won't finish by himself. "And on top of that, you're a danger to me," he says, "or at least, that's how to you feel about it, anyway."

The grim look on Zunetto's face really does turn truly pathetic in a miserable way - Tsunayoshi had thought this and that about maybe teasing him a bit, but this? It's definitely not an expression that he can tolerate without trying to fix things. Though maybe he should be a bit worried that such an expression exists in the first place.

"There's no need to make that face, though," he says wryly. "I won't be able to rest easy about it. Don't misunderstand, okay? Back home, there was always, always someone constantly underfoot and butting in and wanting my attention, so having Zunetto-kun at my side for this short time was why I was able to be so calm about everything in the first place. But I won't ask you to put yourself out for my sake since I have nothing to offer you in return."

"That's really not what it's like," Zunetto says, having wilted so far that he's practically face-down on the table again like a little kid. Wow, it seems the frustration of the situation has put a glitter to his lashes - *just who should be more frustrated here?!*

Barely strangling back a frustrated growl, he sighs instead, shoving his hair back out of his face. He gives up on trying to be gracious about this!

"In the first place, no one would be happy about being abandoned," Tsunayoshi says grumpily. "The reasons you've given for it don't really carry any weight with me - I don't find satisfaction in them at all. If anything, they're annoying."

"My reasons are fine!" Zunetto squawks, coming all the way to his feet. He doesn't quite slam his hands on the table, but only just, leaning toward Tsunayoshi with an indignant expression. "Didn't you hear me when I said it's because it's bad for you? No, nevermind that! What are you talking about, 'abandoned?!'"

He's really asking for Tsunayoshi to put his shoe in his mouth, honestly.

Slumping back in the chair, Tsunayoshi allows: "well, maybe my wording was a little harsh." He hangs his head back to look at the ceiling so he doesn't do anything rash, like grab Zunetto's face and try rearranging it forcefully. "Though, I'm grateful for everything you've done for my sake, without even thinking about it - rescuing me, and then supporting me afterwards, especially."

He still thinks this split is misguided, but whether or not they do isn't entirely up to him.

With a heavy sigh, he adds: "I promised myself not to become a tyrant, so I won't become the kind of scum that will try keeping you against your wishes. If you won't change your mind, I won't argue against it any further, nor will I bear a grudge or anything like that, so-"

It's just that he'll die if he's left alone. That's all there is to it - but *ahh*, he's also a bit stymied thanks to this otherworld business. What's the point of establishing ties so far away from home in the first place? How should Tsunayoshi survive long enough to get back to his household-

No. Regardless, he'll survive to get back to his household - if it's for their sakes, then he's capable
of any measures, so that's not a problem.

Strengthening his resolve, Tsunayoshi sits straight again and observes the miserable, mulish way Zunetto is slumped into himself, still on his feet but not looking strong at all. There's not really any part of him that's frail, but he looks that way - thin shoulders hunched defensively, the angles of his elbows sticking out, the defensive curl of his back.

If Narcisse's pressure reminds him of a needy housecat made feral, then Reborn was definitely correct: Zunetto is no mangy mutt, but he certainly is a house dog who got left behind when the family moved away, and is now desperately trying to survive in any way it can without anyone there to love it and treat it gently.

He shudders on instinct. That's… probably accurate. So far Zunetto has only been whimpering and simpering, but a dog's fangs are much worse than a cat's and they're quick to snap when cornered.

Though Tsunayoshi is the same that way.

"If you ever change your mind yourself, at least consider coming back, though," he says. "I'll respect your choice, but - I can't agree with it."

"It's not a matter of changing my mind," Zunetto argues, though at least he no longer looks like he's ready to bite a hand that tries to comfort him. "It's just me. It's - you don't understand. It's my witchcraft - it's - or it's how I use it, I don't know. It's not supposed to hurt people, but it does. That's all it's really good for. It's supposed to be something that helps people but for me it's just-"

He trails off, frustrated and helpless. Either he doesn't know how to talk about it without telling Tsunayoshi everything, or he doesn't know how to talk about it point blank because he's never been given a reason to try.

"I understand," Tsunayoshi says, though he doesn't. He can't, since Zunetto refuses to explain any of it to him, but - well, he understands that to Zunetto it's not that easy, and he can't change him against his will. "It's fine."

Zunetto sags, sighing with relief as the last of the tension drains out of his body. "Um," he says, palming the back of his neck, head ducked and eyes averted. "Thanks."

Tsunayoshi hums noncommittally. He really has to wonder at what kind of tyrants these Italians are accustomed to that they keep being relieved that Tsunayoshi doesn't stoop to some shitty expectations they have of him.

People with his type of life energy or witchcraft or whatever - they must be the actual worst if scum like Tsunayoshi seems like a blessing.

Thankfully, Zunetto takes his leave then. It's awkward and far from graceful, and there will be moments later for Tsunayoshi to carelessly steam roll over for the sake of achieving his ends, but - he's a bit grateful for it, rubbing his thumb against the aching crescent marks his nails have left on his fingers, and working the muscles of his neck and back loose.

If nothing else, he'll now have plenty of free time to work on his conditioning and the matter of Bianchi Isabella.
* This was all for the sake of developing future relationships!
* here's the trope of encountering Reborn late at night! Despite what it looks like, they did manage to become closer lmao.
* though Reborn has no sensor ability, the way Tsunayoshi, Kyoya, and Xanxus do, he was still able to recognize certain important facts.
* and here we have Tsuna doing the Tsuna thing. He's definitely running away, but he's also trying to protect Tsunayoshi in his own way... but it's not entirely altruistic :V
* Nayo's resolve was somewhat tested. It's fine and all to say "haha, of course I won't keep my friends hostage" but actually doing it when it's against your benefit? That's another.

End Notes

This is getting mirrored from FFN! You can find it [here](#).

**Original Character Guide:**
Disciplinary Committee Members: * Hoshino Yoshio * Nakamoto Kei * Nozaki Sanjiro *
Parental Characters: * Yekaterina Miura * Miura Hideki * Sasagawa Naoko * Hibari Nuo *
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