Sass and Win

by AlligatorEyes

Summary

My name is Sawada Inari and I shouldn’t be here. I remember this story and ‘I’ was never part of it.

But here I am.

Might as well have some fun with all this nifty precognitive knowledge.
...yeah, that would have been nice.

Notes

Like the memory of a dream.
Existential Uncertainty

I shouldn’t be here.

And I don’t mean that in a situational way I mean it in an existential way. I shouldn’t be in this life. It’s not a feeling that I really have any supporting evidence for which makes it even more uncomfortable.

My name is Inari.

Sawada Inari.

I live in Namimori Japan with my mother and twin brother Tsunayoshi. I have lived here my entire life. But recently I’ve been getting this nagging sensation that this is not where I’m supposed to be.

Somehow, I am an intruder in my own life and there is no cause for this. Mom has never been anything less than a loving and caring parent. Sure, she could be a bit of a ditz sometimes, but she had never given me any indication that I don’t belong with them in this household.

And Tsuna….

Well, Tsuna is clingy. I hardly ever get a moment to myself because Tsuna is always there. My brother is kind of a human disaster I don't really understand how it's possible for one person to fail in so many ways. It was honestly somewhat intriguing.

The point is Tsuna doesn’t really have anyone other than me. He doesn’t have any friends. Our teachers are all convinced he’s a hopeless case. Even mom gives him these looks sometimes like she’s not quite sure what to do with him. Technically, if anyone should feel like they don’t belong it should be Tsuna.

Not that I would wish that on him, I love my disaster brother.

Maybe it's just one of those weird teenage things adults keep talking about? Your growing up and your childhood life doesn’t fit quite right anymore? Is that a thing? I feel like I’ve heard someone
say that before.

Whatever.

I don’t really know any other reason why I feel like this.

Anyway, I have more important things to worry about right now.

“Tsuna I swear to god if you stayed up all night reading manga again, I am going to leave your ass here and you can just deal with being late.”

Tsuna proceeded to dispute my accusations by chewing on his pillow and mumbling incomprehensibly.

“I have to be at school in ten minutes for baseball practice. You either have to wake up now or risk getting ‘bitten to death’ by Hibrari when you inevitably turn up to school late.”

Tsuna snores.

I sigh.

“You have sealed your own fate brother. Let it be known that I tried to help you.” I give him a somewhat aggressive smack that apparently, he cannot feel at all through the cushy layers for the duvet.

I don’t even try to be quiet as I gather up my books and gear. If he manages to sleep through all of this, it is his own damn fault. At this point I am pretty sure he willingly ignoring my prodding. He probably thinks that he can get away with skipping out on Nezu’s math test today.

“See ya later bro.”

Mom is already cooking so I don’t put much effort into being quiet.
“Morning mom.” I greet her with a kiss on the cheek. It makes her smile and she laughs. It always does and so I always do it. Things aren’t easy for a ‘single’ mother of two and if there’s even the littlest thing I can do to make things better for her I will.

“Good morning Inari-chan.” She says. “Your lunch is ready on the counter. You have morning practice, right? I packed you some extra.”

Yay, mom’s cooking is literally the best thing ever. “Thanks, mom.”

“Is your brother awake?”

“Naw, not for my lack of trying though.”

She sighs.

“I really don’t know what to do with that boy sometimes. Your guidance counselor called yesterday to let me know that he’s failing math and English again.”

Oh, Tsuna…

“I try to help him mom but…”

“I know you do sweetie. And it's not your job to do your brother's school work for him. Don’t worry Mama has a plan to fix this.”

She gives him the brightest and most concerning smile.

“Now go and have a great day!”
I resolve not to think too deeply into mom’s plots. Last time she had enrolled the two of us into ballet class to try and help with Tsuna’s balance and coordination issues.

Once I had gotten over the mortification of being in public in a leotard it had been fun, and it had given the opportunity to get to know Hanna better. She was a wonderful source of snark and amusement in my life.

Tsuna had never gotten over the leotard mortification and had resolutely refused to put any effort into the class whatsoever. Somehow the kids at school had gotten wind of our adventures in ballet and they had teased Tsuna endlessly about it.

The guys had tried to get to me too but that would have only worked if I had given a shit about what people thought.

Getting friendly with Hana had probably helped too.

About halfway to the campus, I meet up with Takeshi and we jog the rest of the way together. Or you know race like a couple of teenage idiots who don’t know how to properly conserve their energy for a long day.

The two of us have been having friendly competitions for too many years now to stop. We had played on the same little league team since we were tiny tots. We have the sacred bond of sharing juice boxes and listening to his dad plays weird opera music in the car for seven hours as we drove to an away game.

We survived that fucking nightmare camp together.

“Ha victory!” I cheer smacking my hand on the fence a fraction of a second before Takeshi.

“I’ll win next time Sawada.”

Takeshi has this way of smiling that makes me think of a wolf. Sure, it’s a smile, but it’s also a
predator showing off his fangs in a very ‘come at me bro’ kind of way. Honestly, I think it's awesome.

“Sure, you will bro. If by next time you mean in your dreams.” I shoot back because I am made of fucking snark and win.

Takeshi laughs, taking it like the good-natured ribbing that it was meant to be, and the two of us head toward the clubhouse.

“There are better things to do if I see you in my dreams, Sawada.”

Or not.

“Dude what!”

“Wouldn’t it be more fun if we went on a quest to slay a dragon.”

Oh yeah, I forgot this is Takeshi. He wouldn’t understand innuendo if it came and smacked him in the face with an alligator.

“That would be dope… But speaking of dragons, did you finish up the translations for English?”

The slight stiffening of his spine told be that no, no he did not.

“Oops?” He says, completely unrepentant.

“I’ll help you fill it out at lunch if you help me out with the Japanese poetry nightmare.”

“Deal.”
We seal the deal with a fist bump and proceed to change into our uniforms. We go through the usual laps and stretches and go on to the drills. I play shortstop, Takeshi plays pitcher. Neither of us is on the starting lineup for the team but it’s still fun to hang out with everyone.

I had tried to get Tsuna to sign up for the team when registration came around but he had been concerned that it would cut into his all-important relaxation time. Looking back, I probably should have nagged him more. Even if he was only the water boy it would have forced him to come out of his shell a bit more.

We practice for about an hour before the coach orders us to hit the showers before we’re late for homeroom.

The water is still freezing.

I’m not exactly sure what had happened to the water heater but one of the upper class-men had mentioned that it had something to do with Hibari and that had been exactly enough information for me to stop wondering about it entirely. I enjoy living too much to get involved with Hibari levels of crazy bullshit.

We jog into class only seconds after the bell. I notice two things right off the bat. One, Mrs. Nakamura is giving me the evil eye, and two, Tsuna isn’t in his seat. I can’t help but feel like part two is somewhat related to part one.

“Mr. Sawada where is your brother?” The tone of her voice makes me think that the word motherfucker is lurking somewhere in that question. “Bathroom,” I answer immediately because like hell I’m going to call my brother out for playing hooky.

He’ll show up soon eventually anyway.

“Will he be returning from the bathroom this time?”

“Sure, unless he falls down the stairs again.”
She just glares at me. It is so weird. I don’t even think she ever gives Tsuna this much shit and he’s
the one who is perpetually late.

It’s the blonde hair, I know it’s the blonde hair. On the first day of class, she called me out for
having dyed hair and did not buy it when I told her it was natural. It probably didn’t help that
someone suggested that I drop my pants to prove it.

That had been a fun day.

She had hated my guts ever since.

“Take your seat, Sawada.” She grinds out and continues with the attendance.

I slide in my seat next to Hana who is busy organizing her pencils into the optimal pencil
formation. She had explained it to me once, but it had sounded a lot like an OCD panic attack and
so at the time I had simply nodded along and patted her shoulder in what I hoped was a comforting
way.

“Your hair is still wet.” She whispers once Mrs. Nakamura leaves the room.

“The hairdryers are still broken.”

She rolls her eyes and pulls out a notebook and jots down a few lines in the section labeled ‘Student
Council.’

“I’ll bring it up at the next meeting.”

“I look forward to briefly having hot water and hair dryers before Hibari inevitably destroys them
in a fit of psychotic rage again.”

“Ugh, don’t make me think about that brute please.”

“Probably a good idea. I think saying is name is one of the methods of summoning him.”
“He’s not a literal demon Sawada.” Hana says.

“Are you sure? A third-year told me that if you whisper his name three times in front of a mirror he’ll appear and bite you to death.”

“I’m pretty sure that was ripped off from Bloody Mary.”

There are a few more snarky remarks that I could make but at that moment the door flies open and in stumbles Tsuna looking around like a recently escaped fugitive.

“I made it? She’s not here yet?!”

Oh Tsuna, my poor sweet boy.

He sounds so relieved that I don’t have the heart to crush his hopes. However ill-founded they might be.

Lucky, I don’t have to, because Nezu chooses that moment to appear like the creeper he is.

“Sawada, what are you doing out of your seat?” He demands.

“Heee! Sorry!” Tsuna squeals and scampers to his desk.

Which he promptly trips over and faceplants into the linoleum.

I wholehearted ignore Nezu’s demands that I stay in my seat and help my brother to his feet and get him seated in his desk. The rest of the class chuckles but I don’t really give a fuck. I’m not going to leave him when he’s down.
Though judging by the look on his face he wishes that I had. That or he wishes that he had fallen straight through the floor and landed in some alternate dimension where he had managed to take his seat like a normal person.

I realize that I don’t make things any better for him when I’m constantly stepping in and fighting his battles for him. But it would be easier to leave him to his own devices if he had literally any fight in him at all.

“You okay bro?” I ask.

“Ye-yeah I’m fine. Sorry for the trouble.”

I pat him on the shoulder before returning to my desk still pointedly ignoring Nezu’s snide reprimands.

“Since you all seem so lively today, I suppose you won't mine a pop quiz.” He says and begins handing out the completely unsurprising pop quiz.

Can it even be considered a pop quiz any more when there is literally one every class?

I think at this point it is a very much expected quiz. Anyone who is surprised by this quiz is not the sharpest tool in the shed.

I immediately regret this thought as Tsuna’s shriek of despair echoes through the chorus of groans.

Tsuna, bro, buddy, I love you to pieces but please learn to pay attention.

The test is multiple-choice, thank god. Math is not my strong suit and anything that required that I show my work usually ended up with docked marks, but multiple-choice took away that added bit of stress.

Even Tsuna, who was probably at this moment making completely random guesses at answers, had
a shot of doing decently with a multiple-choice quiz. I mean it’s a slim chance but it’s better than nothing.

Spoiler alert.

It hadn’t gone well for Tsuna.

He has the crumpled test paper in his hands as we walk home together that evening. At the top of the page is a big, fat, red zero. Which based on the rules of probability is amazing. Even if he was taking random guesses, he should have at least gotten one or two right.

But no, Tsuna, with all his special talent had managed to get all 54 questions wrong. Honestly, I thought this was more fascinating than tragic.

“It’s not so bad Tsuna,” I say attempting to console him.

He responds with a completely dejected look.

“Ok, so yeah, it is that bad but it’s only a shitty math test its not the end of the world or anything.”

“Kyoko-chan saw my test score.” He sniffles.

Oh lord, not this again.

“Bro, I don’t think Sasagawa really gives a fuck about your grades.”

He gasps, “Inari, don’t swear using Kyoko-chan’s name!”
He sounds so mortified that it's almost funny. But I know from experience that if I joke about his ill-advised crush on our school idol that I am in for at least four hours of the silent treatment and sad puppy dog eyes. Which shouldn’t be as effective as they were considering we had the exact same face.

“Yeah, yeah I’m sorry,” I say to appease him.

“And what are you doing saying Kyoko-chan’s name? Huh, Dame-Tsuna?”

There are various things that I hate about Mochida, but chief among them is that fucking nickname.

He comes around the corner and I can just tell he is itching to pick a fight. No, not pick a fight, he just wanted to fuck with someone and his favorite target just happens to be Tsuna.

“Fuck off Mochida,” I tell him.

“I don’t think I was talking to you Irani-chan. Shouldn’t you be sucking Yamamoto’s dick or something? You fucking faggot.”

I feel Tsuna freeze up next to me. His breath is coming in shallow gasps. He’s afraid and considering the circumstances, I can’t say that it’s not justified. And me well…

The world has started to bleed red at the edges.

“Now, Dame-Tsuna, what were you saying about Kyoko-chan?”

He’s gotten too close now, too fucking close to Tsuna. Suddenly my brother isn’t next to me anymore he’s being pinned to the wall by this fucking prick. There are more guys surrounding us now too. Mochida’s goons by the look of them.

I am kicking myself because I was the idiot who was dumb enough not to pay attention.
This fucker shouldn’t have his hands anywhere near my brother. He shouldn’t be anywhere near Tsunayoshi.

This asshole isn’t even real.

A useless part of the set design.

I don’t really take the time to contemplate the intruding thought. I don’t have any time to spare. That thing has its hands on Tsuna and it’s hurting him and that is not allowed.

Before I can really think about what I’m doing my fist has contacted the back of his head and I am full-on grappling him off Tsuna. One of his goons tries to grab me from behind but I snap my head back just in time to flatten his nose against his face.

Tsuna has taken this opportunity to get as far away from Mochida as possible and is continuing to creep away.

I give him a look that I feel very clearly conveyed, “Get going, idiot.”

Though apparently, Tsuna had interpreted it as, “Come help me, idiot.” And was now coming back toward us. Its moments like this that make me wish that twin telepathy was a real thing and not just some bullshit urban myth.

Unfortunately, as I have said before, Tsuna is an uncoordinated mess and therefore only succeeded in getting punched in the face. He went down hard and was not moving.

I kind of lost it after that.

I remember screaming bloody murder in Mochida’s ear before beating him over the head with my fists. One of the other guys finally managed to pull me off, Mochida. I hit the ground hard and I
felt the pavement slicing into my hands.

Not that I cared at that moment. I lashed out and grabbed one of them by the ankle making him crash face-first into the pavement. And hot damn did he go down hard. I’m pretty sure his nose instantly broke. One of the other fuckers ruined my moment of victory by kicking me in the ribs.

While I was winded, they managed to make off with Matsuda and the other looser leaving me and Tsuna alone in this shitty god damned alley.

It took a moment before I had enough energy to drag my sorry ass over to where Tsuna was still knocked out cold. And I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Beyond the random assault in the alley. There was something else that was wrong here. Something was telling me that ‘Tsuna could have handled those guys easy.’ Which is an insane thought because Tsuna wouldn’t hurt a fly, and nor could he.

But the thought still wouldn’t let up and leave me alone.

**He could have handled that with his dying will.**

“Tsuna? Tsuna are you there?” I shake his shoulder as gently as possible because I really don’t want to aggravate what is probably already a pretty terrible head injury. His eye is already swelling and turning a dark shade of purple, which doesn’t bode well.

“Owwww.” He groans blinking up at me.

“Oh, thank god you're alive.” I heave a sigh of relief.

“Inari? What happened?” He groans prodding gently at his eye and then wincing in pain when he found the lovely new shiner, he would be sporting for at least a week.
“You got punched in the face bro.”

“Why?”

“Because Mochida is a fucking asshole.”

“Oh… Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m, well I’m not fine exactly, but I’m awake and I can move so that’s something at least.”

Tsuna levers himself up to a sitting position and for a second, he looks like he’s about the hurl on everything. He manages to pull it together though. I’m just grateful that my day isn’t ending beat to shit in a seedy ass ally and covered in vomit.

“My face hurts.”

“That’s what happens when you get cold clocked bro.”

He looks so dejected.

“I’m sorry Inari,” says Tsuna.

“For what? It’s not like you invited them to come to beat the shit out of us. As far as I can tell this bullshit is all a random act of god.”

“I’m never any help. I just end up making things worse for you all the time.”

“Tsuna, that isn’t true.”

“Isn’t it?” Suddenly he’s standing, and I must crane my neck to look him in the eye.
“I screw up everything I touch. If it wasn’t for me opening my stupid mouth about Kyo- Sasagawa-san this never would have happened.”

I fix Tsuna with the most deadpan glare that I could muster before shoving out a hand towards him, “Help me up, idiot.”

To his credit, he helps me up immediately and I only throw up on his shoes.

“There. Now we're even. Let’s go home now.”

He looks more disgusted than devastated now which is much better than before. Tsuna does me a further favor by picking up my book bag and baseball gear off the ground and slinging them over his shoulder.

“Okay.”

And off we trot at a bloody snail’s pace with Tsuna jumping at every errant shadow that came to cross our path. When we finally make it home the sun has started to go down and I can smell something delicious from inside the house.

Which is a bonus for an otherwise crappy day.

“We’re home!” I call into the house ignoring Tsuna’s hiss of “what are you doing she’s going to see us!”

I don’t know how Tsuna thinks we would ever be able to hide any of this bullshit. His eye is literally swollen shut and would probably be staying that way for a good long while.

I am not entirely convinced that my ribs aren’t broken.

They hurt a fuck ton.
“Boys come into the kitchen.” Mom calls back, “There is someone I want you to meet.”

Me and Tsuna share a somewhat concerned look. Mom doesn’t have the best record by inviting random people into our house. Case and point the terrifying door to door salesman who wouldn’t leave until we bought a crappy vacuum cleaner.

We gingerly walk into the kitchen not knowing what to expect. Mom’s somewhat exasperated and dismayed expression when she catches sight of the two of us is somewhat expected. What is not expected is the other person who is sitting at our kitchen table sipping on a small cup of coffee.

“Tsuna, dear, I know you have been struggling with your schoolwork recently and so I’ve taken initiative and hired you a home tutor.”

Mom announces this and Tsuna reacts accordingly with claims that he did not need a home tutor. But I don’t really hear anything else.

There is a roaring in my ears.

The world is greying out.

The only thing I can focus on is the dark hair, dark eyes and trademarked fedora of a person that I quite suddenly remembered all about.

“Ciaossu, Dame-Tsuna.”

That’s Reborn.

“My name is Reborn and I’m here to turn you into a leader for the next generation.”

And I quite suddenly realize why it is that I feel like I don’t belong here.
Because here isn’t real.

It shouldn’t be real.

And Sawada Inari never existed.

“Inari-chan?”

I don’t even have a moment to reassure mom before I faint dead away my mind overtaken by the massive download of information.
That Guy From Italy

Chapter Summary

Inari and Tsuna adapt to the new live in tutor (and Inari adapts to having his brain melted by life altering knowledge from the multiverse).

“How many times do I have to say I don’t want to be a mafia boss?!” Tsuna whines to Reborn who looks completely unmoved by my brother's bellyaching.

My current running tally places his objections to his destined profession at around the solid forty-five mark. That isn’t counting whatever goes on when I’m not around.

I’ll round it up to a hundred and five just to be safe. Who knows how much he whines while I'm at baseball practice.

Reborn had aggressively usurped our bedroom for his lessons. Both of us had been given a rundown about the current with the Vongola. He had also made it very clear that his priority here was Tsuna who was the one that then ninth boss had named his heir. I was just along for the ride apparently.

Which okay is fine. I honestly don’t feel like devoting my entire soul to administrating the fantasy mob. Right now I’m more interested in figuring out how the fantasy mob even functions? What do they do?

Form the limited bits of information I can remember from the manga the only thing that happened was that increasingly pretty boys fought each other with magic fire for the title of biggest badass. Not that this is a problem, I have absolutely no problem with watching pretty boys duking it out.

But it irritated me that I couldn’t remember why this was a thing that happened at all. Had I known that one day my life would one day depend on in depth knowledge of a manga series that I only briefly read when I had been a fucking teenager…

To be honest I probably would have still said fuck it. I am not capable of that level of obsessive bullshit.
The Godfather was a much better dramatization of the mob anyway. Less immediately applicable in my circumstances but a much more intriguing piece of media re: crime families.

I am excited at the prospect of wielding magic fire though. The fantasy nerd deep within my heart wants nothing more than to have a chance to use magic.

My stream of consciousness is rudely interrupted by Tsuna letting out a shrill shriek of pain as he once again failed to answer the math problem correctly. One thing I do appreciate about all this shit is that tutoring Tsuna has fallen into much more capable hands.

Tiny sadistic hands that had no problem when it came to using force to motivate him into doing his god damn homework.

“Inari! How can you just sit there?!?” wails Tsuna.

I don’t really pay him any mind. I’m more intent on discovering all the weird new pokemon that had been invented in what I assume is some bizarre alternate timeline. Cobalt was a cool game though. Someone on the programming team was big on hidden lore which is always cool.

“You brought this on yourself bro bro. I’ve been telling you for the past week to finish your shit.”

“This is cruel and unusual!”

A spare a glance at him over the top of my Gameboy. He’s giving me the most pitiful puppy dog eyes that he can muster. Which, hanging upside-down from the ceiling from a lime green cocoon was pathetic.

“Yup.” I agree and then go back to playing my game.

“Can’t you at least help me!?”

I feel a twinge of annoyance at this because I had spent years trying to help him. Years which had
somehow boiled down to me doing his fucking homework for him. So, no, I was not going to help him this time. It was time for my dear brother to get a taste of reality and deal with is own shitty consequence.

Which, in this case, was a violent hell child. Or rather, a grown man trapped in the form of an infant.

Thinking about it, that must be damn traumatizing for him.

No wonder he’s such a sadist.

“Nope, no-can-do bro-bro, you dug your self into this academic canyon and I’m sure you can dig yourself out.”

“Inari~”

“La la la I can’t hear you over the sounds of you doing your homework.”

Reborn quickly grabs the reins after this and is back to drilling algebra through Tsuna’s skull. And I am back on my quest to discover the multiverse of pokemon because this is just fascinating.

I let Tsuna and Reborn’s voices into the background. Eventually Reborn lets him leave to go get a snack. Unfortunately, I wasn’t paying close enough attention to realize that I was now alone in a room with this world’s most deadly hitman. In hindsight, this was a stupid mistake on my part.

He just sits there polishing his gun and staring at me with those unnerving black eyes. I do my best to ignore him, by which I mean I hide behind the Gameboy and shoot less than covert glances in his direction. You know, to make sure he doesn't start pointing that thing at me.

Reborn is waiting for me to say something. I don't know how used to having drawn out stare-downs with thirteen-year-old boys he is but I get the feeling most people crack long before this.
Though to be fair most people don't have inter-dimensional knowledge. Even if it was extremely specific inter-dimensional knowledge about a manga plot and a whole bunch of pop culture and history that didn't really apply in this universe.

Fun fact: the internet doesn't exist in this world at least not in the same way that I remember it.

Think more Wolfram Alpha less Google.

It's also 2002 which is completely normal, but also not because I remember it is not that at the same time. Space-time is a weird concept.

This had actually resulted in a small mental breakdown on my part when I realized that. And then I was hit with an entire existential crisis because I had grown up in this world and I had never had the likes of google here before… but still.

“So Inari-kun.”

I startle so badly that I drop the Gameboy on my face. I had legitimately forgotten that Reborn was here. I was so busy with my paradoxical internet withdrawal.

“Yeah?”

“You seem to be feeling better now.”

“Oh, uh, yeah.”

It was probably a good thing that me and Tsuna had gotten jumped by Mochida and his goons that day. It gave me a legitimate excuse to spend the next three days having an extreme panic attack and pass out all I wanted to.
“Yup all better now.”

Tsuna had even gotten to go and righteously kick Mochida’s ass with his flames of awesomeness. Takeshi had recounted the entire bizarre series of events to me over the phone as Tsuna screamed into the void about the humiliation of having Kyoko see him in his underpants.

That had been a fun night.

We drop off into silence again this time more obviously defending into a staring contest. I have no idea what he wants me to say.

Reborn sighs and holsters his weapon.

Tsuna still isn't back from snack time and I get the feeling that he is just going to be camping out in the living room with a bowl of chips and some anime until Reborn goes to drag him back up here.

“The two of you are really nothing alike.” He says. Not extrapolating and not really needing to. I know who he’s talking about.

“We are fraternal twins. It's a thing that exists.”

I can see the tick of annoyance. Honestly, if Dino and Tsuna were his benchmarks for child interaction he may need to invest in some new tactics because that intimidation stick isn't going to work so well on me.

“I'm aware.” He says dryly.

“Well good, I’d be worried about your tutoring credentials if you didn't.”

“Watch the cheek with me Ragazzo there is only so much I will tolerate from a puppy like you.”

“Ragazzo?”
“It means boy.”

I don't know if I find that demeaning or endearing.

“Do I get to learn Italian?”

The look that he gives me is positively diabolical.

“You're going to learn a lot more than that.”

The grin I give him back is all teeth.

“Sweet.”

The next day Reborn lets Tsuna sleep in.

He had actually managed to write a coherent paragraph in English last night so Reborn had decided to reward him. Sunday is the day of rest after all. I, however, am awoken at 5:59 am by the sound of the safety being taken off of a handgun.

“Did you major in drama by any chance?” A slur at him.

I go cross-eyed trying to glare at him and instead focus in ton the barrel of the gun between my eyes.

He leaves it there for a moment before it transforms back into an adorable chameleon.
“I’m not sure if your reaction to firearms is concerning or impressive.”

“What?”

“I’m going to go with concerning though until I have evidence to the contrary.”

“. . . it's six am man what do you want?”

He kicks me in the leg with more force than a body his size should be able to generate.

“Get up we’re heading out.”

I yawn and stretch.

“Should I get Tsuna up?”

“Just you.”

“Kay.”

I spend the next five minutes stumbling around the bedroom trying to be as quiet as humanly possible.

I settle on jeans and a hoodie, which is orange meaning that it’s Tsuna’s but six am means that I don’t really care right now, and I head downstairs to meet whatever doom Reborn has plotted out for me.

He’s waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs and when I get down there he gives me the most incredulous look and mutters something about irritating children.

Rude.
It's a brisk morning for June which makes me glad I though to put on a hoodie. Reborn hops up onto my shoulder like a parrot and starts giving directions. I move along obediently not bothering to ask where we are going. I'm fairly certain that he isn't going to kill me.

“I've decided it's concerning.” he says abruptly.

Before I have a chance to respond to that something collides violently with the back of my head.

...

It would have been more climactic if I had actually passed out. But I didn’t. I turned slowly to look at the fucking goon that had tried to take my head off, blood dripping into my eyes.

He looks like a fucking yakuza wannabe.

He also looks fucking terrified.

Obviously he isn't used to people remaining conscious after he cold clocks them. Unfortunately for him, I have spent the past year going toe to toe with Hibari Kyoya and my head was made of stronger stuff.

Before the idiot has a chance to do anything else my foot collides with his jaw and he goes down hard.

“That hurt mother fucker.” I tell the twitching mass on the ground.

“Was that supposed to happen?” I ask Reborn. “Or was that like a randomly spawned encounter.”

“Very different,” is the only thing that I hear Reborn say before a comically large green mallet
collides with my head and I go down for real.

When I come to again I am tied to a chair in the most stereotypical hostage scenario that anyone could possibly cook up. And also staged by incompetent gangsters. There is nothing that is actually securing me to this chair other than a badly tied rope that I can easily slip out of.

Where did Reborn find these losers?

Because this was obviously all Reborn’s doing. I am not an idiot, I know what I signed up for here.

I just wish that a concussion wasn't a requirement.

“Hey fuckers,” I call over to them. Because what the fuck right?

The two guards(?) that are on me turn. They really are stereotypical gangsters with their badly dyed hair, a multitude of piercing and leather. I don't know where Reborn found these idiots but he should get a refund.

Excuse me, sir, I need to return these gangsters. You sold me defective gangsters I need better ones to abduct my teenage student.

…

Yeah, I have some sort of head trauma.
“Eh, the fuck do you want kid?” One spits in my face getting way too close for comfort.

“So many things,” I say “For starters how about you be a nice moron and untie me.”

A boot collides with my sternum and the chair and I both go clattering to the ground.

“You are in no position to be talking like such a smart-ass brat.” The other one drawls in what I assume is supposed to be a threatening tone. It would have worked better if the other guy kicking me over hadn't freed my hands.

Seriously incompetent gangsters.

“What do you want with me anyway?” I ask.

They share a look that tells me ‘money.’

“None of your business.”

“I disagree on the grounds that I am tied up on a cliche horror movie set. Common guys, can we move this dialogue tree along to the point where you tell me what the fuck you want?”

He doesn't get a chance to answer because Tsuna chooses that moment to fly through the window in his underpants and kick the fucking shit out of them.

He takes a moment to seethe in rage at the two unconscious idiots before him before he remembers that his dear sweet baby bro is still ‘tied up’ on the ground. The fire dies out and he rushes over to me in a panic.

“Inari! Are you okay!?”

“Yup, sure, awesome. Good work bro you successfully rescued the princess from the dungeon…”
let's loot those motherfuckers.”

Tsuna reaches down to haul me up with a look of absolute **DETERMINATION**.

“Lets do it.”

And this is how we added: taser, a bat with nails in it and 50,000 Yen into our inventory.

Sweet.

Life with Reborn living in our bedroom marches on at a steady pace after this. He inserts himself into our lives with all the self-important ease that one would expect from a mafia legend. Every day we get sent on a new fetch quest and set up for a ‘random’ encounter all in an effort to transform my dopey brother into the king of the mafia (or something like that).

I like to think that I adapted to this drastic change in our daily lives better than Tsuna did, but to be honest most of my nonchalance could be chalked up to the fact that I was quite recently imbued with precognitive knowledge of the events that would make up the next year or so of my brother’s life.

It was strange that I could remember, with perfect clarity, the ink on paper that had told the story of a boy who was forced to take up the mantle of a powerful crime family and wielded magic fire with his hands, and yet I could not remember a single detail from my own past life. Beyond the fact that I am certain that I had one.

Sawada Inari hadn’t existed on the pages of that story. He had never been born, or if he had, he hadn’t lived long enough to make any lasting contributions to the plot.

I exist though. I exist and since I came to this realization I have become intent on making my mark on this story even if it may only be notes in the margins and colorful stuck on the pages with WTF scrawled across them.

**I’m alive.**
I exist.

The creeping feeling of existential terror is not helping my ability to hold onto normality. I have found myself full of nervous energy humming under my skin and an insistent voice egging me on to do something.

This is probably why I threw myself into Reborn’s ‘hellish’ training with such single-minded dedication.

The ferocity of my dedication was almost matched by Tsuna’s complete and utter rejection of the entire thing.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not going to be a mafia boss!”

He screams this at me, Reborn, the universe as a whole as he stands in the school courtyard in his boxers’ courtesy of another of Reborn’s dying will bullets.

“Don’t give up on life Tsuna,” Reborn tells him a faux consoling tone of voice. “I’ll make sure you become the most fearsome boss that ever lived.”

“Heeee!” Tsuna whines pathetically and futilely attempts to cover himself up to preserve some sort of dignity.

I had personally yet to feel the effects of the weird magic contained in Reborn’s special “Dying Will Bullets.” Probably because all Reborn had to say was ‘do the thing’ and I would go do that thing. Even when that thing was getting kidnapped by incompetent yakuza goons.

I kind of want to try it though.

Not because I had any nefarious plots to usurp Tsuna’s role in this story. No, no, no, Tsuna could keep the title of Anime Protagonist with my blessing. I just want a shot at being a somewhat competent side character.

“Common bro don’t pout,” I say as I hand over a set of gym clothes. “Your flames of passion are
pretty friggin awesome. I’m pretty sure you actually jumped twenty vertical feet there.”

Tsuna shoots me the most pathetic puppy dog eyes imaginable. “That's easy for you to say, you're not the one getting shot all the time.”

“Thus, is the burden of destiny, my brother. Face it, you are the chosen one, embrace it.” I choose not to mention the numerous times I have gotten hit in the head since this entire adventure started.

Tsuna leans heavy into my side and I wrap an arm around his shoulders to support him. Poor guy, this is really taking a lot out of him.

“Not fair,” he mutters.

“I would tell you ‘life isn’t fair’ but I’m pretty sure we have slid straight into the realm of sci-fi fantasy, so I will just say “sucks to be you.””

We start meandering back to class, not really paying much mind to the literal pile of juvenile delinquents that have been left behind in the wake of Tsuna’s dying will passion. It wasn’t that I minded having to play the part of damsel in distress for him, but I really hope that I don’t become one of those irritating plot devices.

“Why couldn’t it be you?” Tsuna asks.

“Huh?”

“We’re twins, so why couldn’t you have been chosen for all this weird mafia stuff? You're so much better at all this than me.”

I risk a quick glance over at Reborn who is keeping pace with us atop the school's concrete wall. He hadn’t really extrapolated on the how’s and whys. I’m pretty sure it’s a combo of Tsuna being the firstborn and being a sky flame.

I actually don’t have any memory of using flames myself, but after recent the massive information download last week I do remember when we were very young Tsuna used to be able to conjure a soft orange flame.

It wasn’t until that moment that I had been able to remember anything of that sort happening at all which kind of has me worried that my mind has been tampered with as well.

“Inari?”
I realize that I hadn’t answered his question.

“Oh, uh, sorry. I don’t know ask our lord and overseer over there.” I tell him gesturing over toward Reborn. Who, by the grace of costume changing magic, is dressed up like a Shogun.

How?

And also: Can you teach me?

Tsuna pales dramatically and through a complex series of hand gestures inform me that he would rather drink a carton of spoiled milk (again) rather than willingly engage in Reborn’s extra special brand of crazy.

All right then.

“Yo overlord,” I call up at him.

“Yes, Inari-kun.” He acknowledges magnanimously.

Seriously, if Tsuna just learned to play to Reborn’s vanity half of his problems would be solved.

“Tsuna wants to know the epic backstory of how he was chosen for this magical life of crime.”

There is a glint in his eyes as his focus homes in on Tsuna who is suddenly using me as a human shield. It doesn’t bother me, I have always taken my Tsuna protecting duties very seriously.

“Is that true Dame-Tsuna?” He asks.

“Nope, no, I definitely don’t care about any of this stupid mafia stuff. Can we please go back to class now?!!”

“Oh, good, because both of you are a million years too early to be asking me for storytime.”

So, it seems like we will have to level up Reborn’s social link to unlock this conversation. Which, okay, that makes sense considering we are still technically in the prologue phase of the story here. Unfortunately, the manga only offered the vaguest sense of timeline and that was more or less an ‘order of operations’ type thing. Event B follows event A and so on and so forth.
I think we need Gokudera to show up before truly interesting shit starts to happen. And I have no idea when that will happen because Tsuna has already kicked Mochida’s ass and some other random bonus events. See above re Me getting faux kidnapped by crappy gangsters so that Tsuna could collect some manliness tokens.

“Cool, cool, cool. Just one question if I may?”

“What’s that.”

“Where did you pick up that swag man? I would like to get me some of it.”

Because I have to know where do the costumes come from?!

Reborn legit laughs. Not in a sarcastic way or a ‘look at this dumb ass kid’ kind of way. No, he gives a full-body laugh and he sounds, for the first time since I’ve known him in real life, happy.

“You really are a ballsy little shit, aren’t you?”

I feel Tsuna freeze a little bit against me at the somewhat vulgar language coming out of the mouth of what he saw as a literal toddler.


Shut up, I’m not flirting. I just want to be as big of a badass as Reborn is when I grow up.

Seriously, this is a man who has been condemned to a purgatorial existence in the form of a toddler and yet he is super suave and confident and probably has a literal harem of beautiful people squirreled away somewhere.

“Can I at least get a fedora.”

He snorts, “Do something impressive first brat and we’ll see.”
“Inari.” Tsuna whines.

Expressing his increasing unhappiness that I am interacting with his new sworn enemy.

“Let's go do some fucking geometry.”

Two things happen in math class today. One: I figured out that just because I have apparently lived life once before and have (hopefully) finished middle school education at least once this does not mean that I know the answers to all the questions on a math test.

Two: (and more importantly in my opinion) Gokudera showed up. Finally, I mean I’m pretty sure he has been hanging around somewhere since Tsuna broke Mochida’s face when the two of them went all caveman over The fair maiden Kyoko.

But I digress, Gokudera comes in like fucking gangbusters and promptly kicks Tsuna’s desk over, because he is an asshole right now. I had forgotten that the plot had to happen before he confesses his undying love and devotion to Tsuna. So, this might actually be pretty irritating.

I don’t have much patience for people harassing Tsuna.

It doesn’t help that our class is filled with a bunch of sadistic teenagers who just giggle as Tsuna tries to pick himself up off the floor rather than help him as a decent human being should.

Which is probably why I immediately chucking the world’s worst math textbook at the back of his head.

“Leave my brother alone shithead.”
Silence reigns in the classroom. Even Nezu, who always seems to have a snide comment ready is, for the moment, at a loss for words.

It is worth it though, it is so worth it if only for the look Gokudera gives me. It’s this beautiful combination of outrage, loathing, confusion and a little bit of embarrassment.

When Nezu finally snaps out of it we both get detention.

Which sucks, but I stand by what I said, worth it.

Detention at Namimori Junior High has several downsides. Of course, there is just the pain in the ass part of having to stay after school when all I really want to do is go home and have a nap. The other, more irritating downside is the defense committee.

Gokudera had, of course, skipped out on detention to continue on his quest to assassinate my brother and to claim the throne of Vongola (which wouldn’t have worked no matter what he thought). I know this because all I had to do was look out the window to see him bombarding Tsuna with literal dynamite.

I took some satisfaction from the fact that at least in this universe Tsuna had enough self-preservation instincts to break his nose. And yet Gokudera still pledged his allegiance and undying devotion to Tsuna.

Tsuna himself had a distinctly constipated look as he stared in disbelief at the radically changed individual bowing before him. Poor sweet Tsuna has no idea what to do with respect and adoration.

I watch as the three of them leave the campus. I had told Tsuna earlier not to bother waiting up for me. He was already exhausted from the earlier incident of stupidity. And after taking another dying will bullet to combat Gokudera he looked just about dead on his feet.

While the teacher isn’t looking, I text him and tell him to go home and go the fuck to sleep.

Reborn texted me back telling me to watch my language. And that he was going to keep an eye on Tsuna for me. Which is unusually sweet for him and I am immediately sure he has something else nefarious plotted for poor sweet Tsuna. Whatever, Tsuna can deal.
So back to my current circumstance. I think I have mentioned this before, but just in case I haven’t let me state for the record:

‘Hibari Kyoya is a fucking prick.’

He and his band of goons are pretty much school-sanctioned bullies. They ‘patrol’ around exerting their imaginary authority over the regular student population. He had come out swinging at Tsuna with his tonfa out on our second day of class because he had missed the final bell by a millisecond.

He would have hit him too if I hadn’t inserted myself into that situation. My arm had hurt like a bitch for a full three days afterward. I took pleasure in knowing that my reactionary kick to his knee had left him with an ever so subtle limp for just as long.

And if I thought that would be the end of it well, I was very mistaken. For, you see, Hibari is the kind of guy that likes to pick fights and his favorite targets are the ones who fight back. If I had known that ahead of time I probably would have just gone down and stayed there.

But no, uninformed Inari had wanted to prove a point about standing up for yourself to his impressionable twin brother. Now I had to deal with Hibari trying to sneak attack me all the god damned time.

The tonfa comes from the left and almost catches me in the ribs but it's just a second too late and I dive into a dodge and roll combo. A skill that had come from years of diving after Takeshi’s wild pitches.

“Can you, for once, just not?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

He smirks at me, the jerk that he is, and just readies another attack.

“Your herbivorous brother has been causing a ruckus on school property. If it keeps up I’ll have to bite him to death.”

“Just try it.”

He charges, and to avoid getting smacked in the head I pivot hard, scraping the palm of my hand on the pavement. The tonfa impacts the ground and I swear to god the cement cracks.

Christ, what is he made of?
Cloud flames, I know, but there has to be something else too because this is just not natural.

I kick at the same time that he lashes out with the other arm and by some miracle, I catch the strike with the bottom of my shoe without breaking my entire foot.

“Tell me Sawada Inari, what kind of trouble have you brought to my school?”

I think of Reborn and I smile.

“The best kind.”

“Oh?”

He slams down hard with the base of the weapon and the bones in my arm creek and aches under the sheer force of the hit. I was going to be feeling that for a while. The blow also sends me to the ground in an awkward position and it doesn’t take long for me to realize that I am at a very serious disadvantage for the next blow.

It sucks because usually I would be dodging circles around him, but I was still hurting from my run-in with the incompetent criminals from last week. I brace myself for the next blow.

But it doesn’t come.

Hibari is just standing there regarding me with sharp aloof eyes. As if he’s waiting for something.

“You better give me a better fight next time.” He says, “And remember to tell your brother to behave.”

And then he just walks away. Like we had just been having a perfectly normal and friendly chat and I wasn’t hyped up on adrenaline. God, I can’t stand that guy. It's been a year you think he would have gotten bored of this by now.

I pick myself up off the ground and put a little bit of effort into brushing the dirt off my uniform. I
must at least look presentable when I get home or mom is seriously going to start thinking that I’m the sort of hooligan that goes around picking fights.

Which is true but she doesn’t need to know that.

At least Reborn hadn’t been around to witness that random bit of chaos. I think it might have interrupted our established order of operations if he had been. Which wouldn’t be terrible but I’m not quite ready to give up my oracle like precognitive powers just yet.

When I (finally) get home, mom informs me with tears of pride in her eyes that Tsuna had brought a friend over.

While I get where she’s coming from, and am proud of Tsuna for finally making a friend (?) on his own, I am not keen to share my space with a dick who has, less than three hours ago, ditched our shared detention to try and kill him.

“That’s…nice?” I tell her.

She, with her super mom powers, picks up on my hesitation and gives me a gentle smile.

“Inari-chan don’t worry you’re still going to be Tsu-kun’s favorite.”

I nod in simple acquiescence and let her give me a quick tight hug. It would take to long to explain all the details of why it was that I was hesitant about Gokudera Hayato and hers is the most normal and probable explanation.

“Are they upstairs?”

“Yes, Tsu-kun said they were going to work on homework together.”

Awesome, more people in my room.

“Kay, I’m going to go up now.”
“Inari-chan, if you need to have a nap you can use my room.”

I give her an appreciative thumbs-up before ascending the stairs.

And upon entering our bedroom I find Tsuna, fast asleep face down in his bed and Gokudera being a complete and total creeper watching him as he sleeps. I had no idea that his transformation into creepy fanboy had been so rapid and complete.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Only to be reward by Gokudera jumping a full three feet in the air and shoving a stick of (unlit) dynamite in my face.

I reflexively smack it away, “Don’t wave that shit around my brother, please.”

I toss my bag by the foot of my bed and take a seat at our little coffee leaning heavily on my elbow and level a deliberately judgemental stare at him. It’s fascinating as the look on his face transitions from hostile to irritated to uncomfortable to completely repentant.

I am somewhat surprised when he slams his face against the floor in front of me and begins to beg for forgiveness from ‘tenth’s honorable brother.’

Normally I would let him go on but the swift movement seems to have aggravated his broken nose and it’s now oozing in an unsettling and extremely painful-looking way.

“Dude, please, stop.”

I can’t really hold back my wince when I look at his face. Tsuna really did a number on his nose. It looks like it needs to be set.

“Come here.” I ask/order as I fish around under my bed for the first aid kit.
Having a brother as accident-prone as Tsuna, and not to miss how active and prone to fisticuffs I am, this first aid kit gets used often. Luckily, this is also not the first time I have had to set a broken nose.

He shuffles over to me warily and sits stiffly on his knees. I reach out and gently prod the area around his nose giving it a good look. It was swollen he was starting to develop the raccoon eye bruising. Gokudera winces as I gently tap on the bridge trying to find the possible break.

“I don’t think it's broken but sit still for a sec, I can probably make this a little more bearable at least.”

I chatter away mindlessly at Tsuna’s new minion as I gently apply pressure to get the bleeding to stop. Tsuna himself is dead to the world with his face pressed into the mattress and is snoring loud enough to give a chainsaw a run for its money. I don’t know where Reborn has gone to. Probably off to plot some more nefarious training exercises, or to, you know, assassinate someone. Either way, fun times.

“Shut your eyes and cover them with this.” I order Gokudera and hand him a towel.

I really don’t want to accidentally blind him with the cooling spray. By the time I’ve finished dressing his nose in gauze, tape and that weird little metal brace thing Gokudera had become very quiet and passive.

He’s kind of just letting me manhandle his face.

When I’m done, I catch his eyes and he’s giving me this wide-eyed wobbly look.

“What?”

He looks away and back toward Tsuna who still blissfully asleep mumbling is about ‘Kyoko-chan’ and trying to eat his pillow.

My bro is such an adorable dope.
“Tenth is right about you,” he finally says.

“He usually is.” I agree without knowing what he’s talking about.

“It’s one of the bonuses’ of being twins. But in this case, I may need you to elaborate because I have no clue what you’re on about.”

“You're too nice.”

“That is a lie. Tsuna is a lying liar who lies don’t listen to anything he says ever.”

I am not nice. Tsuna obviously sustained some head trauma today and is suddenly confusing me with himself. If anything, I am the mouthy asshole with impulse control issues.

“Less than three hours ago I was trying to assassinate Tenth. Even if he did forgive me, I’m indebted to him now, his subordinate. All of Reborn’s info about you said that you are the vindictive sort.”

“I am dude, I really, really am.” I tell him.

“Which is why you instead of kicking my ass like I deserve you fix me up? I came at Tenth and you have every right to throw me out of here like a dog, I know I haven’t proven myself yet.”

He’s speaking so emphatically, and the thing is - he’s right. By all means, I should have chucked him out the window and told mom that he had to run. I doubt Tsuna would have even minded considering Gokudera was just the sort of intense personality that scared the shit out of him. And if I didn’t know what I know then I probably would have.

But I do know.

He’s all alone, isn’t he? I don’t even know if he has any food in whatever crappy apartment, he’s renting. Does he even have an apartment? Is he fucking homeless? I am quite suddenly very
concerned about all of this. Who is taking care of this literal disaster child?

And putting all of that out of my mind for the moment. I knew the sort of person Gokudera Hayato was. It has been written out in ink.

He was the most loyal friend that Tsuna would ever have.

And I really didn’t want to fuck that up.

I don’t know what expression I was making, but whatever it was it had Gokudera snorting derisively.

“Too fucking nice.”

“Oh, go fuck yourself asshole,” I tell him and try to fight down the flush on my face. I resist the urge to smack him because I’m pretty sure that one extra hit will legit break his nose.

“Anyway, according to weird mafia law shit your Tsuna’s familgia now or something. And by transient properties of familial relationships, I guess that means we're weird mob brothers now?”

If I was expecting anything it was most definitely not for him to break down into comical tears wailing about ‘Tenth’s honorable brother.’

Tsuna is startled into awareness and somehow manages to launch himself out of bed and land flat on his ass. He gives me the most incredulous and sleepy look as I pat Gokudera consolingly on the back.

Well, if nothing else this should be interesting.
I am awoken in the middle of the night by an increasingly familiar clicking sound of the safety being taken off a gun and a small doll-like hand covering my mouth.

I almost scream.

Coming out of what had been a rapidly deteriorating nightmare vision I briefly fear that I am about to have my organs ripped out by a haunted ventriloquist dummy. Only to realize that, no, its just Reborn being a creeper.

I don’t know why I find this more comforting.

Before I can ask what he wants he makes the universal signals for ‘shut up’ and ‘follow me.’ Not having anything better to do at two in the morning I go along with it. Tiptoeing out of the room taking care not to step on Gokudera who is fast asleep on our spare futon.

I meet Reborn in the kitchen. There is a dim light from the stove that was illuminating everything in a gentle off-yellow glow. Two steaming cups of tea are waiting for us at the table. He takes a seat and motions for me to do the same.

So I do. Pulling my feet up under me to keep them warm and grasping the novelty mug in my hands.

Reborn is giving me this… look. Like he expects me to be nervous or intimidated or something. And because I am a contrary little shit I relax even more slapping a peppy little smile on my face as I flutter my eyelashes at him expectantly.

Reborn sighs.

I don’t know how Tsuna believes this guy is literally a baby when all of his mannerisms are old man mannerisms. How old is Reborn anyway? Had that ever been established?

“You have adapted amazingly well to all of this Inari-kun,” he says.
“You mean the ‘mafia stuff?’”

“Yes the ‘mafia stuff.’”

“And?” I ask somewhat defensively, “What?”

“And nothing,” he waves off and takes a sip of his tea. “It’s a simple observation. A month ago you and your brother were completely normal middle schoolers. And while Dame-Tsuna seems to reject every aspect of the mafia coming into his life you welcome everything with open arms. I find that fascinating.”

It takes me a moment to realize that he is complimenting me. And of course, after I do realize it I am just beaming.

“The fact that you actively working to enforce your brother's power base by playing nice with his would-be assassin is also intriguing.” Reborn continues.

I blink. Was I not supposed to fix Gokudera’s face? That seemed kind of mean the poor guy is essentially an abused puppy dog with attachment issues. Prolonging his misery just seems cruel.

Some of the confusion and incredulity must have shown on my face. Reborn chuckles. “Calm down ragazzo, you didn’t do anything wrong. I just figured that I should explain some things to you before things go any further.”

“I thought I was a million years too early for storytime?” I reply like the cheeky asshole I am.

This earns me a quick smack upside the head. Which doesn’t hurt much but carries much more weight behind it than you would expect from someone with the proportions of a toddler.

“You are, but that’s beside the point right now.”

I am so excited right now. I don’t think Tsuna ever engaged in serious discourse with Reborn in the
original timeline. This is all new and exciting and I love it. It's like accidentally stumbling across a hidden level in an RPG that’s full of secret bits of lore.

“I can't tell you why Tsunayoshi was selected to inherit Vongola, nor does it really matter at this point. I was hired by the Ninth to turn him into a respectable boss and so that’s what he will be.”

“Is that your hitman guarantee?”

“Something like that.”

“And? So? This isn’t exactly new info dude.”

Reborn visibly cringes at being referred to as ‘dude.’ I make a mental note to do it more often.

“Remind me to work on your vocabulary and diction later. There is room for improvement there,” he mutters into his, now mostly empty, cup of tea.

“Righto.”

Choosing to ignore my very deliberate provoking he continues on.

“I was not given any specific direction regarding what to do with you. Your idiot father has some misguided delusions of allowing you the opportunity to live a normal life but –“

“Oh, hell no!” I shout, cutting him off.

And then I remember that we are trying to be quiet and hollering at the top of my lungs at two in the morning was a surefire way to wake up the whole damn neighborhood. I can’t help it though. I refuse to be relegated to a useless background character because Iemitsu was trying to have a conscience.

I communicate this by fixing Reborn with the most intense glare I can muster.
“I told him as much. You are much too useful and too attached to Tsunayoshi for that to work out beneficially for anyone. Which brings me to my earlier point – Gokudera.”

“Tsuna messed up his face when you got him all fucked up on that dying will crap. What was I supposed to do? Let him bleed all over my floor? Kick him out so he could spend the night cold and alone on the street?”

“You misunderstand me Inari-kun, this isn’t a criticism.”

Okay, so I’m more confused now.

“You innately understand something that I feel is going to take Dame-Tsuna a long time to grasp.”

“What’s that?”

“The importance of building a strong foundation.”

There is something about the way Reborn says this that sends a chill down my spine. There is obviously more here that he isn’t saying, something important that I am just too damn tired to grasp right now.

“It’s not an innate talent that he possesses and quite honestly its mostly because he is a lazy brat.”

“A harsh but fair criticism.”

“I’ll work on it with him, but in the meantime, that’s what he has you for. You are his first and last defense Inari-kun and because of your relationship to him you are in a unique position to strengthen the familgia that he creates.”

“Awesome, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I am one hundred percent on board.”
Reborn moves to smack me again but this time I see it coming and duck out of the way, scuttling under the table like a demented crab. When I peek out again, he’s staring me down with a cocked eyebrow.

“Go back to bed brat, you’ll need your energy tomorrow.”

My alarm goes off at five-thirty. Ride of the Valkyries blasts out of the speakers in all its epic glory. And while Tsuna could sleep through fucking anything and Reborn had already acclimatized himself to my bizarre morning rituals, Gokudera was uninitiated and had sprung to his feet ready for a fight as trumpets were blasting in the room.

I had long since decided that if I was going to wake up at the ass crack of dawn, I was going to do it with style.

It was funny to watch him looking around the room with this look of confusion. I don’t think he even remembers that he spent the night on our floor. He looks over at Tsuna, who has huddled into a cocoon of blankets to block out the sound and gulps.

“Don’t bother with him right now,” I tell him, “Tsuna can sleep through just about anything.”

“Oh.” Poor guy is still so bleary-eyed.

“Go back to sleep man, the school doesn’t start for another three hours. I’ve got morning practice.”

“Practice?”

“Baseball,” I answer simply. “Make sure he gets up in time for school…and that he gets there without running into any trouble. Hibari has been on the warpath lately and it would suck if they were to have a random encounter.”

Gokudera looks so thrilled to have been given responsibility for Tsuna’s health and well-being. He
is such a good little guard dog.

I probably shouldn’t have mentioned Hibari though. I can already hear the wheels in Reborn’s head start to turn. He doesn’t fake sleep as well as he may think (and I have something of an unfair advantage when it comes to reading him.)

“I’ll guard the Tenth with my life, honorable brother!”

Wow, I am feeling the dedication here.

“Just call me Inari dude,” I tell him with a wave.

I don’t stick around to watch his brain implode.

Mom is already in the kitchen when I get there. I greet her with a kiss on the cheek and she giggles happily.

“Morning mom.”

“Good morning Inari-chan. I hope you boys got a good sleep last night.”

“We did, Tsuna and Gokudera conked out early,” I tell her. “By the way, thanks for letting Gokudera spend the night, hopefully, we’ll be able to work out the whole student housing situation today.”

She pats my hair gently. “Inari-chan is such a good boy.”

Pretty much exclusively for you mom. I don’t say it out loud and I know that she knows that I am a little shit the other ninety percent of the time. But life is tough enough for her without me making things harder.

“I packed you an omelet to go with your lunch.”
“Yummy, thanks mom. I’ll see you after school.”

And I’m off to meet Takeshi. I kind of feel bad because I haven’t really hung out with him much in the past couple of weeks. In my defense, things with Tsuna and Reborn have kind of taken precedence, but that’s not really any reason for me to ignore my friend.

Takeshi isn’t in our usual meeting place which is odd but not entirely unexpected considering I’ve bailed on him for the last week or so. God, I’m such a shit friend lately. Not that I’ve had much of an opportunity considering literal criminal activity happening in my home and getting a universe worth of information downloaded directly into my brain.

I might still be struggling with that.

I loiter around our spot for a good ten minutes, just in case he’s just running late. But when he doesn’t show up, I book it the rest of the way to school. I’ll have time to talk with him later.

Takeshi is already on the field warming up with some of our upperclassmen when I get there. I wave, and he waves back, and everything seems fine. It's not like I expect for Takeshi to hold a grudge, he’s never been the type. But even so, I can’t shake the feeling that something is off with him.

I don’t really have time to worry about it, because as soon as I have my uniform on Yamada-sempai has taken me hostage. Only not really. Seriously I have been taken hostage at least three times this week thanks to Reborn and I’m never going to be able to make a joke about it again.

“Alright Sawada, you missed practice last night so drop and give me a hundred.” He says it with such a smug look of glee on his face that I can’t stop myself from shooting him a withering glare.

It’s not like I have much of a choice but to comply. So, with a heavy sigh, I drop to the ground and began the one hundred pushups. After all, I am the idiot that got detention because he has shitty impulse control.

One hundred push-ups and what feels like a literal bucket of sweat later finds the two of us running the circuit. Somewhere around lap five Yamada-sempai interrupts our comfortable silence.

“Hey, Sawada.”
“What?” I pant.

“No offense or anything, and please don’t kick me in the balls for asking, but what the hell is up with your brother lately?”

The immediate defensiveness that fills the entirety of my being is born of fourteen years of people asking me what the hell is wrong with my brother. Let me make this clear, there is nothing wrong with Tsunayoshi other than the weird-ass magical seal that an old Italian man put on him when we were like three or something. And that is totally not his fault.

With difficulty, I suck in a breath to calm down because I know that Yamada doesn’t mean anything by it. He’s the third year. He doesn’t really have anything to do with Tsuna, and the one time that he had dared refer to him as Dame- Tsuna I had kicked him so hard in the shin that the foul word had never passed through his lips again.

“How do you mean?” I finally bring myself to ask.

He laughs.

“Dude, you look like you want to kill me. Relax, I just meant that he went all beast mode and kicked the crap out of Mochida the other day.”

Oh yeah, that was something that happened. Three days seems like a lifetime ago now.

“It was a crime of passion,” I inform him in a complete deadpan.

“…Passion?”

“Yes, his lady love, the beautiful and illustrious Kyoko-san’s, honor was besmirched by the dastardly villain Mochida and Tsuna’s righteous fury ignited in his soul and he came to her defense.”
This sounds way better then: Tsuna and Mochida got into a pissing contest over a girl who had no interest in dating either of them. And, actually, she objected to the entire premise of being claimed as a prize.

Yes, it sounded way better than that.

Hana had been so fucking pissed about the whole thing. To be honest I had been too. It really wasn’t cool for them to put her on the spot like that. Not that Tsuna had much conscious choice in the matter when he was all hopped up on whatever illicit drugs are in the dying will bullets.

“Your wild Sawada.”

“I try.” And then I break out into a full-on sprint to burn off the sudden well of energy that has sprung forth as I was forced to remember all the stupid and crazy that keeps cropping up.

Practice continues for the next hour and a half without incident. We do some batting practice and I finally get a chance to show off my new and improved rolling dive catches.

I actually manage to nab one of Takeshi’s powerful line drives and I am thrilled. Usually, it would blast right through my hands from the sheer force of the hit. But I actually managed to catch it!

I beam at Takeshi and fully expect him to celebrate with me. The way we always do when one of us manages to level up. Instead, he just looks pissed off.

I don’t like the look on his face.

I don’t like being the cause of it.

Near the end of practice, he throws such a wild pitch that he manages to break one of the windows in the clubhouse. Everyone applauds, and Takeshi does his best to laugh it off. I have known him
long enough to know when he is putting on a show though.

The coach pulls him aside for a chat while the rest of us hit the showers. I hope sensei can figure out what’s up with him because I really don’t get it.

And I’m desperately trying to remember what had happened in the manga. But I’m drawing a blank. There had definitely been something, something that had resulted in him becoming friends with Tsuna and his guardian. For the life of me, I can’t remember what it was through.

Maybe I’m not supposed to know. I don’t know if there are any rules to this whole ‘memories from another world thing.’ Maybe I’m just not supposed to know.

This is so irritating.

Me and Takeshi have been friends for years. If there is something the matter, I should be the one to fix it, not Tsuna. But if there was something seriously wrong, he would tell me, right?

Right?

There is a new hole in our clubhouse wall that tells me all I need to know about the functionality of the hairdryers and the distant dream of an actual hot shower.

At this point, I'm pretty sure Hibari does it just to antagonize me.

You pick a fight with a violent sociopath over facilities maintenance one time and he never lets you forget it.

Though to be fair, his method works.
I find the man himself loitering around the corner. His tonfa are hanging loosely from his grip and he eyes me with this smug self-satisfied look on his face. Like the cat that cornered the mouse.

Only in this case, I think we can be likened more to Tom and Jerry with our cartoonish violence and silent pact of mutually assured destruction.

“That was just fixed,” I inform him as I drip on to the dusty earth.

“Hn.”

“I thought you were morally opposed to the destruction of school property. What do you have against the poor clubhouse.”

Hibari straightens and begins to twirl the tonfa. Getting ready for a showdown.

“It seems to be one of the only ways to get you to show your fangs.”

“You could just ask?”

“You talk too much.”

And he lunges.

Screw it, I have to blow off some steam anyway.

I take the full weight of the blow with my forearm and retaliate by slamming my foot into his midsection. It hurts like a motherfucker but I get the satisfaction of watching him slam into the wall.

It actually takes Hibari a moment to catch his breath. Which is great because my entire arm went numb from the force of that one hit.
Hibari cocks his head to the side, a terrifying smile spreads across his face. I take a second to shake the feeling back into my arm.

“Wao”

He adjusts his stance and I charge him. My elbow drives into his solar plexus and I take advantage of the low ground to hurl him over my shoulder.

Of course, he lands on his feet, it's Hibari. The preternatural grace that he possesses is ridiculous and impressive. There isn't even half a second before the tonfa are buried in the wall on either side of my head.

Jesus Christ.

I drop, pivot, and roll out of the way before he can do to my face what he did to the wall. I'm not quite fast enough though, a tonfa catches me in the shoulder and I end up with my face in the ground with a mouth full of dirt.

This continues on for another ten minutes.

I hadn't realized how badly I had wanted to hit something until this moment. I didn't even care that I was getting pummelled back it was just nice to have a chance work off some of the stressing on that I had been repressing since Reborn had come and inserted himself in our home.

Since I had realized that I shouldn't exist.

Not thinking about it.

My fist collides with his face with a deeply satisfying crunch.

A tonfa jams into my gut.

The first bell rings.
An incredibly fast and incredibly freezing cold shower finds me ducking into class with five minutes to spare.

Amazingly, Tsuna is already in his seat.

“Holy shit, you got him here on time,” I praise Gokudera. Wonder beyond wonders Tsuna is in his seat before the bell rings. I think this is a first in the history of Namimori middle school.

Tsuna flushes in mortification. Having me put his chronic tardiness put on display is apparently embarrassing. It’s a good thing he never heard any of the excused that I came up with to cover for him.

“Good morning Tsuna-kun,” Says Kyoko-san.

Me and Tsuna both stare at her agog. I don’t think she has ever instigated a conversation with Tsuna before. This is new and exciting.

Hana moseys up behind Kyoko and sits herself down on top of my desk. Gokudera, true to form, is immediately on the defensive. His hackles are all up like an angry kitten.

And then he catches Tsuna’s dreamy, “Kyoko-chan~” and then he is just uncomfortable.

I decide to leave Tsuna and Kyoko to their own adorable devices. If nothing else this should put Tsuna in a good mood for the rest of the day.

“Any trouble this morning?” I ask Gokudera.
“None whatsoever. Though you were right about those Defence Committee assholes.”

“Did they try to start something?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.” He assures me.

But he also avoids making eye contact which is suspicious.

Hana snorts.

“Second day and your already on the DC’s bad side huh new guy?”

I can tell by the tone of her voice that she is deliberately trying to goad him. Which is pretty much par for the course in terms of Hana’s personality.

“Your hair is wet again.” She states blankly as she messes up the already messy birds’ nest that I call hair.

Which apparently is the trigger that gets Gokudera to lose his shit.

“How dare you touch Tenth’s honorable brother in such a casual way woman!” He shrieks and jabs a finger into Hana’s face.

She blinks and then she smiles the most terrifying smile and goes back to absently petting my wet hair.

“Tenth?” She asks me for clarification not even paying any mind to the still fuming Gokudera.

“It’s a long, and quite honestly, a stupid story,” I reassure her. “Chill Gokudera, Hana is cool.” And proceed to zone out from the wonderful head pets.
She hums apparently content not to hear the ever-expanding odyssey of me and Tsuna’s adventures in the mafia.

“I thought the hairdryers had been fixed?”

“They were. For one blissful day, we had functioning hairdryers. And then Hibari slammed some fools face through the drywall and now we don’t have hairdryers anymore.”

“Oh god damn it.” She huffs. “Hey, Tsuna.”

Tsuna snaps to attention like someone shoved steel rebar into his spine. “Yes, ma’am?” He says because Hana is the kind of badass bitch that deserves respect.

“Next time you decide to go all Incredible Hulk on someone do you mind aiming the rage at Hibari? You’d be doing the school a huge service.”

Tsuna pales dramatically, and for a moment I’m worried that he’s going to faint.

“No way,” he says weakly, “Hibari-san is terrifying.”

He doesn’t even know the half of it.

“Hana, please for me, don’t try and send my brother off on a suicide mission.” I beseech her.

Gokudera, completely missing Tsuna’s mood, immediately jumps into reassuring him that of course, he would be able to ‘kick that fucking dickhead's ass no problem.”

I tune them all out because at that moment Takeshi walks in. With the fakest smile, I have ever seen plastered across his face. There is a cold pit quickly forming in my stomach. I quickly excuse myself from the group and walk up to him.

“Hey Takeshi, you didn’t wait for me this morning, jerk,” I tell him with all the levity that I can muster.
He looks brittle in a way that I have never seen before, and I am immediately on high alert. There are sirens blaring in my head ‘WARNING, WARNING, WARNING.’ But I have no clue what the hell it's about.

“Sorry bout that Inari. You’ve been so busy lately, I didn’t think you would even notice.”

He is laughing, and it is the most unsettling thing that I have heard come out of his mouth.

“Come on dude, you know I didn’t mean anything by it. Things have just been crazy lately. I totally wanted to catch up today.”

He’s about to say something. Unfortunately, at that exact moment Nezu, fucking asshole that he is, burst into the room demanding that we all take our seats. Takeshi takes this moment to escape within a heard of his adoring fangirls.

I try to put it out of my mind. The day progresses and Takeshi continues to avoid talking to me and I try not to let it bother me.

It bothers me.

It fucking bothers me.

I fucked up and I need to fix it. But he’s being an asshole and not letting me fix it and it's driving me crazy. Every time I try to catch him alone, he runs off to talk to someone else. It is really getting on my nerves.

Eventually, irritation wins out over-concern. If he doesn’t want to talk, fine. Screw it. I’ll try again tomorrow or something. I’m especially irritated because I missed watching Tsuna break the earth to uncover Nezu’s hidden shame. However, I did have a front-row seat to the principal firing his ass. So that was something at least.

When the final bell rings Takeshi rushes out before I have a chance to grab him. I sigh and let it go. It would all work out in the end anyway. Destiny had confirmed that.
I slide into step with Tsuna and Gokudera as they leave the campus.

Tsuna looks shell-shocked and elated at the defeat of his mortal nemesis. If a crappy math teacher could be considered a mortal nemesis.

“Yo, Gokudera have you heard back from the student housing service yet?” I ask.

His prolonged ‘uhhh’ tells me all I need to know.

“Cool, so I guess you're spending the weekend at our place. It’ll be awesome.”

Chances are Reborn will have something extra special planned for us.

“We can play monopoly.”

“Absolutely not!!” Tsuna snaps back to awareness when faced with the threat of monopoly.

“Aww, why not? It’s my favorite game~” I faux whine.

“You know very well why.”

Gokudera is watching us go back and for the like a tennis match.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss experiences Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn chimes in from whatever ethereal portal that he transports himself through.

“You only say that because you have never played monopoly with this monster.” He says, a little wild-eyed.

“Wow, Tsuna tell me what you really think of me,” I tease.
He glares.

Its awesome.

“Fine,” he finally caves, “we’ll play monopoly.”
To say that I have a competitive streak would be something of an understatement.

“I told you so,” Tsuna says miserably as Gokudera joins him in the dredges of bankruptcy. Gokudera hands over the last of his colorful money and several plastic houses to me with a somewhat mesmerized look on his face.

“Always go for the railroads,” I tell him with a smile.

What had started as a childhood fascination with trains had evolved into a game-winning strategy, at least in terms of monopoly.

Or, as it was in Reborn’s case, fill a literal block with hotels and wait for someone to fall into the trap. I am still amazed that we somehow convinced the world’s greatest hitman to play a dumb American board-game with us. But then again, he had a competitive streak too.

It was easy to goad him into playing with us once we started taking shots at his pride. We are probably going to suffer for it later but ends and means and all that. As much as Tsuna hates this game I can tell that doing this perfectly normal thing with his demon tutor is doing wonders for his ability to calm the fuck down around him.

“Your turn man,” I tell Reborn trying to sound as cocky as possible. “Prepare to hand over the cash.”

“I don’t think so brat.”

I don’t know how he can make rolling generic plastic dice look cool but somehow, he does it. It was amazing.
What’s more amazing is that he manages to avoid landing on my railroad and the electric company. Curses.

I already know I’m going to lose. It is a forgone conclusion at this point. My only real goal was to beat Tsuna and Gokudera. I never had any hope of beating Reborn.

Maybe in ten years.

Which is something I am resolutely not thinking about right now.

I had tried to. Only to have my brain start to explode. That had been a whole bunch of pain that I was not eager to revisit under any circumstances. I could remember that time travel in this world is, in fact, a thing just as long as I didn’t try to remember anything about said time travel.

I think the universe is trying to prevent me from accidentally causing a paradox.

And that’s cool, but I wish it could find a better way of communicating that with me. You know other than making my brain feel like it's going to liquefy and drip all over the floor.

So yeah, no thinking about things that haven't happened yet.

Anyway, back to the important part, a monopoly showdown with the worlds greatest hitman. Reborn was going to win, of course, he was going to win. I was coming up to the block stretch that he owned.

“Well, bambino, it's your move.” He says all smooth like.

I grin. And roll the dice.

And then I proceed to shell out all my hard-earned winnings to him when I landed on Broadway.

“Oh thank god!” Tsuna exclaimed in absolute exhaustion.
“I didn’t think that was ever going to end.”

“As expected, we were no match for Reborn-san,” Gokudera says with a look of admiration? Maybe? It’s hard to tell with him, everything is always so over-dramatic with him.

“Speak for yourself man, I almost won.”

A small hand smacks me lightly over the head, “Not a chance.” Reborn chides and hops up onto the desk where he can lord over us like the dark tyrant that he is.

“You all should try to get a good night sleep in while you still have a chance. You're going to have a busy day tomorrow.”

The look Tsuna gives him has the oomph of a kicked puppy.

“B-b-but its the weekend,” He protests.

One day Tsuna will realize that the good old days of lazy Sundays are well and truly behind him, but it is not this day. Chances are it wouldn't be tomorrow either.

For lack of any better response, I stand up and hoist/toss Tsuna onto his bed before stepping over Gokudara who is suddenly looking at me with this wide-eyed expression. Like he wants to protest the boss being thrown around like a rag doll but cannot physically bring himself bitch at me.

“You heard the man bro-bro, bedtime.”

I mosey over to my side of the room and flop into bed. Pointedly ignoring the incredulous look Tsuna is shooting at me and the muttered ‘no matter how you look at it he’s a baby. He shouldn't get to boss us around.’

Reborn’s abyssal eyes bore into me for a moment and I very deliberately don't look over at him. He's not used to people calling him out on his adult-ness, I don't think.
It must be part of the curse, the whole ‘perceived to be a hyper-intelligent and physically capable infant’ thing. There is no way that anyone would buy it if there wasn't some sort of supernatural element to it. Or maybe they would, I probably shouldn't underestimate how dumb people could be.

But no, for as much as a dunce as Tsuna can be very perceptive about people I can’t see how he would just accept this as fact without even a question.

Speaking of Tsuna, I only have a moment to brace myself when he lets out a demented howl-scream and launches himself across the room and body slams me. I magnanimously let it happen, bro needs a win once in a while.

And thus Reborn and Gokudera are treated to a classic, but rarely seen, Sawada Twin Rumble. Which pretty much boils down to headlocks and tickling. I dig my fingers under his arms and Tsuna dissolves into peals of laughter. Gasping for breath with tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

Ha, his greatest weakness!

I can hear Gokudera panicking in the background. He wants to help out the boss but doesn't want to attack the boss’ baby brother, it's actually really cute when I think about it. I slam a pillow into his face effectively snapping him out of his indecision.

“Come on hot-head defend your ’boss’” I taunt him.

The grin on his face is diabolical, its awesome. Half a second later two pillows slam into my face knocking me off of Tsuna. My brother takes this reprieve to catch his breath and then swipe the pillow from my bed and smacking me in the face with it repeatedly.

Ow.

Well then…

Bring it bro-bro.
Yanking out the blanket from under him, and in an impressive (if I do say so myself) one-two combo I have him wrapped up like an adorable burrito. Which of course is when Gokudera decides to make his move and hurl himself onto the bed.

Intent on defending the boss, but only succeeding in body-slamming Tsuna and getting himself caught up in my, increasingly amazing, blanket trap.

I'm getting ready to grab some more pillows to continue with my assault when I stop to look at Tsuna and Gokudera. They have gotten so hopelessly tangled in my blanket that they are starting to look like a two-headed sentient blob. And I can’t help but notice how happy Tsuna looks.

Like, ever since Reborn showed up he has been complaining and dragging his feet along this magical mafia ride. He goes along with Reborn’s crazy schemes with begrudging acceptance. But he did it.

Until Reborn had shown up Tsuna hadn’t done anything. He didn’t talk to anyone other than me and mom. He didn’t participate in anything unless he absolutely had to and even then he had mostly given up before he had even tried. The manga had never really gone into Tsuna’s state of mind before Reborn had arrived, but now I had lived through it.

My brother had been depressed.

I was worried about him constantly because he had no matter what it was he had already given up.

And right now he was laughing. He was joking around with Gokudera and having fun for the first time in years, and I couldn't have been more grateful if I tried.

Truth be told, I’m still having trouble reconciling myself to the precognitive memories from another life. There were a lot of blank spaces in there still. Details of my past life that I could not, and really did not, want to remember.

But this story still stands out pretty clearly in my mind.
This hadn't happened in that story. In that story, Tsuna and Gokudera hadn’t gotten this close this fast. In fact, I don’t think they had ever really made it to the level of light-hearted joking around.

And considering it's only been two days I foresee good things in the future of this bond.

But I can't deny that things have changed.

Of course, they have. This was real life, not a story. There isn't a script that we are all following. Free will exists.

But it makes me nervous. Pretty soon things are going to get dangerous. Very dangerous. I'm counting on having the precognitive advantage for a little while, at least until the rest of the family is all up to snuff.

Which is somewhat laughable since I'm pretty sure I'm the mundane in this situation. I've gotta get Reborn to shoot me with one of those magic bullets one day. Just to see if I can do jack shit in this world of magical mobsters.

I watch as Tsuna and Gokudera both yelp as they roll off the bed and into an even more tangled heap on the ground. Tsuna is still laughing though and I can’t help but smile.

“Inari~” He tries to whine but it is undercut by the happiness in his voice.

“Save us!”

I chance a look over to Reborn who has been watching over all of this random madness from his hammock perch. Technically this is his show.

I raise an eyebrow at him in a ‘should I help out these morons?’
“Dame-Tsuna, you should be able to solve your problems.”

“Hieeee!”

“Don't worry Tenth!” Gokudera chimes in with his usual conviction. “We can get out of this.”

“I believe in you guys, but also hurry I wanna go to sleep and that is still my blanket.”

I step back over the writhing mass and flop back down on my bed to observe their daring escape.

So Tsuna and Gokudera’s ‘social link’ has gained more levels faster then it would have without my interference. It was interesting but it probably wouldn't change too much in the long run.

“You have sixty seconds or else you get a punishment,” Reborn says.

Tsuna squeals in fright.

But he is still smiling.

Reborn wakes us up at the fucking ass crack of dawn with buckets of ice water and a smug smile on his chubby-cheeked face.

“You all have five minutes to get ready and meet me out front.”

And then he just jumps out the second story window like the fucking badass he is.
Tsuna lets out a tiny enraged sound before tossing himself out of bed. Unfortunately, he just lands on Gokudera’s futon which in an identical sopping state. The boy in question has the look of an angry wet cat.

“That fucking asshole.”

The way he says it is just so toneless that I can't help but burst out laughing. I peel the cold wet sheets off of myself and stumble into the bathroom with a bundle of clothes fished out of the closet. Ignoring Tsuna’s shout of “cheater!” Following me from behind once he realized my cunning plot.

“You snooze you, lose bro.”

They are plotting vengeance upon me I already know it.

It doesn't actually take all that long for me to finish with the morning ablutions. I do have to remind myself to put on some deodorant though. There is no way that whatever Reborn has planned doesn't include excessive physical activity and I do not want to go around having random encounters smelling like the locker room.

“Inari hurry up I have to use the bathroom.”

I duck out past the guys who, after taking a look at the time, decide to forgo shame and pile into the bathroom together. I guess it's true that hard times breed camaraderie.

Mom is standing in the hallway giving us all a fond look. She already loves Gokudera. She will probably still love him once she catches him chain-smoking and swearing and will cheerfully shove nicotine patches at him.

This is Tsuna's first friend.

“G’ morning Mama.” I greet her with a good morning hug.

“You boys are sure up early today. Do you have anything special planned?”
“Something, I guess. Reborn has ‘plans’ but he hasn't shared with the class yet. I think he wants it to be a surprise.”

“Reborn-chan has been such a good influence on Tsu-kun.”

Mom smiles.

“Whether he likes it or not.”

Mom giggles.

“Don't worry mom, we are going to drag Tsuna into functional adulthood kicking and screaming if we have to.”

And, you know, mafia Don-ship, but mom doesn't need to know that quite yet.

Although I'm not quite sure that she doesn't know about it. I mean she has been married to a man of the mafia for almost eighteen years.

“Do you boys have time for breakfast before you head out,” Mom asks.

“Don't think so, Reborn said on the double.”

“I'll make a big lunch for you then.” She promises and my stomach rumbles at the thought of Mom’s wonderful cooking. Too bad we have to skip breakfast.

“Grazie Mama.”

“Inari-chan, Reborn-chan has been teaching you some new things too.”
“Of course, haven't you seen his hat? Reborn is super cool and suave why wouldn't I want to pick up some new skills?”

She laughs and ruffles my hair. “Inari-chan you're so cute!”

“You know it.”

I bid her goodbye and make my way outside to wait for the new wonder duo with the overlord.

Seriously though with just a little bit of tweaking Gokudera and my brother were awesome friends. They had this who ‘we've just met but it feels like I've known you for years’ thing going on.

Just so long as Gokudera didn't try to step to the second in command thing. That position was mine, knowledge from another universe be damned.

“You're late.” Reborn intones from his perch atop the fence.

“I had to say bye to Mama,” I reply as unaffected as possible, “we can't just leave without telling her that would be rude.”

Reborn chuckles, “well at least one of you has manners.”

I choose to ignore the prod.

“So why are we out here at…” I chance a look at my watch, “four-o-fucking-clock in the god-damn morning?”

“I take it back, watch your mouth kid.”

“I can't help it, everyone keeps telling me how nice and polite I am all the time. It's starting to make my skin itch. So what are we doing today?”
He fixes me with this considering look. Like he can't decide if it would be more fun to tell me straight out or leave me hanging here in suspense.

“What you said the other day got me interested.”

Uh, what?

“Dude, you're going to have to clarify I say a lot of shit daily it is like my key character trait ‘Sawada Inari -that kid who says a lot of bullshit.’”

He pets Leon in silence as my anxiety rockets up to a few extra levels. I hear the clatter of Tsuna falling down the stairs on his ass from inside the house and Gokudera’s cry of ‘Tenth!’ But choose to ignore them in favour of attempting to stare down the worlds greatest hitman into submission.

“Please tell me, the suspense is killing me. What dumb thing got your attention? Are we going to go fix the water heater in the clubhouse? I know I was bitching about that a lot the other day.”

And then I realize what he is talking about.

“No.”

Reborn smirks, “You are a perceptive brat aren't you.”

“It is called logic and no. No. With a capital N.O.”

“You don't believe that your brother can hold his own against the defence committee?”

“I believe that Kyoya is a fucking psychopath and if you send Tsuna at him you may need to go find a new heir for your weird magic mafia.”

Reborn hums but doesn't say anything else which I take as ‘your objection has been noted, filed, and ignored.’
Tsuna and Gokudera appear looking harried, out of breath and Tsuna’s shirt was inside out. So not as bad as it could be but still not a super great start to a day when we are attempting a high-level quest.

“Did you have to trap the stairs,” Tsuna demands glaring at Reborn.

“Bro I think that was probably just you.”

“No! It wasn't there were like wires and a weird mole thing with a cannon.”

Gokudera is nodding along with him emphatically. He is a little singed around the edges which lend some credibility to their outlandish story.

Only…

“I just walked down those stairs and it was fine. And Reborn has been right here since so I really don't know how that would work.”

I mean other than the fact that this was Reborn I was talking about and he had ‘ways’ of doing whatever the fuck that he wanted. Actually, he probably did do it. He probably enlisted the aid of his nightmarish insect army (don't get me started on that I almost had a heart attack the day. I woke up to see him communing with his creepy-crawly minions.)

“How?”

I don't even give anyone a chance to catch up with my train of thought I just power straight through glaring at Reborn. He is actually trying to kill Tsuna today that asshole.

“You have to learn to be more observant Dame-Tsuna or you aren't going to last very long in the mafia.”

“I don't WANT to last long in the mafia.”
Tsuna, buddy, he means you'll be dead.

“I mean you'll be dead.”

Get the fuck out of my head Reborn.

“Now Get running boys.”

He says as he pulls out a machine gun out of nowhere.

Twenty minutes and a series of crazy evasion maneuvers later find the three of us gasping for air outside of Namimori middle school. Gokudera just collapses on his ass gasping for air. I have Tsuna slung over my shoulder in a fireman carry because an athlete my brother is not.

He had tripped up about five minutes in and rather than going through the insanity of Reborn shooting him with the crazy magic bullet to unleash the beast I opt for the no-man left behind option and just carried his ass as he shrieked evasion directions in my ears.

“Are you alright Tenth?” Gokudera asks still breathing heavily.

“Tsuna.”

“Huh?”

“We have escaped death by crazy toddler together, call me Tsuna please.”

Gokudera turns so red so fast that for a moment I am terrified that he is going to pass out. And the.
He starts babbling about how he couldn't possibly call the Tenth by his first name and I can just feel Tsuna’s vague irritation.

“Just make it an order bro,” I whisper. “I mean it's weird but it's important to him.”

Tsuna sigh.

“Gokudera I order you to call me Tsuna.”

That is probably the coolest my brother has ever sounded. It's a shame that he is still hanging off of my shoulder with his ass in the air. It would be more impressive, but less Tsuna.

As it was it was absolutely perfect.

“Alright, Ten- I mean Tsuna-san.”

Not perfect but at least it was progress.

“Not bad brats,” Reborn says as he strolls along the school wall, not even the least bit out of breath or sweaty. Even though he has been chasing us the whole time while carrying an enormous machine gun and ammo.

I fix him with the flattest look I can muster (with another human being slung over my shoulder).

“That was in no way necessary.”

“Oh, but it was fun.”

“For you maybe,” Tsuna mutters darkly.

Reborn jumps down from the wall and lands heavily on Tsuna’s back (and in turn my shoulder,
“You have no business complaining Dame-Tsuna. If it wasn't for your brother you would have been dead meat.”

“Sorry for not being naturally athletic,” Tsuna grumbles back.

Getting a sick of being a human coat rack I abruptly chuck them both down to the cement. Tsuna lands with a yelp in a sprawl. Reborn of course lands lightly on his feet like a ballerina.

It wouldn't surprise me if he had a tutu stashed away somewhere.

I’m pretty sure mom kept the ballet outfits me and Tsuna had. We could probably put on Swan Lake or something. It would suck and Tsuna would hate it, but I'm sure we could do it.

“Inari!”

“What? I can’t lug your but around all day.”

“A little warning would have been nice.”

“… I'm going to drop your ass.”

“Too late!”

Gokudera manages to roll himself over and crawl over to where I dropped Tsuna. He is winded. I need to make a point to talk to him about his smoking habits. If he really is intent on protecting Tsuna he needs to be in better shape.

“You're not injured are you Tsuna-san.”
“Only my pride.” Tsuna relents.

“Oh suck it up bro.” I snap.

I’m getting edgier the longer that we stand in front of the gates. I don’t think Tsuna has realized where we are yet, and even if he did it would probably take some impressive mental gymnastics to understand the greater meaning of why Reborn had herded us here.

I can make out members of the Disciplinary Committee through the blinds. Whatever Hibari has on the school board must be pretty damn juicy for him to be able to house his gang on privet property in broad daylight.

A nagging feeling draws my gaze up to the roof. Even at this distance, I can feel my eyes lock with Hibari’s.

Fuck.

There goes the element of surprise.

“So what’s the objective here overlord?” I ask Reborn without breaking eye contact with my “mortal nemesis.”

A little bit dramatic but accurate.

Tsuna and Gokudera perk up and realize where we are.

“Why are we at school?” Asks Tsuna.

“It's Sunday, this shit box is closed,” Gokudera says.

Reborn smiles like a gremlin.
“We’re breaking in of course.”

We are straight-up Metal Gearing this shit.

Me and Tsuna a creeping through the campus underneath a cardboard box while Gokudera flanks us throwing yen at the DC thugs that are patrolling. The current count is:

Team idiot - 3

Disciplinary committee - 0

“Why are we doing this?” Tsuna hisses at me.

He is currently teetering somewhere between anxiety and irritation. Which is a perfectly valid state of being considering what we are doing. Tsuna isn't like me, he doesn't frequently go toe to toe with THE Hibari Kyoya without more than a bruise to show for it.

And just for the record, those bruises hurt!

“We are doing this because we Reborn said so. And because we are serving up some good old fashioned vigilante justice to these assholes.”

“So!? He's like one! He's not the boss of us! And it's not like this matters anyway we should just go home now before Hibari-sempai bites us all to death!”

I quickly slap a hand over Tsuna’s mouth to stop the rant. I don't feel like fighting Hibari or his cult of devoted goons today. It will give him unrealistic expectations for our continued animosity. But the stakes are much too high for us to surrender.
“What’s that?” Asks the somewhat muffled voice of a Disciplinary Committee member.

I peek through the hole in the box in time to see Gokudera shoot what looks like a blow dart into the guy’s neck. He drops like a sack of potatoes.

You know I never thought of it before but Gokudera must know a whole bunch about poisons and chemistry from Shamal and Bianchi. I'll have to grill him on it later, it seems like a good skill set to have in the back pocket.

Also, science is cool.

“Murph?”

“Tsuna, Reborn is the boss of us. I'm pretty sure he is the boss of small kingdoms. He is most definitely the boss of us. And more to the point we are doing this shit because it is a matter of pride.”

Tsuna’s very mature response is to lick my hand.

Yuck.

“Let’s just do this stupid thing.” Tsuna relents.

To be fair Reborn hadn't sent Tsuna on a mission to challenge Hibari. Thankfully.

No, he just wants us to rob him.

He wants us to rob Hibari Kyoya. Or to be more specific we are going to rob the Disciplinary Committee’s collection of confiscated contraband.
Because that is a fantastic idea.

Yeah, this is going to end in tears.

Anyway back to the point that I have been avoiding. Apparently yesterday while I was indulging in some violence with Hibari himself Gokudera and Tsuna had their close encounter with a member of the DC.

One by the name of Iwazumi Mine who wasn't anyone of any particular note beyond the fact that he had been on my brother's case since elementary school. I never really understood why he went at Tsuna but regardless it had kept up right into middle school. Only now he has a red ribbon that gives him the authority to be a dick to people.

And take their stuff.

Once upon a time a very, very long time ago in a sandbox, a little red-haired girl who spoke in broken heavily accented Japanese had given a little crying boy a present.

It was a small plush monkey on a keychain and it was one of my brother's most prized possession.

And also the origin story of his infatuation with Kyoko Sasagawa.

Iwazumi had confiscated it because it 'violated the student dress code.'

I honestly hadn't noticed it was missing until Reborn had announced the true purpose of our infiltration assignment. Tsuna hadn't wanted to make a fuss and he had all but begged Gokudera not to mention it to me.

Poor Gokudera had 'repented' so hard that he had almost re-broken his nose. Going on about how he had failed Tsuna-sama until I slapped a hand over his mouth to stop the endless stream of apologies.
Suffice to say I was much more geared up for this once I knew the real reason behind it.

Don't worry little monkey thing we are going to rescue you.

Me and Tsuna ditch the box and utilize a masterfully timed Gokudera distraction to bust through a vent on the side of the school and duck into it. I push Tsuna in ahead of me and make sure that the absurdly useful cardboard box is covering the missing grate before following in after him.

Three minutes of crawling through a dusty later find the two of us falling from the ceiling in a vacant hallway. Don't ask me how we went from ground level to seven and a half feet up in a hallway ceiling, but we did. Obviously, our school was built on a rift in reality.

Or a Hellmouth.

“Good work you two.” Says Reborn as he appears from the shadows dressed like a miniature ninja.

“Reborn? How did you get in here?!”

Probably the front door.

“The front door,” Reborn tells him with a smug look.

Nailed it.

“Where's our distraction?” I ask.

“He’s giving the security a run for their money.”
He actually looks vaguely impressed by the whole thing. Gokudera's skill as ‘the distraction’ guy and Hibari’s pseudo-military operation.

“This is so messed up,” Tsuna groans pulling himself up off the linoleum.

“No, it’s not, its fun.”

I swing an arm around his shoulder and give a comforting squeeze. Tsuna still isn't used the high octane action that Reborn inspires. We're going to have to go do something low key and normal later.

“Common bro, let's go get Mr. Monkey back and get some lunch.”

“…Kay.”

“Now where’s our target?”

“Fourth-floor room 418 on the south-eastern side of the building,” Reborn answers informatively.

And successfully makes this feel even more Oceans 11 than it already had.

“Let's roll bro-bro.”

The good part of breaking into Namimori middle school is that we are both very familiar with the school floor plan. Probably more so than the average student considering me and Tsuna are both some variation of delinquent and thus know all the best hidey-hole and escape routes.

The point is we don't have to memorize any complicated floor plans to know that hard left and tripping through a door marked maintenance will take us to a hidden stairwell that goes straight to the fourth floor (and to a trapdoor to the roof).

I can hear a series of explosions from outside and which hopefully means that Gokudera is still keeping our friends nice and distracted. Knowing Hibari explosions on school property has gotten
his attention as well.

Hopefully, Gokudera can last long enough for us to get in and out of the Disciplinary Committee’s ‘office’ without issue.

Without him dying I mean.

We get there without issue and lo and behold we are the only ones here.

“K I’ve got the door you go find the treasure Tsuna.”

He flushes in embarrassment but charges in with Reborn perched on his shoulder. I take my point in the doorway keeping watch down the hallway. It also gives me a vantage point to scope out the field where a herd of dumbasses with pompadour hairdos are chasing down a very determined Gokudera.

Remind me to buy him something nice.

However, what I don't see is Hibari.

And that is worrying.

My train of thought is rudely interrupted you a series of crashes from inside the room and my brother's high pitched shriek of terror.

“You're trespassing herbivore.”

Yeah, I was afraid of that.

I spin on my heel intent on charging in to rescue Tsuna from Hibari’s wrath. A gunshot rings out, and with a burst of orange fire, Dying Will Tsuna emerges.
“SAVE INARI WITH MY DYING WILL!!”

“Wha-” is all I have tome to get out before Tsuna is colliding with me at high velocity.

WHY!?

WHY SAVE INARI?!

And the next thing I know the two of us are bursting THROUGH THE FOURTH STORY WINDOW AND PLUMMETING TO THE GROUND BELOW!!

I unashamedly cling to Tsuna trusting that he would somehow cushion our fall. If not we die together, as brothers should.

We slam into the ground like a meteorite amidst screams of ‘what the fuck!.’ I manage to force myself to take a peek at where we landed and meet Gokudera's eyes. He is staring at us wide-eyed and blinking at us with a stick of dynamite fizzling in his grip.

I slowly reach out a shaking hand dampen the flame before we all get exploded.

“Hey, Tsuna we should probably save Gokudera too.”

This is all the encouragement that Tsuna needs. In an instant I have Gokudera smooshed up against me and we are both clinging for dear life as Tsuna utilizes the unnatural strength of his Dying Will to rocket us toward home.

“Owwwww.” Tsuna moans as he lies starfishes on the back porch.

Me and Gokudera sit on either side of him sharing a plate of watermelon slices that I have
ingeniously balanced on Tsuna’s midsection.

“Everything hurts.”

“Considering that you jumped through a fourth story be happy that everything just hurts and we're not dead or horribly crippled.”

He makes a noise of agreement.

“Can I have a slice of watermelon too?”

“You have arms. Get it yourself.”

“I can't feel them though.”

I take pity on him a shove a watermelon slice into his mouth.

“Don't choke.”

The three of us munch in silence for a little longer before mom comes out with a tray of coffee and pastries. Reborn trots alongside her with a small cup in his hand and a look of contentment.

Mom makes the best coffee.

There is one more thing that I make note of, a tiny little monkey plush hanging from Leon's mouth.

Reborn is a decent sort underneath all of that sadism.

“Inari-chan” mom says breaking my chain of thought.
“Yeah?”

“Takeshi-kun stopped by while you boys were out playing. He wanted to talk to you about something.”

I’m on my feet in an instant and slipping past her and Reborn into the house.

“I’ll call him right now!”

I skid into the kitchen and grab the phone off the wall before I even have a chance to stop. I dial his home number first. I don’t want to call the restaurant and bother his dad during the lunch rush.

The phone rings and rings and rings.

And goes straight to message.

I slam down the receiver and start to dial again.

No answer.

That bad feeling is back again, as is the brain static.

There is something wrong, something that I’m not allowed to remember, and an uncomfortable spike of anxiety is growing in my chest.

I call the restaurant.

“Take-sushi! How can I help you today.” Yamamoto-san recites into the receiver.
“Hi Yamamoto-san, it's Inari, I was wondering if Takeshi was there?”

“Inari? I thought Takeshi was hanging out with you today?”

My anxiety grows to a whole new level.

“Our, yeah, he came by earlier but I had to go run some errands with Tsuna so I missed him. Do you know where he might have gone? I tried calling the house but no one answered.”

Yamamoto-san sighs.

“That boy has no attention span.”

“Don't worry Yamamoto-san I’ll track him down.”

I hang up the phone without waiting for a response and run back down the hall grabbing my shoes as I go.

I need to find Takeshi. I need to find him right now.

“I'm going to hang out with Takeshi I’ll be home later k bye.”

The words tumble quickly out of my mouth as I bolt through the crowd on the porch. I use my momentum to vault over the concrete wall that divided our yard from the street and land in a run.

He would be at the park. He had to be.

If he had gone to the school I would have noticed him. And he wasn't the type to go to the arcade on his own. There was a chance that he had gone to hang out with someone else from the baseball team but… no, I'm not the only one that Takeshi has been avoiding lately.
So the park.

I turn my brain off and run.

He wasn't at the park.

He wasn't at his house.

Or at Take-Sushi.

Or at the arcade.

I’ve spent hours running around town desperately searching for him and nothing. I ran into Iida and Nori from the team and they had seen him earlier doing some solo pitching practice at the park but nothing after that.

Nori said that he hadn't answered when they called to him.

Neither of them seemed particularly worried about it. It just worried me more. Takeshi wasn't the type to ignore people. He usually at least pretends to be social even when he wasn't feeling it.

The fact that he hadn't meant that something was very, very wrong.

And I had known it. I’ve known for the past few weeks that something was eating at him. But everything with Tsuna, and Reborn, and the reality-altering knowledge that had been unceremoniously shoved into my brain I’ve been preoccupied.

I had just figured that one day Takeshi would just start hanging out with us and joining in with all the mafia shenanigans.
But he hadn't.

It's been weeks and he still hasn't gotten recruited. I know Gokudera had only shown up a couple of days ago but I expected some sort of interaction with Takeshi.

Hadn't he and Tsuna talked about something?

Fuck, had we missed a flag?

Did we bypass the recruitment phase?

...

God, I'm such a shitty friend.

It's starting to get dark and I am way past exhausted now. I'll see Takeshi tomorrow at school and this time when I try to talk to him I'm not going to take no for an answer.

It takes another half hour to drag myself back home. To add to the depressing ambience it starts to rain. By the time I get home I'm solved to the skin and dripping onto the hardwood floor.

Mom takes one look at me and rushes back into the house to get towels and a fresh pair of pyjamas. I do my best to dry off quickly but all the action of today has finally caught up with me.

A series of bangs followed by a shriek echo down from upstairs. It seems like Tsuna is still full of energy.

I sigh and give mom a sleepy (and pathetic) look.
“I’m gonna sleep on the couch tonight.”

She pets my head affectionately and says, “I’ll go get some blankets for you.”

She leaves and I meander over to the couch and collapse face-first into the soft cushions. The sound of rain beating against the windowpane is starting to put me to sleep.

Today has been way too eventful for me.
Chapter Summary

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every once in a while a man has to evaluate his life choices and ask himself the profound philosophical question:

“What the fuck are you doing?”

It happens with more frequency than for most with me. It has something to do with the whole poor impulse control and inclinations toward violent confrontations. I spend most Wednesday’s and Friday’s picking fights with Hibari and had on more than one occasion taken a pitch to the head from Takeshi just to see if I could.

The point is I end up asking myself “what the fuck are you doing?” a lot and honestly considering the current trends in my life I don’t foresee this changing anytime soon.

What I’m doing right now though, I have achieved a whole new level of crazy.

And for some context: I am currently clinging to the outside of Namimori Middle School. Stuck somewhere between the third and fourth floors.

It is pouring rain.

I have a fever of 103.

Am I an idiot?
Yes.

Am I questioning my life choices right now?

Most definitely yes.

Does any of this matter right now?

No, no it does not. Because somewhere, approximately three and a half feet above where I have wedged myself between a pipe and a windowpane Takeshi is teetering on the edge of the abyss monologue about how he has nothing left to live for since he keeps screwing up with baseball and doesn’t have any real friends.

Of all the fucking days to wake up late it had to be today, didn't it? It was my own damn fault. I had overexerted myself last night running around in the rain after spending hours running around on a Reborn mission.

Of course, I had gotten myself sick.

And Mom is the kind and loving soul had called the school to let them know that I wouldn't be coming in today. And she had let me sleep in and made sure that Tsuna and Gokudera didn't wake me up.

And on any other day, it would have been appreciated. But on this day I remembered exactly how it was that Yamamoto Takeshi was recruited into the Famiglia of Vongola Decimo.

He was going to try to kill himself.

Through the haze of illness and darkness, this information is blasted into my conscious mind startling me into awareness.
In terms of rude awakenings, today had taken the cake.

I had woken up so fast that I had fallen off the couch in a tangle of blankets. When I had tried to get up my head had spun so violently that I almost passed out again.

Mom had left a bottle of cold medicine on the coffee table for me and I had eyed the small plastic measuring cup for a moment before forgoing it and downing half of the bottle.

I had all but thrown myself out of the house into the ongoing rainstorm in a pair of pajama pants and an inside out t-shirt.

And I ran. I ran faster than I had ever run before.

It was going to happen today. Don't ask how I knew it but I knew it. I felt it in my gut. And maybe it as all scripted and preordained or whatever. But I didn't trust that. I could not leave Takeshi’s life up to what was written in a comic book in another universe.

I made it to the school in record time only to have all my fears confirmed when I had to look up through the wind and rain to see a familiar silhouette standing on the ledge of the roof.

At that moment I was completely paralyzed. That was Takeshi up there and one missed step was all it would take for him to come plummeting down to his untimely demise.

The smart thing to do would have been to go inside the school and run up the stairs. But I was terrified that if I lost sight of him he would be gone.

So I did things the dumb way.

I would have done anything to have had Reborn or someone with more adequate life skills with me at that moment. Chances are if I had they would have been able to talk me out of my chosen course of action. There was no way that scaling a building in a rainstorm was the best course of action in this situation.

Though knowing Reborn he might have suggested the same thing. I think our tiny tutor also has
some impulse control problems.

The haze of cold medication and the fever had helped plot out my ascent. Under normal circumstances, I would have looked at the exterior piping and thought ‘bad idea’, however, high Inari looked at the exterior piping and thought ‘yeah, I can probably do that.’

Clearly, intelligence is one of my core character traits.

Which led me here.

Hanging off the side of a building. Listening to my friend tell, what sounds like, a crowd of our classmates about how he feels isolated and listening to them say superfluous shallow bullshit about how he should be happy that he’s good looking and popular.

I really hope that Tsuna is up there. Because this needs to end immediately.

Listening to this is heartbreaking and infuriating at the same time.

Depression is a fucking monster. I get it, it takes all the joy out of the world and it makes everything seem pointless and hopeless.

But that bit about not having any real friends.

I take umbrage with that last bullet point about not having any real friends. Because I am here literally scaling a five-story building for you in the pouring rain ASSHOLE!! I mean I know I dropped the ball a little bit since Reborn turned up but I had still been there. If things were getting this bad he could have talked to me about it.

Right?
I barely manage to stop myself from screaming that at him. I’m pretty sure that if I did right now he would fall off the roof from the shock of having moron clinging to the outside of a school building screaming at him about poor life choices.

If that isn’t an oxymoron I don’t quite know what would qualify.

I make a mental note to scream at him later.

And hug him.

And punch him in the stupid face.

And cry.

And then hug him more.

I'm having a lot of conflicting feelings right now and I'm not exactly great with the whole ‘emotions’ thing on a good day. It probably has something to do with all the cold medicine that I downed on my way here.

“No matter what I do lately I just seem to fail. You know how it is right Tsuna? Everyone is always calling you a failure. It's an awful feeling, right? It would be better to just die.”

A mixture of relief and terror makes my heart stutter. Tsuna is there. Thank fucking god Tsuna is there. He should be able to talk some sense into Takeshi right?

Right?
The plot says yes. But my understanding of reality says - I have no fucking clue man.

And also ‘don’t rope my brother into your depressing melodrama Takeshi!’ He was only just now starting to get over that bullshit.

“Are you stupid or something?” Tsuna asks.

And I freeze and stare up at the roof with wide eyes. A hush has fallen over the observing audience.

“What?” Takeshi asks quietly.

“I asked if you're stupid.” Tsuna says.

I can hear the mixture of annoyance and anxiety in his voice.

“What the hell are you talking about not having anyone or anything going for you? Do you not see the literal crowd of people here? They’re all terrified for you! They all care about you! And what about your dad?! What about Inari!?”

His voice gets louder and louder the longer that he goes on. I don't think I have ever heard Tsuna so impassioned about something before.

“You don't think they would miss you? You don't think this won't break their hearts?! Because I can tell you right now that if you think Inari will be able to brush this off like it meant nothing, you have another thing coming!”

“And so what if the ‘baseball god’ or whatever isn't talking to you anymore. Maybe that just means its time to try something else! We’re thirteen, you have time to find your life’s calling. And knowing you Yamamoto-kun it's going to be something awesome.”

“But it won't be anything if you give up now. All you will be is a smear on the ground who gave
up. And your better than that!”

Holy shit Tsuna.

The rain is finally starting to stop and as I stare up at Takeshi’s silhouette I can see the blue sky peeking through. As if it was called forth by the power of my brother's conviction.

“You’re a really cool guy Yamamoto-kun,” Tsuna says softly. “And I always wanted to be your friend too.”

“…Tsuna-”

What a beautiful touching moment. It's a shame it had to be interrupted by gravity.

I watch as Takeshi makes an abortive motion toward where I assume Tsuna is standing. And then I watch him slip, stutter and fall. The world doesn't descend into dramatic slow motion.

Takeshi falls.

People scream.

And acting on pure reflex and instinct I reach out and latch on to his wrist as he falls by.

My arm feels like it was almost torn out of its socket.

Fun fact: catching someone falling at terminal velocity is painful because physics is a thing that exists.
I am hanging on to the window ledge for dear life. I might have screamed (I definitely screamed). Once I'm certain that I'm not going to lose my grip and send us both plummeting down to our untimely demise I look down to make sure that Takeshi is okay.

He is STARING at me.

The look he's giving me clearly echoes my earlier thoughts of “what the fuck are you doing.”

“Inari?” He speaks with quiet disbelief.

“Yup.”

“What are you doing here.” There is a very noticeable brittle edge of hysteria in his voice.

“Oh you know just hanging out.”

He laughs. The hysteria wining over all further questions.

“YAMAMOTO-KUN!” Tsuna screams appearing from over the ledge.

“Hey, bro-bro,” I answer because Takeshi is busy with his stress laughter.

“INARI!?”

Tsuna just about launches himself over the side wrapping his hands tightly around my wrist.

His eyes are orange.

There had been not gunshot. Not burst of flame. No declaration of dying will.
It was just Tsuna all on his own. His eyes clear, and bright, and orange with the power of the sky flames harnessed under his own power.

“Don't worry I've got you. I'm not going to let you fall.”

My bro is so fucking cool sometimes.

Of course by the laws of dramatic irony it was at this moment that the strength in my fingers gives out and Tsuna is left supporting the full weight of two teenaged boys with his scrawny little arms.

I'm pretty sure all three of us would have gone plummeting to our collective dooms if it wasn't for Gokudera.

Together he and Tsuna manage to pull us back up over the ledge. In the end, we are all spawled out on the roof gasping and exhausted. I look over at Takeshi who laying next to me with his arm pressed over his eyes.

I vaguely realize that he is crying.

I don't have enough energy to get myself up again. The adrenaline rush that was powering me through this insanity has worn off and I can't actually feel any of my extremities anymore. I summon the energy to roll over so I'm sort of on top of him.

This is literally as close to a hug that I am capable of right now.

“I love you man,” I mumble into his shirt. “Please don't go splat on me.”

Somewhere in the background Hana has started marshalling the onlooking audience down the stairs. Kyoko’s voice cuts in sweetly whenever someone tries to argue with Hana.

“Sorry.”
I want to say something.

But I am literally unable to remain conscious any longer.

One of the fun things about real life is that shit has consequence. Case and point you do something crazy like scale a building in a rainstorm with a fever you will absolutely land yourself in the hospital.

Namimori general isn’t so bad as far as hospitals go. The staff is decent and the rooms are clean and spacious. They had also been chill enough to let me and Takeshi share a room.

But Reborn impersonating world renowned pediatrician might have had something to do with it. Either way, I’m grateful. I don't think I would have been able to rest otherwise.

Takeshi had to go in for a psychological evaluation. I think Reborn must have understood my concerned mumbles because he insisted that he attend. After all child psychology was the great Rebo-sensei’s specialty.

It probably wasn't necessary but I'm glad that he did it. I wouldn't want him to get a weird diagnosis or something because he didn't have someone there to explain shit to him properly.

Mom and Yamamoto-san ran in at about the same time. And we're now talking to our nurse to get all the details about what happened, or at least as many details that she was able to give. I trust that Reborn and Tsuna will fill them in more later.

And speaking of my brother…

“What were you thinking!?” He demands.
He and Gokudera have set up camp on the empty bed by the window. It's been awhile since ‘big brother’ Tsuna has come out to play, I'm glad to see that he's still got some bite to him.

“I had to be able to catch Takeshi.”

“Yeah, And that's great and all but you were home sick. How the heck did you even know what was happening?”

Both he and Gokudera are staring at me expectantly.

“I premonitionded it.” I slur.

The antibiotic IV that they have me hooked up to right now is seriously impairing my speaking abilities. Not that they were super before, but I'm pretty sure I didn't sound like drunk.

“You ‘premonitioned’ it.” He sounds so very unimpressed with me.

“I don't know man. I was sleeping and then it was like BAM and someone was screaming in my brain ‘You have to get to Takeshi right fucking now’ and so I did and there he was all up there and shit. So I did the thing and I'm not sorry for that because I caught him.”

I am rambling like a nutcase.

Tsuna buries his face in his hands and groans loudly.

“How did you even get up there!?"

“I climbed.”

“Wha- Bu- HOW!?"
Poor bro-bro is really having a hard time with this.

“I did it with my fucking dying will dude,” I tell him.

And then I pass out.

I'm brought back into the world of the living when a weight dips the mattress next to me. I have to fight the exhaustion and the general feeling of blah to crack an eye open. Takeshi has a pretty distinctive profile even in the near darkness that we’re sitting in.

“Hey.” I croak.

My throat is killing me. That teaches me to go running around in the rain without a coat on.

“Hey.”

The actual enormity of everything that went down is finally starting to catch up to me now that all the panic and insanity has worn off. I stare up at him giving my eyes a chance to adjust, and I think.

I had literally scaled a four-story building. I had pulled myself up forty vertical feet in a rainstorm.

Takeshi had almost thrown himself off the roof of that very same building.

This was all a lot heavier than I had anticipated.

This is the moment where I should say something meaningful and profound. Something to affirm
our bond of friendship. Or just something to make him feel better.

But I'm me. So instead I say:

“So what's the verdict? You crazy?”

He lets out a harsh snort of laughter. But it's not entirely cheerless; so that's something.

“Oh, completely.”

I can just barely make out his expression. He's smiling, a classic Takeshi smile, though with a touch more exhaustion than usual.

“Shit man, that sucks.” I grin at him. “What are you gonna do.”

He laughs, for real this time.

“I don't know, but apparently I'm in good company.”

“No kidding?”

“Yup.” He chirps. “See this guy I know had the crazy idea to climb the school building with his bare hands.”

“Shit, that is crazy.”

Takeshi hums in agreement.

“Yeah, but he did it for his friend.”
My arms feel like the have been filled with lead, but somehow I muster up the strength to reach out and give his arm a light squeeze.

“‘You would’a done the same for me man.’”

He gives me a ‘look.’

“I would have stood at the bottom and waited to catch you.” He says dryly.

“Aw dude, you wanna play catcher for me?” I say, imbuing my, very wrecked, voice with a comedic level of flirtation. Because I have just about had it with the seriousness.

“I always thought you preferred to pitch.”

I waggle my eyebrows at him in a flirtatious way. It’s always fun because Takeshi understands innuendo about as well as Tsuna understands physics. He takes everything literally and it gives me a decent chuckle.

Instead, I find myself half pinned to the bed and Takeshi’s face wayyyyy to close to my face. The high pitch sound that comes out of me is worthy of Tsuna.

“For you, I would play any position.” He says in a low and ridiculously seductive tone.

I immediately retaliate against this grave offence by aggressively jamming my fingers into his armpits. He launches himself away from me laughing.

How dare he develop an understanding of pun based innuendo. My world has been thrown off its axis.

I shall never forgive this…”
Okay, I'm over it.

“Fuck you man, don't pull that shit will me I invented that shit.” The words I speak are in jest.

The pillow I chuck at his head most defiantly is not.

Of course he snatches out of mid-air and neatly throws it on to his own bed. Leaving me sad and pillowless.

Curses, I didn't think this plan through.

I would go and reclaim it but the IV line is still jammed into my forearm and that would lead only to more pain. For me at least.

“Jerk.” I huff.

And he just keeps laughing.

I briefly consider going back to sleep, but no, I'm up now. Might as well make the best of this.

“Seriously dude, are you okay?” I ask.

He sits on the edge of his bed and stares at me quietly for a moment.

“Better than I was…”

He looks away toward the dull light in the hall, and we both wait in silence as a nurse walks by our room.
“I made dad cry.” He admits.

“Yeah…”

There was no way that I could have ignored Yamamoto-san sobbing in the hallway. Lucky mom was there and she is awesome at comforting people.

She had actually been pretty amused at my antics. Apparently, the old man had once done something similar back when they were dating. This does not make me feel any better about it. It actually makes me feel worse for having something in common with that asshole.

It had made mom smile though so I'll let it slide.

For now.

“I didn’t -”

He doesn't finish the thought. I don't think he knows how to.

“Tsuna is actually really cool isn't he.” He says instead.

“He really, really is.”

And one day even he would believe it.

“That funny little doctor guy recommended that the best medicine for me would be to spend more time hanging out with Tsuna.”

Takeshi is beaming.

“So I hope you don't mind if I tag along with you guys from now on.”
That sounds exactly like Reborn.

Though I can't help but wonder if there are actual medical benefits that come from hanging out with a Sky Flame? And if so can we find a way to bottle it and sell it.

A happy orange fire. Yours today for three easy payments of $9.99.

“S’cool dude. Just prepare yourself for some high-octane shenanigans.”

I see a flash of teeth in the dark.

“Looking forward to it.”

Takeshi was released into his fathers loving care after a 24 hour observation period. There was an awkward moment when Yamamoto-san came to pick him up and randomly grabbed me in the tightest hug.

I stared wide-eyed over his shoulder at Takeshi who gave me an equally wide-eyed expression. He was still a little bit weepy which was even more awkward.

Not knowing what else to do I gave him a couple solid pats on the back.

Pat. Pat.

Takeshi promised to come visit me tomorrow.
And then I was alone in a big quiet hospital room.

To be fair I didn't really have much of an opportunity to be lonely. I've spent most of my time here passed the fuck out. Because guess who the smart guy who gave himself god damn pneumonia is?

That's right, me.

But the doc said I should be well enough to go home in a couple of days so I guess that I'm just going to enjoy having this mini-vacation from school.

I'm sure Mrs. Nakamura will be so sad when she sees I'm not there to contradict her with smartass comments. Or to correct her English pronunciation. Which I'm sure is something that all English teachers love.

And speaking of school…

“We brought you homework.”

Tsuna looks about as happy about this as I feel. Actually I think that we have the same expression on our faces. Because that is a huge stack of homework.

What the hell? What did I miss!?

And then Reborn struts in his tiny three-piece suit and a paper cup of coffee. He’s looking debonair as usual and kicks Tsuna in his calf sending him stumbling forward with a yelp. I reflexively lunge forward in bed and barley manage to catch the spill of books and notebooks and pens.

“Ciaossu Inari.” He greets.

“S’up,” I reply.

It's hard to read Reborn's expression. The eyes in particular are difficult, mostly because they look like giant black buttons. Adorable, but utterly mysterious.

But that being said; I am pretty sure he just rolled them at both of us.

“Alright boys, no more slacking it's time for study.”

He leaps up onto my bed and lands without spilling a drop of the coffee. And you better believe that I am eyeing that coffee.

“Aw, you guys brought the tutoring session to me? I'm touched.”

I actually really am. Tsuna is the one with the criminal destiny, not me. So Reborn doesn't really need to put the extra effort into me. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

I make a grab for the coffee.

Reborn, of course, expertly dodges.

“Don't think you can play hooky just because you're in the hospital brat. I have a reputation to uphold after all. If you fall behind it reflects badly on me.”

Tsuna dumps the rest of the pile of textbooks on the nifty little rolling table the hospital had provided. It actually sags a little bit under the weight.

“Holy crap, did you carry that all the way from school?” I ask as he flops across the bed in an exhausted heap.

“We’re working on Dame-Tsuna’s stamina.” Reborn replies as he makes himself comfortable.
I poke Tsuna and he hardly flinches.

“How’s it coming?”

“Slowly.”

Leon transforms into a paper fan which our all mighty overlord expertly wields to smack Tsuna back into the land of the living.

One day in the far and distant future I need to remember to have a talk with Reborn about violence not always being the answer.

“You okay,” I ask Tsuna.

“My arms feel like noodles. I think my arms are just permanently noodles now.”

I give his hair a playful ruffle.

“That's what you get for always skipping gym class.”

“Not all of us are crazy stamina freaks like you are.” He tells me with a flat look.

I choose to ignore the very pointed reference to my most recent adventure and instead fish out my math text book from the pile. As long as Reborn is here I might as well take advantage of his mathematical know-how. Geometry has really been kicking my ass lately.

Tsuna manages to pull himself up to a sitting position and half heatedly pulls out his own text book with a heavy sigh.

“Anything interesting happened while I've been away? Has Hibari succeeded from the rest of the school to create his own totalitarian dictatorship? Is Mrs. Nakamura pining for me in my absence? Have you finally professed your undying love to Kyoko?”
Tsuna flushes so hard as that last one that I briefly worry that he's going to make himself pass out.

“None of those things happened!”

“Boring.”

We settle in and let Reborn take the reins of the tutoring session. He's actually a really good teacher, just as long as you ignore the threats of violence and sadistic punishment games. Tsuna had actually managed to vet a solid C on the last math test we had. Which may not seem like much, but for him it is a monumental achievement.

And the lions share of the credit goes to Reborn. Who has suffered through weeks of his student whining and complaining before Tsuna had finally given in and decided to put in some actual effort?

“Soooooo, hows Takeshi?” I ask.

Attempting to be nonchalant this and failing miserably.

“He said I’m a ‘cool guy’ and he' been eating lunch with Hayato and me since he came back.”

The disbelief in his voice is palpable.

“Me, Yamamoto-kun said ‘I’ was cool.”

Oh, Tsuna, bro.

And also… “Hayato?”

I ask quirking an eyebrow at him.
He blushes bright red just like I knew he would. It’s just too easy to embarrass him.

“I- its Gokudera-kun’s first name,” he says, deliberately not making eye contact. “I made him call me Tsuna so it only seemed fair to return the favor.”

Tsuna trails off uncomfortably still staring at the wall.

I am so proud. Tsuna is upgrading his social links all on his own.

“Tsuna~”

His head snaps back towards me and he glares. He knows me much too well to miss the teasing tone in my voice.

“No, you’re going to make this weird. Please don’t make this weird. It doesn’t need to be weird.”

“Weird? Me? Would I do that?”

I totally would.

“You would, you absolutely would. You always do. Please, please don’t.”

I laugh.

“Yeah, yeah I get it. No bugging you about your budding bromances.”

Tsuna whines and buries his face in the math textbook.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed about developing strong relationships Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says
jumping into the conversation.

“Gokudera and Yamamoto are good additions to your Famiglia.”

The mention of the mafia thing makes Tsuna snap up from the textbook and glare daggers at our diminutive tutor.

“Please don’t drag Yamamoto-kun into the mafia thing.”

Reborn predictably ignores his complaint and starts back in on the geometry lesson. Tsuna keeps glaring for a while longer before giving in and starting in on the mountain of homework before us. We go on for another forty-five minutes or so before Tsuna starts getting distracted and jittery. Reborn sends him out to get us all snacks.

“And coffee!” I yell after him.

And immediately resolve into a coughing fit, because yelling with a chest cold is dumb.

“He better bring me that coffee.”

Reborn sits himself primly atop the tower of textbooks and stares at me. Petting Leon like he’s a supervillain in a campy spy movie.

I actually don’t know what the heck Leon is. I mean, Reborn calls him a chameleon, and okay he sort of looks like a chameleon. But he is also a harbinger of chaos, a shape-shifting weapon of mass destruction (and if I remember correctly a mini-magical-item-dispenser).

I’m not exactly up on my cryptozoology in this universe, however, even if I was I don’t think there is an entry in the mystical bestiary for ‘lizard that turns into a gun.’

Reborn notices my intense examination of his animal companion and wordlessly reaches out the hand with Leon resting on it toward me. I reach out my own creating a little bridge for him to cross over to me.
Oh my god. He has sticky little toes!

Leon’s tongue shoots out and sticks onto my face. I don’t even care. He is adorable.

“I keep meaning to ask you what he is.”

I gently run a finger down the chameleon’s back in a petting motion. I think he likes it? It’s hard to tell with reptiles.

“He’s a chameleon of course.”

I level Reborn with the flattest and unimpressed expression that I can muster with a lizard tongue sticking to my face.

“Chameleons don’t turn into guns.”

“This one does.” He says with a secretive smirk.

Jerk, Reborn knows very well by now that I can’t leave a mystery alone.

However, any attempt to stare him into submission is proving to be futile. I try anyway, but he just crosses his arms and stares back with his unnerving black eyes.

Curses.

“Can I get a hint?” I ask.

Conceding to his superior stare down skills.
He reaches out a tiny little hand again and Leon scurries back over and takes his rightful place atop the fedora.

“I’ll make you a deal Ragazzo,” he says after a beat of silence. “You tell me about this ‘premonition of yours, and I will give you a ‘hint’.”

Premonition?

“What premonition?”

Did I have a premonition? I don’t remember having a premonition.

“Dame-Tsuna said that’s how you knew Yamamoto was planning on jumping that day. He said you ‘premonitioned’ it.”

Ah, I did say that, didn’t I?

Well now, this presents me with an interesting conundrum. What happened technically wasn’t a premonition. It had been my brain unlocking a plot point that had been locked up until that point. It was information from another world, another life brute-forcing itself into my brain, thankfully in time to save my friend.

Which does fit some definition of precognition, I guess. If you turn it upside-down and look at it from a certain angle at least.

But Reborn is fishing for specific information here. I’m just not sure what. He is doing his best to be all nonchalant but there is an intensity to his gaze that makes me nervous.

“What about it?” I ask not confirming or denying anything.

He’s too difficult to read and I don’t fancy accidentally stepping on a landmine.
I swear one day I am going to be a master of reading Reborn’s micro-expressions and he will never be able to get away with withholding any important or interesting things from me. It’s going to be a personal mission of mine. Just give me like ten or fifteen years.

Reborn hums in consideration.

“You asked before why it was that Tsunayoshi was chosen to inherit the Vongola.”

Holy crap, full name usage. This must be even more serious than I thought.

“Yeah?”

“It is in part because he is the firstborn child of Sawada Iemitsu and thus the next blood-related heir to Vongola. But more importantly, it is because he checked off certain ‘ability’ requirements needed by the head of the Vongola Familiga.

Sky Flames. He has to mean the Sky Flames.

“You mean the fire stuff?” I ask, being deliberately reductive.

Silence.

Dead silence.

“… This would have been so much easier had you been a gullible dunce like your brother.”

“Oi! Rude!”

“Yes. Brat. The ‘fire stuff’ as you so eloquently put it.” Reborn continues completely ignoring my objection to him calling Tsuna an idiot. “Now tell me how often do you have these ‘premonitions.’”
Precognition is a Sky Flame thing, isn’t it?

I should have come up with a better lie while I was all hopped up on cold medication and antibiotics. One that would have preferably put me under less scrutiny.

But there is also a chance that I can use this as a loophole of sorts. I mean, yeah it’s complete bullshit and I do not, in actuality, have access to Sky Flames (or flames of any kind) but it’s not completely unreasonable that I could have inherited something from Vongola, right? I would be a convenient workaround for me knowing things I shouldn’t.

Well, in the absence of better superpowers at the moment…

“What do you count as premonitions?”

“Kid.” He growls obviously thinking that I’m still stalling.

“Hey, I am legitimately asking here. Do you mean full-on technicolor the hills are alive the sound of music, sirens blaring in my ears or like deja-vu or general bad feelings.”

“All. Of. It.”

“Oh….Often then?”

I then get the absolute pleasure of watching the world’s greatest hitman smack himself in the face. Reborn has achieved peak levels of exasperation. It is somewhat gratifying to know he can get just as frustrated as the rest of us.

He probably just has a higher tolerance considering the whole cursed to live a purgatorial existence in a comically tiny form.

He starts muttering to himself in angry Italian. I can’t understand what he’s saying but I do catch the word ‘idiot’ used liberally throughout the entire rant.
“You okay?”

Reborn glares at me from beneath the brim of his fedora. After a beat, it softens and he pinches the bridge of his nose. The moment of rage has passed apparently.

“Fine. I am going to have to have words with that idiot Iemitsu in the very near future about the importance of not withholding pertinent information from me.”

I can’t help but make a face. That is the second time in this conversation that the old man’s name has been mentioned and it’s starting to make my skin crawl. What does he have to do with anything anyway? It’s not like he’s ever here.

It’s not like he knows a thing about me or Tsuna.

“Dude, why would you ask that looser anything about us? He hasn’t been home in like eight years. I’m pretty sure that Tsuna legitimately thinks he’s dead.”

Reborn just stares at me. I think he has just about had it with this conversation now. If it wasn’t so disturbing to have the soulless black eyes continuing to bore into my soul it would almost be funny.

“For what it’s worth I don’t think this is anything to worry about,” I say in a vain attempt to console him. “I mean, I can’t do any of the crazy orange fire stuff that Tsuna can so I don’t think that anyone can worry about me trying to step on his toes and trying to usurp his claim to the mafia throne.”

“Any attempt at that would require you to kill him.”

My heart fucking stops.

“Excuse me?”
“Tsunayoshi is the heir designated by Vongola Nono. It has been written with his will. Any attempt to usurp him would require his death.”

“Never.”

I say it with all the conviction I have in me.

“I would rather die first.”

Never in a fucking million years. I will never hurt my brother.

Reborn turns to face the window. The rain has started to pour again. In the distance, I can hear a clap of thunder roll through the sky.

“It’s a shame that not all brothers share your sense of loyalty,” he says.

I get the feeling then that the conversation is over. And just in time too. Tsuna comes back in the room with a bag full of snacks and a tray of coffees from that artisanal shop down in the cafeteria.

“You're my hero, I love you,” I tell him as I take a sip of the lovely, lovely laté.

He smiles back at me and pops open the lid on the box of donuts that he got for us.

I can’t imagine a world where I would turn on my brother for power or glory or whatever else that Vongola may try to tempt its heirs with. Tsuna is my brother, my best friend. Tsuna is…

Well, he’s my Sky too, isn’t he?

Chapter End Notes

For no reason in particular, does anyone want to guess what Inari’s flame type is?
The Rules of Russian Roulette

Chapter Summary

It’s a dangerous game.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Two days later the hospital releases me which a clean bill of health. Mom, Tsuna and Reborn all come to pick me up, which is sweet of them. Not that I was expecting that they would make me walk home on my own, but I’m pretty sure that Reborn and Tsuna had more interesting things to do at the very least.

I am so ready to sleep in my own bed again. Away from the endless beeping, yelling and general ambient hospital sounds. I have a hard enough time combating my insomnia without all that. Once I started getting used to the medication they had me on I pretty much kissed goodbye to sleep.

Also, my latest Reborn encounter had left me pretty on edge.

As we walk home Tsuna fills me in on all of the latest and greatest news from Namimori Middle School.

“We had an assembly yesterday so that the principal could talk to us about gang violence on the rise in town.” He tells me.

“Gang violence? You mean like the Disciplinary Committee?” It would serve Hibari right if someone in authority finally cracked down on his little para-military regime. But somehow I highly doubt it.

Tsuna shakes his head, “No, like an actual street gang with drugs and guns and stuff. Apparently there has been an increase in gang violence in the downtown area.”

He's quiet for a moment.
“I think it might have been the same people who kidnapped you that one time.” He whispers so that mom doesn't overhear.

Ah, those assholes. I spare a look at Reborn. Even though I am fairly certain he had played some hand in orchestrating that whole adventure I don't think he has anything to do with this gang stuff.

If I remember right, he doesn't associate with no-name riffraff.

He's an elitist snob.

“Something you want to say Inari-kun?” He says in a completely faux innocent voice.

“Nope.”

I turn back to Tsuna intent on changing the subject.

“So how are the guys?” I'm referring to a Takeshi and Hayato who have become his constant companions in my absence.

His face twists into something like a grimace.

“Takeshi and Hayato don't get along at all.” He complains.

That doesn't surprise me at all. Conflicting personality types and all that. Takeshi has probably been needling poor Gokudera (or Hayato now I guess) to see what happens. I'm sure they will settle into a stable dynamic eventually.

They just need a good old fashioned bonding moment to bring them close together.

“So I guess lunchtime has been lots of fun.”
“I can't wait to have you back so I'm not the only one caught in the middle.” He complains.

“I think it's all part of your stunning magnetic personality.”

Tsuna levels me with a flat look. “Are you saying that I attract weirdos?”

I pause to think about it for a moment. Considering all the colorful characters that are on their way I'm going to have to say…

“Yes.”

Mom laughs as Tsuna makes a loud squawk in protest.

“Tsu-kun has made so many wonderful friends lately.”

I stumble as Reborn decides this is the perfect moment to jump ship from Tsuna’s shoulder to my own.

“Another premonition of yours?” He mutters in my ear.

It doesn't seem like Reborn will be letting go of the whole ‘premonition’ thing anytime soon. He must have caught my momentary pause. I really hope he loses interest in this soon. Or I think of a better lie.

Whichever comes first.

“Yup.” I agree as I cheerfully disclose no further information.

I am not helping my own case at all here.

“And Hibari-san keeps turning up everywhere lately.” Tsuna continues on. Unaware of our little
“Really?” Tsuna’s threat level must have been upgraded if Hibari has taken an active interest in him. But then he had born witness to Dying Will Tsuna who displayed inhuman feats of strength.

“He keeps asking about you.” Tsuna continues on, “You shouldn't fight him so often.”

I don't know how to respond to that. It seems like my sworn nemesis misses me. It's the downside of me being the only one crazy enough to fight him voluntarily.

“It's all part of our manly bond,” I inform him.

“Frequent violence?”

“That, and I really can’t stand that jerk.”

“… I really don't like that he's always picking fights with you.” Tsuna grumbles.

He's worried about me. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

“It's all good bro, I can handle him.”

He grumbles but doesn't offer any further comments on the Hibari front.

We're just going to have to cross that bridge when it comes for a beat down.

“Anything else I should know about on the school front?”

“Oh, Kyoko-chan!!” He exclaims so suddenly that I jump and look around trying to spot the girl in question.
She is nowhere to be seen.

“Uhhh, what about her?”

Tsuna then informs me in rapid and somewhat broken sentences that are becoming more and more nonsense the longer that he speaks that we (here meaning the two of us) are going to be working on a group project with the illustrious Kyoko Sasagawa. Apparently, just the mention of this impending collaboration with his lady love had fried the logic circuits in Tsuna’s brain. He kept going until he was just straining off into space with a dopey love struck look on his face.

“Tsuna, concentrate.” I snap my fingers in front of his face trying to get his attention.

“I know your all excited to be working with Kyoko, but I need to know what this project is on.”

“Huh?”


Mom laughs some more. I’m glad that me and Tsuna are such a good comedy duo today if only to brighten hers.

“Tsu-kun has a crush, how adorable.”

“Moooooom.”

Tsuna turns bright red.

“Its really sweet honey. Your just as dumbstruck as I was when I first met your father.”

She’s been talking about the old man a lot lately. I know she misses him, no matter how much of a dead beat he is. He better call her soon, or else I’m going to have to get on a plane to Italy and go
kick his ass.

Or better yet, I'll hire Reborn to go kick his ass for me. I'll probably have to sell him my soul or something but it would be worth it.

It doesn't look like I'm going to be getting any more sense out of Tsuna until the Kyoko haze wears off. Oh well, I guess I'll figure out what the project is on later. I'm sure we have time.

Or maybe fucking not. Because as soon we turn the corner of our street and I can see, even from the end of the block, that Kyoko Sasagawa is standing in front of our front gate. Apparently awaiting our arrival.

When Tsuna said we would be working on a project with her I didn't think he had meant in the immediate now!

“Tsuna-kun! Inari-kun!” She calls to us in a cheerful greeting.

Well, at least now I know why Tsuna went offline so suddenly once he had mentioned Kyoko. I glance back over to him to see that he has dissolved into a blushing and stammering mess.

He has absolutely no game.

Mom slips past all of us to unlock the door and usher everyone into the house.

“You kids get settled and I'll bring you out some coffee and snacks for your study date.”

At the word ‘date’, we lose Tsuna completely. His soul vacates his body and we are left with a husk that has been left over.
“Hey Kyoko, how have you been?” I ask because I have at least some social skills.

“I’ve been good, schools been really exciting lately.”

“Exciting is a word for it.”

I feel her eyes lock on to Reborn, who is still perched upon my shoulder like a demented parrot. I actually think he might have been doing something with his magical sunshine fire, because ever since he had hitched a ride the lingering pain in my chest has subsided.

Has Kyoko met Reborn yet?

They haven't crossed paths in my presence yet at the very least.

Should I introduce them?

“Who is this little cutie?” She asks taking the decision out of my hands.

“Ciaossu, I’m Reborn.” He introduces himself.

I have a feeling that we missed an important plot point somewhere along the way here. Reborn and Kyoko should have crossed paths long before this. Like the day after he arrived or something. Right? Or am I remembering things wrong?

I mean I don't think it will have any negative effects in the grand scheme of things. But it is still odd.

“Is he your little brother?” She asks me and Tsuna.

“T’m their tutor.” He answers with a hint of irritation.
“That's so sweet that your playing pretend together.” She coos.

Yeah, this shit must get really irritating for him.

“I'm also a hitman.” He says flatly.

Kyoko seems to have resolved to believe the most mundane answer in this scenario and Reborn's minor protest had fallen on deaf ears. But to be fair to Kyoko no one outside of our little bubble of reality-warping weirdness would ever readily accept that someone with the physical appearance of a baby would be in any way qualified to teach or monitor a couple of teenagers.

I feel sort of bad for him, but Tsuna is more than happy to go along with this misinterpretation. He jumps back to life and begins telling Kyoko about how Reborn is our young cousin from Italy who is staying with us for a while.

It's so boring in comparison to the truth. And I'm sure that in some other bizarre reality it is the truth.

Tsuna always gets weird whenever someone brings up the fact that Reborn has absolute authority over us. And I guess I sort of understand where he's coming from. Tsuna has always cared way too much about what other people think.

And the thought of a child, no matter how talented and intelligent, being seen as more capable then he is, is just too much for his poor ego to deal with. It shouldn't be an issue though, I mean, travel-sized or not Reborn is pretty fucking cool.

And Tsuna should have some inkling by now that Reborn isn't actually a child…right?

I mean even without my super cool foreknowledge I think I would be able to tell that something isn't quite right with our home tutors whole situation.

Okay, so maybe it was a little out of the realm of possibility for Tsuna to make those intuitive leaps.
No one expects cursed rainbow babies to be the answer.

“He really is our tutor though,” I say because I owe Tsuna back for forgetting to tell me about the whole group project thing.

Neither of them pays any attention to my little insertion. They are just busy being adorable and innocent together.

“So what’s this project on anyway?” I ask, somewhat desperately.

“Oh, Tsuna-kun didn't tell you?”

Somebody better tell me something soon or I'm going to fucking scream!

“No.”

“We’re doing a collaborative writing project for literature class. We're supposed to write about our dreams for the future based on our elementary school ‘when I grow up’ projects.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

I don't want to do that.

Tsuna, upon hearing this reminder, gives me a look that clearly communicates ‘Oh fuck.’ It is a look that is probably mirrored exactly by my own face.

Those papers are somewhat problematic.
For various reasons.

Paramount of all being the embarrassment they are likely to cause us. Although for different reasons.

Those papers had also been buried deep within the depths of the linen closet never to be seen again. There are some things that should just be allowed to fade out of memory. Such as the personal writing projects of a pair of somewhat troubled and impulsive seven-year-olds.

Me and Tsuna share a look of silent understanding. We were going to lie through our teeth and admit to nothing.

“Oh no, I don't think we kept those,” I say with my voice filled with faux regret.

“Yeah, I think mom threw those out ages ago,” Tsuna says adding into the deception check.

“Really?” Reborn is clearly not buying our bullshit.

But I'm hoping that in the absence of viable evidence to the contrary he will drop it.

“What have I thrown out?” Mom asks. She comes back into the room with a tray of coffees and treats. “I never throw away anything that my boys make.”

“It was just a homework assignment from years ago,” Tsuna says quickly, “nothing important.”

Yeah, not suspicious at all there bro-bro.

“They were ‘my plans for the future’ from back in elementary school.” Kyoko chirps in helpfully.

“Oh! I have those!”
Apparently too helpfully!

Me and Tsuna share a horrified look across the table. This is bad. Not only did we fail to properly dispose of those embarrassing things, now it’s worse because now Reborn is curious. Tsuna is frantically shaking his head, desperate to get the cease and desist order across.

Unfortunately, mom is already halfway out of the room.

“You boys were always so cute,” she calls back to us, “Just give me a second and I’ll go fetch them for you.”

Oh well, no stopping it now.

I sigh.

“So, Kyoko, what did you want to be in the future when you were seven?”

We might as well get on with this.

“A police officer.” She answers with a serene smile.

Ah, well, that might make things a little bit awkward for Tsuna.

The mob boss and the police officer, star crossed lovers. It sounds like something straight out of one of those harlequin romances that mom likes to read. Though judging by the look on a Tsuna’s face he’s more concerned with the inevitable arrest.

“That's cool. You still want to be a cop?”

“Nope.”
Tsuna breathes a sigh of relief.

“So what are your plans now?” He asks.

“I want to be a secret agent like in the movies.”

She is smiling in that lovely serene way that she is known for but the longer that we go without responding a level of uncertainty creeps into her eyes and she starts to fidget uncomfortably.

It's good to know that me and Tsuna aren't the only ones with odd aspirations for the future.

Reborn nods in approval, “it's good to aim high.”

I'm glad that someone said something because I've really been caught by the strange vision of our class idol decked out in leathers like Black Widow. Not really my thing, but an interesting visual.

Tsuna, on the other hand, makes his little squealing noise and falls over. Kyoko leans over and gives him a concerned look and an experimental poke when he doesn't move.

He sits bolt upright, his face is red as a fire hydrant and he stutters and stammers. He must have had the leather vision as well.

One day, Tsuna will be able to carry out a normal interaction with this girl, but that is not this day.

“I know it's a bit of an odd career choice for a girl,” Kyoko says, “but it's not that strange right?”

“It's badass is what it is,” I tell her.

She smiles.
“What about you two? What did you dream of becoming when you were kids?”

“Uhhhhh.”

We share another pointed look.

By now they both must know that it’s embarrassing. And they wouldn’t be wrong in that assumption. In terms of sheer weirdness to come out of the mouth of a seven-year old, I think that I might even have it worse than Tsuna does.

His at least could sort of be played off as a child with an overactive imagination. Mine on the other hand…

Well, let’s just say that looking back, it is entirely possible that bits and pieces of information from another world might have been leaking through my entire life.

That or I was exposed to some R rated movies and trashy reality TV when I was way too young.

“I found them!” Mom says, coming back into the room with perfect timing.

We reach out to take our respective papers.

“Thanks, mom.”

“Where did you even find them?” Tsuna asks.

“I found them in the linen closet when I was doing some spring cleaning. They must have ended up in the laundry somehow.”

Note to self: never hide anything in the linen closet.
“Well, I’ll leave you, kids, to your project. Have fun.”

And then we're left facing the combined expectant gazes of Reborn and Kyoko. There has been too much build-up at this point for us to chicken out now. The sadistic glint in Reborn's eye tells me all I need to know about what he thinks about this situation.

I peek at my paper. It's still weird but not quite as bad as I thought it was and not as long as I thought it was. Though a paragraph in second grade almost equates to a three-page essay these days.

I really do wish that I had just written mad scientist though.

“Tsuna, you go first.”

“What? Why?!”

Because I really don't want to go first bro.

“Dame-Tsuna, cowardice is not an attractive trait for a mafia boss to show in front of a lady,” Reborn chides him.

Tsuna looks like he wants to argue the ‘mafia boss’ thing, but amazingly it also looks like he wants to man up and impress his lady love.

Impressively, the option to man up and get it the fuck over with actually wins.

He holds up the page with a grimace on his face.

“My name is Tsuna. Everyone says I'm Dame-Tsuna. But when I grow up I'm going to become a giant robot. I won't be worthless Tsuna anymore. And then I will have friends.”

His voice is completely flat as he reads it and the grimace on his face deepens.
The rest of the page is decorated with a doodle of a robot that bore a vague resemblance to my brother.

I had forgotten how much self-loathing had been put into those few sentences. See, it's one thing for a kid to imaginatively write something like 'when I grow up I'm going to become an awesome giant robot-like a Gundam or Voltron and fight the forces of evil!' It is another thing entirely for a little kid to write 'I'm a worthless piece of shit and I hope that one day someone will rebuild me as something better and more functional.'

The teacher we had that year had made it even worse when he had read Tsuna’s little paper out loud in front of the entire class and had mocked him for it.

He had laughed. At a seven-year old boy in front of all of his peers and had encouraged them all to join in.

That man had been a fucking asshole. And I live happily with the knowledge that I had gotten that asshole fired.

“That…sure is something a Tsuna-kun,” Kyoko responds awkwardly.

“Yeah…” Tsuna trails off.

“Inari-kun?” Kyoko prompts me.

If they are counting on me to end this awkward encounter they have another thing coming.

“When I grow up I'm going to beat the ever-loving shit out of anyone who ever tries to mess with my brother. And I'm going to marry a billionaire and I'll have a bunch of nice cars and drink martinis every day. I'm going to be more badass than all you other fuckers and you can just suck it.”

I had been a foul-mouthed little shit.
And yes, I did want to be trophy husband.

I bask in the ongoing awkward silence.

To be perfectly honest, the dream really hasn't changed that much. At the most, it would require some tweaking to include the Italian mafia and magical fire that I may or may not possess.

I really want me some magical firepower though.

“So,” I continue powering right through the awkward silence, “somehow we need to reconcile these three very different ideas into one cohesive essay.”

“Obviously we are going to need to veer into the realm of fiction because these ideas are much too different to be brought together in any other way.”

“We can make is like a spy thriller.” Kyoko jumps on board with way more excitement than I would have anticipated.

Seriously Tsuna, you better ask her out on a date soon.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you'll be our super cool secret agent protagonist, Tsuna will be your partner who has been transformed into a cyborg by the villain.”

“And what about you Inari-kun?”

“I, of course, will play the role of the villain's roguish boy toy who is playing both sides until I discover that Tsuna is my long lost twin brother and switch to the side of good.”

Tsuna shoots this forlorn look between the two of us as we continue to brainstorm our literary masterpiece. He sighs, picks up his pencil and notebook and starts to take notes.
We go on working like that for another two hours. By this point, Tsuna has filled up most of the notebook and me and Kyoko have moved on to the sequel in what is shaping up to be a blockbuster script.

Reborn has been lounging over on the couch taking apart and cleaning a revolver. He looks over at us every once in a while when we start getting too loud.

When he begins to deliberately spin the cylinder and stare unblinkingly at us I know that he is plotting something.

I mean it's Reborn so he is always plotting something. But it seems that he has something particular in mind for the three of us.

“You have all been working so diligently,” he says casually. “How about you take a break and we play a game.”

He hops down from the couch and saunters toward us. He spins the revolver dexterously before setting it down on the table between the three of us.

We all look at it.

“Got a specific game in mind dude?” I ask.

“Russian Roulette.” He replies with a smirk.

“Isn't that dangerous?” Tsuna asks, “Why would we want to play something so dangerous?”

He looks to Kyoko, obviously hoping that she would be a voice of reason. He obviously hasn't been listening very closely to our tales of alternate universe Kyoko who is a gun-toting badass.

“Sounds like fun!” She chirps clamping her hands excitedly.
I reach out and pick up the revolver.

“Is this real?”

“It's a toy,” Reborn assures us.

He's lying. I don't exactly have much experience with guns but I am fairly certain that this is a real gun.

Now I'm sure that he has something specific planned.

“So who wants to go first?”

“I will!” Kyoko instantly volunteers and reaches out her hand for the revolver.

I hand it over to her pointedly ignoring the look of panic on Tsuna’s face. I am going to trust that Reborn is not going to actively try and kill us.

She takes the gun in hand and aims it at her own temple. Kyoko really fits in with this crazy family, doesn't she? I mean, we've never really hung out all that much, but the few times that we have she has been down to go along with the crazy. It's a shame that she never got a chance to level up in the ‘original timeline.’

“Wow, this is more nerve-wracking then I thought it would be.”

Kyoko takes the revolver in her hands and nervously presses the barrel against her temple. She is shaking. Apparently, even with Reborn assuring everyone that it was just a toy her self preservation instincts were kicking in.

“Kyoko-chan, you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” Tsuna says reassuringly.
This is apparently all the encouragement she needed to actually get on with things because the next thing I know a shot rings out in our living room and Kyoko drops to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Holy shit!

“Is she dead!?” Tsuna shrieks, turning to Reborn with accusation in his eyes.

“Don’t be stupid Dame-Tsuna, I never would give you idiots a gun loaded with real bullets.”

“Would you give us a gun loaded with unreal bullets?” I ask tentatively.

“There was a Deathperation Bullet loaded in the chamber.” He confirms, still showing no reaction to the fact that there is a motionless thirteen-year-old girl on our living room floor.

Tsuna lets out a wordless exclamation of outrage as he rushes to her side, using his non-existent first aid skills to check for a pulse.

“We just have to hope that she had something that she regretted.”

“And what if she didn’t!?” Tsuna demands.

“I know how to hide a body Dame-Tsuna, I’m not an amateur.”

Reborn is a stone-cold killer.

Tsuna looks like he’s gearing himself up for a full-scale panic attack when an explosion of light erupts from Kyoko’s body. Sparkling yellow flames bursting through her skin and a burst of concentrated sunshine centered on her forehead.

Her eyes snap open.
Brilliant gold instead of their usual honey brown.

And then she sits bolt upright…

Leaving the majority of her clothing behind!!!

“Kyoko-chan!” Tsuna wails in mortification.

“Who invented those bullets anyway?” I ask Reborn, doing my very best not to stare at the glowing half-naked girl standing in the centre of our living room.

“Vongola Primo.” He answers simply.

“So what your saying is that our ancestor was a fucking pervert.”

Reborn doesn't dignify this with a response.

Kyoko in dying will mode is nothing like Tsuna in dying will mode. There is none of the screaming or uncontrollable rage that seems to personify my brother when he takes one of those magic bullets.

This probably says something about the levels of rage that he is repressing. We should probably talk about that at some point.

She regards the room in slow consideration before her eyes fall upon the revolver that is still in her grip.

“This will do.”
The prim feminine voice carries with it an undeniable air of threat with it that immediately sends a chill down my spine.

What will do?

And also why?

And also WHAT?

“I'm going to borrow this.” She says gesturing to Reborn with the gun.

“There are no bullets left-” He starts to say before the same yellow fire fills the chamber and she spins it experimentally.

“Never mind.” He says.

“Reborn?”

“This might be a problem.”

The panic that fills my soul when these words leave Reborn's mouth is indescribable. The fact that it is closely accompanied by the sound of glass shattering as Kyoko bursts through our living room window clad in only her panties and a bra.

Which, according to anime logic, is the most powerful armor of all.

“KYOKO-CHAN!” Tsuna shrieks bolting to the window and looking helplessly after her as she marches down our walkway and out of view.

“Uhhh, Reborn?”
Leon darts down his arm and transforms into a small green handgun that Reborn cocks dramatically and takes aim.

“Go after her Dame-Tsuna.” He orders, and fires.

With a burst of orange fire and a roar, Tsuna explodes out of his clothing and throws himself out the OTHER window in mad pursuit of Kyoko.

“I have no idea how we're going to explain this to mom.”

“Worry about the small stuff later Ragazzo,” Reborn says as he leaps onto my shoulder, “after them.”

And with that, I'm running, taking only the briefest moment to slip on my shoes at the front door before I'm hot on their trail. The ache in my lungs returns momentarily and I almost dissolve into a coughing fit, when a warmth stars radiating from the back of my neck seeping into my skin and chasing away the pain and exhaustion.

I never would have pegged Reborn as a white mage, but somehow it almost fits him. In a roundabout way at least.

“Thanks.”

He doesn’t say anything, but the healing warmth intensifies. Something fun that I didn’t know about Sun Flames until this moment was that shot of fucking adrenaline that closely follows the infusion. It's like downing a six energy drinks. An explosion of energy on the cellular level.

My mitochondria are dancing the fucking samba right now.

I take off after Tsuna like a fucking race car. Launching over a mailbox and scampering up a wall to get a better view of my targets.
Lucky for me, it’s not too hard to spot a couple of glowing teenagers rampaging through the suburbs in their underpants.

Their stampede has a distinct downtown trajectory to it. Kyoko is going to fucking kill someone. There is no other explanation for why our class idol would take a god damn gun with a look like that on her face. She constantly has assholes confessing their ‘love’ for her and trying to manhandle her. It’s probably some jerk from school.

In which case we should probably stop her from killing them.

Let’s not kill normie teens.

Hana is going to kill me.

Hana is most definitely going to kill me no matter what happens here. As soon as she finds out that I let her best friend run around the city in nothing but her bra and panties she is going to kick my ass.

And to that point, I am feeling a great deal more uncomfortable about Kyoko in Dying-Will-Mode (or is this Hyper Dying Will now?) than I ever did about Tsuna.

It is probably because she is orders of magnitude more terrifying than he will ever be.

I make a running leap off the wall and land in a full out sprint. Even going at full speed I will have a hard time catching up with the two imbued with supernatural strength while I’m on foot, Sun Flame booster shot or no.

“I’m going to need to jack a bike or something,” I inform Reborn through panted breaths.

He hums in acknowledgment but offers no other commentary. I get the sense that even he is a litter perturbed by this situation.
“So, you know, keep your eyes out for a fucking bike or whatever.”

He tugs hard on my hair and I yelp.

“Watch your mouth, Ragazzo.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

I sprint another four blocks or so when Reborn cuts in,

“On your left.”

I pivot hard without thinking, and where I expect to see some idiots unchained bicycle I come face to face with Hibari Kyoya.

On a motorcycle.

Fuck me, I don’t have time for this shit.

“Sawada.” He says with a predatory glint in his eyes, which only sharpens when he notices Reborn there with me.

“And the baby.”

He makes a motion that I immediately recognized as a prelude to an imminent fight. I really don’t have time for this right now though. I need to catch up with Tsuna and Kyoko and either stop them from committing murder or help them commit murder. I’m still not clear on that.

I make a split-second decision.
One that I am most likely to end up regretting in the very near future.

I march right up to my mortal nemesis (who even seated on a motorcycle is still taller than me which is extremely irritating) and look him dead in the eye.

“I will fight you as many god damn times as you want for a whole fucking week if you help me catch up with those two glowing idiots right the fuck now.”

Apologies Kyoko for calling you an idiot, but desperate times and all that.

Hibari’s eyes narrow in consideration and after a long moment of silence, I feel something hard shoved against my chest. I look down and see...a helmet?

“Get on.”

Let me make one thing clear. I have never in this life or any other ridden on a motorcycle. And let me tell you now I hate it. Immediately after taking my seat behind Hibari and feeling the engine rev I proceed to cling to him for dear life.

He makes an ‘oomph’ sound and I realize that I am probably crushing his ribs, but I really could not care less.

“You should hang on tight,” I tell Reborn.

“You’re still too green to be worrying about me.”

If he has any further commentary it is lost in the roar of the engine and the gust of wind that blasts into us as Hibari takes off in high-speed pursuit.
I blank out the drive. There is no way that I can force myself to remain cognizant for this trip. I can put up with a lot by putting my life in Hibari Kyoya’s questionable hands is one step too far.

And more to the point, I have learned something important about myself today: I am petrified of motorcycles.

I am fairly certain that I actually cracked some of Hibari’s ribs. Not that he would tell me if I did. He deserves it anyway for driving like a maniac.

We did actually manage to catch up with Tsuna and Kyoko who had skirted the downtown center and led us straight into the industrial district. It’s not the nicest part of town. Most of the warehouses around here have been abandoned in favor of new infrastructure outside of town. This particular conglomerate of storage facilities is somewhat infamous for gang activity.

And actually looks vaguely familiar.

Isn’t this where I was kidnapped a few weeks back?

Huh.

Enemy hideout encountered. Apparently.

Though I still don’t know why.

I look over to Tsuna who has collapsed onto his ass his flame slowly dying out but not quite extinguished yet. He has returned enough to his right mind enough to be freaking the heck out now though. His gaze is locked onto Kyoko, which is fair considering she looks more like an avenging angel bathed in divine light than out classmate right now.

She’s totally badass.

But still in her underpants.
“Inari,” Tsuna hisses at me, “clothes.” He gestures toward Kyoko while doing his best to cover his own shame.

I give Reborn a sidelong glance. “If I give her my hoodie is it going to instantly dissolve from the nuclear radiation or whatever the hell this is?”

He gives her an appraising look, “Not at this point.”

“Kay.”

I quickly shuck off my hoodies and hand it over to her.

“I’m totally down for this mission of vengeance or whatever the heck this is, but please put this on before Tsuna has an aneurysm.”

Kyoko stares at it quietly for a moment before grabbing it and sliding it on.

“Thank you.”

“So, uh, Kyoko-chan?” Tsuna stammers still red as a brick, “What are we doing here?”

She doesn’t look at him. Just continues to stand there and quietly regard the warehouse we have gathered in front of. And then she speaks.

“The men who hang out here are terrible people. They have been extorting the people in my neighbourhood and last week they attacked my brother.”

She raises the revolver and reignites the chamber with sun flames.

“I am going to teach them a lesson.”
From the look of how things are shaping up, it is going to be the lesson of a quick and painful death.

Holy shit though, Kyoko has the world’s greatest poker face. I never would have guessed she had something so heavy weighing on her mind. But then again it’s not like either of us know her all too well.

I hope Ryohei is okay.

He’s a couple of years above us so I don’t know him all that well. But based on the knowledge gleaned from another universe he is a pretty cool dude.

Whatever happened to him must have either been really bad to have the usually peaceable and polite Kyoko going off the deep end like this, or she subscribes to the same school of ‘disproportionate retribution on behalf of my big brother’ that I do. I have a feeling it’s the latter. If anything tragic had happened to the captain of the boxing team there would have been a school-wide announcement.

“Shouldn’t we call the police or something?” Tsuna asks looking between the lot of us somewhat desperately.

“Those crowding herbivores would never bother coming here.” Hibari responds, “they are nothing more than cowardly sheep.”

Tsuna, who apparently failed to notice who I arrived on a motorcycle with, just barely manages to smother his own shriek of terror.

“Hi-Hi-Hibari-san!”

“Not really important right now bro.”

“What- But-“ He starts and stops several sentences looking from me to Reborn to Hibari and then to our resident angel of vengeance Kyoko.
He sighs and pulls himself up.

“Can I at least have some pants?” He groused at Reborn.

Half a second later Tsuna is smacked in the face by a pair of cargo pants that Reborn summoned from the ether. He quickly shimmies into them and then sneaks around so I am a solid barrier between him and Hibari.

Chicken.

But, okay, I get it.

“Welp, if we’re actually going to do what I think we’re going to do you kids hang tight while I go do what I do best.”

“What’s that?” Tsuna asks warily.

“Vertically scale a fucking building.”

So, good news and bad news.

The good news is that we seem to be dealing with our basic garden variety thug infestation. I recognize a couple of them from back a few weeks ago when I was briefly kidnapped in one of Reborn’s schemes to get Tsuna to man up. They still have the bruises that he gave them too.

Now the bad news.

There are at least twenty-six of them in there from what I was able to spot from my ceiling rafter vantage point. And there is also something that looks vaguely like a ramshackle meth lab in the
back of the warehouse. Because apparently we’re doing a Breaking Bad crossover now.

Once I manage to quietly shimmy back down the drainpipe I relay this important tactical information to the rest of my adventuring party who gaze back at me with variations of the dead-eye stare.

“Two of them have semi-automatic weapons,” I go on, “So we should probably use an element of surprise or something to take them out first.”

For a moment I wish that Hayato had come along with us on this random quest. His dynamite would be awesome for taking out all these fuckers in one go. And then I remember the meth lab, and no, that would be all sorts of a bad idea.

“You really have brought the best sort of trouble,” Hibari says busting out the tonfa and licking his lips like the violent creeper he absolutely is.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Tsuna cuts in with frantic and emphatic hand waving. “We’re thirteen and those are actual real criminals with guns! What the hell are we going to do against them?!?”

He’s not wrong.

Magical mafia bullshit aside this whole situation is completely buck wild. And I have no roadmap here. I have no alternate universe information about this situation, because as far as I can tell this situation never happened in that story. There are no guarantees here.

And I’m not going to lie.

I kind of love it.

“We are going to dispense some good old fashioned vigilante justice on these morons for having the audacity to start shit in our town against our people.”

“But-“
“Tsuna, bro, these fuckers are so bad that they have inspired the divine wrath in Kyoko Sasagawa who I’m pretty sure is the most chill person either of us knows.”

“And you heard the apex predator over there, the cops are too scared to do anything about ‘em. And if these assholes are left to go unchecked who knows who they might hurt next. And besides all that we’ve had encounters with these fucks before and last time you beat the ever-loving shit out of them.”

I clap a hand onto his shoulder. I’m kind of hoping that the power of inspiration will just sort of absorb into him.

His head is turned down and his bangs have cast a shadow over his eyes so I can’t get a great read on his mood. But seriously though, if Tsuna isn’t one hundred percent down with his we’ll bail. We get Reborn to use his Dying Will negating mallet we grab Kyoko and we run like hell.

Hibari can do whatever the fuck he wants to do.

I wait a bit. It feels like our whole little party here is holding its breath waiting for Tsuna’s decision.

I catch Reborn out the corner of my eye staring us down with an intense and completely unreadable expression.

A beat passes.

Tsuna clasps his hand over mine. When he looks back at me I watch as his brown eyes bleed to orange and the flames that had all but died out reignite.

And Tsuna is filled with god damned DETERMINATION.

“What’s the plan?”
The plan goes like this:

“Yo! Ugly!” I shout down from on high.

“Yeah you who made the poor choice of facial tattoos.”

I’m the distraction. Of course, I’m the distraction, what else would I be? Who else but me can piss off an entire warehouse full of baddies while jumping around like a lemur and narrowly avoiding death?

I land loudly on the pyramid of crates that are set up under the row of broken windows that I had peeked through earlier. I immediately start screaming insults at whoever is in sight, paying special attention to the two creeps with the semi-automatic handguns.

Lucky for me, neither of them have the wear with all to instantly shoot me in the head.

They really are incompetent thugs. Heavily armed incompetent thugs, but incompetent none the less.

“What the fuck?”

I have the attention of all two dozen people in this warehouse. And even better than that I seem to have a surprise round against them. Which would be awesome if I could do some kind of super cool move to take a whole bunch of them out at once.

As it stands I can only do this:

“Taser!”

I raise up the weapon that I had pilfered from these same idiots weeks ago and pull the trigger. The probes discharge at high velocity and latch into my chosen target. A millisecond later a massive
discharge of electricity travels down the cables and pours into him.

Honestly, I don’t know what I was expecting but I’ll say right now, it wasn’t the Pikachu esque thunder-shock that transformed him into a charred and smoking heap on the ground.

“That was cool.”

There is a moment of stunned silence in the warehouse following this before one of the guys by the ramshackle meth lab (and I can’t help but notice how they are all wearing industrial gas masks which is concerning) hollers:

“Get that fucking kid!”

I had no idea my stupid distraction would work so well.

They all rush forward toward me. There is a mad scramble to grab weaponry and the other guy with the semi-automatic is having a problem with the safety.

Which gives Tsuna ample opportunity to sneak up from behind and judo throws him on to the ground.

He makes a satisfying ‘gack’ sound when his back slams into the concrete and then twists into a convex shape and passes out cold. I can’t help but note that he is also a little on fire, thanks to Tsuna’s crazy fire hands.

The guys that have borne witness to Tsuna’s sneak attack seemed awestruck by the kid who was literally on fire before them. And really who can blame them? Tsuna is super fucking cool right now.

And he doesn't give them time to recover, bull-rushing one and hurling him into the wall.

Kyoko shoots six more of them down with some crazy laser sunbeams that don’t so much pierce into them as they do stun them in an aura of golden light. They don’t really move after that but they aren’t dead. Which is good, because I don’t think Kyoko would be able to live with herself if she literally shot someone dead.
Under the influence of supernatural bullets or no.

Reborn has taken up point on her shoulder. I assume he is imparting some wisdom about using Sun Flames to kick ass.

Hibari charges around like the god damn tank he is clubbing down our enemy combatants. I actually hear a few of them shriek “Hibari Kyoya!” When they spot him and make an attempt to flee.

Not that any of them get really far.

It doesn’t take long for complete chaos to erupt. Three more of them try to swarm Tsuna with bats and brass knuckles. I launch myself off from the top of the crate pyramid and land feet first on one of their shoulders sending him crashing into the ground hard.

I reach out with the taser again and jam it into the ass of the dick with the bad dye job who I recognize from my ill-conceived kidnapping. Once again the eruption of electricity is unexpected, but hey, I’m not going to complain.

“And ya’ toasted.”

“Inari...” Tsuna groans.

“What?”

He doesn’t answer me. Instead, he punches the remaining punk in the nose with his flaming fist.

“Mother fucker.” Curses said punk clutching his bleeding nose and glaring at us through watering eyes, “What’s wrong with you fucking brats?”

“Just think of us as the neighborhood watch,” I tell him just as Hibari comes up from behind and clubs him across the back of the head.
There are about ten left standing at this point. The four with the gas masks are still in defensive positions around their chemistry set. Whatever it is they are making they are devoted to protecting it.

I also can’t help but notice that they all look extremely nervous and not about the supernaturally imbued teenagers attacking them.

Note to self: whatever that is it’s probably even more dangerous than I think it is.

“Yo! Who’s in charge of this operation?!"

I address the ones left standing. They all look at each other with equally dumb expressions which tells me all I need to know about the structure of this organization. Nonexistent is what it is.

If they do have a boss of some sort they aren’t in the building right now.

“Hey Kyoko-chan this is your show, did you want to address the class?”

She steps up and I can’t help but marvel at the vision she creates. She bathed in yellow golden light that sparkles in prismatic bursts. The most impressive part though is how the flames have convalesced and formed behind her in what looks like honest to god angel wings.

I don’t know if it is her own little flare for the dramatic or if it has some greater meaning. Either way, it looks totally badass.

“You are all going to put down your weapons and march yourselves to the police station where you will confess to your crimes and accept your punishment without complaint. You will never come back to this neighborhood or harass my neighbors or my brother ever again.” She raises the revolver, “Or next time you won’t be getting back up again.”
Kyoko fires off another chaotic burst of sunshine laser beams that send our new friends fleeing for their lives. Some pause to pick up their injured and unconscious comrades, before running scared like the incompetent gangsters they are.

And then there is only one poor fool left. One of the gas mask dudes who’s holding up a crowbar and has planted himself between us and the drug lab (?)

I saunter up to him doing my best to get a look at what’s cooking on the table. There are colourful concoctions bubbling in their beakers, well-sealed packages, and, what stands out the most, polished violet crystals giving off an eerie glow.

So, maybe not drugs.

Which begs the question; what the hell is it then?

I catch sight of Hibari behind him and I smile in the most threatening way I can muster right now. I walk right up into this random goon's personal space completely ignoring the crowbar that he still has clutched in his shaking hands and clap a hand around his upper arm. The spark of electricity travels from me to him and I can feel his muscles lock up when the current runs through him.

“Choose life dude.” I tell him as Hibari brings his tonfa down on the table breaking it in half sending everything crashing to the ground in a cacophony of breaking glass.

He breaks from my grip and bolts toward the exit, not even taking half a second to look back. That’s a bad sign.

A haze of purple and indigo starts to swirl up from the mess on the floor. I briefly consider grabbing one of the glowing gems but decide against it. Fuck it, if it’s important I’m sure we will encounter more at some point.

“Yeah, we should leave.”

“Tsuna!” Reborn calls out and Tsuna is there next to him and Kyoko in an instant. She is wavering dangerously eyes drooping and the Sun Flames finally dying out. She drops and Tsuna catches her in his arms and lifts her up bridal style.
A strange cracking and chiming sound starts to arise from the slaw of chemicals and broken chemistry equipment on the ground and a feeling of dread immediately fills me.

**MOVE. MOVE. MOVE. MOVE. MOVE.**

The urge to get out of this building ASAP intensifies and I sprint toward Tsuna latching on to one of the belt loops in his pants and tugging him toward the exit. Something that sounds like cherry bombs being set off starts popping off behind us.

“Leaving now!”

Later that night once we deliver Kyoko safely back home and Tsuna is passed out cold face down in his bed; Reborn hops up next to me and smacks me hard across the head.

“OW! What the heck was that for?!”

“Brat, next time you feel the urge to inspire someone do me a favor and don’t use your WILL to do so unless you’re absolutely sure you can deal with the consequences.” He growls.

And even coming from that cherubic face it is terrifying.

But also confusing.

“What?”

He very pointedly does not answer me, turning around in his hammock and aggressively snoring.
“What?”

Chapter End Notes

Inari is a disaster lighting child with a little something extra mixed in that will come into play as the story goes on.

Let me know what you think as we tread further into canon-divergent territory.
Expect the Unexpected

Chapter Summary

It’s a hard lesson learned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have come to the extremely important conclusion that I know jack about shit. Either the information that was bequeathed onto me by supernatural entities beyond my mortal understanding is missing some very key information or my very existence in this world has had some very dramatic butterfly effect ripples.

We made the morning news.

Well, we sort of made the morning news.

“...street gangs known as the Hammerheads charged with various counts of assault, extortion, kidnapping, armed robbery, and drug trafficking. They have been plaguing the Namimori police department for the better part of a year and have, in recent weeks increased the frequency of their criminal activity...”

Me and Tsuna had stopped dead in the middle of our morning rituals to stare at the timeless beauty of Hinata Shoichi of channel five news talk about some very familiar-looking individuals.

“...that is until last night when the entirety of the gang arrived on the steps of the Namimori police station and turned themselves over into police custody. Confessions are still being received but at this time it looks like the justice department will have all they need to get full convictions of all the members...”

“What did we do?” Tsuna asks faintly.

I don’t answer I just keep watching the news footage. Yup, those are most definitely our friends from last night.
“...officials have noted that the gang members have suffered a litany of injuries including burns, blunt force trauma and in some instances electrocution. At this time it is unknown what caused these injuries or what inspired the Hammerheads to turn themselves in, however, officials are speculating that it is the result of a turf war with a rival criminal element...”

“Inari, what the fuck!” Tsuna hisses smacking me repeatedly in the arm, not tearing his eyes away from the screen.

“Uh...”

“...the most recent press release from the Namimori PD states that the wear-house that had functioned as the Hammerhead’s base of operations has been placed under quarantine. Forensic investigators have found evidence that the gang was in the midst of developing some sort of biological weapon and ask that the public remain clear of this area until further notice...”

“Bio- What?”

“... expect further updates in this story as they come to light. This is Hinata Shoichi with channel five news signing off...”

The television powers down with a click and we turn to look at Reborn who is holding out the remote in front of him.

“What did we DO!?” Tsuna asks Reborn, leaning heavily into the developing hysteria.

Reborn tips his fedora and smirks at us.

“You did what a good boss should do Dame-Tsuna, you defended your people and your territory from a rival faction.”

He looks considering for a moment before he continues, “I’ll be honest, I’m actually a little impressed I suppose this means I can step up your training sooner than I anticipated.”

Tsuna just continues to stare at him. He opens and closes his mouth like he wants to argue but can’t manage to summon the words. And it all just culminates into a low drawn-out “Hieeeeeee.”
He burrows into my side and continues looking shellshocked.

“I don’t understand what’s happening.”

I pat his back comfortingly.

“Neither do I bro.”

And I don’t, I really, really don’t. My roadmap doesn’t include anything about this stuff. Me being here couldn’t have possibly changed things this dramatically, could it?

If that is the case I am kind of nervous about the larger ramifications of my existence. But a large part of myself is just saying fuck it and roll with the crazy. And I am leaning hard into that feeling for my own sanity.

“But, hey, look on the bright side,” I say tickling him in the side and making him flail.

“What bright side?”

“Apparently we saved the city from a badly constructed bioweapon. We’re basically superheroes now.”

Or anti-hero protagonists at the very least considering our criminal underworld connections.

Tsuna’s response to this is to roll into a fetal position and disappear inside his hoodie like a turtle. I reach over and jab him in the side with a finger, he static charge that zaps him is completely unintentional.

I have to bite back the manic grin that is threatening to take over my entire face as I make the deep green sparks of electricity dance across my fingertips. It’s not quite thunder-shock level but it is better than nothing and I am fucking thrilled.

I glance over at Reborn out of the corner of my eye and find him staring back at me intently. And then he leaps down from the bed and lands heavily on Tsuna.

“Oomph! Ow! Reborn that hurt!” Tsuna whines popping out of his hoodie fortress.
“Don’t be a wimp Dame-Tsuna, or else I’ll have to think of a harsher punishment for you.”

“Hieeee!!”

He’s still bothered by this whole thing. I don’t think Reborn is used to things catching him off guard and yesterday came from way out in left field. I need to ask him about it later though. The whole part where I might have unconsciously inspired Kyoko’s whole ‘Angel-of-vengeance’ thing with my WILL (whatever the fuck that means)is really freaking me out.

It has to be a magic fire thing. Which means that I want to know all about it a Reborn is going to tell me absolutely nothing because he is a horrible sadist who enjoys dangling interesting bits of information above my head.

I need to find a new source of mafia magic information.

Before I go and use whatever crazy flame witchcraft that was again.

And on the topic of Kyoko; she was in dying will mode for a really long time. That can’t have been healthy. Or could it? I mean it was sun flames so technically it was the healthiest.

“She’s probably okay.” I mutter to myself absently.

“Huh.” Tsuna stops doing his weird chicken dance/Reborn avoidance maneuver to give me a look.

“Kyoko I mean. Not that god tier Kyoko wasn’t a thing to behold, I just hope she’s doing okay.”

Tsuna sits up so fast that Reborn is launched off of him and halfway across the room. I watch on in awe as our tiny tutor catches himself in mid air does a flip and lands perfectly on his feet.

Damn impressive that.
Tsuna’s lip wobbles a bit and he wails, “Kyoko-chan~”

I don’t think he really knows what to do with any of his newly gained Kyoko info stats.

“She better be okay and back to normal today.” He glares at Reborn.

“You have to be open to new experiences.” Is his derisive non-answer.

“Your no help!”

“Don’t worry bro-bro I’m sure she’s fine.”

I’m trying to be as pacifying as possible, but I doubt it’s working because all I keep envisioning is the Sasagawa household waking up this morning to find ‘the angel of vengeance’ in their breakfast nook.

He sighs deeply.

“I guess...”

“Boys!” Mom calls from downstairs interrupting our anxious contemplation.

“Hayato-kun And Takeshi-kun are here. You better hurry if you don’t want to be late!”

We look at each other and then as one we start scrambling around the room. I’m shoving books inside backpacks making sure to put in our creative writing collaboration that had kicked off yesterdays chaos. Tsuna chucks my blazer at my head as he hops around trying to pull his pants up.

He chucks off his hoodie and pulls on the sweater vest and his own blazer. If I noticed that he deliberately forgot his tie I’m not going to mention it. The only reason that I’m wearing one right now is that mom tied it for me once and I never untied it. I am basically walking around with something that looks more like a decorative noose than an actual tie.

Ties are hard shut up.
“Coming Mom!” We call down in unison before rushing out of the bedroom.

Mom is waiting patiently at the bottom of the steps with a patient smile and a pair of lunchboxes in her hands. I can spot Hayato through the open door behind her and he is clutching a matching lunchbox protectively to his chest with a flush across his face as Takeshi stands behind him snickering.

I knew Mom would love him.

“Grazi Mama!” I say, giving her a big hug.

Half a second later Tsuna slams into my back after trip hoping down the stairs. At least he managed to stay on his feet this time. That’s a first.

“Thanks, Mom! Bye Mom!” He calls rushing out the door a head of me.

Reborn isn’t with him.

I look up the steps and see him standing there casually with his hands in his pockets making no move to follow after.

“You not coming?”

“I have business to attend to. I’m sure that you brats will be fine on your own for a couple hours.” He replies dryly and then disappears down the hall and out of sight.

Huh. Well, that’s odd. I thought he was like glued to Tsuna.

I shake it off and follow Tsuna out the door. A lot of random crap happened yesterday. He probably has to report something to Nono or the old man.

Tsuna had used his flames on his own. His flames that were supposed to be safely sealed away or whatever the fuck that Nono had done to him all those years ago. They’re probably hearing all about it.
I don’t know how I feel about that.

Or Reborn is just sick of hanging out with a bunch of crazy teenagers 24/7 and needs a mental health break before he kills us all.

It’s probably that one.

“Yo Inari, you’re finally free.” Takeshi cheers and slings an arm around my shoulder in a tight squeeze as the four of us start walking.

Hayato looks like he about to say something before Tsuna grabs him and pulls him ahead. Tsuna shoots me a smile over his shoulder.

He’s such a good brother.

I do my best to return the half embrace. It’s a little hard because Takeshi is like almost a foot taller than me so I wrap my own arm around his waist.

“Hey man.”

“Feeling better?”

“Well, I can breath again and I’m not coughing up my lungs anymore so I’m going to say yes.”

I was still feeling a little bit shitty when we first got home yesterday but I think Reborn fried the last of the infection out of me with his magical sunshine powers.

“I’m glad.”

“And you?”
Takeshi doesn't stop smiling but he doesn't answer right away.

“Therapy.” He finally says.

“Huh?”

He's not looking at me. But I'm not getting the same bad feeling that I was before everything went down. So whatever it is, it's not weighing on him too much.

“I'm going to be going to some therapy sessions for a while. That doctor, Rebo-sensei, recommended one to dad so I'll be going once a week for the next couple of months.”

“Oh…” I pause for a moment, “have you met the doc yet?”

If he's expecting judgment from me he's not going to get it. Sometimes you need help fighting monsters and this therapist probably has better tips and tricks for fighting the beast known as depression than I do.

“Yeah, I had the first session yesterday. She's pretty cool has a very calming presence.” He gives me a much brighter and Takeshi-like smile, “I told her all about what you did.”

“You were bragging about me? How bold.”

“How couldn't I have ‘he climbed up the building like WHA! and and when I fell he caught me like BAM!’” He bursts out laughing, “she thought I was making it up until dad confirmed it for me.”

It's always nice to know that tales of my crazy are spreading across the land. Pretty soon neighbourhood kids are going to be telling tall tales about me like I'm goddamn Chuck Norris… or the Slenderman.

“I always wanted to be an urban legend, thank you for making my dream come true.”
I yelp as I am abruptly lifted off of my feet into a monster hug.

“Thanks, Inari.” He mutters.

“Anytime,” I reply giving taking a moment to melt into the hug before giving him a firm pat on the back. “Now put me down.”

He kindly complies and I am back on solid ground.

“Keep that in mind when I ask you to tag along for a therapy session with Yukimura-sensei.”

“Are you two finished having your touching heart to heart yet?” Hayato interrupts loudly tapping his foot on the pavement about five feet away from us.

“Hayato-kun!” Tsuna hisses in outrage.

I had completely forgotten that they were there. Right there. Waiting for us.

“Ah.”

“Are you feeling neglected Hayato?” Takeshi asks with a grin and a tone of voice that would sound kind and pleasant to anyone else but to me it just sounds like ‘I am deliberately fucking with you.’

And it works immediately.

Hayato hackles we immediately up and he hisses like an angry cat, “who gave you permission to call me by my first name?!”

“Hm? Why would I need permission we’re all friends right?”
“We aren't close enough for that!”

“We’re standing pretty close right now.”

I see now what Tsuna meant about them not getting along. Tsuna himself has powered on ahead of us desperate to escape the stupid argument. I run through between them to break them up and hurry to catch up.

“Yo! Tsuna! Wait up!”

“Tsuna-sama!”

“Tsuna.”

He's so popular now.

Any and all lingering questions that we might have had about Kyoko's health and well being are answered once we reach the front gate.

Because she's standing there.

Waving at us.

And sparkling with radiant golden light.

The good news is that no one else seems to notice the sparkles.

The bad news is that no one else seems to notice the sparkles and I have to aggressively rub my
eyes to make sure I'm not seeing things. Apparently not.

“She's super sparkly today.” Tsuna sighs with a love stuck smile.

Oh good, Tsuna sees the sparkles too.

Wait a minute…

Today?

Does Kyoko always sparkle like this in Tsuna’s eyes?

And if so why?

And why do I get to see the sparkles now? I'm not the one who's madly in love with her.

I quickly glance to Hayato and Takeshi to see if they have any comment about the literally glowing girl.

Hayato’s brow is furrowed but that's pretty normal. And Takeshi has slipped on his nothing smile that he wears at school which tells me absolutely nothing.

“YO SAWADA BROS!” greets an extremely extreme voice.

And up runs Sasagawa Ryohei in his full boxing get up with the noticeable addition of an arm cast. Though judging by the way he's wildly waving his arm about it has become somewhat superfluous.

And he's sparkling too!

What the hell?!
Is it me?

Did I inhale something weird in that warehouse last night?

“THANK YOU FOR BRINGING KYOKO BACK HOME LAST NIGHT THAT WAS EXTREMELY COOL OF YOU BOTH!”

The sheer intensity of his presence sends me scampering behind Takeshi for cover. Just in time too because Ryohei continues to surge forward grasping Tsuna’s hand in his own non-cast encased hand and shaking it madly. His makes Tsuna’s entire body lurch up and down with every shake and he looks absolutely petrified.

“Eep!”

“Thank you so much Tsuna-kun, Inari-kun. I’m so sorry for falling asleep on you last night. I’m so embarrassed.”

She’s smiling brightly with a light flush of pink on her cheeks.

“I had no idea things were so dangerous last night so really thank you for carrying me home.”

“Asleep?” Tsuna asks snapping out of his stupor.

Hayato takes this moment to insert himself between Tsuna and Ryohei and smack the interlopers hands away.

“Hands off the boss you turf headed idiot.” He growls menacingly.

Ryohei, predictably, completely ignores him.

“It was EXTREMELY impressive of you guys. Our house was right in Hammerhead territory. You
could have gotten yourselves hurt.”

Oh yeah, I almost forgot about that.

“Well their not a problem anymore.” I say, still safe from the ‘extreme-ness’ behind my Takeshi barrier.

He looks at me and gives a solemn nod. “Yeah, but we don't live in the best neighbourhood even without those guys running around picking fights with everyone so thank you for getting my sister home safe.”

I knew that they lived in a bad part of town but I didn't know that it was so bad that a violent gang was barely a footnote.

“Someone should really do something about that.”

I think I'm just as surprised as Tsuna is that those words came out of his mouth.

“I mean…” He says awkwardly, “someone already did something.”

“Now we just have to hope that these guys aren't worse than the last ones.”

Kyoko puts a hand on his shoulder, “Don't worry big brother I'm sure these were just concerned members of the community doing their part to make our streets safe again.”

She's smiling pointedly at me and Tsuna.

I guess that answers the question of whether or not she remembers what happened.

“You sounds like a public access commercial,” Tsuna says and then smacks his hands over his mouth when his brain catches up with his mouth and he realizes who exactly he's snarking at.

Kyoko bursts out into barely concealed snickers, leaning heavily on her brothers shoulder.
“I do, don’t I?” She says, “I do owe you though Tsuna-kun. Maybe I can treat you to some cakes sometime.”

“Uh… um… yeah sure that would be great!” Each word climbs up an octave until he sounds like a strangled chicken and Hayato is the only thing holding him up.

“It’s a date then.” She says and skips off toward the school closely followed by Ryohei who waves at us and continues on with his EXTREME morning exercise.

As soon as they are out of sight Tsuna falls to his knees looking dazed.

“Tsuna-sama!” Hayato panics.

“Kyoko-chan asked me on a date…”

He looks over at me.

“Inari…”

“Yeah bro?”

“Am I dreaming?”

I reach over and pinch his ear making him yelp.

“Nope not dreaming dude.”

This is an epic an unprecedented turn of events. Tsuna’s dream girl has asked him on a date. Tsuna dream girl also has the capacity to kick all of our asses, so there’s that too.

Tsuna lets out a shriek of pure happiness.
“Kyoko-chan asked me on a date!”

Hayato, who is the closest to him, suffers the brunt of a crushing hug as Tsuna clings to the closest thing to him in glee.

“I have no idea what's going on anymore and I don't care! This is the best day ever!”

He is so happy, and I find myself beaming back at him reflexively. The world feels brighter and fuller and sparklier in the face of his joy. A bubble of warm happiness builds in my chest, and looking at Hayato and Takeshi I see them smiling too.

Sky Flames man.

And then the second bell rings and Hibari appears to combat our joy with his tonfa.

“Stop crowding and get to class.”

Tsuna lets out a terrified shriek and stars running and is quickly followed by Hayato and a Takeshi.

I fix Hibari with a resigned and expectant look. I had promised him unlimited combat yesterday and if nothing else I am a man of my word…

“After school.” He tells me and then continues on the prowl to terrify more lagging students.

That is more restraint than I expected from him.

__________________________________________________________

Being back in class after a week-long absence is interesting to say the least. It's a lot like becoming
a sideshow attraction in a circus. So there's a lot of staring and whispering which I pointedly ignore.

And then Hayato tells everyone to mind their own fucking business and then it's not a problem all.

There is a high pitched ringing sound coming from an omnipresent everwhere in the classroom. It almost sounds like high voltage electricity. I look around trying to spot an exposed wire or a glitching lightbulb or something, but there's nothing.

Well, whatever it is hopefully it won't kill us.

After homeroom ends Hana saunters over to my desk and takes a seat. She is glaring at me so I use my wisdom and say nothing.

“You are a dumb, dumb, idiot.” She tells me sternly.

“Yes, yes I am.” I agree with her.

“But you are also very brave and a good friend so I'll give you a pass this time.”

And then she smacks me across the head.

“Don't you dare scare me like that again. I almost had a heart attack watching you morons.”

“Sorry Hana.”

She gives me one more stern look before sliding back into her own seat and starting to chat with Kyoko.

“Sorry about that,” Takeshi says, leaning over to give me a sheepish look.
“Not your fault dude.”

I'm still just happy that he isn't a smear across the pavement. There is nothing that is not going to make me happy that he isn't a smear across the pavement and nothing anyone might say about my stupidity will make me regret what I did.

I'm just about to say something touching to this effect, but when I turn to look at him I jump almost a foot in the air sending my chair clattering to the floor behind me.

Suddenly, everyone is looking at me again.

And I really don't care because I'm more interested in the person dressed like fucking Predator staring in at our class!!

“Inari?”

“What the hell Sawada?!”

I watch as they creeper fades out of existence. It's almost like some one took the opacity slider on reality and turned it all the way down. I can't see them anymore but I am viscerally aware that they are still there. And the ringing sound that I've been hearing since getting to class has become almost deafening.

And then it slowly begins to quiet.

And then deepen.

**Duplicate.**

**Resonate.**

It's a discordant melody that makes my teeth ache. For an instant it feels like I'm going to faint.
And then it stops.

A cursory glance around the room tells me that no one else noticed our creepy creeper friend. It doesn't seem like anyone else heard the dissonant nightmare sound either. Even Tsuna is giving me this look of concern and alarm.

I'm not crazy.

Or, at least, I'm not this kind of crazy.

“Nothing, nothing. Don't worry about it,..”

I pull my chair up and make sure to keep an eye on the window

Whatever it is, it's not too keen on leaving.

Please dude, whoever you are, please don't make me spend more time on the outside of buildings defying gravity. Please be a nice weirdo and fuck off. Pretty please with sugar on top.

Hayato seems to have caught on that there is something not quite right out there and he follows my line of sight.

His eyes narrow as he spots… something?

Oh good, proof that I haven't completely lost my mind.

Then Kimura-sensei walks in and Lit class begins. And slowly the feeling of being watched fades.

Yeah, Reborn might have picked the wrong day to ditch us.
Our creepy friends peek in on us three more times as the day goes on. Around the end of Lit Takeshi and Tsuna have caught on that there is something not quite right going on outside. It doesn't take much to catch on to the paranoia vibes that me and Hayato are giving off.

Half way through math I notice Kyoko staring out the window in a terrifying way. Apparently she has noticed our invisible stalker too. I guess to be fair to the invisible stalker you don't really expect to run into these sorts of issues when you can literally become invisible.

I'm going to have to knock this guy out and steal his space-age cloaking device because that is too cool to pass on.

I mean we're obviously going to have to take this guy out anyway because of the whole invisible stalker thing and the fact that he is most likely here to mess with us in particular.

Mrs. Nakamura has decided to be particularly vindictive today and gives our class a surprise exam. This would be have been more troublesome if this wasn't my best class and I hadn't recently become completely fluent in the language.

I finish fifteen minutes into the class and slam my completed exam packet down on her desk with a smug smile. The look of absolute loathing that I get in return is the most wonderful thing. I'm sure she will appreciate all of the corrections that I indicated in her questions.

“You can leave now Mr. Sawada.” She says with disdain.

I give her a mocking salute and stroll onto the hallway where I post myself up against the wall and stare back into the class though the room windows.

The class room isn't the most defensible position from a strategic standpoint. There are too many windows and two doors. The only benefit this right now is that from outside I have a decent vantage point of the entire situation from out here.

I pull my archaic cell phone out of my pocket and fire a quick text off to Reborn:
There are some dudes here that look like their going to a sci-fi convention only real.

That should be fine.

I mean it's not the most informative message but Reborn should get the general gist of ‘something ain't quite right here.’ I wait a couple of minutes for a response but get nothing. He must be busy, I'm sure he'll get to it eventually.

Another five minutes pass and Hayato joins me out in the hall.

“That woman is a fucking nightmare.” He says irritably.

“She is that.” I agree, “but she's mostly harmless.”

He makes a grunt of acknowledgment and we continue on with our observation.

“So what do you think of our new friends?” I ask conversationally.

Hayato’s mood visibly darkens.

“Fucken’ annoying is what they are.” And then, “they?”

I guess he hadn't caught that bit.

“There are at least two of them crawling around out there. I can tell by the uhh- frequency?” That's probably not the right word to describe the pitchy sounds I've been hearing coming from these fuckers but it's close enough.

“Not sure about that, I just keep seeing… static.”

Well, that's interesting.
“Did you get a clear look at them at all?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No, just fuzzy outlines.”

“They look like they walked straight off the cover of a 1970’s pulp sic-fi magazine.”

Hayato stares blankly at me.

“What?”

“Never mind, armor, bodysuits, creepy helmets.”

He makes a violent ‘tich’ noise and his fingers twitch purposely at his sides.

Hayato has dynamite hidden under his clothes, doesn't he?

That can't be safe.

I nudge him deliberately to get him to refocus. “Lets not go straight for the nuclear option dude.”

He glares, “Its pretty obvious that they are here for the boss.”

“Point, but we are still in the school building and I don't want to get sent to prison for attacking invisible green men with explosives as fun as that sounds.”

We fall into silence as we watch the creeper scuttle across the windowpane like a beetle. From my perspective he's flickering in an out of existence like a television with bad reception. I need to get a
magical antenna to get this shitty station working.

From the way that Hayato is squinting at it I'm pretty sure he's getting pure static.

Inside the class I see Tsuna and Takeshi freeze up and glance toward the window. I don't think either of them sees anything there at all.

“Is the baseball idiot in the know about any of this?”

“You mean Takeshi?”

He gives me a look.

“I have been described as ‘that idiot on the baseball team’ before sorry if I need a little clarification.”

“I meant Yamamoto.”

“Then no, unless Tsuna used some latent telepathic powers to tell him all about the mafia and the hitman living in our bedroom, which I doubt. I'm going to need to bring him up to speed before he gets dragged into a turf war or something else stupid.”

“Is Reborn-san around at least?” He asks with an edge of anxiety creeping into his voice, “I have a shitty feeling about this.”

“Nope, he decided that we can handle our own shit today.”

Speaking of the devil…

I pull out my phone just a text notification goes off.
From Reborn: **What?**

I don't really know how much more I need to clarify the dudes in weird outfits situation to him. It feels self explanatory.

I send back:

**I think it's aliens.**

Just to be a prick.

We watch as the other creeper crawls across the window. And then we watch as Hana slams her pencil down on her desk, storms over to the window and deftly flicks the blinds shut.

Hayato lets out a burst of laughter.

“I'm really starting to like that bitch.”

“What. Was. That!?” Tsuna wails as soon as we are an acceptable distance away from the classroom.

He clings to my arm and is shaking with barely concealed panic; his eyes shifting wildly.

“You mean the two guys?” Takeshi asks guilelessly.

As one the three of us whip around to stare at him.
“You saw them?!” I demand.

“No, but they were there right?”

Hayato smacks himself in the face and Tsuna looks even more confused than he did before.

This conversation is going absolutely no where. We need to establish some facts before we get caught going around in circles forever playing twenty questions.

“Fact the first,” I address the group as we exit the main building on the way to the cafeteria.

“There are invisible people following us. They’re dressed in crazy green jumpsuits which I can only assume give them their crazy cloaking device powers.”

“Fact the second, me and Hayato can see them. Sort of. And the two of you couldn’t, which I assume me means that it has something to do with the crazy magic fire stuff.”

“Fact the third, Takeshi,” I pause in step and turn to look at my very, very good friend (who is also a little bit of an idiot and needs things laid out as plainly as possible), “it has recently come to our attention that Tsuna and I come from Italian Mafia royalty. He has been selected to take over the family business. The kid that you’ve seen hanging out with us is not our little brother or cousin or anything like that he is a professional hitman who has been sent by home office to teach Tsuna the secret art of becoming a mob boss. Also there is magic fire.”

“Inari!” Tsuna squawks in mortification.

They all stare at me in wide-eyed incongruity.

“Fact the fourth, they are most likely assassins here to kill us all”

“Assassins!?” Shrieks Tsuna.
“Magic fire?” Asks Hayato.

“Sounds like fun.” Says Takeshi.

Great, now we’re all at least somewhat on the same page.

To bring an end to my latest triumph in awkward silences I throw open the doors of the cafeteria with a little more flair than is technically called for.

We are immediately hit with the most god awful smell imaginable and the sight of half the student body wrenching on the ground. Everything is covered in a violently violet and mauve sludge that is wriggling with maggots and larva.

I slam the doors closed as fast as I open them and immediately start gagging.

“We need to get out of here,” Hayato says going deathly pale. “Now.”

“It’s called poison cooking,” Hayato tells us once we are all jammed into the janitors closet together.

It’s nice and cozy and has convenient access to the maintenance staircase incase we need to flee quickly.

Hayato is clutching at his stomach in pain and has broken out in a flaky sweat. Tsuna reaches out and rubs his back comfortingly. He seems to appreciate the show of affection.

Obviously, Hayato needs some extra hugs too.

“It’s a somewhat legendary assassination technique that was developed and used by the freelance hit-woman known as the ‘Poison Scorpion.’”
Oh yeah, her...

I can’t believe I forgot about Bianchi.

“And you know this person Hayato-kun?”

He gulps loudly and steels himself looking Tsuna dead in the eye.

“You could say that,” he says.

We’re waiting with bated breath for the big reveal.

“She’s my sister.”

“So we’re okay, right?” Tsuna says with a deep exhale of relief.

We're not okay. The look on Hayato's face tells me emphatically that we are not okay. The manga had played the repeated childhood poisonings of Hayato at the hands of his older sister off as a joke. Something funny for the audience to get a snicker at.

This isn't a joke.

There is nothing funny about the fear on his face.

Siblings are supposed to love and protect each other. They aren't supposed to hurt you.

I decide in this moment that I don't care what explanations she might have about what she had done to her brother. I don't care if Reborn tells us that he trusts her. I hate her.

I hate her fucking guts.
It's rule number one: you don't hurt your family.

“I'm the one she perfected her ‘technique’ on.” Hayato confesses vaguely as he turns away to inspect the shelves of cleaning supplies that line the closet walls.

I see the moment that Tsuna realizes what that means. The fear and anxiety drain from his face and are replaced by a look of cold fury.

He looks over to me and I see the flickering orange lighting up his irises.

“Then we get rid of her.” His voice is low with barely bridled rage.

Hayato’s breath catches painfully and Tsuna tightens his grip on our friend's shoulder in a show of support.

I can't help but stare at Tsuna.

Things have changed things have changed so much and I have no idea what's going to happen. This is more dangerous than anything that's come up since Reborn came into our lives.

And Tsuna isn't afraid.

He doesn't have anyone holding a gun to his head. He's not hiding behind me.

Tsuna is actively taking on this shit situation.

I am so proud of him.

“Boss. I appreciate it, but I wasn't joking when I said she's a professional assassin.”
“I know,” Tsuna says and turns to look at Takashi.

“Takeshi-kun I know that this has been a lot and if-”

“Oh, I'm helping,” Takeshi says, cutting Tsuna short with a bright and terrifying expression.

“You couldn't make me leave if you tried.”

Tsuna, wisely, doesn't try to dispute this.

Neighbourhood Watch versus the forces of evil round two.

“You know if we keep doing shit like this everyday we’re going to need code names and uniforms.” I snark.

What we really need is weapons.

There are at least three hostiles milling about the school right now and one of them has already proven that she doesn't give a shit about casualties or injuring literal children.

This really isn't the same story as the one that I knew.

I left Tsuna in the capable hands of Hayato and Takeshi. Hayato had started shoving cleaning supplies two of them. Bottles with fun labels like: explosion, fire, bone hand, and death. I trust that he has some specific plan in mind. We had designated the science lab as our base of operations (at least until Reborn shows up with an actual plan).

It gives Hayato access to all the fun stuff he needs to make some truly interesting explosions and it's the room least likely to be populated during lunch hour since they lock the doors.
Unless, of course, if you conveniently have access to the janitorial maintenance staircase which has a crawl space entry into the science lab.

I have never seen the school janitor but I am beginning to suspect that he is a secret agent… or a doomsday prepper.

Meanwhile, I'm on the move doing some recon as I try to gather weaponry of a more mundane nature; bats, sharp pointy things, the fucking tank known as Hibari Kyoya.

You know, simple things to bludgeon people with.

There in no way that, that psycho will let an assault on his beloved school go unchallenged. Though he is going to be pissed that our issues rolled us into his domain.

But until I inevitably cross paths with Hibari I'm using the fact that I have yet to hit anything resembling a teenaged growth spurt to my advantage. Ducking through the ventilation system to stay out of sight.

There are victims of Bianchi’s poison cooking as far as the B-wing. They are mostly clustered around bathrooms, and while most of them are unconscious and frothing at the mouth no one looks dead. So that's a bonus.

I still haven't seen the woman herself. And I have no idea what the hell shes doing here right now. In the original story Reborn had contracted her as an assistant tutor for Tsuna.

I don't think that happened here.

If it did there had been a serious miscommunication somewhere along the line.

I have also just barely managed to avoid encounters with our invisible sonically challenged friends in green jumpsuits. A quick update on that situation - they are most definitely armed and dangerous.
The guns that they carry at their sides give off an eerily familiar violet glow. I'm not sure what will happen if someone gets shot with that and I really do not want to know. Our best bet is probably going to be to take them out before they know what hit them.

I catch sight of another unfamiliar face too.

A man dressed like a fucking Vatican Priest is strolling the halls sending directing kids to vacate the halls. And out of every crazy thing that I have seen today he is probably the most terrifying of all.

I don't know him and I don't want to know him. I would be much happier if I could put Reborn somewhere between me and this ‘priest.’

He's not even doing anything threatening, he's just walking down the hall telling kids to get out. Not exactly menacing villain behaviour.

And then I watch him reach out and dissolve a wall with a sickly red flame and I am scurrying through the vents as fast as I can.

I could handle Bianchi, hell I can even handle the invisible stalkers. I can't handle unsettling priest with acid hands!

I suddenly regret being such a glib shit in my texts to Reborn. To be fair I hadn't been expecting today to devolve into a siege of assassins. If I had, I would have just sent an SOS in bold.

I also regret not bringing my taser with me to school today. I had stupidly assumed that we would get at leas one low key day to recover.

At this point, I'm just hoping that Reborn gets here before we get our dumb asses killed.

Taking on low level no name minions gangsters is on thing. Taking on real professional assassins with flame based weaponry is another thing entirely.

Moving on from things that I have absolutely no control of; I have spotted an implement of violence.

Takeshi’s bat hangs off of the back of his seat ready for the taking. The class room is dark and the blinds are still shut which should afford me enough cover to creep in grab the bat and maybe the
canister of pepper spray that I know Hana has hidden in her desk.

It doesn't look like anyone is in the room which is weird but not too weird after an exam. I open the vent grate as quietly as possible and drop into the classroom and start stealthing toward Takeshi’s desk.

I just about have my hands on the bat when the lights I licked on and I freeze in place.

“Mr. Sawada, what a pleasure.”

Mrs. Nakamura stands at the head of the class leaning casually against the podium. I can feel her distain from here.

How did I miss her standing right there? I'm really off my game today.

“Heyyy, Mrs. Nakamura…what are you doing here? In the dark?”

Had she not noticed the sounds of mass hysteria and projectile vomiting that had been echoing though the halls since the start of lunch hour?

She really is a shitty teacher.

“I'm just going to take this and go…” I say and slowly inch my hand back toward the bat.

“No,” she whispers into my ear, “you're not.”

Before I can think, before I can react, I'm slammed hard onto the desk. The back of my head is cracked against the wood and stars burst across my vision. I try to push myself back up only to be slammed back down with a heavy vice like grip pressing into my throat chocking off my airway.

The panic almost immediately takes over.
I thrash and claw and kick. Desperately trying to get her off me. But she's stronger and heavier than she looks.

I try to summon the spark of electricity to zap her but just as I feel the energy gathering in my palms my head is slammed once more into the edge of the desk and the world starts spinning.

I dig my nails into her wrists and forearms trying to pry her hands away from my throat.

I try again to kick her off of me, and I make contact but again it feels like she's bigger and heavier than she looks and I can't get any distance. She steps in between my legs and presses down even harder.

I can't breathe.

I can't BREATHE!

“You. Have. No. IDEA. How much. I am going. To ENJOY this.” She grinds out between clenched teeth.

“Vongola Decimo.”

No.

Nononononononononono.

The panic has really and true lay set in. My vision is going dark at the edges. Dark spots and burst of light dance across my eyes. All the strength is draining out of my body.

I can't get her off me.

I can't breathe.
She thinks I'm Vongola Decimo. Tsuna is Vongola Decimo. She's going to kill Tsuna!

I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe!

Tsuna.

I'm going to die.

Tsuna, Tsuna, Tsuna.

I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

An explosion of inhuman force slams into Mrs. Nakamura knowing her off of me. I hear a crash across the room but I don't fucking care. I slide to the floor coughing and gasping for air.

Tears stream down my face and I can't stop shaking.

It hurts.

Oh god, it hurts.

Every desperate breath I take burns like fire.

“Keep your filthy hands off of my student.” Reborn snarls.

And then he launches himself at her.

I hear the impact and growls before a shot rings out and everything falls silent.

They panic and pain takes over leaving me a paralyzed, shaking sobbing mess on the ground.
I need to stop.

I need to get up.

Tsuna is in danger. I need to get to Tsuna now. I need to get to Tsuna before they kill him.

I almost died.

I almost DIED.

I need to get to Tsuna. I need to protect my brother.

I try to pull myself up, but I'm shaking too hard and immediately collapse back to the floor. And I can't entirely suppress the sob of frustration that escapes me. I smack at my leg but miss entirely which just makes me sob harder.

I fucked up.

I knew something was wrong from the get-go today.

I should have gotten Tsuna out of here as soon as I noticed those guys. He might be dead now. Mrs. Nakamura, or whoever the fuck that was, had all but confirmed that she had been gunning for Vongola Decimo. And I can only assume that all the other weirdos that are hanging around our school are here for the same reason.

I fucked up.

“Kid.”

I fucked up.
“Kid.”

I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up.

“Ragazzo!”

Something flops down over my head covering my eyes and snapping me out of my accelerating panic attack.

I look down and see a small hand covering my own and giving off a faint glowing light.

“Re-Reborn?” My voice is absolutely ruined. It's worse now than when I had pneumonia last week.

“You're alright,” he says, “just breathe.”

I do as he says and spend the next moments just focusing on breathing.


It hurts so bad, and each breath I take is accompanied by an unpleasant ratting sound from somewhere inside my throat.

A long moment passes before I have myself under control again.

I finally manage to focus my eyes on him and I am completely incapable of suppressing the hysterical giggles that burst forth.

He's missing his trademark fedora. Without it his hair is a wild tangled mess of spikes and curls that go off into all directions and add another six or so inches to his height.

“Oh my god,” I rasp. “Your hair is amazing.”
And then I realize the more important detail. I reach up and gently run my finger along the brim of the fedora that is now resting on my head. It's actually a little big on me and dips to the side.

Magic hat.

“How cool do I look?” I ask with a snuffle and a watery smile.

I see the corner of his lip twitch up in amusement.

“Brat.”

I finally manage to sit myself up straight and try to angle myself over toward where Mrs. Nakamura…fell. Reborn tugs hard on my shirt refocusing my attention on him.

“Not yet.” He orders.

“What?”

“Don't question it just listen to me. Do you know where you are?” He asks.

“School. Reborn what's-”

“Do you know what's happening right now?”

“Yeah, weird guys, assassins…” and then I remember the most important part.

“Tsuna!” I shout and immediately regret it.

Owwwww.
“Tsuna is fine.” He says, “he wasn’t the one who charged into an unknown hostile situation without any backup.”

Wow, he actually sounds concerned.

“Aww, were you worried about me?” I rasp.

“You have the self-preservation instincts of a stoned lemming you terrible brat.”

I try to laugh but all that comes out are more tears.

“Is Mrs. Nakamura dead?” I ask wetly.

“Yes.”

“Oh… good.”

I don't know how to process any of this. I fidget absentmindedly with the brim of the fedora as I try to get my thoughts in order. She was a terrible and antagonistic English teacher. I knew she hated me but I had no idea that she would try and kill me.

“Was she an assassin the whole time?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Did you know?”

“No.” He answers tightly.
“How?” It seems impossible that Reborn could have missed something like that.

He doesn't answer me. Instead, he turns his attention to where her body is. This time he doesn't stop me when I try to look.

Indigo embers smolder across her body and I can't help but recoil as I watch her pretty face melt away into a massive misshapen head, scarred face and squared jaw. There is a small bullet hole in the forehead where blood is slowly oozing out from the unfamiliar individual before me.

“What the fuck.”

The body there looks nothing like her anymore. It doesn't even look like a woman at all.

“I admit that illusionists are not my strong suit,” Reborn explains dispassionately.

“What?”

“We are going to have a conversation in the very near future, Ragazzo, believe me, however, this is not the time or place for it. Now, we are going to go find Dame-Tsuna and the boys before they try to do something stupid.”

“Kay.” I croak and slowly pull myself to my feet using the desk as leverage.

As I reach over to finally grab the bat, Reborn hops up onto my shoulder and lightly lays a hand on the back of my battered neck. I flinch reflexively at the contact.

He doesn't move his hand away though and slowly warmth starts seeping into my skin leaching a little bit of the bite of pain away.

“That is the best superpower ever,” I tell him reverently.

“It comes in handy.”
Chapter End Notes

So that happened....

Thoughts?
It took me a little bit to muster up the energy to crawl back into the vent after the whole…choking incident. Unfamiliar exhaustion weighing me down making every move I made jerky and uncoordinated. Eventually, Reborn's Sun Flame infusion took hold and I was able to scurry back into the opening.

Our trip back to the science lab to meet up with Tsuna in the others is characterized by me repeatedly falling into a panic attack followed by Reborn yanking me back out of a panic attack. It is a vicious cycle and I know that when this is over I am going to need to take Takeshi up on that therapy offer.

Because this is just fucking awful.

My neck still looks like a horror movie make-up even after the Sun Flame infusion. Though I will say it no longer feels like I’m swallowing nails every time I so much as inhale too hard. When I asked him why he couldn’t just keep healing it the whole way his answer was:

“As useful as this ability is, it isn’t exactly healthy to use it to replace the natural healing process of your body. It can have some… unfortunate side effects, particularly if it’s not your primary element.”

“Good to know.”

I am going to add this to my ever-growing list of magic fire-related questions that I am going to ask Reborn when we eventually have our long-awaited conversation.

At some point, someone, who is much smarter than me, had realized that crazy shit was happening in Namimori Middle School and had pulled the fire alarm. Reborn and I watch from our vantage
point in the vent as a stampede of students filters out into the halls toward the nearest emergency exit.

My earlier approximation of Bianchi’s victim count doesn’t seem too far off. It’s hard to get an exact count of the casualties while I’m crawling through a ventilation shaft and I’ve counted about a hundred and thirty so far. Most of whom are either passed out on the ground or milling about like dazed zombies. But that doesn’t take account anyone who is still in the cafeteria.

This situation has gotten very bad, very fast. Having innocent bystanders in the mix isn’t going to help us resolve it either.

Someone needs to get them out of here before they get killed.

Unfortunately, no one seems too keen on stopping to help their fellow students out. Hell, even the teachers that rush past don’t seem too keen on helping their students out.

A quick glance at Reborn tells me that he’s deeply unimpressed by the faculty of our school.

I don’t really have time for a detour, but I can’t really just leave shit like this.

Hopefully, this won’t take too long.

I kick open the nearest grate with much less care than I had the last time and drop down into the hall in front of a group of fleeing students stopping them in their tracks.

“Sawada?”

“Yamada-sempai?”

“YO MINI-SAWADA!” Hollers Ryohei, drawing the attention of people in the next prefecture.

“Mini wha- never mind.” I battle through a momentary burst of outrage. It’s only an inch. I am only an inch shorter than Tsuna that hardly calls for ‘mini.’
Reborn chuckles from his place on my shoulder. I decide to be the bigger person and not bring up the fact that he could literally pass as a babydoll.

“Holy shit Sawada what happened to your neck?” Yamada hisses reaching out toward me to inspect the ... injury.

He doesn’t even make contact before I flinch back so hard I slam myself into the wall. My heart is beating like a hummingbird’s and my vision starts to tunnel.

“Calm down.” Reborn whispers.

I breathe.

One.

Two.

Three.

I’m going to need to deal with this at some point. Preferably not while my school is under siege by terrifying mafia types. For now, I reach down into myself for that bullshit pool of sass and win that I fucking run on and stare down Yamada and Ryohei and the group of jocks in their gym uniforms that are all standing in the hall staring awkwardly at me.

“Not really the most important question right now dude.” I tell them with all the confidence I can muster, “Especially not where we are surrounded by a fuck ton of unconscious people covered in technicolored nightmare goop.”

They all jump and start looking down at the literal bodies in the ground. I guess no one had been looking down until this point, but that doesn’t really excuse how shitty it is to leave someone when they can’t stand up on their own.
“You’re all big strong beefy types.” I continue looking them all over appraisingly.

There are fourteen of them standing around me. And really when you think about it there aren’t that many unconscious people laying about. It would be a breeze for these athletic physiques.

“Uhhh... what?”

“I need you guys to get all this dead weight out of here before they actually literally die.” I motion down the hall at the trail of bodies that leads back in the direction of the cafeteria. The layer of poison wriggling sludge that coats all of them is probably the most troubling aspect of this for me.

“Sawada we don’t have time for that.” Yamada-sempai says, “didn’t you hear the announcement? There’s a gas leak in the school we need to get out of here!”

“And what?” I ask gesturing emphatically to the nearest person moaning in pain on the ground. “They’re just shit out of luck.”

“The emergency workers will-“

“Will do fuck all by time it actually matters.” I cut him off.

“They’re in trouble now. Right now. And everyone in this city knows that police are useless and the paramedics can never get anywhere fast enough cuz whoever was in charge of city planning was fucking high at the time!”

“These are our classmates, friends, and hell if not that they are our fellow human beings and need help so fucking HELP them!”

And yeah, I’m trying to do the thing. The thing that Reborn inferred that I did to Kyoko and Tsuna yesterday. The thing that I’m not quite sure is a real thing or not but I’m really fucking hoping that it works.

I’m giving them some inspiration.
“LET’S DO THIS TO THE EXTREME!” roars Ryohei bursting with sunshine and sparkles. And like the barbarian he is starts hauling people up and over his shoulders, paying absolutely no mind to his casted arm.

The rest of them spend half a moment staring at him, for ore unleashing their own adrenaline fueled exclamations of extreme-ness. And then all of them are rushing around the hall picking up the victims of the poison cooking and carrying them toward the exit.

I can’t believe that actually worked.

Never thought I could play a bard in real life.

“DON’T WORRY MINI-SAWADA WE’VE GOT THIS HANDLED!” Ryohei stops in front of me with a mountain of people on his back and a somewhat strained grin on his face. And then more seriously “But if you’re going through the school can you do me a favour and make sure that Kyoko made it out alright?”

“You got it dude.”

And then I start running again. I don't even bother crawling back into the ventilation system at this point. Stealth would be nice, but I'm starting to get the feeling that time is seriously of the essence.

“You need to be careful with that.” Reborn says after a drawn-out moment of silence.

“Yeah, I got that.”

And I do. I really, really do. But there is only so careful I can be if I don't know exactly what I am being careful with.

If he has anything helpful to say on the topic he doesn’t get a chance to say it because we are interrupted by a thunderous roar that shakes the ground and reverberates down the hall. It’s a human voice.
But only barely.

And if I thought that I was afraid before, it was nothing compared to the smothering terror that grips me now. My stomach seizes and my heart rate accelerates.

I crash out on the linoleum hard and scramble desperately toward a wall where, against all reason, I curl myself into a ball in a desperate attempt to protect myself from the crushing presence of whatever the hell that is.

My blood is pounding in my ears.

Heart hammering in my chest.

I’m shaking, shaking, shaking.

Tears sting at the corners of my eyes, and a sob rips its way out of my chest. It feels violent. It feels painful.

I can’t do this.

I can’t.

I need Tsuna.

It’s too much.

I’m sorry that I ever thought that I knew what was going on. This must be some sort of punishment. I don’t understand why else this might be happening.

I want to find Tsuna and get him as far away from this as possible.
I want to find these threats and end them as violently as possible.

“Inari.”

I manage to pry open one of my eyes to look into Reborn’s. His small hand rests against my shoulder.

“I am not going to let anything happen to you or Tsuna. You have my word. It’s my job to raise you boys into respectable mobsters.”

I can’t help but giggle at that.

He ignores the rude interruption and continues; “And I promise you that when I get my hands on the idiot that is responsible for this they will LIVE to regret it.”

“Now get up and get moving Ragazzo.”

Well, I can’t argue with that.

I slowly manage to pull my self to my feet and do as I’m told. Pausing for a moment to readjust the fedora. A hat this cool can’t sit askew.

And then we are on the move again.

I come across a few more students on my way to the science lab and direct them toward my muscle bound minions who should hopefully still be carting people out of the school.

I don’t find Kyoko or Hana though.

I hope they’ve already gotten out of here.
This whole situation is so fucking crazy. I have nothing to go on except what little I remember of Bianchi’s character profile. If I can even trust that at this point. I didn’t think she would do anything to go against Reborn, what with the logic crippling crush that she supposedly allegedly had on him.

“Please tell me that you didn't actually date her,” I whine without really thinking about the words coming out of my mouth. “Please tell me you have higher standards than ‘that’.”

I feel him tense on my shoulder.

“Date who?” He asks as nonchalantly as possible.

Though I can still hear the hint of cold calculation in his voice.

Fuck.

I said something I shouldn't have again.

Screw it.

“I mean Bianchi.”

“Bianchi?”

“You know; Hayato’s crazy sister, poison cooking assassin who has taken over our cafeteria as a base of operations. That Bianchi. The one that you were possibly romantically involved with for reasons beyond my mortal comprehension.”

I thought the name would have been pretty self-explanatory. Am I in a crazy alternate universe where Reborn and Bianchi never met?

“Now why would you think a thing like that?” Reborn replies tightly.
I shrug noncommittally and keep on moving. “I don’t know man, I just suddenly knew it. It popped into my brain with musical accompaniment and terror.”

He’s silent for a moment before he speaks again.

“I wouldn't say we were romantically involved. Bianchi has something of a …overactive imagination. We’ve done a few jobs together over the past few years but that was about the extent of our ‘relationship’ as you so eloquently put it.”

“Oh.”

Well, at least that disproves the ‘alternate universe where they never met theory.’ And the whole ‘lovers’ thing too. I don't know why but the thought of them actually being involved irritates me so fucking much.

“So any idea why she decided to attack our middle school?” Because, yes, I am very curious why we have seen the sudden influx of assassin types today. And I don't think the annual hitman convention is being held in town.

There must be an explanation.

“I have some idea,” Reborn says darkly.

“Care to share with the rest of the class.” I say once it becomes clear that he isn’t going to extrapolate.

“Wait until we meet up with the boys.” He replies.

When we finally make it to the science wing the halls are vacant. The fire alarm is still going through, but it sounds more distant on this side of the school. I still haven’t heard the telltale sirens of emergency response vehicles which is concerning.
I wasn’t lying when I said response times were bad in this city. But they are not usually this bad. Which makes me think that there might be some interference going on.

The door to the science lab is closed and from what I can see through the small window it has been successfully barricaded with a tower of chairs, a bookshelf, and what looks like a cadaver. Fucking awesome.

So it’s back into the vents I go. Seriously, at this point, I think I could probably draw a map of our school ventilation system blindfolded. It’s not too hard to shimmy my way up into the ceiling through the exit hatch presents something of an uncomfortable drop.

The second I tumble though into the lab Tsuna has his arms around me in a crushing hug. He is babbling tearful assurances, apologies, and:

“You’re okay, you’re okay, thank god, I thought you were dying. It felt like you were dying.”

I wrap my own arms around him in return and bury my face into his shoulder. It’s stabilizing. I don’t feel like I’m short-circuiting and flying apart at the seams anymore. Tsuna is here, so everything is okay.

I slump more into the hug and feel Tsuna stumble slightly.

“Sorry bro-bro, I’m going to need to lean on you for a minute.”

He doesn’t argue. Just readjusts his footing to keep us both standing.

“I’ve got you.”

We spend the next few moments in silence as Tsuna lets me cry into his shoulder. I don’t know what I would do without him.

When I finally manage to re-center myself I push away from Tsuna and scrub a sleeve across my
face quickly and aggressively to wipe away the tear tracks. I angle the rim of the fedora down to shadow my red and puffy eyes.

A pretty crier I am not.

“Reborn what the heck is going on!?” Tsuna demand with a shrill edge to his voice. He turns to look at our tutor who has hopped up onto the table next to Hayato and Takeshi.

Hayato is staring intently at a bubbling beaker filled with electric blue liquid. Takeshi is next to him with safety goggles on and protective mittens on his hands as he holds out two glass containers.

Takeshi isn’t paying attention to the volatile experiment happening to his immediate left though. His attention is fixated on me. And he looks furious.

I flinch reflexively.

Is he mad at me? What the hell did I do?

Is he pissed that I have his bat? He does get a little possessive of is baseball equipment. He can have the bat back. I got it for him.

“Inari... Who did that to you?” He asks vacantly.

Oh… it’s not ‘me’ he’s glaring at. Its the dark ring of bruises around my neck.

I quickly reach up to cover them but its too late at that point.

Tsuna sucks in a sharp breath as he finally noticed what he had been too distracted to before. And while all this heartwarming concern is appreciated we have more important shit to worry about right now than my brief brush with death and my new found fear of asphyxiation.

“See above re-fucking assassins in our school.” I snark in a desperate attempt to diffuse the mounting tension.
“Seriously guys, we have bigger fish to fry than rehashing the less than epic adventure of Inari. We can do that later when we aren’t in danger of dying horrible gruesome deaths.”

I nod my head in Reborn’s direction hoping against hope that he will jump in with an actual explanation regarding our current state of affairs.

“Focus Dame-Tsuna.” Reborn snaps, but it lacks some of the usual bite.

He does manage to divert the attention away from me and my stunning new neck ware which I am extremely grateful for.

“Hey, kid.” Takeshi greets brightly, switching moods so fast that it could give a guy whiplash. “Inari says that you’re a professional hitman.”

Or maybe it’s just the fact that situational awareness isn’t Takeshi’s strong suit. Either way, I do appreciate the fact that he is no longer hyper-focused on my whole... situation.

Reborn gives me a considering look before pulling Takeshi’s baseball bat out of my hands and handing it over to him.

“Inari is an honest sort.” He says in lieu of an actual answer.

Takeshi takes the bat gingerly and holds it in one of his mittened hands, making sure not to drop the glass beakers.

Reborn gives us all a look over before clearing his throat and continuing to speak.

“The situation as it currently stands is this: Vongola headquarters has suffered a security breach and some ‘sensitive information’ that should have been available to only a select few individuals has been leaked onto the underworlds information network.”

To say that Reborn looks displeased about this would be a grave understatement.
To say that Reborn looks murderous would also be a grave understatement.

“What sort of ‘sensitive information?’” Hayato asks warily still focusing on his volatile concoction.

“The identity and location of Vongola Decimo.”

We all stare.

“Who?” Takeshi asks.

This is fair because I hadn’t really gotten into the whole title of mafia kingship when I had been giving him the Magical Mafia Cliff’s Notes.

“E-excuse me?” Tsuna squeaks in terror. Because he doesn’t have the same cocoon of ignorance to shield him from the truth of this very dangerous turn of events.

“You heard me.”

“B-b-but that’s ME!” He shrieks

“That also doesn’t really explain the sudden influx of assassins in our middle school,” I interject.

“The price for the head of Vongola Decimo is currently a hundred million.”

…

That is an absurd amount of money to pay for a teenaged mafia don in-training. That is an absurd amount of money to pay for anything in general.

“Who has that kind of money?” Hayato asks faintly.
He has finally lost concentration on the frothing liquids. The beakers have begun to froth over the edges and onto the table where it immediately starts eating away at the countertop.

Tsuna has gone completely offline. He is just sort of standing there staring vacantly into the middle distance mouthing ‘a hundred million’ over and over and over again. I really hope he doesn’t make himself pass out.

On the plus side; at least he’s not a cheap hit. He’s worth those big bucks and he hasn’t even done anything yet. Not that the price makes it better in any way shape or form.

“Her name is Cassandra Della Rosa.”

I don’t know who that is. But judging by the expression on Hayato’s face she is someone important in the criminal underworld. Still a name doesn’t really give me all the requisite information that I need on this person to hate her adequately.

“I don’t know who this person is. We’re going to need a little more context before we are sufficiently intimidated.”

“She was Federico Ferrino’s lover.” Reborn answers plainly.

That name sounds... familiar? Maybe?

“We know that name,” Tsuna says snapping back to reality. His brow is ruffled in intense concentration as he tries to recall where that name had come up before.

“You should,” Reborn nods, “I showed you his picture the day that we met. Well... a picture of his bones at least.”

Oh.

That’s who Federico was.
Vongola Nono’s youngest son. The mand who had been first in line for the position of Vongola Decimo.

Only his bones had remained.

“Oh, so what does she have against Tsuna? He didn’t kill that dude. Hell, we never even met him.”

“She doesn’t care about Tsuna in particular. It’s the head of Vongola Decimo that she wants. Tsuna just happens to hold that title at the moment. Cassandra Della Rosa’s goal is to hurt the Family.”

“B-but why?! If she and Federico-san were l-l-lovers why would she want to hurt his family?!” Tsuna stumbles over the L-word in his hysteria but it doesn’t really make his point any less valid.

Reborn doesn’t say anything for a moment.

“It is something of an open secret that Nono’s sons killed each other in their bid for control of the Family.”

‘It’s too bad that not all brothers share your sense of loyalty.’ Isn’t that what Reborn had told me?

His face is has retained his default neutrality. But there is something else there in the way that he’s not quite meeting any of our eyes.

A dark heartbreak.

One of those dead men had been his student, hadn’t they?

“They killed their brothers,” Tsuna whispers wide-eyed and pale.

Reborn shrugs.
“Fratricide is not exactly an uncommon practice in the mafia Dame-Tsuna.”

We all stew on that lovely tidbit of information. Today is really drilling home just how brutal the mafia is, and how little I actually understand about any of this. Despite the ‘advantage’ that I have, I am starting to understand how very little I know at all. A story is one thing. Life is something else entirely.

Right now there are hitman in our school that had come here to kill my brother (or me if they all had the same bad info that Mrs. Nakamura, or whoever the hell that was, had). They had come to lay siege to a random middle school in Japan to kill a kid who hadn’t even properly inherited his title yet.

These are actual killers that we are dealing with here.

And then I have a truly terrible thought.

“What about Mom!?”

If they had known enough to come to our school they would have known to come to our house. Where Mom would be alone and defenseless.

“Maman is fine,” Reborn says quickly cutting off the panic spiral that me and Tsuna had been quickly descending into. “An associate of mine is in town and will be looking out for her until this mess is resolved.”

We breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Well, that solves one problem at least which just leaves us with the current issue of being besieged by assassins.

“Um,” Takeshi cuts in with a raised hand and a smile that falls more into the category of terrifying than cheerful. “I’m not entirely sure what’s going on, but the lady who wants to kill Tsuna is in Italy right?”
After receiving a nod he continues:

“So how do we kill her?”

Okay, so, without the filter of the ‘Mafia Game’ the whole ‘Natural Born Hitman’ thing really shines though. It probably says something tragic about me personally that wholesale murder actually seems like the most logical option right now.

Reborn smirks. He seems to like this option as well.

“Don’t worry Takeshi-kun. Headquarters is taking care of that part of our problem as we speak. Which just leaves our ‘infestation’ here in Namimori.”

Takeshi’s smile brightens considerably and he laughs, “Oh, that’s much easier then.”

A pair of safety goggles smacks him hard in the side of the head as Hayato finally explodes.

“Don’t be so laid back about it baseball idiot!” He snaps, “Tsuna-sama’s life is on the line here!”

He punctuates his point with a slam of his foot, but this just makes Takeshi laugh even harder.

“Don’t worry, Don't worry.” He soothes, “I'm plenty serious. It’s just exciting right?”

Takeshi’s smile then takes on a sharper edge as he continues, “besides Yukimura-sensei mentioned that I should try to find new hobbies.”

“Murder?” Tsuna asks vaguely.

“They started it.” I instantly snark back.
Reborn claps his hands together to refocus the waning attention of his pack of baby assassins. We quiet down and wait for him to speak again. His hands are clasped neatly behind his back and Leon is perched on his shoulder. There really shouldn't be anything threatening about the way Reborn looks.

He looks THREATENING.

Without the hat his hair is wild and there is a manic edge that is shining through those large black button eyes. There is nothing joyful about the smile that pulls across his face. The faint glow from the pacifier around his neck casts his entire visage into dramatic shadow.

He's basically a murder doll straight out of a Stephen King novel.

“Alright bambini, get ready for your first practical lesson in Mafia Warfare.”

Hayato makes us all goodie bags of destruction. Smoke bombs, flashbangs, knock-out-gas, and honest to god Molotov Cocktails. Mass destruction in a glass beaker (just add fire).

We are one hundred percent going to kill ourselves with this stuff.

It will be glorious.

He disperses them among the four of us at Reborn's instruction.

And then we plot.

“Knowledge is the most powerful weapon that you will ever wield,” Reborn tells us as we commence our round table discussion. “Never rush in blindly unless you have absolutely no other choice.”

He gives me a stern look as he says that last bit. I'm not sure if I appreciate that insinuation. I do
have plans… it’s just that most of them are ‘blindly rush in and hope for the best.’

As quickly as we can we go over all we know about our first target.

Poison Scorpion Bianchi; freelance hit-woman. Specializes in poisons and close-quarters combat. A former work partner of our tutor Reborn. Psychological profile: obsessive and volatile. Currently camping out in our school cafeteria; located on the ground floor of the main building with, what we can only assume (judging by what I have already seen of her handiwork while I was crawling through the vents), is a virtually limitless supply of poison soup to drown us in.

Poor Hayato looks profoundly unwell just talking about her. I don't blame him. I’ve only had the briefest of encounters with her ‘creation’ and the thought of it makes me want to throw up. I can’t even imagine what it must have been like for him growing up as the sole target of her ‘creative pursuits.’

She must have been legitimately trying to kill him. I can’t really think of any other explanation of why she would repeatedly feed her brother the poison cooking she would later go and assassinate people with. There is no way she didn't know what she was doing.

But we’re going to table that until we’re done kicking her ass.

“She is dangerous,” Reborn tells us, “and despite current evidence to the contrary she is smart.”

He really isn’t happy with her right now. His dissatisfaction rings out with every frigid word that he speaks.

“What do you think the chances are that she, you know, just killed a fuck ton of our classmates and is currently sitting on a throne of corpses?” I ask tentatively.

The looks of horror and panic that I receive in return are not entirely unwarranted. But I can’t be the only one thinking about the potential body count that we’re facing, right?

“High,” Hayato says.
At the same time, Reborn says, “low.”

They look at each other. Ex-partner vs. Brother/ex-victim; who knows the crazy assassin lady best?

“Her technique is messy and has a wide area of effect, but historically she has kept a relatively low body count when it comes to civilians and bystanders. At most they will be out with a bad stomach flu.”

Hayato sighs but nods in agreement.

Somewhat upsetting but, not as much as it could have been.

“So how do we deal with her?” Tsuna asks, his voice is wavering with barely suppressed nerves. “I mean, if her favorite weapon is food and she in the cafeteria, that’s the worst place we could fight her right?”

“Good observation Tsuna.” Reborn says.

Tsuna lights up at the genuine bit of praise from our tutor.

“Unfortunately the chances of us rooting her out are slim to none. Which is why we’re going to have to be smart about this.”

He looks us all up and down.

“Two teams, one for assault one for distraction. And Inari and Hayato-kun will need to be on separate teams.”

The two of us share a confused look.

“How come?”
“You boys mentioned that there were two men in green suits. Ones that only you can see?”

Ah, our creepy crawly friends.

“What about them?”

“I'm not fond of uninvited guests and if we are going to be interrupted I would prefer to see it coming.”

That makes sense.

“I’ll be on the assault team.” Tsuna bursts out suddenly.

We all jump and stare at him.

His lips are drawn into a tense line and he is trembling. He doesn't look particularly excited to be volunteering for this job.

“Tsuna?”

“I’m doing this.” He says as he gives me this uncharacteristically severe look.

“Are you sure? You don't look particularly keen to-”

“If I don't do it you will do it.” He cuts me off, “and I really don't want you to do it so I'm going to do it.”

“Okay, okay I got it. Just don't hyperventilate.”
“I’ll go with you Tsuna-sama!” Hayato jumps forth clasping Tsuna’s hands between his own his eyes shimmering with unshed tears of devotion.

“So that leaves me and Inari as team distraction.” Takeshi laughs as he slings an arm around my shoulder. “Sounds like fun.”

Reborn gives us all a nod of approval before jumping up onto Tsuna’s shoulder. He beckons me over with a wave of his hand and I step in. Only to have him swipe the fedora off of my head and place it snugly back onto his own.

For a brief moment I considered protesting, but it looks better on him anyway. And who knows, maybe Bianchi wouldn’t be able to recognize him without the signature hat.

“We are going to be utilizing the ventilation system in order to get the drop on her. We will wait for the two of you to start the distraction before we move in for the attack.”

“Have fun crawling thought the vents guys. I’m pretty sure there are plenty of spiders left in there for you.” I say with an exaggerated smile and a wave.

Someone else can have all the fun of getting up close and personal with the school ventilation system for once. Me and Takeshi would be taking the direct route and strolling down the hall, like the nice distractions that we were.

Tsuna just glares at me.

“Stay safe please.” He says and then he hops up onto the table and scurries into the vent.

“You too bro-bro.”

Hayato gives us a quick salute before following him in.

And then there were two.

Tsuna is going to be fine. He has the lord and master of chaos at his side so there is no way he isn’t
going to be fine. Me and Takeshi on the other hand, are another matter entirely. I don’t particularly want to go back crawling in the vents again, but I also do not want to run into the scary priest guy or whatever it was that was roaring earlier.

We hadn’t really come up with contingency plans for all the hostiles currently besieging our school. I’m not even sure how many mafia types are currently here either. If Mrs. Nakamura was actually an assassin the whole time there is a chance that the entire faculty is made up of assassins.

An unlikely scenario, but it is a possibility.

Hope for the best, plan for the worst. Isn't that what people say?

If today has taught me anything it is that I need to be more prepared. This isn’t fun and games, this is serious and there are lives on the line.

My train of thought is rudely interrupted by another one of those earth-shaking roars tearing through the school.

If Takeshi minds that I am digging my nails into his arm he doesn’t mention it.

“Come on,” I say tugging him toward the maintenance shaft that will take us back to the ground floor. “We better hurry up.”

The school has pretty much been evacuated at this point. We do encounter a couple of stragglers though and usher them out as best that we can. We also have a brief run-in with Kusakabe, Hibari’s hulking second in command. He directs our attention to a collection of about fifteen interlopers who have been beaten bloody and duck taped to the walls.

“I had a feeling Hibari would be on the warpath.”

There was never any chance that he would let a literal invasion of his territory go unchallenged. The blunt instrument of destruction and all that. He pretty much only knows how to do the one thing. Destroy the enemy.
“That would be putting it lightly Sawada,” Kusakabe says.

He looks us both over and notices the bruises around my neck, our makeshift implements of war and raises an eyebrow.

“Your getting in on this?”

“You bet, we’re off to take down one of the mini-bosses now.”

“Uh-huh.” This asshole always looks so unimpressed with me. If I wasn't so busy right now I would teach him a lesson.

“If you happen to run into Kyoya could you do me a favor and make sure that he hasn't gotten himself shot?”

“I’ll add it to the list.”

And we’re off again.

I will say, it is nice to be on the same side as the Disciplinary Committee for once. Para-military regimes made up of juvenile delinquents are actually quite useful when combating actual gangsters.

We haven’t run into Kyoko yet. I'm hoping that she has gotten the heck out of here. Not that I wouldn't love to have Terminator-Kyoko on our side, but I'm not sure if she can summon her powers of sunshine and pain without the help of the Deathperation bullet.

“I always forget that your friends with those guys,” Takeshi comments suddenly distracting me from my train of thought.

“Huh?”

“Hibari and the DC guys. You hang out with them sometimes right?”
“The word you're looking for is enemies. You have to care about people for them to be your friends.”

He laughs like it's the funniest joke he's ever heard.

“You care, you wouldn't be so worried about Hibari if you didn't care.”

My entire body freezes up and I stop in my tracks to just glare at him. Yes, thank you Takeshi, I really needed that emotional revelation right now at this moment where there is nothing I can do about anything and everything is terrible.

“There’s no point being worried about that asshole,” I finally manage to say, “He has more hit points than all of us combined.”

Takeshi stops and stares back at me with an easy smile and his arms folded behind his head. If I didn't know him better I would say he isn't taking this seriously.

“You keep using video game metaphors too. You really are worried.”

“Yes,” I hiss at him, “I'm worried. Of course, I'm worried. In case you hadn't noticed this is a worrying situation.”

I rub absently at the ring of dark bruises around my neck and try very hard not to get sucked back down into the panic spiral. I try very hard not to think about how close I had come to dying. And I try very, very hard not to think about the high probability that we may all still die.

“Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean anything by it.” He fidgets with the bat testing the grip and slinging it over his shoulder. “I'm worried too.”

God damn it.

I let out a harsh breath and reach out to grab his wrist. Takeshi has taken this whole mafia and
assassins thing remarkably well considering that this morning he had no idea about either of these things. I can't blame him for being nervous. Hell, I couldn't blame him if he decided to turn tail and run right now.

“Listen, dude, I am like terrified beyond all reason right now. Everything about this situation is fucked beyond belief and I am worried about everyone. I might die, you might die, we all might die. I am terrified. But, I would rather be terrified with you were with me than on my own. And I know that makes me a shitty asshole because a good friend wouldn't want to drag someone they care about into the line of fire with them. So I guess I'm a shitty friend so I'm sorry about that but also not and -”

My developing hysterical rant is cut short by a hand covering my mouth. I squeeze my eyes shut, not really willing to look at him and waiting with bated breath for him to realize what a terrible idea this is and to leave me here alone…

He slowly takes his hand away from my mouth and rests it on my shoulder. And then all my anxiety begins to wash away as a cool calm seeps into me. Steadying the frantic heartbeat that has been hammering painfully in my chest since that ‘Illusionist’ had tried to choke the life out of me.

When I open my eyes all I see is blue.

Oh…

So that's why they’re called flames of tranquility.

“Same,” He says, “to all of that.”

I don’t say anything. I just bask in the calming blue glow, the pure chiming of bells, and the beating of a distant drum.

“Now let's go kick this bitch’s ass.”

There are two large double doors that lead from the main hall into the cafeteria. They are ever so
slightly ajar and pressed outward against their hinges and a thick viscous red sludge is oozing outward.

Well, this looks perfectly welcoming.

I don't know what mad science was used to create this infinitely propagating nightmare ooze and I don't particularly want to know. But I can't help but wonder; where do all the bugs come from. Is her secret sauce full of insect larva or something?

Gross.

Just gross.

“And why did it have to be maggots?” I mutter morosely to myself.

As carefully as we can Takeshi and I creep into position. Taking care to watch where we step so as not to slip and fall on our assess. I don't really want to get any more up close and personal with the poison cooking than I absolutely have to.

Once I have my back pressed up against the wall and a clear sightline into the cafeteria I pull out my phone and text Reborn:

We’re ready when you are.

I get a response almost immediately.

From Reborn: We'll move on your mark.

And then…

From Reborn: Remember to use your head brat.
I take a moment to peek through the crack in the door and get a lay of the land.

And well… It’s bad.

It’s really bad.

I had only gotten a brief look when we were here earlier. But at least then the students in here at least looked conscious. There are just piles of bodies littering the floor.

Reborn’s assessment seems to check out though, while this does look like an apocalyptic war zone none of them look dead. And really considering the smell and the bugs unconsciousness doesn’t seem like such a bad alternative right now.

And there, sitting in the centre of all the chaos is a familiar red-haired woman.

Poison Scorpion Bianchi.

She is perched on top of one of the lunch tables that hadn’t been upended. She almost looks like a model… if not for the fact that she had a semi-conscious boy held up by the collar of his shirt.

“We’re going to try this one more time.” She says sweetly bringing him up close to her face.

And then I watch as the gentle smile melts away into an ugly glower and she aggressively starts shaking him.

“Where is Sawada?”

“I don’t know who that is!” The kid wails in terror.

She smacks him hard across the face and is wails quiet to whimpers and sobs.
Upon seeing this my own adrenaline levels spike and the crackle of electricity begins to crawl across my skin.

“She’s not very nice is she?” Takeshi whispers from his position at the other doorway.

“Not at all.”

This has given me an idea for a distraction. A really bad idea for a distraction. Reborn had told me to use my head after all.

I step in front of the doors and pull them the rest of the way open so that I am standing in full view. I cup my hands around my mouth and I shout:

“Hey, bitch!”

Bianchi startles and drops the guy as she turns to face me.

“I heard you were looking for me.”

This probably wasn't exactly what Reborn had in mind when he had told me to use my head, but hey, whatever works right?

She smiles.

“There you are Vongola Decimo.” She reaches behind herself and pulls out a plate of something green and bubbling. “Now die like a good little boy.”

The only thing that saves me from taking that plate straight to the face is the literal decade of experience I have ducking out the way of Takeshi’s wild pitches. Muscle memory for the win.

When it splats on to the ground five feet behind me it starts making a hissing sound and I watch in mute horror as it literally eats a hole through the floor.
That could have been my face.

She just tried to melt my face.

Holy shit!

There is crazy and then there is CRAZY and Bianchi has crossed over into the comic book supervillain kind of crazy.

The next two plates come flying at me before I have a chance to move. Lucky for me Takeshi’s reflexes are akin to a God’s.

The bat swings through the air makes contact and sends both death platters flying back her way.

And thus begins a high velocity food fight of death the likes of which Namimori middle school has never seen before.

I dodge between the doors taunting her.

She throws her toxic concoctions.

Takeshi launches a counter strike sending them back at her.

And then there is a crack of a gunshot.

An explosion of orange flames.

And Tsuna, clad only in his boxers, with Hayato clinging to him for dear life, burst through the ceiling with the fury of his Dying Will. Landing square on top of Bianchi.
“STAY THE HELL AWAY FROM MY BROTHER!” He roars grabbing her and putting her into a headlock.

I don't have long to celebrate Tsuna’s dynamic entry/ moment of awesomeness or the glorious expression of WTF that forms on Bianchi’s face. That sound is back. That ear-splitting scream of electronics followed by the tonal dissonance.

I only have a second to dive tackle Takeshi out of the way before two beams of violent violet light strike the wall where we had been standing.

“I was wondering what those guns did.”

And then there is a sound. Like thousands of glass windows cracking and shattering in a symphony of destruction. I watch in fascination as from the points of violet light embedded in the wall a wall of crystal begins to rapidly grow. Almost instantaneously the walls and doorways are covered in an opaque sheet of violet with jutting spikes and scale-like protrusions.

We're cut off from the rest of our party.

This is probably a bad thing.

“Fascinating.”

The voice that is projected through the suit is stilted and robotic. It almost sounds like it's coming through a vocoder.

Like whoever is speaking is talking through these guys.

The splitting pain that crashes through my skull at this thought tells me that I'm about to run headfirst into a locked plot point. Meaning whatever revelation is about to punch me in the face is going to hurt one way or another.

So, the question is, who is the man in the machine?
“Is it a purely auditory cue that gives them away or is there something else?”

I sit up so I'm half straddling Takeshi and look up at our looming robotic friends.

“Naw, I'm just tuned into your station.” I snark the best that I can from the low ground.

“An irritating oversight.”

“Umm, Inari?” Takeshi asks tentatively, “who are you talking to?”

Right, I forgot he can’t actually see them. I should probably see if I can fix that.

I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. There is every possibility that I'm going to be sitting here looking like an idiot when nothing happens. But, hey, this might actually work and it will be awesome.

Lightning pulses and arcs in my palms and I lunges forward grasping each of them by an ankle. The current unleashes traveling up and across their bodies. They spark and a wave of what looks like television static washes over both of them and then it passes.

They’re both still standing there.

“Oh, there they are.”

I glance down at Takeshi to find him grinning widely at our newly visible friends.

Great, it worked.

I have no idea why or how it worked, but it worked.
“There, now we can all see each other.”

Oh boy, do they look large and imposing from this angle.

“You will make the most intriguing test subject.”

“You’ll have to catch me first Mr. Ghost in the Machine,” I challenge like the cocky idiot I most certainly am.

They burst into action with deadly synchronicity. Gauntleted fist swinging down toward us.

They're fast.

But Takeshi is faster.

Their trajectory is knocked off course as he swings the bat in a wide arc above my head catching them both. And just for a fraction of a second it look as if they are caught moving through molasses.

I don't let the moment go to waste. I somersault my way thorough the closest ones legs, hit the wall on the other side of the hall, and use the extra leverage to leap up onto its back.

And I just sort of dangle there, because these things are like seven feet tall.

“That shouldn't be too difficult.” The speaker crackles.

Suddenly, I’m flailing in mid-air as the robot (I am almost positive that they are robots now, arms don’t move like that) hoists me off its back by the collar of my shirt.

The world spins as it flings me back over its shoulder and slams me up against the wall of violet virulent crystal. As soon as I touch it it begins to crack and expand crawling over the exposed skin and holding me in place. Pressed this close up I can just barely make out the sounds of explosions and shouting from the other side of the wall.
I hope those guys remember that there are innocent bystanders in there.

“There. I’ve captured you,” It intones flatly. “Reborn isn’t keeping up to his usual standards if this is the best you can manage.”

This time there is no thought. No charge. There is just the intense spike of outrage and the accompanying blinding flash of lightning. When I finally manage to blink my vision clear I spot my assailant a twitching mess of fried circuitry broken on the ground.

Ow.

That. Hurt.

The crystal that was holding me in place shatters and I fall to my knees and tuck my hands and arms close to my chest. There is a crushing stabbing pain that is running from my fingertips up my forearms. My skin is hot an red and it feels like the worst pins and needles that I have ever had in my life.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!” I chant.

“To use yourself as a conduit… you’re not very intelligent are you.” It's not a question the way that he says it, it is a statement of fact.

Irritating fucking asshole.

I glare up at where the other one should be standing, and I have to do a double take. He's not there. There is only Takeshi standing there giving me this very concerned and somewhat exasperated look. The sneaky fuck must have gone invisible again while I was distracted with the other one.

I'm looking around wildly trying to catch sight of it again. When I hear the voice again.

“Idiot.”
And then I focus back in on Takeshi. Or rather, the head that Takeshi has tucked under his arm like a football.

“Like your one to talk,” I snap at the decapitated head. “What made you think this was a good idea anyway? And who the fuck are you?”

The person on the other end of the speaker sighs.

“Honestly, I wouldn't have bothered with any of this nonsense if you lot hadn't interrupted a very delicate experiment last night.”

Last night?

“It was a very inconvenient interruption.”

No way. No fucking way.

“You were working with the Hammerheads?”

The disdainful laughter that comes from the decapitated head makes this whole scene seem way more evil than it had before.

“‘With them’ vastly overestimates their importance. No, I was outsourcing the production of a highly volatile compound to an expendable workforce.”

Ouch, I almost feel bad for those guys. They obviously hadn't known what the hell they were doing.

“What are you, Lex Luthor plotting to take over Metropolis with your doomsday weapon?” I ask snidely.
There is more chuckling projected through the speaker.

“Nothing so extravagant as that.” They say, “and since you are so interested in my identity; you can call me Verde.”

As soon as he says his name I am steamrolled by half-formed memories slamming into my brain. And I remember - green hair, glasses, lab coat, alligator…green pacifier.

Because it was more than just Reborn who had been cursed. There had been more….

There had been seven.

The pain that explodes inside my head as I try to brute force my way to the sealed information is indescribable and is accompanied by bursts of orange light behind my eyes.

I press my aching hands against the sides of my head in a desperate attempt to try to keep my skull from breaking. I try desperately to reach for more information but there's nothing else.

Except the void.

“Whatever your doing I recommend that you stop. Your heart rate has accelerated dramatically. If you keep this up your going to send yourself into cardiac arrest.” Verde says dryly.

Then it all stops, and I am back in the hall with Takeshi gazing at me with obvious concern. He looks a little banged up himself but nothing too bad. A few scrapes and bruises.

He slowly lifts ups the talking head so he's holding it at eye level and smiles guilelessly into what I now see is a camera where an eye would traditionally be.

“I don't really get what you guys are talking about, are you still going to be trying to kill Tsuna?” He asks, remembering the important part of why we're doing this in the first place.

There is a long pause before Verde answers us.
“At this point the entire endeavor is more trouble than it's worth.” We hear the sounds of typing come through the speaker before he continues, “Vongola is already acting, anyone who tries to fulfill this contract will be facing quite a bit of trouble. Though that probably won't deter the others who have already arrived in this …. Lovely town of yours.”

“That was a lot of words was there a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ somewhere in there?”

There is a burst of startled laughter after the words tumble thoughtlessly from my mouth.

“Oh, he must just adore you,” He says. “No, I will not make any further attempts to assassinate Sawada Tsunayoshi.”

“Good.” Takeshi chirps happily and tucks the head back under his arm.

We listen to the sounds of more typing and I start to wonder if Verde has just lost interest in this conversation and forgot to turn off the mic. Is there a way to hang up on our end?

“You should drop the helm now,” he informs us suddenly, “I have set it to self destruct in forty seconds. Once it does the jamming frequency that it is emitting will go down and emergency calls made in the area will go through. Although, I estimate it will be another thirty minutes before the police force arrives.”

Me and Takeshi share a look, turn to the wall of virulent cloud crystals in front of us, back at the robot head, and then nod.

He quickly sets it down at the base of the crystal wall, while I quickly loot the remains of our robotic adversaries. There's not much left of them but the space-age guns they had been toting are still intact so I grab those. And then we scuttle back and duck into the, now vacated, administration office.

“Give Reborn my regards,” Verde says.

There is a drawn-out height pitched whine before the helm detonates. The following explosion shakes the foundations and sends us toppling into each other.
When we poke our heads back out into the wall there are shards of purple class scattered everywhere but mostly congealing and melting into Bianchi’s nightmare in puffs of red and violet smoke.

Tsuna and Hayato are standing in one of the doorways wielding chairs. Tsuna has one raised high above his head, while it looks like Hayato was caught in mid-swing. They had probably been trying to bludgeon the wall from the other side. They are giving us these wide-eyed stunned expressions. We only return the stunned looks and wave weakly at them.

“Hey guys,” I greet with a half-hearted wave.

I'm exhausted.

Today has been absolutely fucking exhausting. I'm about ready for this quest to be over and done with. Verde had mentioned something about Vongola making moves; I hope one of those moves a cleanup crew here to handle the rest of these fucking assassins so that the rest of us go have a four-day nap.

Though I wouldn't trade the sight of Reborn having hogtied and gagged Bianchi for anything. She looks so pissed off, it's hilarious.

But hopefully, the cavalry will arrive soon and she can be someone else's problem. Because I sure as hell do not want her moving into our house.

The three of them make their way out of the cafeteria stepping carefully over the coagulated chemical stew of the poison cooking. And dragging Bianchi straight through it on her face. This ticks off two of our assassin problems from the list. I'm not sure how many more there might be mulling around, but all things considered, we aren't doing that badly.

Of course, just as I have this vaguely optimistic though a high pitched laugh echoes through the long hallway and a long dark shadow is cast upon us. A dark shadow with horns… and a rocket launcher. And a high pitched voice declares:

“DIE REBORN!!!”
As Lambo Bovino, in his cow print pajama glory, fires a rocket straight at us.

“Fucking hell.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus the chaos continues....

Thoughts? Theories? Questions?

Seriously you guys have no idea how much I love hearing from you, it always makes my day!
Chapter Summary

We interrupt your regularly scheduled assassins to bring you even more assassins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reborn springs into action before the rest of us can even properly react to the incoming projectile. He kicks it away with ease sending it flying past the cafeteria down the hall toward where the principal's office is. The whole thing is executed with such practiced ease that I’m almost jealous.

Mostly, I’m just grateful that we didn’t get blown to smithereens.

Unfortunately, Lambo follows this up with a barrage of grenades raining down upon us. I am so exhausted that I can’t make myself move with my usual level of agility. I just kind of waver there staring up into death.

“INARI!” Tsuna screams at me.

In the blink of an eye, a small (and yet extremely powerful) hand grabs me by the back of my shirt and I am flung straight into Tsuna who takes the full brunt of having a human person slammed into his gut. We end up rolling an extra few feet after the grenades land and detonate.

“Now fucking what?” Hayato hisses.

He has three sticks of dynamite clutched between the fingers of his left hand and in his right hand one of his homebrew creations that he concocted in the science lab.

“I think it’s a kid,” Takeshi says, coming to stand behind him.

The kid in question charges at Reborn and is quickly rebuked. He is sent skidding on his knees across the floor where he tumbles into the wall and starts wailing.
I have been both anticipating and dreading the arrival of Lambo. Ever since I Reborn arrived and I started ‘remembering’ things I knew that this kid was eventually going to turn up. And with him a certain problematic ‘item’ that I am unable to properly think about.

Don’t get me wrong, I have tried to think about it. However, every time I try to think about that particular magic item that the kid has squirrelled away in his pocket of extra-dimensional space I end up with a splitting head ache and the taste of grape cough syrup sticking to the inside of my mouth.

I have tried bashing my skull against that metaphorical wall many times trying to brute force my way to the information that I know is just waiting there. Here is what I have discovered in my attempts:

I can think about Lambo Bovino as a person that exists in this world. If I am careful about how I am ‘remembering’ him I can even draw up some important plot points that are associated with him.

I can also think about time-travel as a concept and understand that under certain specific circumstances it is possible in this world. I just can’t think about myself time traveling. There in lies the painful backlash of the paradox.

And I absolutely cannot make myself think about the ‘thing’ that I know he has hidden in his hair. I know that it’s there. I know what it does. But if I try to actively think about it things on the inside of my head start getting a little more fucked up than usual.

I assume it might be the universe trying to keep me from creating a world ending paradox that would result in the end of space time as we know it, so I have mostly been okay with letting this curiosity un-prodded.

But now, when I’m actually looking at this tiny kid sniffling on the ground with scraped knees, I’m not thinking about any of that world ending complicated stuff.

Who’s child is this?

Who let his small child go to a foreign country all by himself with an arsenal of deadly and dangerous weaponry at his disposal?
Why doesn’t this small child have any parental supervision?

I lever myself off of Tsuna and brush past Reborn who has taken an offensive stance in front of the four of us. I take a quick moment to marvel that through all of that he had somehow managed to keep Bianchi ensnared and relatively unharmed.

I kneel down next to the blubbering little boy, and he looks up at me with these big watery green eyes. He looks so sad and fucking pathetic. This kid is five and he is alone. He doesn’t have anyone except us fucking idiots, and he doesn’t even have us yet.

“You okay there kiddo?” I ask him as gently as possible.

He sniffles and gives me the most petulant look that he can muster under the current circumstances.

“Lambo-san isn’t a kid,” he insists with a hiccup, “Lambo-san is five years old and a professional hitman.”

Oh my god, this fucking kid. He’s a bratty little asshole and so fucking adorable in his outrage that it hurts.

“Really?” I ask humoring him. “You must be very strong then.”

Lambo nods excitedly, momentarily forgetting his scraped little knees. “Lambo-san is the strongest!” He declares proudly, “That’s why the boss sent him on this super important mission!”

“That’s very cool,” I tell him mentally promising the boss of the Bovino Family a painful death for apparently sending a literal toddler after the World’s Greatest Hitman.

“My name is Inari,” I introduce myself. “And over there is my brother Tsuna, and our friends Hayato and Takeshi.”
Takeshi waves.

Tsuna and Hayato just kind of stare at me with a ‘why are you befriending the assassin you idiot!?’

Look.

I hear Reborn’s footsteps as he comes to stand next to us.

“And you already know Reborn of course,” I say nodding toward the master of chaos himself.

Lambo gives everyone curious looks, but he gets a little nervous when he notices the calculating way that Reborn is staring at him. He tries to get back up, but his knees hit the ground and he lets out a yelp and starts whimpering again.

Poor little guy.

“Your a little banged up there buddy.” I say digging in my pocket for the stash of bandaids that I always keep at the ready in case Tsuna needs them. I pull out a handful and find sparkly cartoon dinosaurs looking back at me.

“Look,” I say dangling the glittery adorable dinosaur bandaids in front of his face like a piece of candy, “I have sparkly dinosaurs! Do you want one?”

His eyes light up and he makes a grabby motion toward them.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Gimme!”

“Alright, show me your knees and I’ll put them on for you.”

“Kay.”

Behind me I can hear my brother and friends start to crack up as I tend to this bratty little kid. I don’t know exactly what is so funny about this situation. As far as I’m concerned they are all fucking assholes.
“You are surprisingly good with children.” Reborn observes as I expertly stick pink and yellow stegosaurus’ onto scraped knees.

I shrug.

I don’t really know if I am or not. What I do know is that I have a terrible soft spot for underdogs and scrappers. And this kid is both of those things.

“H-h-hey Reborn!” Lambo abruptly greets, “It’s me, Lambo!”

Reborn continues to stare at this tiny little disaster child and for a second I’m almost terrified that he’s going to snub him and then we would have an entirely different problem on our hands. Instead, he starts speaking rapid Italian to him. Lambo blinks at him and responds. They go back and forth for a little bit. During which time Takeshi crouches down next to me with a bright smile on his face.

Tsuna and Hayato are still keeping alert and watching out for enemies that might descend upon us at any moment, which I appreciate. Though I can see Hayato’s ears perk up as the conversation continues.

Lambo says something, and I have no idea what it might have been but the sound of outrage and frustration that Reborn makes leads me to believe that it couldn’t have been anything good.

Reborn pinches the bridge of his nose and turns away from Lambo with a somewhat pained expression. I can only assume that whatever was said was just as ridiculous as one would expect. He actually seems more worn out from this than from the actual assassins that we have been dealing with all day.

“I can’t stand that family,” I hear him mutter before he abruptly re-centers himself and hops onto Tsuna’s head.

“Dame-Tsuna we’re taking the cow with us.” He announces, his tone leaving absolutely no room for argument.
“What!? Why!?” Tsuna asks incredulously. “He just tried to kill us! Doesn’t that make him one of the assassins sent here to kill ‘Vongola Decimo?’”

“Bro, he’s like five,” I tell him flatly.

“So?” He fires back. “Reborn is like two and we don’t doubt that he could kill us all in a heartbeat.”

I sigh. There is no point opening that particular can of worms. Instead, I look back down at Lambo who has finally stopped crying and busy being enchanted by Takeshi juggling some spare change. Which I’ll admit is pretty enchanting.

I look at Tsuna who glares back at me in a sad attempt at putting his foot down.

I quirk an eyebrow at him.

The glare wavers.

I flutter my eyelashes at him in my best pretty, pretty please expression.

He looks away.

Victory is mine!

“Fine,” he relents.

“Hey Lambo,” I turn back to our new little buddy with a big smile.

Takeshi has balanced a small stack of shiny coins on the tip of his nose and Lambo is giggling in glee. Seriously, who sent this actual literal baby away?
“We’re on a super-secret, super dangerous mission right now,” I tell him conspiratorially. “Do you think that you can help us out?”

“Why would we need a snot-nosed-“ the rest of Hayato’s outrage is muffled behind Tsuna’s hand.

He obviously knows nothing about dealing with small children.

Lambo doesn’t seem to have noticed though. He leaps to his feet with his hands on his hips and his chest puffed out with all the self importance that a five-year-old can muster and gives us all a cocky grin and a haughty laugh.

“Of course! Lambo-san is super strong and brave!”

This fucking brat is too fucking cute.

“Good because I’m very scared, so I’m going to need your help.”

“BWAHAHA! Don’t worry fratello! Lambo-san will protect you from all the bad guys!”

They guys are all trying so hard not to laugh as I beseech this child for his help. Tsuna has one hand clamped over his own mouth and the other over Hayato’s. I hear a small chuckle escape Reborn before he turns away.

Takeshi isn’t even trying to hide his own amusement. He laughs brightly, “What a cute kid.”

A moment later I hear Hayato mutter, “fucking softie.”

I will get him back for that later, when we aren’t all in mortal danger.

“Enough,” Reborn says cutting short our moment of levity. “Focus up boys.”
He hops onto Takeshi’s shoulder as he is the tallest perch among us. Takeshi takes it in good grace. Though the whole picture is kind of weird considering that Reborn is still holding the tether that is keeping Bianchi bound and out of our hair. She is still watching all of us intently though which is uncomfortable.

“We aren’t out of trouble yet Dame-Tsuna,” he warns. “Don’t get cocky because you took down one hit woman.”

He nods his head toward Bianchi glowers at the rest of us the best she can with a gag in her mouth.

“I think we’re at four now actually.” I say absently thinking back on all the fights we’ve had today.

“Hn?”

“That illusionist person, Bianchi, and Verde’s robot dudes,” I list counting them off on my fingers.

“Verde?!” Reborn snaps.

“Says ‘hi’ by the way,” I tell him flippantly as I deliberately miss the point.

I pull myself to my feet and gather Lambo into my arms.

“And that’s not counting all the guys that Hibari took out either,” Takeshi adds. “He’s gotten more points than all of us.”

“At least that asshole is good for something,” Hayato grumbles.

Reborn just stares at me for a moment before he starts aggressively rubbing his temples. There have been so many unexpected surprises for him today. It must be off-putting for someone who is used to dishing out the unexpected chaos not the one on the receiving end of it.

I almost feel bad.
Almost.

As it stands I’m pretty sure I’ve gotten the worse of the beating today, and I’m starting to run a little low on sympathy.

“We’re getting out of here,” Tsuna rules firmly looking around to each of us. Though some of the impact of his conviction is lost on the fact that he is standing around in his boxer shorts.

“You sound confident Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says.

“Well, the only other thing we can do now is give up and die,” Tsuna replies. “So we are going to get out of here because I am NOT going to die in this terrible school!”

I can’t help it, I laugh.

“I am right there with you bro-bro.”

“Great...” and then realizing that he is standing in the hall in his underwear, “does anyone have some pants?”

“Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn chides and then throws a randomly materialized gym uniform into Tsuna’s face.

I wish that I could say that escaping Namimori Middle School was as easy as walking out the front door. But nothing today has been easy so far. So why would this be any different?

Tsuna takes the lead. The sky flame is burning like an ember on his forehead and his eyes have settled somewhere between their natural brown and the unnatural orange. I’m not sure where he is sitting on the sliding scale of Dying Will Mode, but he has his perception skill turned up to eleven.
Thanks to him we managed to avoid at least six more random encounters with various terrifying looking individuals. It really is fucking Assassin Con 2002 here right now. I don’t know what message board this Cassandra chick posted her call to arms on but it obviously had a very wide reach. Though I get the feeling that only about a hand full of these fuckers are actually dangerous. Most of them seem pretty... normal.

Well, normal for assassins at least.

“We should try to get out through the teachers parking lot,” he whispers. “It exits right onto 4th and it’s a straight shot to the shopping center from there.”

“We could get lost in Lucky Taro’s Grocery Store for a bit,” I add with a grin. “That place is a warp in space, no one would ever find us.”

The four of us look to Reborn, who is still perched on Takeshi’s shoulder, for the final okay. He is the expert here, and Tsuna’s not even trying to dispute his authority anymore.

He silently regards us for a moment before saying, “You’re certainly not as hopeless as I thought Tsuna.”

We take that as our all clear to keep moving.

After a couple minutes I have to haul Lambo up onto my shoulders for a piggy back ride. The pins and needles in my arms have yet to go away completely and my skin has started to sting uncomfortably.

I’m vaguely terrified that I have given myself some sort of nerve damage by using myself as a ‘conduit.’ I’m not sure what Verde had meant about that but the more I think on it the less good it sounds.

Apparently Hayato thinks so too. He falls in step beside me as I, covertly as possible, examine the red and swollen lines across my forearms and palms.

“What have you done to yourself now.” He asks with a hiss of sympathy.
“I’m pretty sure I electrocuted myself,” I tell him blandly.

“Electo- What? How?”

“Magic lighting.”

“What?”

I give him a side long look and shrug the best I can with a small child clinging to my back.

“Dude, as soon as I figure it out I will tell you.”

I can tell by the look on his face that this is not even close to an adequate explanation. Hayato is a man of science after all, the ‘magic’ explanation must grate on his nerves.

He is about to say something else when he is interrupted by Lambo who has noticed the fun new designs on my arms.

“Fratello, your arms look funny,” he laughs and proceeds to lean over and prod at them.

It takes everything I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek and NOT scream.

The jolt of agony that blossoms at the point of contact is unexpected and has by hair standing on end. I grit my teeth and do my best to maintain the bland smile. There’s no point scaring the kid and string him off crying again.

Hayato obviously does not share my concern. The second he notices the flinch of pain he is up in Lambo’s face with a dark glower.

“Oi cow, don’t go poking at people without their permission, it’s rude.”
I immediately hear the telling sniffles of an oncoming fit and sigh heavily.

“Don’t worry about it Lambo I’m fine, really,” I console him.

This situation is chaotic enough as it is and I really want to avoid tantrum time-travel for just a little longer. I also want to make sure that my brain isn’t going to turn into the singularity when it does happen before hand.

Lambo sticks out his young and waggles it at Hayato.

“Hear that idiota?” He taunts, “Fratello doesn’t mind.”

Hayato’s eye twitches spastically which is somewhat concerning, but mostly hilarious that a kid has managed to get under his skin so thoroughly. That takes talent.

“Relax man, he’s just a kid, he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

I feel, more than see, Lambo making faces at Hayato as we hurry to catch up with the others.

I’m irritated to see that at some point Reborn had allowed Bianchi back the use of her legs. Her upper body was still bound tightly in the Leon cable but rather than being dragged across the ground she was trotting after Reborn and Takeshi. And thankfully she is still gagged. I don’t particularly want to listen to her mooning after Reborn or antagonizing Tsuna.

As we silently make our way through the school I settle into glaring at the back of her head.

The longer we go without encountering anyone or hearing anything the higher the tension in our group ratchets up. Even Lambo is able to read the general mood and is mostly staying quiet as he clings tightly to my shirt collar.

And then Tsuna abruptly stops in his tracks.

We all freeze in place and stare at him expectantly. He doesn’t really take notice and is staring
intently at the empty bulletin board to his left.

“Kyoko-chan....”

An instant later the wall bursts inward covering us all in a dusting of drywall and plaster as the priest that I had seen wandering the halls before comes flying through. He goes headfirst through the opposite wall where he twitches for a moment and then goes completely limp.

“Holy shit!”

We all just stare at the aftermath of this completely unexpected dynamic entry. He isn’t moving. If he isn’t dead then he at the very least is going to have a hell of a headache once he wakes up.

How the hell had that happened though?

Soft footsteps start approaching the brand new hole in the wall and we all turn and gape as Sasagawa Kyoko, bathed in divine light and wielding a broom like a polearm step through.

“It’s bad manners to burst in on the ladies’ change-room without knocking first.” She chides his unconscious ass, ignoring the rest of us poor mortals completely.

Tsuna is staring at her with this adorably star-struck expression on his face. I think he is really starting to warm up to his whole, Kyoko is a badass thing.

“Oh, hello Tsuna-kun,” She chirps happily finally noticing us. It’s somewhat disturbing that she can just switch gears like that and go from sending a guy flying through a wall to acting like we are just casually passing each other on the way to class.

“H-hi Kyoko-chan,” Tsuna greets back with a weak wave.

“Sasagawa is a little bit terrifying isn’t she?” Takeshi whispers into my ear with a smile.

“Yes, yes she is.”
I look over the, now unconscious, assassin. He is stuck in there, well specifically his head is stuck in there which is rather impressive in an of itself.

“You sure taught this guy a lesson,” I say.

Kyoko huffs in irritation while propping her free hand against her hip.

“Some people are just so rude,” She tells us. “He broke right into the girls' change room and scared everyone half to death.”

“Everyone?” Tsuna asks anxiously. “Are there still more people in there?”

She shakes her head. “There were about half a dozen hiding in the change room with me and Hana.”

“Hana is still here!?”

“No, she and the others got out through the teachers parking lot while I was dealing with this... person.”

The way she says ‘person’ makes me think that what she actually means is ‘this piece of shit.’

“I told her you boys would explain everything once this is all over,” she directs this at me and Tsuna in-particular.

I don’t know why she thinks we know anything about this FUBAR situation.

“Why us!?” Tsuna whines, because he has always been low key terrified of Hana.

“Well, all of these ‘lovely’ gentlemen have been going around looking for a ‘Sawada’, and since you two are the only ones named Sawada at this school I assumed you would know something.”
“Ah.”

Her logic is sound.

I have no explanation for any of this shit, but I can’t fault her powers of deduction. Even the truth is going to sound like bullshit to Hana though.

“We were heading to the parking lot to get out,” Hayato cuts in. “How’s it looking over there?”

Kyoko shakes her head.

“I wouldn’t. A bunch of black cars pulled in after the girls got out, or else I would have followed them out the first time I knocked him out.”

There are a few concerning bits of information in that statement, but the one that I’m latching on to is ‘the first time.’ I survey the priest who I had assumed was down for the count, What with the massive head trauma and all, and I see his fingers start to twitch.

That sickly off-red flame is starting to swirl around his fingers, and head in the wall or not he is much too close to Tsuna for my comfort.

“Hold him,” I tell Takeshi, shoving Lambo into his arms.

I grab Tsuna by the arm an pull him behind me ignoring his yelp of confusion.

“Reborn!” I call and gesture madly toward the man who is now well on his way to melting the wall.

He swears.

I don’t know what he said because it’s in Italian, but I know what swearing sounds like, and it is
Reborn pulls aggressively on the Leon-cable sending Bianchi crashing to her knees as Leon snaps back into handgun form and settles into Reborn’s grasp.

He fires.

The bullet slams into the back of the priests head with deadly accuracy just as he pulls himself free. For s moment he just says there on his knees, ridged and twisting, and I am terrified that somehow he survived that shot.

And then he falls back through the wall limply.

We all breathe a collective sigh of relief.

We do not look at the rapidly spreading pool of blood.

“Was that one of the Sicilian Alliance’s Enforcers?” Hayato asks weakly.

“It was,” Bianchi answers breathily as she pulls the gag out of her mouth. “Poor Antonio didn’t stand a chance against my darling Reborn.”

Hayato flinches violently as she begins to speak and noticing moves back a step.

Yup, she is just as creepy and crazy as she was before. I’m not sure why Reborn decided to drag her along with us on this super fun field trip of death and not, you know, knocked her the fuck out and left her tied up in the cafeteria with an admission of guilt stapled to her forehead. But then I am not the all mightily Machiavellian master of chaos that Reborn is.

So I’m going to trust he has some reason.

But that doesn’t mean that I have to like it.
“Hello Hayato,” She says suddenly turning her attention away from Reborn and focusing on Hayato with a sickly sweet smile pulling across her pretty face. “I had no idea I would be running into my darling little brother. Really it’s been years, you should visit more often - Daddy misses you.”

I would have to be blind not to notice the heart attack she is giving Hayato right now. Tsuna is bristling with outrage, and he breaks out of my hold to stand firmly at Hayato’s side and gives her the best stink eye that he can muster.

There is probably a ‘smart’ response to all of her creepy antagonism. And under less stressful circumstances I would totally put forth the effort to think of it. But right now I want to do the ‘fun’ thing.

Shucking off my shoes, I pull of my socks and wad them into a ball and jam them straight into her irritating smiling mouth. She lets out this glorious shriek of outrage that is muffled by the socks. Really, it’s like music to my ears. She had absolutely no right to be all smug and condescending about anything.

She’s the bad guy.

And more importantly: She LOST.

“Blah, blah, blah, shut the fuck up nobody cares.”

The hysterical giggle that tears itself out of Hayato’s throat tells me exactly how badly her words had been fucking with him. I’m glad I could bring some levity to this otherwise fucked up situation.

Lambo takes this as an emotional cue and starts to laugh along with him.

“Stupid face!”

Bianchi makes a move to rip out her nice new gag but is stopped in her tracks by Kyoko. She deftly grabs both of Bianchi’s arms and twists them up behind her back.
Kyoko is much more competent at this than all of us combined.

“Who is this?” She asks as Bianchi struggles vainly in her grip.

“Uhh-“ Tsuna stares wide eyed at her. “An assassin?”

He looks a little bit more than a little bit lovestruck. I think he is really starting to like the fact that Kyoko could kick his ass without breaking a sweat.

She huffs.

“Do all assassins have such bad manners?“

“I think it’s in the job description.”

They are adorable.

I look away from their general cuteness and turn to watch Reborn. His posture gradually relaxes into something a little more normal. Leon transforms back into his chameleon form and scurries back up Reborn’s arm and reappears on the brim of his hat.

He strolls over to where Kyoko has Bianchi keeling and restrained and steps in close enough too make eye contact through the curtain of red hair. For a long, drawn out moment, he just stares at her.

And then a terrifying weight of an unnatural presence surrounds him. The pacifier around his neck lights up.

As do Leon’s eyes.

“And then a terrifying weight of an unnatural presence surrounds him. The pacifier around his neck lights up.

“As do Leon’s eyes.

“Bianchi,” he begins, his voice light and casual. “You can attribute the fact that you continue to
draw breath to our past partnership. However, do not think that I will keep extending this mercy if you continue to fuck with me or my kids. If you utter another word that is not extremely helpful. If you so much as twitch in a way that is even remotely threatening you can consider this mercy forfeit.”

Well... damn.

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Reborn say ‘fuck’ before.

Somehow, its scarier when he says it.

We all watch with bated breath as he and Bianchi have their intense staredown. Tsuna has gone completely ridged as he watches Reborn intently. His eyes have turned a vivid shade of orange.

I don’t know if it’s because he’s super freaked out, or if its because he is in the midst of having some sort of ‘realization of great truth.’

I’m just caught up in how cool Reborn looks right now, even in his cursed baby form. It’s no wonder why he was able to inspire so much fear and respect in the mafia, even when like ninety-eight percent of them have no idea that he is actually an adult man.

“Capire?”

Bianchi is absolutely still, and then she nods slowly.

“Bene,” he says, tapping her gently on the cheek before walking out of her visual range.

“Dame-Tsuna,” he calls out as he reaches into his jacket for something.

“Yes’sir?!?” Tsuna squeaks, snapping to attention.

A second later my brother is fumbling to catch a role of lime green duck tape that our tutor throws his way.
“Make yourself useful and make sure she is well restrained this time.”

“Yes’ sir!”

He springs into action working with Kyoko to make sure that our prisoner (?) won't be going anywhere in the near future.

“It doesn't look like we’ll be leaving through the parking lot anymore,” I say trying to steer us back on topic.

We will have plenty of time to marvel at Reborn's badass-ness later.

“Which is a shame because I think Lucky Taro’s is having a two for one special on bubble tea today and that would have worked out pretty good for us. Now we’re going to have to go by the ‘worst route possible’ - the sports fields.”

Everyone pulls a face at this declaration. Because running through a large wide open space is the stupidest plan ever when trying to avoid multiple hostiles with firearms. I am desperately hoping that someone has a better plan than this.

“Unfortunately,” I continue because I am fairly sure that if I stop talking at this point I am just going to dissolve into another panic attack. “I don't think we have a cardboard box large enough or inconspicuous enough for all of us to sneak out under. Which means that this is probably going to be a fight… again. Not that I’m not totally down for another fight, but today is getting a little long and with the amount of stuff that we've already done I'm not sure that-”

“Ragazzo,” Reborn cuts me off mid-monologue.

“Mnhmm?” I squeak.

“Relax.”
“Kay.”

I close my eyes and take three deep breaths.

A hand rests on my shoulder.

A familiar hand.

The most familiar hand.

I open my eyes and meet an identical set gazing into mine.

“Hey bro.” Tsuna says wryly.

“Oh.”

“You okay.”

“Nope,” I pop the ‘p’ sound.

“Yeah, me neither,” he agrees. “But well have time to panic and cry once we get out of here.”

He reaches out and grabs my free hand in his and squeezes it tightly. Somewhere in the distance I can hear the somewhat inexperienced trumpet of a bugle horn. It is so out of place and yet it’s the somehow it's the most familiar sound that I have ever heard.

And then I realize…

Oh, that's you isn’t it Tsuna?
A call to arms sounding clear through the panic. I take another breath and shut my eyes again listening closer, and I can hear the drum again. The somewhat manic rhythm of a snare drum that playfully beats alongside the horn egging it on to get louder and more confident.

And it's me.

It's such a familiar song. Each note is accompanied by a flash or orange burning behind my eyes and the sensation is painful in a distant sort of way. This isn't a pain that I am going to bend to. This is too important.

So I listen, concentrate, and remember.

Two small boys running up a flight of stairs to answer the call of a much beloved voice.

And then the rest of the memory burns as I try to chase it.

I blink my eyes open.

Tsuna is still there gripping my shoulder.

“You still with me?” He asks.

“Always.”

Our group is too big to try for stealth anymore. Now we are going more for an expeditious retreat while avoiding as many of the hostiles as we possibly can. Tsuna has taken point and is doing his best to lead us through the winding halls without too many encounters.

There are a few though. But our group deals with them pretty expertly. My favorite moment was when we managed to get the jump on a group of them and Kyoko and Takeshi did this awesome combo attack; where she used her expert broom handling skills to smack them all up between the
knees and Takeshi followed up by clobbering them all across the back of the head with his bat.

Lambo has been having the time of his life. I don't think he really understands what's going on, which is probably a good thing. If he did actually comprehend how much trouble we are in it would be much harder to keep him calm.

Well, some sort of calm at least. Somehow he had gotten shuffled into Hayato’s care. Those two play against each other like a well practiced comedy routine which is amazing in its own right. and it's keeping Hayato’s attention off of Bianchi which is also helpful.

I’ve noticed something concerning as we’ve been going through. I'm pretty sure we've all noticed it at this point.

We’re being herded toward the gym.

All other paths out of the school are being guarded. All other hallways are blocked off. Most of my favourite access panels into the ventilation system have someone posted in front of them.

And the vast majority of the mobsters that we've been seeing now are all sporting the same insignia somewhere on their getup.

A dagger and a rose.

I'm going to take a wild guess and say that Cassandra Della Rosa hadn't entirely trusted that random criminals answering her job posting would be able to get the job done. I get the feeling that she sent the bulk of her own personal forces to make sure the job got done.

This woman doesn't want anything from us.

There is nothing that we can say or do that will de-escalate this situation. There is only one thing that she wants and that is Vongola Decimo dead. She wants Sawada Tsunayoshi dead…

Though going by the information that I have gathered I don't think that the name they got from Vongola HQ is Sawada Tsunayoshi.
It’s nice to know exactly what the old man thinks I’m good for.

I’ll make sure to return the favour next time he comes home for a visit.

It doesn't really make much of a difference at this point anyway. We have all been spotted now. And I don't think they are all collectively stupid enough not to have noticed the whole ‘twins’ thing. Me and Tsuna might not be identical but we are pretty damn close. Close enough that they have probably realized that something is fishy with their orders.

By the time we’re standing in front of the gymnasium doors, the enemies have started to close in on us. There are a lot of them coming out of the woodwork now.

We press close together as we turn to face them.

“Cover me,” Hayato whispers.

We shift as unnoticeable as possible to allow him to slip into the center of our defensive conglomerate with Lambo still firmly attached to him. He starts shifting slightly with something underneath his blazer and I am abruptly reminded that, oh, yeah, Hayato wears explosives and other fun area effect weapons under his clothes.

I resolutely ignore what he's doing and focus my full attention on the man who is now approaching our group.

A spokesman or general. I can’t really get a read on any hierarchy that these guys might have since they are all dressed in the same black on white get up. I'm going to assume that since he’s stepping up he has at least some sort of rank in his criminal order.

“Reborn, how nice to see you again.” He speaks with a drawling accent and focuses in on Reborn who is lounging comfortably on my shoulder. “Though you have a great deal more useless baggage attached to you this time. How’s about we help you out with that.”

By which, I infer, he means ‘look the other way while we kill these kids.’
Yeah, I don't think he actually knows Reborn so well.

“I don't think so,” Reborn says steadily.

The man blinks at him in incredulity before bursting into humourless laughter. I feel as everyone tenses up. Tsuna has one of his hands gripped into the back of my shirt, Takeshi and Kyoko tighten their holds on their makeshift weapons, and I hear a quiet ‘tink-tink’ sound as Hayato continues to work at a furious pace behind me.

“Still funny,” The laughter finally dies down and he steps a few paces closer. “Kiddos this guy here has always been such a fucking riot, and that's not counting how fucked up he looks either.”

I bristle at the complete lack of respect and feel a surge of the static run up my arms. I’ll admit that the only thing that is keeping me from flying off the handle is the sharp tug Reborn gives to the back of my hair.

I settle for glaring at him and mentally willing him to spontaneously drop dead.

“The ‘Worlds Greatest Hitman,’” he mocks, “It looks like your slipping a bit considering that we got the drop on you. You should have heard the way that Bruno was shitting himself when you first showed up. He called up the Lady, we hadn't even known he was over here watching those brats, he was so sure that you were going to figure him out and shoot him in the head. But it looks like you and Vongola both still have that problem spotting Mists.”

“Well, I did shoot him in the head.”

They are talking about the individual formally known as Mrs. Nakamura. I guess his real name had been Bruno… that whole situation is still giving me the worst feeling inside.

“That you did. Poor fucker. But hey, you did me a favor because now I don't have to pay that ugly fucking Estraeno ass.”

“If you have a point I would appreciate it if you got to it,” Reborn counters. “I don't have all day to spend listening to the monologuing of no name riffraff.”
The look of outrage on the guys face is priceless. I can’t help but chortle as I realize that all this time he's been talking to Reborn like he knows him personally. And Reborn has no fucking clue who the hell this asshole is. This isn’t him being fastidious or anything, he honestly has no clue.

It’s hilarious.

“You’re such a cocky prick,” he mutters once he's gotten himself back under control. “It’s time someone knocked you down a peg.”

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a gun and levels it at my head. He takes there long strides and suddenly the barrel is pressed against my forehead and I hear the distressed exclamations of my brother and friends around me.

I am really getting sick of people shoving guns in my face.

“Fratello?” I hear Lambo whisper from behind me.

I’m sick and tired of these assholes in general.

“We’ve got you beat. You’re surrounded you dumb fucks there is no getting out of this. I don’t care how good you might think you are there is no escaping from this. I am going to shoot this unfortunate fucking kid and his face and drag his corpse back to Roma where I will gladly tell the lady that the Vongola has suffered another tragic loss. And there is nothing that you or any of these fucking brats can do about it!”

I hear the click of the safety.

My brother's harsh cry of “Wait!”

And then I hear Lambo wail.

“What the fuck-” The random mobster on stage left doesn't have a chance to finish his thought
because in an instant the entire area is consumed in an explosion of pink.

Reborn takes this moment to grab me roughly by the collar of my shirt and send me careening into Tsuna and sending us both crashing to the floor. A second later there is a shot.

A wet gurgle.

And a thud.

I'm not paying attention to any of that anymore. Because Lambo had used THE THING. I'm fairly certain that everyone is just confused about where all the weird cotton candy pink smoke had come from. I hear Hayato yell, “Fucking Cow! What the hell did you do?!”

Meanwhile, I am busy staring into the gaping maw of the universe as my brain turns itself inside out with remembering and forgetting and infinite possibility and probability. It's many armed and many-eyed incarnation of madness staring back into me an laughing.

I just barely manage to keep myself standing.

“My, my,” a deep voice cuts through the chaos ringing though my head. I stare up through the clearing smoke and see a familiar face. “What sort of trouble has little me gotten himself into now?”

“Who are you!?” Tsuna shrieks in anxiety and confusion. He has me clutched protectively in his arms as we both gaze up at-

Lambo.

Ten years later Lambo to be exact.

His eyes light up as he looks down at us. “Hey boss,” he greets with an easy smile.

“And Fratello too.” He continues, “I was wondering when little me would be running into you
guys. You two look like a mess. Is there anything I can help with.”

I have no words. I just keep staring at him. My brain is still trying to reorder the universe and has taken all other functions offline. Tsuna doesn’t seem to be doing any better. He just lets out a long, ‘Hieeee!’

“Um, I don’t know what’s going on here, but we are still surrounded if you want to help with that,” Kyoko says pointing over Lambo’s shoulder to the swarm of gun toting gangsters wearing suits.

“Ah, yes, I can see how they might be a problem.” He fishes around in his pockets and pulls out a set of copper horns which he deftly attaches to his head. “Hey, hey, Fratello look at how cool I get in ten years.”

And he charges forward with lightning sparking at the horns.

“Who the hell is that!?” Hayato demands, gesturing madly with the stick of dynamite in his hand.

“Lambo.” I answer blandly staring intently after him. He had asked me to watch after all.

“Lambo is a baby,” Tsuna says flatly.

“Yes, and obviously time-traveling witchcraft was used to switch baby Lambo with Lambo from ten years in the future.” I watch as he changes into three of the gangsters electrocuting them with a blast of green lightning gathered between the horns.

It is pretty damn cool.

I am also going to assume that, that is what Verde had meant when he had mentioned a conduit.

“…What?” Tsuna looks so very lost.

“We should probably help them out, right?” Takeshi asks with a dangerous smile.
I reach up and hand and he drags me up to my feet, “yeah, we can't let those to have all the fun.” I say nodding toward where Reborn and Lambo were making there way through the crowd of gangsters.

At some point Lambo had realized that Reborn was there and was now in the midst of antagonistic jibes as he attempted to show him up. Reborn was taking it in stride, by which I mean he is completely ignoring Lambo and demonstrating his own proficiency with firearms.

Tsuna sighs, “He called me boss didn't he?”

“Yes, yes he did.”

Me and Hayato stoop down to haul him to his feet and he gives our ragtag group of idiots a solemn once over before the small ember of sky flames that had slowly been burning out on his forehead reignites in a blaze.

“Okay,” he declares. “Let’s do this.”

Kyoko shoves Bianchi to the ground and out of the way and twirls the broom in her hands. It has been a surprisingly effective and durable weapon throughout this event.

“We have your back Tsuna-

Hayato starts us off by lobbing a shower of dynamite down on the sea of dumb-asses in suits. I just barely catch a glimpse of the blue vile that is thrown into the mix.

“Brace yourselves,” he says.

There are multiple detonations followed by screams and swearing. And then a blue haze begins to rise from the ground and we watch as a dozen or so just drop.

“Ha! I have been waiting to do that!” Hayato crows in pride.
“That was cool.”

Takeshi rushes past me while I am momentarily distracted by the awesomeness of science and slams his bat into the midsection of a rushing gangster with such velocity that the man flips in mid-air and lands flat on his face.

“That was also very cool,” I mutter to myself as an all-out brawl erupts around us.

The enemy converges upon us from all angles. At first, I thought the fact that there was like fifty guys to take on a handful of teenagers was overkill. But most of these guys are going down easy. I think they went more for quantity than quality when hiring their legion of doom. None of them are even lighting up with anything looking like Dying Will flames.

It's an army of minions.

That and I'm pretty sure that we have all leveled up like crazy throughout this side-quest.

Somewhere through the noise and confusion, I hear someone screaming into a radio receiver, “We need back up here now! Get those doors open!”

I whirl around the face the gymnasium doors, cold clocking one baddie across the jaw as I do so and sweeping the legs out from under the other. It’s only now that I notice the commotion that is coming from behind the door.

Sounds of combat.

A strangled scream cracks through the radio.

“What the hell is going on in there!?”

There is a heavy impact on the other side of the doors. And another. And another.
For a moment everything stops and everyone left standing on our side of the divide is holding their breath. Then a body flies through and skids across the floor and comes to a slow stop at my feet.

And, there, standing in the doorway with a backdrop of carnage behind him is a god damn cave troll.

“Trespassers will be bitten to death.”

By cave troll, I mean Hibari Kyoya of course.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH THESE KIDS!?” Screams one of the ones who have yet to get knocked the fuck out.

I turn and give him the biggest possible smile I can manage. It’s pretty damn big considering that Hibari is standing directly behind me dripping with the blood of our enemies. It's really nice to have a monster on the team.

“Welcome to Namimori!” I call. “We’re the fucking Neighbourhood Watch mother fucker!”

With that, the last of them are dropped and the lot of us are left standing around on a pile of unconscious bodies.

“Boss, Boss, Boss!” Lambo calls crowding in on Tsuna with a big smile on his face. “Did you see how many bad guys I took out?!”

“Ahh~”

It’s good to know that even as a teenager he is still a brat. It is also good to know that I am not going to drop dead with the odd occurrence of time travel. Although, I don't really understand what I ‘saw’ (nor do I particularly want to).

“Sawada,” Hibari materializes in front of me with a murderous look on his face.
“No, shut up,” I already know where he is going to go with this and just NO.

“You cannot blame this fuckery on me. This fuckery goes so far beyond my mortal capabilities.”

His eyes narrow further.

“Tetsuya is worried about you,” I inform him abruptly.

I'm hoping that changing the subject will make him slightly less murderous in my general direction. It seems to work. The tonfa are lowered and his posture relaxes ever so slightly.

“Hn.” He kicks over the nearest body, which groans in pain. He rummages around in the coat pulling out a passport, some cigarettes and rips the insignia pin off of the lapel.

“Herbivorous scum.”

I watch as he casually walks back through the gym doors, back to his masterpiece of violent indulgence. Seriously, there must be at least a hundred gangsters in there and they are all down for the count.

Tsuna shrieks and I refocus my attention back on him in time to catch Reborn kicking him in the back of the knee over some sort of transgression. Lambo has returned back to his five-year-old form and is now snuggly in Kyoko’s care. They are both laughing at whatever ridiculous thing Tsuna said to bring Reborn's wrath down upon him.

Hayato seems to have the same idea Hibari did and is picking through jacket pockets looking for anything particularly interesting.

“I'm really glad that Hibari is on our side,” Takeshi comments as he comes to stand next to me.

“He's a god damn cave troll is what he is.”

He laughs.
Everyone's mood seems to have brightened considerably. There aren't any more assassins coming at us (yet) I'm not sure if there are even any more in the school.

And yet I can't shake the feeling that we aren't out of the woods yet. I want to believe that it had actually been this easy. The final boss is down for the count, time to go home and eat some cookies.

No, considering everything that has happened today, it doesn't feel like we've cleared the level yet. We still need to escape after all.

I have a really bad feeling still.

It's been nagging at me for a while now. Since I started hearing those bellowing roars. At first, I thought it might be some weird intimidation tactic one of these assassin guys was using. But, no, none of these guys seem to be proficient in fire magic. Certainly not enough to create a presence as terrifying as the one that I had felt earlier.

There is more too.

Now that there are fewer people moving about I am certain that I can 'hear' it. The cracking of glass. It sounds like... well, it sounds like the wall of crystal that Verde’s robots had created with their sci-fi ray guns.

Speaking of which, I still have those don't I?

I fish the less charred one out of my pocket and look it over. There are a few knobs and dials along the exterior, a small LED display that shows energy levels and frequency? Not sure what that is. The chamber is illuminated in a quickly draining violet light.

I hold it up to my ear, ignoring the questioning noise that Takeshi makes, and listen. It makes the same sound. Quieter though and getting fainter with each passing moment. Whatever else is here it is somehow connected to Verde, which is concerning.

When I grip it properly the screen starts flashing.
Recalibrating frequency

Recalibrating frequency

Fulmine

Charging sequence initiated

I feel something prick into my hand and I do my best not to react. I'm pretty sure that if anyone realizes that I'm screwing around with potentially evil technology I am going to get so many disappointed looks.

It continues on for a few beats before the screen flashes again.

Charging sequence completed

I watch as the chamber that had previously housed a dying violet light is filled with a vivid green. And listening now I hear that same rhythmic beating of a snare drum.

I hear something else too.

Footsteps.

The staggering footfalls of something massive and getting closer.

“What's wrong Inari?”

I look up from the ray gun and meet Reborn's eyes.
I don't have a chance to answer.

I am interrupted when the exterior wall of the gymnasium is slammed inward as something outside lashes out with a titanic force. We all freeze and stare as the wall starts to crack and crumble.

A second blow comes and this time a massive, misshapen arm punches its way through it is covered in jutting purple crystals that have broken through the skin and seem to have taken root within the musculature.

That horrifying roar sounds again. Only this time I don't freeze up. This time my legs carry me forward into the gym to face whatever it is that has come for us now, ignoring the panicked calls of my brother and friends behind me.

I'm done with running. Done with hiding. We are getting out of here. I don't care what I have to break my way through. We are getting home.

The wall shatters completely to reveal the monstrosity before us.

It had probably been a normal human once. But now its body was enlarged grotesquely and disproportionately. There were cloud flames running under its skin. With each flash, another tumorous crystal would swell and jut forth. It must be unbelievably painful because every time it happens the monster before us roars and wails.

There are another two dozen suits standing behind it. All of them have that same Rose and Dagger insignia on them. All except one very tall, a gaunt woman wearing large wireframe glasses.

With rows of stitches across her face.

And she stares at us in vacant intensity as the thing at her side screams in pain.

“Gregori fetch,” She speaks in a cold emotionless voice, uncaring, unfeeling.

Dead.
The monstrosity bellows again and lumbers for on an unsteady gait.

That woman is dead.

I don't know how I know it but I can feel it in my bones she is dead. There is nothing in there. It is a walking corpse.

That man who had been mocking Reborn back there. He had said a name. I had been too pissed off at the time but now it is ringing clear as a god damn gong.

Estraeno.

That's a familiar name that has some pretty heavy plot connections. I really wish I wasn't about to get run over by a stampeding monster so I had time to actually think about the ramifications of it but, oh well.

I raise up my stolen ray gun and take aim. The chamber is pulsing with an ecstatic green light and the thrumming of a heavy drum beat. I know beyond all shadow of a doubt that this is going to work.

I pull the trigger and a streak of lightning blasts through the room colliding with one of the monsters legs. It shatters and the entire thing stumbles barely catching itself.

I can see from here that the leg is already starting to reform itself. Cloud flames property is propagation so my guess is that if we want this thing to stay down we are going to have to shatter it completely. Which is easier said than done.

Hibari leaps past me. Taking advantage of its momentary weakness and jamming the tonfa into its elbow with enough force that the entire arm cracks and pieces of it begin to shatter off. He doesn't give it a moment to recover continuing on with his relentless strikes.

Bullets whiz past my head as the suits outside start firing on us. Because apparently sending a giant crystal golem that can I finally repair itself after us isn't overkill. Return fire comes almost instantaneously as Reborn rushes past me gun raised and pacifier burning with intense yellow light.
Tsuna rushes up to my side, and much to my confusion he swings a wild punch at what looks like thin air.

I am even more confused when he actually collides with something and in a flash of indigo the corpse woman who I was certain was still outside. I glance back to the gaping hole in the wall and see the rest of our crazy band of idiots rushing through with a hale of explosives and makeshift weaponry to take on the last of the assassins besetting Namimori Middle-school.

I make eye contact with the corpse woman and I watch as milky white eyes shift and suddenly I am looking into the very distinctive heterochromatic blue and red.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The image wavers and dissipates into nothingness.

A knife flashes through the air aimed at my brother's head, as another corpse woman appears. Without even looking back Tsuna catches her wrist in mid-swing and his hand ignites in a blaze of Sky Flames.

I'm tackling the illusion? Duplicate? Identical twin? Faster than I can even process slamming into the floor with lightning crackling at my fingertips again. The ray gun is forgotten somewhere at my feet. Its power is drained again and I don't have the time or inclination to charge it.

So I focus on the feeling, the sound, the frequency, and I brace myself for pain as I unleash a current of electricity from my hands like a fucking Sith Lord.

The illusion shakes and shutters and then dissipates.

I turn back to Tsuna as fast as I can. He's standing over the corpse woman. The real one, considering she is unmoving on the ground. He is giving her this extremely intense look. He has truly entered Hyper Dying Will Mode now. I can remember him like this. It’s different up close and in person.
If it was anyone else I would say that he almost looks frightening like this. Enraged and wreathed in flames. But all I can feel in this moment with him next to me is safe and calm.

Like everything is going to be okay.

And then the monstrosity formally known as Gregori roars shattering my moment of serenity.

I try to turn my attention toward it but even the slight turning of my head sends the world spinning on its axis. Everything is starting to fade at the edges and grey out.

I'm tapped out, done, I've got nothing left.

Hibari is still hacking away at the monster and not really getting anywhere other than maintaining the status quo. Most of his energy is being spent on dodging around the wild swings of its arms.

Reborn is alternating between taking shots at our crystalline assailant and making sure that Kyoko, Takeshi, and Hayato aren't killed outright. I know I should go an help them, do something useful other than sitting here on my ass, but my arms have gone numb again and my legs flat out refuse to move. This is going to be problematic in a moment because the monster has started to use its free arm to claw its way closer to where me and Tsuna are.

I guess it still intends on fulfilling that last order even though its master has been defeated.

The flames on Tsuna abruptly flicker and die out and he crashes down next to me cradling burnt hands close to his chest and hissing in pain.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow ow!”

“Y’kay?” I slur.

“No!” He snaps with tears gathering in his eyes. “I set my hands on fire.”
“M’gic fire.” I giggle stupidly.

So we sit there pressed together side by side and watch as the beast claw its way closer, and closer, and closer. I am distantly aware of Reborn screaming at us both to move our asses out of the way but neither of us has that kind of energy anymore.

And then it stops.

It begins to convulse violently. Shaking and shivering and bulging unnaturally.

Violet flames burn off rapidly flying away and scattering into the air. The crystalline growths that had mostly overtaken the entire organic base begin to slorp out as the entire construct begins to collapse in on itself. It is horrifying to watch. It’s screaming in pain right up until the crystals that had been holding its throat and jaw together fall apart leaving us looking at something at we know is screaming but can’t make a sound.

We watch in mute terror as it slowly, slowly dies.

And the terrified voice of a child calls out, “Mommy?” Before it falls to pieces.

The last things I see before falling into unconsciousness is Trident Shamal steeping through the hole in the wall with Hayato slung over his shoulder, and Reborn rushing toward the two of us.

I collapse into Tsuna, and I know no more.

Chapter End Notes

And thus brings an end to what I am calling “The Siege of Namimori Middle School Arc.”

That was a wild ride away from canon.

Please let me know what you thought in the comments :)
I’ll be back next week with the next instalment in this crazy story.
Chapter Summary

It’s not something that you can just slap a bandaid on to make it all better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Well.... we lived.

Somehow?

When I actually take the time to mull it all over I can think is: ‘we should be dead.’

There is no way that a handful of idiot teenagers with no formal combat training should have been able to survive against a siege of professional killers. Somehow we had though. I’m going to chalk it up to Reborn, and his bizarre talent for warping the rules of reality, coming to our rescue. Because, really, we should all be dead.

Or, at the very least, I should be.

If Reborn hadn’t shown up when he had there is no way that I would have survived that first encounter. And then I would be a ghost and not just suffering the aftermath of strangulation, concussion, electrocution, and absolute god damn exhaustion.

Yeah, I fucked myself up real bad. But plus side; not a ghost. And Tsuna isn’t a ghost, and none of our dumb friends are ghosts either. I am seriously questioning their self-preservation instincts, but at least they aren’t dead.

After Shamal, and the reinforcements that Vongola managed to round up on short notice turned up, things had moved very quickly. I don’t remember much of what happened, what with the unconsciousness and all, however, I do remember being tossed in the back of a van and the look of panic on Reborn’s face as he tried to snap me back to reality with sunshine magic.
And then nothing.

It had been nothing for a good long while.

There were flashes though. Takeshi’s voice. Tsuna and Lambo snuggling up next to me. Mom singing as she pets my hair.

Reborn hushing me back to sleep when I woke screaming from a nightmare.

There had been so many nightmares. The ones that stuck out most though were the ones where a heavy body presses me now against a desk and big meaty hands clamp around my throat cutting off my airway. And no matter how much I would trash I couldn’t get them off. And this time Reborn doesn’t show up to save me, so I die and I die and I die and I die.

And I am left staring into the dissolving face of a monster that had once been a child screaming desperately for its mother.

Interspersed in all of that are memories. Memories that smolder with orange fire at the edges and they burn away with painful flashes. I don’t manage to hold onto much. Two things.

A word and a boy.

Arcobaleno.

And Rokudo Mukuro.

Neither of which I have the energy to deal with right now.

It’s been four days since all of that happened, apparently. I have slept through most of it. I scared the shit out of Tsuna and Lambo when I bolted up, flipped myself out of bed landed on my face and started cursing up a storm.

I have never been fussed over so much in my entire life than I have been in the past hour. This is
including the five days I spent in the hospital... which was just a couple of days ago.

Now that I think about it that’s probably why there is all the fuss.

Oh well, we get pancakes and espresso out of it. Made with love from Mama despite the fact that she was awoken at three in the morning by the sound of her children screaming.

Now, I am attempting to mimic Tsuna’s fork holding technique in order to consume said glorious pancakes. We seem to have both come down with a terrible case of mummy hands (and arms in my case). He is decidedly better at this than I am. At the very least he is able to grip the fork and pilot pancake into his mouth.

I have dropped this fork like six times. I can’t even manage to grasp it. If this goes on any longer I am going to forgo table manners completely and just mash my entire face into those pancakes.

I carefully press the fork between both my hands and move carefully toward the stack of pancakes. Just as I am about to pierce down into the sugary breakfast treat the offending utensil slips from my grasp and clatters against the coffee table.

“Wahhh~” I whine and press my forehead against the tabletop. “Pancakes~”

“Bwahaha, silly Fratello. That’s not how you hold a fork,” Lambo laughs at me.

I’m glad that my emotional turmoil and lack of manual dexterity is a source of amusement to him at the very least.

A small hand prods my head, and I look up to see Reborn holding out a bite-sized pancake slice on the end of a fork in front of my face. I snap onto it like a god damn alligator before he has a chance to change his mind or yank it back (like the sadist he most certainly is).

“Thank you,” I tell him reverently through a mouthful of sugar and syrup.

“Don’t get used to it brat,” he says before cutting another piece and holding it out to me. “You look too pathetic for even me to tolerate right now.”
I consider arguing that ‘pathetic’ comment. However, my desire for breakfast wins over my pride and I bite down on the offering. Just as a flash goes off next to my head.

When the spots clear from my vision mom is sitting there with a goofy smile on her face and a camera raised. Tsuna had burrowed his head into his arms and he’s giggling like a lunatic.

I don’t know why. It’s not that funny.

“I’m sorry Inari-chan,” Mom giggles. “You and Reborn-chan looked so cute I couldn’t resist.”

I stare at her wide-eyed for a moment while I chew slowly. She had looked so worried and worn out when she had run into our room. No one has really said anything about what happened yet, but I can only imagine how terrified she had been when we had been hauled into the house by a strange man, beat to shit, and then had a strange five year old thrown at her.

If it takes my immortalized humiliation to make her smile today so be it.

I turn back to Reborn to find him staring back at me with a quirked eyebrow and a fresh forkful of pancakes. Apparently he has reached the same conclusion.

Fuck it.

I bite at the pancakes with a wide grin. Mom squeals happily and snaps another picture. Tsuna just breaks down into full-blown howling laughter. He has gotten pretty ballsy if he is willing to laugh at Reborn to his face. That or he sustained some serious head trauma when we were being attacked by assassins.

Of course, he immediately starts chocking on one of the strawberries, because that is how karma works. And Reborn claims immediate vengeance for his dignity by smacking Tsuna across the back with way more force than necessary until he spits up the offending fruit.

“Tsu-kun, honey, I’ll go get you a glass of water,” Mom says as she gets up and leaves the room.
“Thanks, Mom,” Tsuna rasps after her.

“Dame-Tsuna, Don’t laugh with your mouth full.”

Lambo blatantly ignores this sound piece of advice that he is overhearing and continues to laugh uproariously at our antics.

Apparently Lambo is just ours now. He’s been calling Mom ‘Mama’ all morning and she is just rolling with it without question. I don’t know if I missed an intense conversation about custody or adoption while I was unconscious. Or if we just skipped to the part where he is just part of the family now.

I’m not sure if the Mafia has different rules when it comes to this kind of stuff.

Whatever, either way, I’m ruling that he is ours now and the Bovino can go fuck themselves for letting such a tiny kid wander the world on his own.

“So, uh...” I start my thought by reaching out and prodding one of Tsuna’s heavily bandaged hands with my own. “I know its not the most important question right now, but, uh, what’s with the mummy hands that we’re rocking?”

“Um.”

Tsuna stutters around an actual answer and starts flexing his hands within their confines. He seems to have a much better range of motion than I do. I don’t know if that is because he has had a couple of extra days to practice, or if he just fucked himself up less than I did.

“Burns...from the magic fire.”

He sounds so very pained to be speaking the words ‘magic fire’ aloud. Like he cannot believe that this is the most logical explanation that he can give me for our current predicament. I guess it makes just as much sense as anything else would.

Meaning none at all.
I can’t help the giggle fit that I fall into. We must be the only idiots who have been stupid enough to burn themselves with their own Dying Will Flames. I can’t remember anything from that story about Dying Will Flame backlash. But then again that story is proving to be more of a loose guideline than a tried and true road map.

“Don’t laugh, I’m being serious,” he whines.

“I know, I know,” I continue to giggle. “That’s why it’s so funny.”

“You two are hardly the first to feel the backlash of Dying Will Flames,” Reborn says, apparently reading my mind again. “Though I will admit that both of you injuring yourselves in the same way at the same time is a little bit ridiculous.”

“Yup, that’s us,” I agree, “absolutely ridiculous.”

“Any chance that you can teach us how not to horrifically injure ourselves with our mafia magic powers next time?”

“It’s on the addenda,” Reborn answers wryly.

He missed my stunning wit and sardonic soliloquies. I can tell. He would have smacked me by now for saying ‘mafia magic’ if he hadn’t.

A small tug comes at the bottom of my shirt and I look down to find a bleary-eyed and droopy Lambo staring back at me.

“Fratello,” he yawns. “I’m sleepy again.”

A quick glance at the clock tells me that it is four-thirty in the fucking morning. It is way too early for him to be awake.

“Yeah, it’s still really early buddy the sun isn’t even up yet. Do you want to go back to sleep?”
He nods, and I make a few valiant attempts to pick him up and put him into bed. It’s a lot harder with my hands and arms wrapped up the way they are. Lucky for me Mom walks back into the room with a fresh glass of water for Tsuna and notices my struggle. She swoops in and scoops Lambo into her arms and cradles him against her chest with a gentle smile.

“I’ll get Lambo tucked back in my room so you boys don’t have to worry about waking him.”

She stops briefly before she leaves again to run her free hand through Tsuna’s hair, and then through my own.

“My brave boys, Mama is very glad that you are both safe.”

And then she steps out again. We wait for her footsteps to fade and the sound of her bedroom door opening and closing before picking up the conversation again.

“Out of curiosity, what does Mom think happened?” I ask. “Because it is obviously not ‘besieged by mafia hitman.’”

Unless it is and Mom knows wayyy more about this situation than we give her credit for.

“The official police report says that a structural defect in the school building gave way causing the structural damage and that a gas leak resulted in mass hallucinations amongst the student body. Which is a convenient excuse for explaining away the assassins.”

“Mom thinks that we stayed behind to help other students get out safely,” Tsuna adds on awkwardly.

“Not a total lie.”

There are a million other questions that I should be asking now: what’s the situation with the hit on Vongola Decimo? What about Della Rosa? Estraeno? And the monster? And Verde? And, and, and...
“How are the rest of our party members?” I ask instead.

“Kyoko and the boys are fine,” Reborn reassures me. “We made sure that they all made it home safely.”

I let out a small sigh of relief. Well, that’s something.

“Kyoko-chan punched a man through a wall,” Tsuna says vacantly.

“Yes, I saw that.”

Kyoko was all sorts of badass throughout that entire ‘event.’

“No, I mean, yes that too. But after you passed out one of the guys that Vongola sent over to help us tried to grab her and get her into the van and she punched him through a wall.”

Tsuna gets this glazed overlook and I make an attempt to way a hand in front of his face to snap him out of it.

“Tsuna?”

“It was awesome,” he whispers reverently.

Ah.

All right then.

Reborn gets a sly look on his face, “Kyoko-chan would make a good wife for Vongola Decimo.”

“Yeah~” is Tsuna’s dreamy reply. Apparently not noticing what he is agreeing to.
“I think you mean that she would make a good queen for Vongola,” is my snarky addendum to that. “Girl is a badass.”

“I cannot argue with that,” Reborn chuckles. “She has quite a bit of natural talent that I wasn’t anticipating.”

I look to Tsuna to see if he has anything else to add, but we have well and truly lost him off in the land of daydreams. He is mumbling something about the wedding cake now.

He’s such an adorable Goofus.

And he’ll be offline for a while while he finishes acting out his imaginary wedding.

“So I guess Lambo is just ours now?” I ask Reborn. Latching on to my next not too intense line of questions.

“Hn?” He makes a questioning noise as he digs into his own neglected plate of breakfast.

“Do we have to fill out paperwork or something? Or are a legion of crazy cow people going to show up on our doorstep demanding ransom money for him?”

His expression darkens dramatically as he finishes gulping down his coffee.

“They better not,” he mutters into the now empty cup.

He is legitimately perturbed by the thought of the Bovino coming here to cause a ruckus.

“Are they dangerous?”

“I... no...”
That was a weird pause.

“What’s with the long pause?” I prod when it becomes apparent that he isn’t going to continue on.

I don’t particularly like long pauses. Long pauses have a tendency to turn into problems that will come and punch me in the face.

“The Bovino are a profoundly irritating low-level Familia whose members have no sense of professionalism or personal boundaries.”

Wow.

“That was a much more scathing commentary than I was expecting. What the heck man? Did a Bovino steal your girlfriend or something?”

Reborn gives me a withering glare and flicks a strawberry at my face. I am still a little too groggy for my usual level of acrobatic evasion right now, so I take it.

Also, it seems to make him feel a little better.

“Hardly, but they have interrupted more than one delicate operation with their ridiculous antics.”

A raise a very judgemental eyebrow at him.

“This coming from the man who once dressed in a fairy princess outfit dangled himself over Tsuna’s bed and rained extremely realistic rubber snakes down upon him to teach him a lesson about punctuality.”

He ignores my rebuttal completely and continues to munch on his breakfast. Meanwhile, mention of the rubber snake thing has finally snapped Tsuna out of his daze. He shudders and looks between the two of us with a look of confusion.
“What?”

“What, what?”

A projectile strawberry flies into his face and he shrieks and falls over.

“Hieeee!”

“Dame-Tsuna, pay better attention to your surroundings.”

I laugh. It serves him right for laughing at us earlier.

“So, moving on to something a little more important? Life-threatening? Whatever - “I wave away my own indecisive wording. “The assassin thing, is that still a thing? Is that still happening? I mean, what is our current assassin situation?”

They both stare at me blankly for a long moment as I slowly work my way to a halfway coherent question. Assassins make me nervous, go figure.

“Nothing since we left the school,” Tsuna says. “But we haven’t really left the house since then so I don’t really know.”

He gives Reborn a somewhat concerned look. I get the feeling that he had been trying to forget our multiple near-death experiences as best as he could. The whole price on the head of Vongola Decimo thing was probably also pretty upsetting for him. He is just radiating anxiety now.

Reborn shrugs.

“There have been no further incidents in Namimori since what happened at the school. Vongola managed to rally their allies in the region rather quickly and the city is now on an ‘underworld lockdown’ as it were.”

He makes a grab for my coffee, and I let him have at it without any fuss. There is an air of
exhaustion around Reborn. I assume that he hasn’t actually gotten much sleep since this whole thing started.

“The assassins that had been in the city have all been dealt with for the most part. Shamal and our other allies managed to root out a few more that hadn’t been at the school. If there are any others lurking about they will be dealt with eventually.”

Tsuna makes a face at the mention of Shamal’s name. I give him a questioning look and he tilts his head in a way that I interpret to mean ‘I’ll tell you later.’

“As for the situation back in Italy,” Reborn continues, ignoring our little exchange. “Della Rosa have retreated to their compound in Milan. The bounty on Vongola Decimo has been retracted. Headquarters is still in the midst of implementing a more permanent solution for Cassandra herself, however, they seem to be having some trouble with the...execution.”

I swear, I hear him mutter the word ‘armatures’ as he drains down the second cup of coffee, and starts eyeing Tsuna’s.

Oh, boy, is he wound up.

“Regardless, that situation will be dealt with soon enough. Even if I have to go over there and shoot them all myself.”

“Sounds therapeutic.”

“In the meantime, we are going to get the two of you healed up, and then I am increasing your training.”

Tsuna lets out a long whine at this. “Increasing!? It was already crazy!”

Reborn stares between the two of us for a good long while without saying anything. Tsuna’s outrage winds down quickly under scrutiny and we both start to fidget.

“Tsunayoshi,” He looks to Tsuna and then to me. “Inari. You boys did amazingly well considering
the circumstances. I am proud of how you handled yourselves. But that, as stressful and dangerous as it might have seemed, is just the tip of the iceberg. Things are only going to get more dangerous for you from here on out.”

Tsuna makes a sound like he wants to protest again, but Reborn simply raises a hand and cuts him off.

“Despite your reservations about becoming Vongola Decimo, the fact remains that you are the heir. The blood of Vongola Primo runs in your veins and there is nothing that you or I can do to change that.”

He abruptly hops down from the coffee table and makes to leave our bedroom. Pausing briefly to say:

“Shamal will be by later to give you boys a check-up. I should be finished by then.”

“Doing?” I ask curiously.

“I have a call to make.”

And then he leaves.

_________________________________________

Tsuna somehow manages to fall back asleep after all of that. Not that I can really blame him. It was still absurdly early when Reborn left us to our own devices. I can only assume that the school will be closed for a while too which means that we have no schedule to keep for today.

We are just waiting around for Shamal to get here and give us a clean bill of health.

Just waiting here.

In the quiet.
I’m wide awake.

I slept for three god damned days and the chances that I will be able to fall asleep again any time this week are slim to none. So I sit awake, and I pace the room, and I try desperately not to get sucked down into spiraling (and depressing) thought vortexes with limited success.

Fuck that old man.

Whatever, I’m over it.

Well, I’m not, but...

Fuck it.

I managed to fish out my phone from a pile of clothes at the foot of my bed. I’m happy to see that my new ray guns somehow escaped confiscation and I quickly shove them under my bed.

I call Takeshi.

Well, I try to call Takeshi. The whole mummy hand situation somewhat impedes my ability to dial, and unfortunately, voice recognition in cell phones has yet to be invented in this universe. My attempts at calling him lead to a weird conversation with someone who sounds vaguely like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and a sleepy kid who is at least somewhere in Japan.

I give up.

I’ll talk to him later. When there is a better chance of him actually being awake.

...
quiet contemplation. I am all about running and jumping and doing random stupid things like scaling buildings and picking fights with delinquents.

I pull myself up and quietly start pacing the room again.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

My hands don’t feel right.

Back and forth.

They itch.

Back and forth.

The bandages don’t feel right. They feel too tight. They shouldn’t be this tight right? They are going to cut off my circulation. They’re cutting off my circulation. I need to take them off now. Right now.

I need to take these things off.

Off, off, off.

There’s someone in the window.

There is nothing in the window there is a tree in the window you idiot, calm down.
Assassin.

Tree.

Assassin.

Tree!

FUCK!

...

I should take these bandages off, right?

Yes, yes, yes.

They won't come off.

Why won't they come off!

**Of course, they won't. They are hiding something from you.**

Why are they bandaged?

I don’t remember bleeding.

Are you sure?
No?

Did they tear something out again?

There’s nothing there! Nothing under my skin!

There are maggots under your skin. Can’t you feel them wriggling?

GET THEM OFF!

...

Your father tried to kill you.

...

He must know that you don’t belong here.

...

Or maybe you do. And this is the only reason you do.

Shut up.

Shut up.

Shut up.

Please.
I should take these off, right?

“Inari?!”

**Coward.**

“Inari, s-stop it, I know they’re uncomfortable, I-I know it, but you have to leave them on or you’ll h-hurt yourself even worse.”

Tsuna?

“Inari please!” The crack of desperation in my brother's voice snaps me back into myself.

We’re in our bedroom.

On the floor?

Tsuna has wrapped himself around me like an octopus. Pinning my arms to my sides. His face is pressed into my shoulder.

It feels damp.

I made him cry.


“No you’re not,” he sobs. “You hurt. You were hurting yourself more. I hate it when you hurt.”
“You got hurt so badly!” He continues. “And I know you don’t want to talk about it, because you never want to talk about it but -“

His voice breaks and he tightens his hold around me. And I am helpless to stop my own tears. That’s the thing about us. Pain and sadness always have a way of being shared and amplified between the two of us until we are both blubbering messes.

I force myself to relax in his hold. Listening closely to catch the scattered melody of our duet. A drum beat and a trumpet.

After a few moments, the harmony kicks in full force and the last of my panic attack begins to really and truly drain away.

“You’re really not,” he sniffles. “You were okay when we were all awake and talking and then suddenly you weren’t and I was so scared.”

“And I’m not stupid!” He continues fiercely. “I know what they did and I hate it. Because you’re more important than a scapegoat or a decoy. You’re my brother, my best friend. I hate it.”

“Okay, yeah, fine. You’re right. It’s terrible and shit but I still don’t-“

“Then talk about something else!” He jumps in again. “Talk about literally anything else. And it doesn’t have to be with me. Talk to mom about weird recipes that she wants to try. Talk to Reborn about that mafia trivia stuff that you like. Talk to Takeshi-kun-“

He freezes and pulls back to give me a somewhat alarming manic look.

“You have to call Takeshi-kun,” he tells me seriously. “He was really freaked out when you
wouldn’t wake up. He keeps calling to check in on you and I promised him that I would make sure to let him know as soon as you woke up.”

I stare at him wide-eyed and stunned at the sudden impassioned onslaught of information. And then I slowly raise up one of my heavily bandaged hands that gives me the precision dialing ability of an oven mitt.

“Tried that, I think I called the terminator.”

The look he gives me in response to this is uncharacteristically wild. He moves to grab at the phone before realizing that he would have the same trouble dialing as I did due to the whole, mummy hand epidemic.

“We’ll get Mom to dial.”

“What?! No!”

“Why not?” He demands.

“I’m not waking her up so she can make a phone call for me, it’s embarrassing.”

“She won’t mind.”

“I mind!” My voice cracks, humiliatedly, on a high note making this whole exchange even more awkward than it already was.

“Why?” He sounds genuinely perplexed by this. Honestly, I don’t even know why I suddenly feel so weird about all of it. I mean it’s not like I wasn’t about to call Takeshi on my own.

“You’ll feel better. I felt better once I called everyone to make sure they were all okay.”

“Yeah but not at like four in the morning!” I protest.
“It’s eight!” He counters.

I look to the alarm clock that sits on our shared desk. Sure enough it’s quarter after eight. When did that happen? I could have sworn Tsuna had only fallen asleep like a minute ago.

“Whatever it’s still too early for emotional breakdowns. Case and point this.”

And then I take a moment to backtrack.

Everyone?

Did he call everyone?

“Bro-bro, did you get Kyoko’s phone number?” I ask teasingly.

Tsuna blushes so hard it looks like his face is glowing, and he starts sputtering.

“So!? Don’t change the subject.”

“Please let me,” I beg him with a grin crawling across my face. “Your relationship drama is always so much fun.”

“And yours isn’t?” Ha, now it’s Tsuna’s turn to have his voice crack on a high note.

“Not for me,” I say cheerfully ignoring his jab. “Common bro, you're the one who wanted to talk.”

I flutter my eyelashes at him all innocent-like. Suddenly I’m feeling much better about everything.

“Yes, fine, I got Kyoko-chan’s number,” he snaps begrudgingly.
“Way to go Tsuna!” I cheer, ruffling his hair. “I never thought you would work up the guts to ask.”

If possible Tsuna goes even redder than before and mumbles something under his breath.

“Huh?”

“I said I didn’t ask.”

It takes me a moment to work out what he means and once I do I am grinning even harder than before.

“Tsuna, you are so lucky that girl likes you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kyoko is sweeping you off your feet bro. She is the sweeper, you are the sweepy. She is boldly taking the initiative asking you out, giving you her number. Which is awesome because I’m pretty sure if left up to you you’d just be giving her the puppy dog eyes until we were forty.”

“That’s not... okay fine, that’s probably true.” He groans and flops back across the floor, narrowly missing the corner of the table with his head.

“This doesn’t change the fact that you should call Takeshi-kun though.”

I sigh and stretch out next to him.

“I know, and I will. Preferably after I have medical verification that my arms aren’t full of maggots or in danger of falling off so I don’t have an upsetting panic attack all over him.”

He rolls over and gives me a loose one-armed hug.
“I don’t think he would mind.”

I don’t really think he would either. But things have been super stressful lately. I mean, it wasn’t too long ago that he was teetering on the roof of the school. And I don’t want to be the reason that he’s sad. That the only thing that’s going to come from him having to listen to me have a panic attack right now anyway.

I start fishing around on the coffee table blindly grabbing for the remote. I think we have had just about enough dramatic heart to heart time at this point. Its time for some mindless television. I make it a little more difficult for myself than it needs to be since I don’t have the energy to actually sit up and grab the remote like a normal person.

I eventually get it.

Me and Tsuna spend the next few hours getting way too invested in the adventures of an anthropomorphic cartoon cat. Lambo wanders back into our room around ten-thirty and joins us in the impromptu marathon. He takes a seat on Tsuna’s bed behind our heads and will yank on our hair every once in a while when things take a particularly dramatic turn in the show.

About an hour later Reborn returns and spends a long moment standing in the doorway staring at us as we cheer for the victory of Sir Moonclaw against the dastardly rat wizard. It almost seems like he’s about to interrupt us and tell us to go do something useful with ourselves. Instead, he comes into the room, hops onto the bed behind me and starts asking questions about our dopey tv show.

It’s hilarious because in no time he is just as invested as the rest of us, but at the same time, he just cannot seem to wrap his head around the whole anthropomorphism thing.

Mom comes in with a plate of snacks and sandwiches around noon and joins me a and Tsuna on the floor. And as ridiculous as the whole thing is it made me feel so much better about everything.

It’s nice, and warm, and safe. A protective cocoon of the family to ward off all the terrible things that might be lurking outside our door.
After another hour the cartoon marathon comes to an end and we are brought back to the real world boy an incessant knocking on the front door.

Mom gets up with a stretch and a smile, “I’ll get that.”

“That will be Shamal,” Reborn announces with a quick glance at the clock. He grabs the remote to switch off our little television ignoring Lambo’s whine of protest. “Head downstairs.”

It takes a moment for me and Tsuna to pull ourselves up off the floor. Hours of lounging in once position had left us both a little cramped.

“Oh, Shamal-sensei how nice to see you again,” Mom greets cheerfully. “Thank you for coming to check on my boys.”

“Oh, Shamal-sensei how nice to see you again,” Mom greets cheerfully. “Thank you for coming to check on my boys.”

“Anything for a beautiful woman,” comes the reply.

And I suddenly remember something very important about Trident Shamal. He is a skirt-chasing sleazebag and I don’t want him flirting with our Mom!

We share a horrified glance and I realize this is the reason Tsuna had pulled a face when Shamal’s name had come up earlier. He must have already witnessed the pervert flirting with Mom.

Let me just say now, for the record; I have nothing against Mom meeting new people, flirting, going on a date, and who knows, maybe one day leaving that sorry excuse of a man who has the gall to call himself her husband. However, if that ever happens the guy best be a fucking gentleman and not a skirt-chasing sleaze.

Tsuna barrels ahead of me and actually manages to make it down all the stairs without tripping himself up. His coordination has improved by leaps and bounds lately, I am really impressed.

And also a little suspicious.
He is about to insert himself between Mom and Shamal, when a body launches itself through the front door from behind the not-so-good doctor with a wail of “Tsuna-sammmmmmmmaaaaaa!”

In an instant, Hayato has himself wrapped around Tsuna’s legs babbling about how happy he is that the boss is okay and how worried he was and how he has failed in his duty as a subordinate.

Of course, Tsuna isn’t able to keep his balance having a human person clamped around his legs and he falls over onto his ass.

“Hayato-kun!”

He’s staring down at our friend with this perfect ‘what the fuck’ look on his face which perfectly encapsulates what I’m feeling in this moment as well.

“I hope you don’t mind I had to bring these idiots along with me or they would have tried to cross town on their own. One of them almost did,” Shamal drawls.

There was a plural ‘idiot’ in that statement.

I don’t actually have time to ponder it any further than that because just as the word leaves his mouth another person pushes past him and I am being hoisted up into a monster hug.

“Hey Takeshi,” I greet him as best I can whilst being grappled. I graciously allow him to manhandle me until I am clinging to him like a mutant koala. I fell like I’m at a bit of a disadvantage being this far away from the floor.

“Well, this is a convenient solution to my whole ‘how do you dial a phone without fingers issue.’”

I’m going for humor here.

“Your awake,” he breathes in relief.
I don’t think the humor is going to fly right now. Drat.

“And as you can see totally fine. All systems are functional. Nothing to worry about here.”

He doesn’t answer this time, just squeezes me a little tighter.

Normally I would be squirming out of his hold by this point but this seems to be an important somewhat defining moment so I let it ride. I do wish it wasn’t taking place in our foyer in front of half a dozen people though. I’m really glad that Tsuna and Hayato are having their own, much louder, moment less than a foot away from us. It cuts down on the awkward.

For me at least.

“You're going to have to put me down eventually dude.”

“Yes now,” Shamal says pushing past us into the lounge where a table and chairs have been set up in a makeshift examination station. He opens his briefcase onto the table and starts pulling out some vaguely medically looking things that I couldn’t name if my life depended on it.

Tiny scissors.

Bandage things.

Sticky tape stuff.

Long needle looking gizmo.

A box thing...?

I give up.
“I’m going to need to examine them both, you can resume your weird little lovefest after I leave.”

“Kay!” Takeshi chirps cheerfully.

At least it sounds cheerful. Judging by the ‘eep’ sound that Tsuna makes I’m going to assume that Takeshi is doing that thing where he is smiling but isn’t actually smiling.

The terrifying one.

He proceeds to walk over to the living room still carrying me like a small child and sets me down on the couch.

And, yup, that is a terrifying smile.

He is definitely pissed at me.

“Dude, I woke up at like three this morning you haven’t really missed any dramatic milestones,” I lie through my teeth.

He stares at me, still smiling, before flopping down next to me on the couch and slinging an arm around my shoulders.

“The Yankees were playing the Redsox at three in the morning.”

Ah.

He was awake at three in the morning then.

Upon closer inspection, he has that same ‘I haven’t slept well in three days’ look that Reborn and Mom are rocking. That makes me feel even worse.
“Really?”

“Yup, Yankees won in overtime.”

“No shit? How many innings did it go?”

“Fourteen.”

“Holy... I’m sorry I missed it.” I really, really am sorry.

“Next time.”

I am going to interpret this as ‘I forgive you for not calling me, but next time you better fucking call me you jerk.’

Only without the swearing.

Hayato comes and joins us on the couch and glares daggers at Shamal as he starts unwrapping the bandages from Tsuna’s hands.

“You better not mistreat Tsuna-sama, asshole,” he growls.

Shamal doesn’t even do him the courtesy of a glance over his shoulder at the over hostility.

“Which of us is the doctor here?” He says dismissively. “You just sit there and be quiet. The sooner this is done the happier I’ll be.”

Ass.

“You should be glad I’m looking over your precious ‘boss’ at all, it's against my policy to examine guys,” Shamal continues complaining.
This guy rubs me entirely the wrong way. I don’t care if he did perform an eleventh-hour rescue, he’s a dick.

“Don’t worry boys,” Reborn says, reappearing behind us. “Despite his attitude, Shamal is a very competent doctor. He assisted with my ‘birth’ after all.”

“Wouldn’t that make him an obstetrician then?” Tsuna asks giving the doctor a suspicious look over.

No, I don’t think so.

And also, I wonder what exactly he did to help Reborn out. It obviously would have been something after the whole curse thing. Records maybe? But that wouldn’t really require a medical doctor.

Reborn must have something big on him too if he is able to force him to help us out considering treating men is against his ‘policy.’

“Well if the kid says we can trust him it should be fine,” Takeshi says relaxing into the couch.

Hayato glowers even more.

“You say that because you haven’t had to live with him for the past three days. Believe me, he needs to be watched closely.”

“That bad?”

“All he does all day is flirt with all the women in the complex, it’s irritating and disgusting.”

“Gross,” I agree with him.
“I can hear you,” Shamal intones without taking his eyes off his work. “You kids will understand in a few years, your still too young now.”

“Hayato-kun lives in the dorms,” Tsuna observes with a flat and judgemental stare. “The only girls that live near him are teenagers.”

“Gross!” I say with more emphasis this time.

Shamal chooses to ignore our loud and ongoing scrutiny of his character and continues to examine Tsuna’s hands. From what I can see they seem fine. Everything moves in the right way, he can feel all the different pokes and prods, pick things up, squeeze, etcetera. The only thing that is different, and that stands out, are the scars.

A very familiar looking starburst of dark scar tissue that begins at the center of his palms and wraps around his hands.

That is probably going to unlock an interesting dialogue tree at some point in the future.

“Alright Decimo, your good to go.” Shamal turns to look at me. “You’re up blondie.”

I begrudgingly trade seats with Tsuna. I don’t like this man. I don’t particularly want him touching me either. But for the time being, I am going to trust that Reborn will shoot him if he tries any funny business.

The bandages are slowly unwound. A brief panic strikes me in the chest as I remember my earlier (irrational) panic about maggots crawling under my skin and I wait with bated breath to see what exactly I’m going to be working with here.

Dark branching fractals stretch down my arms. They almost look like trees reaching from the bend in my arms down and exploding in my palms. It's a very distinctive pattern that looks both creepy and cool at the same time.

Lichtenberg figures.
“The swelling seems to be gone now,” Shamal observes as he presses his thumbs up and down the marks. “Skin is healing up nicely too.”

He picks out a fresh needle gizmo, like the one he had been prodding Tsuna with and takes one of my hands in his free one. “I’m going to test for sensation now don’t twitch too much.”

He presses it against my index finger.

“Can you feel this?”

“Ow!”

“How about that?”

“Fuck! Ow! Yes!”

“And that?”

“Stop stabbing me you fucking prick!” I finally snap and try to yank my arm out of Shamal’s vice-like grip. “Where the hell did you get your medical license from, asshole? Your bedside manner sucks.”

Shamal gives me the flattest look and proceeds to jab the needle into my thumb without breaking eye contact.

“Ow!”

“You should be thankful that I’m doing this at all kid. I don’t generally treat men.”

“Fuck you.”
He rolls his eyes at me and finally drops his nefarious instrument of torture. He then proceeds to manhandle my arm into an even more uncomfortable position. Thumbs press firmly into the soft tissue of my forearm and continue down to my palm.

“Quit whining, you’re lucky that you didn’t give yourself permanent nerve damage with the voltage you were handling.”

“He’s going to be alright though?” Tsuna asks.

“He’ll be fine,” Shamal grouses. “He’s just being a baby.”

“You were jabbing me with a needle!”

“Hold this.” He says handing me the weird box thing.

I grumble and do as I’m told.

Nothing is happening.

“Is it supposed to do some- HOLY FUCK THAT'S COLD!!”

The peanut gallery sitting on the couch has apparently decided that it's fine for them to laugh at my torment now. Which is fine, I guess.

“And now?”

“HOT!” I shout and throw the box back at him.

I don’t know what the heck that thing is but it is not natural.

“Sensitivity to temperature seems to be fine as well, though your reactions are a little extreme.”
“You are fucking with me aren’t you?” I whisper hiss at him.

“Maybe a little bit.”

The next thing he pulls out is the electronic hand grip.

“Here squeeze on this thing now.”

I squeeze it without breaking eye contact with him.

It beeps.

“Yeesh, your pretty strong for such a tiny kid.”

“Are we done yet?”

I don’t remember him antagonizing Tsuna this much when it was his turn. This is his revenge for that ‘gross’ comment, isn’t it? Well, fuck him, I’m not taking it back.

“Yes, you're fine, go do whatever it is that you normally do,” he waves me off dismissively. “Just don’t go jamming any more forks in light sockets.”

“I’m not an idiot!” I snap.

“Thank you for your assistance Shamal,” Reborn cuts in before I really lose my temper. “I’ll have the usual fee deposited into your account.”

Shamal grumbles and starts to pack up all of his equipment, “I should charge you extra for the trouble.”
He pauses in his packing up to give a considering look to me and Tsuna.

“And extra for having me treat a couple of guys.”

He will just not let that go, will he?

Reborn doesn’t say anything, he just gives Shamal this intense dead-eyed stare that speaks in volumes exactly what he thinks of the dear doctor’s complaints. Shamal breaks first; turning away and starting to pack up all his medical supplies into his briefcase.

“Nice doing business with you, as always, I can’t wait until the next time you call me up with a new set of impossible demands.”

“Are you boys all finished up with your checkup?” Mom asks poking her head into the living room.

“Yes, they are,” Shamal says slinking up to her with that sleazy smile on his face again. “I am happy to say they both have a clean bill of health although I can’t do much about the scar tissue. That will just have to fade over time.”

“That’s a relief to hear. Thank you so much for coming.”

“Anytime m’ lady.”

He makes to grab her hand for a kiss but before he can get that far he is sprayed in the face with a stream of grape juice.

Lambo is standing by Mom’s leg with a box of grape juice in his hands. His eyes all watery as he sniffles up at her.

“Mama, I couldn’t get the straw to work.”

“Oh sweetie, let’s go get you a new juice box.” She bends down to scoop Lambo up, apparently
forgetting all about Shamal who is standing there dripping with grape juice with this shocked look on his face.

As mom turns back to the kitchen, Lambo gives us a thumbs up before breaking out the crocodile tears again.

Way to go little brother!

Shamal stands there for a moment longer before wiping his face with his sleeve and turning to the front door.

“I’m leaving now.” He announces. “I assume that you’ll be able to get the two of them back safely when they want to leave? Great. Goodbye.”

He’s gone without waiting for a response.

We all stare after him.

“Are you sure you trust that weirdo?” I ask Reborn.

“He is, unfortunately, the best in the business.”

“Sure...”

I stare out the still opened doorway.

It’s a nice day out.

And Shamal had said that I could do whatever I normally do...

“I’ll be right back.”
I sprint out the door before any of them have a chance to react.

I’m not leaving our yard. I did hear the part where Reborn had mentioned that there might still be assassins lurking about. Though there is a part of me that wants to do a mad dash into town just to see if anyone tries to kill me again.

I desperately want to hit something. It’s so much easier than actually you know dealing with my issues.

But I’m not that stupid.

I am a little bit stupid though.

I also need to verify a weird conversation I had with myself about the tree in our back yard. Because something about that has been nagging at me.

I pivot quickly around the house. Ignoring the calls of “INARI!” “IDIOT!” And “RAGAZZO!” That follow me.

Once again, not going far, and this is probably just me being stupid and paranoid. Someone would have noticed an assassin in the tree next to our window.

It takes me less time than I thought it would to circle the house and scurry up the branches. I hear the front gate open and close a few times while I’m ascending.

Do they think that I hopped the fence? I’m not that fast.

I push through the leaves to reach the branches level with our bedroom in no time at all. Huffing from the exhilaration of activity. It’s nice to know that I can still climb as well as I used to. I would have been pissed if I had to relearn that skill again.

I look around in the branches of the tree.
Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Looks like it was just me being crazy after all.

It’s just me and an owl hanging out in a tree.

I hear the stomping of footsteps rounding the house. It sounds like there are way more people tromping around than there should be. Which I would be more concerned about if it wasn’t for this owl.

...

This owl with heterochromatic eyes.

...

Hello Mukuro. How nice to see you again so soon.

“I hate being right...”

The owl screeches and flies at my face with its talons out and I quickly let go of the branch that I’m balancing on to protect my eyes from the sharp pointy things.

It slams into me before bursting out of the tree and flying away.

And I tip.
I’m really am an idiot. I’m never going to hear the end of this.

I wobble.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck!”

And I fall.

I fall right into the arms of the prettiest man that I have ever seen in my entire fucking life.

Blonde and tall and sparkly.

And surrounded by at least a dozen men in suits.

“Hey, Reborn! I caught him!” Dino Cavallone calls out.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah... Inari is a bit of a mess right now. More so than usual I mean.

Thoughts? Feelings? Theories? I always look forward to hearing from you guys :)
Hey, Look, a Distraction!

Chapter Summary

You’re just a mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have a terrible weakness for pretty faces. It is a horrible, horrible character flaw of mine that has a tendency to pop up every once in awhile. It’s not a situation that comes up very frequently because I also have impossibly high standards for what constitutes a pretty face but when it does... well, lets just say that I don’t deal with squishy emotions well

Dino Cavallone is a very, very pretty man and he checks off more than half the boxes that make him ‘my type.’

Because, yes, I have a type.

A somewhat specific type that I hold to my impossibly high standards.

Taller than me, older than me, suave, charming, maybe a bit of an asshole and, of course, pretty as fuck.

There are a few more modifiers interspersed within that top-secret list, but that is about the gist of it.

The point is Dino is so fucking pretty that my brain went violently offline whilst he carried me bridal style into the house by the living manifestation of attractiveness.

Of course, then he proceeds to drop me flat on my face as soon as he passed through the threshold knocking me out of my daze and back down to reality. I had forgotten that he is also a terrible dope and spaz.

It’s awful Dino Cavallone is all at once totally my type and not at all my type. I am in an appalling
limbo of being all of a sudden super into him and completely repulsed by him.

Help.

Please make it stop.

I have had more than enough mood whiplash today to add in train wreck infatuation.

To make matters worse, in my stunned state I had no way to defend myself when Tsuna had given Takeshi and Hayato a manic look and ordered: “Hold him, make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.” Before he was whisked away upstairs with Reborn and Dino for a secret meeting.

A fuck ton of Dino’s guys filed in through the front door and Dino had called down to them; “Help Vongola’s boys keep an eye on his little brother.”

Which leaves me here. Stuck on the couch surrounded by armed guards and my less than amused compatriots.

“This seems a little excessive,” I observe with all the jovial candour of a man being held in place by human restraints. “Not that I’m complaining. I’m totally digging the arm candy.”

Hayato and Takeshi just scowl at me and continue holding me in place. Their arms are looped through my own, so I’m effectively pinned between them and therefore stuck on this couch.

As half of Dino’s army of minions laugh at my misfortune.

Fuckers.

Why is there always a peanut gallery around to witness my humiliation?

It probably has something to do with karmic retribution for being an asshole.
Well, fuck you too universe.

“Guys, seriously, I promise that I won't leave this couch. I will stay here like a good boy,” I beg. “Please give me back the use of my arms. I just had them fixed.”

“Yeah, and your first act was to throw yourself out of a fuckin’ tree!” Hayato shoots back at me. “Not a chance.”

“That wasn’t my fault, it was the owl!”

“The owl didn’t make you climb the tree in the first place dumbass!”

“IT MIGHT HAVE! IT WAS AN EVIL OWL!!”

They just stare at me, completely and totally unimpressed. As Dino’s guys just continue to laugh at us. I don’t blame them, screaming about an ‘Evil Owl’ isn’t the best defense that I could have come up with. It probably makes me sound a little bit more than a little bit insane too.

But the actual answer is so much longer and more insane than that though. Seriously, what am I going to tell them? The owl wasn’t really an owl, well it was, but it was being possessed by a powerful illusionist. Why? Oh, I don’t know but he was also possessing some of those assassin types that were trying to kill us back in the school a couple of days ago.

And how do I know all this? Well, you know, I have memories from a past life or alternate timeline or parallel universe that lets me know extremely specific information about events that would have transpired in Tsuna’s life if I had never existed. Because I’m not supposed to exist in this story. Oh yeah, and I forgot to mention that this was all in a comic book that I remember reading... maybe... it's complicated.

I’m sure that would go over great with everyone. It totally won't result in them throwing me into a looney bin thinking that I’ve had some sort of mental breakdown due to stress.

Hell, I don’t even know how accurate any of this shit is anyway. Everything has changed so dramatically that I don’t think we are following anything even remotely resembling that plot anymore.
And I don’t even know what the hell is going on with me.

“Tsuna said to make sure you don’t run away again,” Takeshi says interrupting my spiralling thoughts. He doesn’t look happy with me at all. As soon as Tsuna had asked him and Hayato to hold me in place while he was drug off to have a super-secret boss meeting with Dino and Reborn he had gleefully done so.

I am being tormented on multiple levels here.

“Tsuna isn’t even here,” I whine. “He’s having his boss meeting with Pretty Dino upstairs. He’ll never know if you guys ease up a bit.”

“‘Pretty Dino?’” Hayato repeats judgementally.

“Shut up,” I blush and ignore the way that the guy with the glasses snorts when he hears what I called his boss. “You cannot tell me that you don’t think that man isn’t ridiculously attractive.”

“WHAT!? NO!” Is Hayato’s loud and aggressive denial.

“LIAR!” I accuse. Dino looks like a god damn model. Anyone with eyes would have to admit that he is pretty to look at.

Takeshi is trying very hard to remain stern with me, but I hear him snickering. He’s seen me do this before, and he always seems to find it’s absolutely hilarious.

“Hey, you!” I single out one of Dino’s guys who is stuck on babysitting duty. “Yeah, you with the glasses. You think your boss is pretty right?”

Actually, looking closer now I’m pretty sure that this guy is Romario. It’s convenient that the only one of Dino’s minions that I know the name of is here for me to call out.

I must look more intensely manic than usual, Romario is giving me this very alarmed look. He
sputters and panics, as was my intent.

“Excuse-“

“So you don’t think your boss is pretty?” I cut him off, “That seems pretty rude.”

If possible Romario looks even more embarrassed and outraged than he did before. His face is so red that it’s starting to turn purple. This has also gotten the attention of the rest of Dino’s guys who are now listening very intently.

As was also my intent.

“Poor guy I hope that he doesn’t know that all his followers think he’s a hideous motherfucker,” I continue to antagonize.

It works.

They all look incensed now and they all at once start jumping to his defense yelling over each other all going on about how beautiful their boss is. It is a cacophony of outrage and it is absolutely amazing.

Takeshi is trying so hard not to laugh out loud. I can feel him shaking next to me. More importantly, his hold on my arm is starting to loosen significantly. Hayato’s earlier irritation has melted away into unholy glee now that he has realized that I am fucking with the invading adults.

“Fuckin’ disloyal is what they are,” He joins in, egging on the chaos.

“Right you are,” I nod solemnly.

Dino’s guys freak the fuck out and go into a full-on revolt. Most of them are going on about how their boss is the prettiest boss in the world. And ‘how dare you brats question our loyalty to the Cavallone Family!’
A few even charge on upstairs proclaiming:

“BOSS! YOU ARE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOSS IN THE WORLD!!”

“These guys are hilarious,” Takeshi laughs.

And lets go of my left arm.

Yay.

“These guys are fuckin’ idiots,” Hayato amends.

There are a series of crashes and bangs from upstairs, which probably means that my mad plot to incite mayhem and interrupted the irritating secret meeting up there has taken effect.

Tsuna lets out a long high pitched ‘HIIIIIII!’ Which probably means that something is absolutely ridiculous is happening up there.

Which means it’s time for me to make things worse.

I turn back to Romario who is looking around helplessly at his colleagues. Poor guy, I doubt he’s used to this level of random escalation. Oh well, as far as I’m concerned they all deserve it. Their dumb pretty boss dropped me on my face while carrying me across the threshold.

“Hey, dude!” I call him out drawing his attention back. “Didn’t you hear all the commotion up there? You should probably go check on your lovely boss.”

I grin at him all teeth and mean as his orders clash with my ‘suggestion’ and he is caught up in indecision.

He twitches.
“Get going.”

He bolts.

I should be a little more discerning when I use my bardic superpowers of persuasion. I’m fairly certain that this whole even has earned me a whole bunch of points in renegade.

I need some paragon points to offset it.

Shit, that means I’m going to have to do something altruistic or some shit...

Fuck it, renegade all the way.

The sounds of pandemonium draw our attention to the ceiling and we all stare up with curious anticipation.

“You’re kind of a dick,” Hayato mutters.

“You already knew that.”

“No, I knew you were a crazy fucking softie.” He leans back into the couch unknowingly letting go of my other arm.

Freedom!

In one swift motion, I launch myself off the couch and away from my former shackle like arm candy. We will probably revisit that one day, hopefully under more fun circumstances.

“Victory is mine!”

“INARI!?!”
Oh wow, neither of them look particularly happy with me.

“Relax, I said I wasn’t going anywhere,” I soothe. I couldn’t go anywhere even if I wanted to. There is still an army of Cavallone henchmen standing around outside in addition to the ones flailing around in the living room. I don’t think I could make it past all of them. Maybe I could, but I’m not too tempted to try right now.

And besides, I still need to see how my nefarious plot plays out.

Three gunshots ring out, signalling the end of Reborn’s patience. Closely followed by more screaming and a stampede of footsteps charging down the stairs. Well, sort of, Tsuna and Dino get their feet tangled together on the first step and slide the rest of the way down on their asses.

They are both such uncoordinated idiots. Tsuna I kind of understand, he’s still dealing with the whole ‘sealing of his will’ thing that has been fucking with his coordination for years.

As far as I can tell Dino is just an idiot with all the dexterity of a newborn foal. I thought he was supposed to be a little more coordinated when his men were around?

At least he’s pretty.

Tsuna lands on top of Dino at the bottom of the staircase as calls of ‘boss!’ echo down at them. Tsuna isn’t paying them any mind. He just stares at me.

“What did you DO!?”

I shrug, “I got bored.”

“It was only five minutes. We were only up there for five minutes. How did you cause a riot in five minutes!?” He exclaims with incredulity.

“I dunno.”
Dino lets out a pained groan and pulls himself up making Tsuna tumble off his back and on the hardwood with a yelp.

“You okay there Doll-Face?” I reach out a hand to help him up and I am treated with a look of wide-eyed confusion.

“Huh?”

“Shit, you didn’t give yourself brain damage or something right?”

“Doll-Face?” He repeats weakly.

“Yes, don’t worry, you’re still very pretty,” I reassure him.

Because apparently this is a thing that I’m doing now. My brain to mouth filter seems to be malfunctioning right now. Not that it ever seems to work super great.

He doesn’t even respond this time. He just makes a strangled chicken noise and stares at me. Dino is too fucking easy to mess with. Which is too bad, I like a little banter.

“Inari is a very straight forward young man Dame-Dino,” Reborn says as he appears on the end of the banister. “You’ll get used to it.”

Ah, there’s my witty banter, right on cue.

“I don’t believe in censorship,” I shoot back.

He quirks an eyebrow at me and surveys the chaos that I have wrought upon the household in my fit of pettiness. “You believe in shit disturbing.”

“Same thing,” I grin.
Takeshi and Hayato finally manage to squeeze their way through the sea of people cluttering our living room and make their way into the foyer to join the rest of us.

“Sorry Tsuna,” Takeshi apologizes with an easy smile, “He got away from us.”

“I’m sorry Tsuna-sama! I failed you!” Hayato wails melodramatically and launches himself at Tsuna again.

“GAH! Hayato-kun you’re crushing me!”

“I didn’t really get a chance to introduce myself to all of you before,” Dino says, once we are all seated around the kitchen table and the majority of his minions have cleared out of our house. “My name is Dino Cavallone, I am the tenth boss of the Cavallone Familiga.”

He makes an attempt to bow while seated at the table and succeeds in bonking his forehead against the table. The fact that he had been attempting to be all suave and debonair with that introduction just makes it that much funnier.

“Ouch,” He says rubbing at his forehead.

“A-are you alright Dino-san?” Tsuna asks as I laugh at his misfortune.

“Fine, fine,” he reassures us, “I didn’t think the table was so close.”

I just stare at him.

“Are you very high?” Hayato asks at point-blank.

I appreciate that because I was wondering the same thing. That, or maybe he needs an eye exam
because there might be something very wrong with his depth perception. Maybe he just needs some glasses.

...

Fuck, he would be even hotter with glasses. He can never get glasses I would die. I would just fucking die.

“The Cavallone Family has been allied with the Vongola for generations.” Reborn cuts in, as half of the table coughs and sputters over Hayato’s very important question (which we don’t get an answer to). “Dino and his boys will be around to help keep an eye on Namimori and you lot while we deal with the ongoing infestation of Hitmen that have arrived in the area.”

“Oh, um, thank you Dino-san please take care of us,” Tsuna says gratefully, and then he does the exact same thing that Dino just did and bows at the waist and bonks his head against the table.

Dino laughs and slings an arm around Tsuna’s shoulder, “Relax kid you’re way too uptight.”

“Oi, watch your hands, you weirdo!” Hayato snaps at him and waves his hands spastically across the table like Dino was a very irritating fly. “Don’t think that you can get all handsy with Tsuna-Sama!”

“He’s friendly isn’t he,” Takeshi leans over and mutters to me.

“And possibly on a whole bunch of drugs,” I mumble back while everyone’s attention is on Hayato.

“There is that too.”

I’m glad that mom had taken Lambo out shopping with her once Dino and his guys had all shown up. I can only imagine how crazy this might have been if we had thrown a toddler with the powers of time travel and very little emotional control into this mix. Though I have to wonder why she felt comfortable leaving her teenaged sons home alone with a whole bunch of strange men.
I’m going to assume that Reborn offered some sort of convincing explanation to her. That or she is so overtired that she isn’t thinking straight anymore.

“I was Reborn’s apprentice before Vongola Nono contracted him to come over here to teach you,” Dino continues once Hayato has been calmed down. “So you can think of me as your older brother. Call me Dino-niichan.”

“Ahh-” Tsuna wavers at the intensely awkward and personal turn this conversation has taken. “Alright, Dino-niichan?”

Dino is lucky he’s so entertaining and nice to look at or I might be taking issue with all of this.

“Dino is also going to be helping me ‘teach’ you boys while your school is being repaired,” Reborn adds while looking around at all of us. He gives me a particularly meaningful look before adding; “play nice.”

“Never.” I shoot back cheekily.

He rolls his eyes and turns his attention away.

I prop my chin on my hand and lean against the table, giving Dino my best flirty stare. “Sorry about messing with your boys Doll-Face.”

He ‘eeps’, which is adorable, and proceeds to turn bright fucking red. I don’t know how someone it’s such thin skin managed to become a respected mob boss. But, then again, he did manage to survive Reborn’s spartan training regime so there must be an edge somewhere under all those squishy awkward layers.

Takeshi raises his hand as if we were actually in class right now and asks, “do you mean us too?”

“You boys are part of the Family now,” Reborn answers. “I’m hardly going to leave Dame-Tsuna’s protectors untrained and uneducated.”

Tsunamakes a somewhat concerning gurgling noise at the mention of ‘Family’ and ‘Protectors’...
but offered none of his usual protests. Which is odd. Usually, he would be screaming useless
denials to the heavens at this point.

What the heck did I miss in that five-minute meeting?

“That’s fine then just as long as it doesn’t cut too much into baseball. We have a couple of games
coming up during the break and I’m looking forward to playing with the team again.”

I give him a somewhat startled look when he says this. He hasn’t really mentioned playing since
the whole roof thing. I’m glad though. He always loved the game so much, it would have sucked it
he had quit altogether.

“That should be fine Takeshi-kun,” Reborn says.

As Hayato mutters, “Baseball idiot,” under his breath.

It goes without saying at this point that Hayato is down for whatever crazy shit Tsuna is getting
dragged into without any questions.

Dino finally manages to pull himself together and has fixed a charming smile on his stupid
attractive face and is resolutely not looking at me. “It’s going to be great I’m really looking
forward to being the teacher now.” He still has an arm slung around Tsuna’s shoulder and my poor
brother is starting to look a little bit uncomfortable from the prolonged affection.

He shoots me a look that clearly communicates ‘please get him off me now please, Inari, please.’

Who am I to deny such a sincere plea for aid?

I get up and meander casually around the table and clap a friendly hand on Dino’s shoulder,
“Please take good care of us Dino-sensei~”

And if I give him a tiny little controled shock.... oopsy?
He leaps up from the table and somehow ends up doing a complete forward flip before landing flat on his face on the kitchen floor.

That was a bit more of a dramatic reaction that I had been anticipating. We all watch as he twitches and groans from the ground.

“So, that was a bit of a dick move on my part, so sorry. But I’m pretty sure that was only like forty percent my fault. Because I have no idea how he managed to do THAT.”

“Dame-Dino, You have to keep your wits about you when dealing with bratty children,” Reborn chides.

“Oi! Rude!”

Tsuna reaches out and tugs firmly on my shirt so I fall into Dino’s now vacated chair with an ‘oomph.’ He wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder.

“Stoooooooooop,” he drags out the word and as he does so the ball of irritation that has steadily built in my chest pops and I sag and relax into him.

“Fiiiiiiiiiiiiine.”

“Dino-san is nice enough,” Tsuna continues murmuring as we watch Dino flop and fall over again as Reborn teases him relentlessly.

“He’s lucky he’s pretty,” I grumble.

“You always get so hostile whenever you have a crush.”

“Not a crush, very much not a crush,” I deny immediately. “I’m just going to be here appreciating the very pretty eye candy.”

“You’re impossible,” He laughs and then abandons me to go help out his new Mob Boss- Sempai.
The talking goes on for a bit more. I zone out around the time that Reborn starts talking about lesson plans and training regimens. I’m sure it’s fascinating stuff and all but... I have had a day already. Intensive thought is sort of escaping me at the moment.

Blah, blah, blah math.

Blah, blah, blah survival training.

Blah, blah, blah, turtle.

Oh...

Hello, turtle.

I probably shout have noticed the little turtle crawling around on the kitchen table before now, but as I said before I’ve had a day and I’ve been ‘distracted.’

He’s a cute turtle.

I think his name is Enzio?

Has Dino introduced us to his animal companion yet?

I don’t think he has, but I do remember Enzio from ‘before.’ And if I remember right Leon made Enzio for Dino didn’t he? I’m not quite sure how that works. Probably in the same way that he does all his other magic item dispensing.

And Enzio is a magic turtle.

Like a chia pet; ‘just add water and watch ’em grow!’
Is Enzio Leon’s baby then?

I bet Leon wants to visit his weird magic turtle baby.

I look over at Leon who is in his usual place perched on top of Reborn’s fedora. Sure enough, the little chameleon is staring intently at Enzio who is in the process of slowly crawling across the table in the direction of his human’s voice.

Leon suddenly locks eyes with me and... whoa.

I am hit with this sudden projection of intent and desire. It feel like an entire orchestra suddenly forcing itself into my head.

And yeah.

Yeah, Leon really wants to visit his baby. Now, if that would be convenient.

I lean my chair back and reach out to where Reborn has perched himself on the adjacent countertop by the stove and create a bridge for Leon to climb upon and once he is safely attached to my hand I turn and lower him gently onto the table.

He immediately makes a B-Line for Enzio his eyes shining a bright golden light.

Reptiles don’t really emote the same way that humans or other mammals do. But there don’t to be here for me to understand the feelings of gratitude, and love, and ‘hello dear how are you I’ve missed you. Has the human been treating you well?’

I can ‘hear’ it.

The same way that I can ‘hear’ flames when they are being used. At least that’s what I think that is. The frequency, the rhythm, the harmony. And for most folks, it’s like one instrument that plays a steady melody.
What is being projected from Leon at this moment is multiplied by thousands. It is more vast and consuming than anything that I have ever experience before. It is immense and immeasurable and consuming.

I can hear voices.

I had asked Reborn what Leon is. He had managed to worm his way out of that conversation without giving me a hint. I am now even more curious than I was before.

And much more afraid than I was before.

It’s bigger on the inside

The intensity lasts for a moment longer.

And then it’s gone.

Everyone has stopped talking and is now looking at me.

I have to stop doing things that draw attention to me. Things like plucking Reborn’s lizard buddy of his hat while he is in the middle of giving a lecture. Dino actually is looking between us like he thinks Reborn is about to pull out a gun and shoot me for getting too familiar.

He can deal.

“Leon wanted to visit his baby,” I explain and turn back to watching the adorable reunion.

Dino brightens considerably at this.

“Reborn told you about Enzio then? Isn’t he cool!?”
He reaches out a finger and affectionately rubs the top of the little turtles head. Once again, can’t really read reptile emotions very well but Enzio seems to bask in the attention.

“Isn’t that a turtle?” Hayato asks.

“Yup.”

“But Leon is a lizard,” Tsuna chimes in. “How could he have a baby that’s a turtle?”

Reborn doesn’t answer him. He’s is just staring right at me trying to puzzle something out.

I slipped up again. Though this time was somewhat more deliberate. There is no way that I could have known the connection between Leon and Enzio. I don’t offer any explanations, he can chalk it up to the whole precognition thing. Besides, I don’t think I could come up with a more suitable lie right now.

He owes me magical reptile lore anyway.

“Dame-Tsuna,” he finally says, “you should know by now that Leon is not an ordinary lizard.”

“That’s right,” Dino adds. “Before Reborn was reassigned here I asked if he would give me Leon but of course he wouldn’t part from such a useful familiar so he got Leon to make Enzio instead.”

“He’s a very cute turtle,” Takeshi smiles.

“Does it DO anything?” Hayato inquires curiously looking over the reptilian duo.

“You’ll see,” Dino answers with his best attempt at a devious smile.
Dino and his boys leave soon after that. With a promise to come back tomorrow to start up our brand new training regime. Hayato and Takeshi hitch a ride with them back to their respective homes. Apparently, it still isn’t super safe for any of us to go wandering around without an escort. I don’t know why I think we did a pretty good job taking care of shit before.

Better safe than sorry I guess.

Takeshi grabs Hayato as they walk out the door and invites him to come back home to him. I think he must have caught the bit about Shamal being an unrepentant pervert who has taken up residence in Hayato’s student dorm.

Hayato hisses at the offer like an angry cat, but Takeshi keeps at it as they head toward the car. Tempting him with promises of homemade sushi. Hayato will cave. There is no way he will be able to withstand the overwhelming power of Takeshi’s puppy dog stare and unwavering smile.

Everyone here goes to bed early. Mom and Lambo are out at seven. Neither of them could stop yawning once they got back home from their shopping trip. She went to tuck him in and fell asleep while reading a bedtime story. I make sure to tuck mom in to when I peek my head in.

Tsuna is asleep soon after, face down in the pillow and snoring. He had quite the day too. What with making a new boss alliance (or whatever they were doing that I wasn’t included in), kicking me out of my panic attack. He deserves a good night’s sleep.

Even Reborn is dead to the world. Which is more than understandable because I don’t think he slept at all from the day of the hitman invasion to now. He’s laying on his back in the Leon hammock with his hat over his eyes and breathing deeply and evenly. He hadn’t even bothered to change into his pyjamas before he crashed.

This once again leaves me in the somewhat awkward position of being the only person awake in the house.

I swear to god I am not going to have a crazy meltdown again.

However, I refuse to stay in this room staring at the walls again.
Once I’m sure that everyone is well and truly in dreamland, I lean over and reach under my bed to pull out my stolen ray gun and quietly as I can creep out of the bedroom. Making sure to avoid the creepy floorboards and quietly shut the door behind me.

I have some things to think about.

Important things.

Things that I should probably tell Reborn about but...

I need to make sense of this shit in my own head first.

I enter the kitchen and switch on the stove light, filling the room with a dim orange glow that flickers every so often. As quietly as i can I turn on the tap and quickly fill the electric kettle and then switch it on.

And I pick out my favorite mug, and my favourite tea bag, and I wait.

Here is what I know:

**Rokudo Mukuro has been watching our house.**

I don’t know how long he’s been doing this for but now I am sure that he has been. And I know that it’s him. I had known that it was him when I looked into the eyes of the corpse woman back in the gym.

I know it was him that was going for Tsuna at the end there.

But some things aren’t quite adding up between what I ‘know’ and what ‘is.’

He’s stronger than he should be, I think.
He’s also here sooner than he should be (if he is, in fact, here at all).

I really do have to wonder how long Mukuro has been staking out our house? It can’t have been too long. I would hope that someone other than me would have noticed a suspicious owl looking into our bedroom. At least to point out the fact that there is a Snowy Owl hanging out in Namimori out of season, if not to point him out as an assassin.

But then again, Rokudo Mukuro is an illusionist, and a very powerful one at that. I don’t know if he can use illusions though something he’s possessing, but as of now, all signs point to yes. Honestly, I hadn’t even noticed him until I was right up in the tree next to him. And while I’m reluctant to believe anything that asshole from Della Rosa said, he had mentioned that Reborn isn’t great with spotting Mist users.

I guess even the world’s greatest hitman is allowed to have some faults and foibles. Life wouldn’t be interesting if he was good at everything.

Still, this probably means that I’m going to have to exercise some CONSTANT VIGILANCE. I’m not sure how good Dino and his guys are with illusionists, but at this point, I am going to hope for the best and plan for the worst. At least until I know what the fuck he wants. And until I figure out what the heck is up with the Estraeno.

Because the Estraeno Family are a linchpin in this entire mess that are really fucking with me.

Ever since I spotted him at the school I have been remembering things about Mukuro’s storyline. And I’m pretty sure that the way the plot went was: the Estraeno had been blacklisted in the mafia for all the fucked up child experimentation shit that they had been into, and subsequently singlehandedly slaughtered by Mukuro himself.

Obviously that didn’t happen though.

Because Bruno Estraeno was camped out in Namimori Middle School disguised as Mrs. Nakamura, watching me and Tsuna for whatever reason. That prick who was talking about the Estraeno with Reborn went on like they were regularly contracted to take on jobs with other Mafia Families.

And I know in my gut that the corpse woman and the crystal monster were from the Estraeno Family. Mukuro himself had given that away when he had possessed the corpse woman and
showed off his very distinctive eyes.

Of course, I don’t know what any of that means other than the fact that the family of child experimenting monsters hadn’t gotten their just deserts yet... or they had and Rokudo Mukuro is playing a very different game.

I take a sip of my cooling tea and stare into the darkness of the night and listen to the quiet rattle of the refrigerator. I can sort of make out a couple of Dinos guys walking past the yard on their patrol route. It had seemed a little excessive when Pretty-Boy had shown up with what seems like his entire God-Damn Familiga, but now that they have actually gotten to work and aren’t all standing around in one place I can see the reasoning behind it. He probably has them patrolling all of Namimori.

I sigh and start to fiddle with my ray gun. I’m not going to get anywhere going in circles trying to figure out what a guy who specializes in subterfuge and misdirection is planning. He’s dangerous, he might have an army of assholes backing him, and he’s interested in Vongola Decimo.

Great.

We’ll leave it at that for now.

I keep messing around with the ray gun as I continue to sip on my tea. I think there’s something wrong with it now. Before it had just sort of instantaneously charged when I had picked it up. Now the display keeps going through this whole:

SYNCHRONIZING...

SYNCHRONIZING...

SYNCHRONIZING...

ERROR

ANALYZING FREQUENCY
585nm

540Thz

ERROR

ANALYZING FREQUENCY

3Hz

10000000000000000000000000000

ERROR

I try a few more times, but each time it reads out some completely different numbers and I have no idea what the heck they mean. Maybe it took a hit after I went down and it's broken now? That would suck, it seems like such a useful weapon.

SYNCHRONIZING

Maybe I have to concentrate on using the power of magic lightning for it to work. I readjust my grip and concentrate on a thunderbolt. It’s easy while looking at the Lichtenberg Figures.

I feel something start to crackle and the smell of ozone filling the kitchen.

ANALYZING FREQUENCY

And then my phone starts buzzing.
I hadn’t even realized that I had brought it with me. I’m so startled that I drop the ray gun and it clatters against the countertop. I fish around in my pockets and pull out my cell phone.

Unknown Caller.

That’s suspicious.

It might just be a telemarketer.

But then again...

I shouldn’t answer this.

It’s not a good idea to answer random phone calls at one in the morning where there are people who are interested in killing you.

“Hello?” I answer in a hushed whisper.

“As fascinating as all this data that you’ve been sending me is I am going to advise you to desist your current actions,” Verde drawls. “Unless of course your intent is to cause massive structural damage to your home.”

“What? No, wait, how did you get my number!?” I demand.

“Unimportant,” I can feel him rolling his eyes at me. “Considering your well on your way to creating an EMP in your kitchen... unless that was your intent.”

I give the ray gun a concerned look and use a finger to nudge it away from me. It is giving off a somewhat concerning high pitched ringing noise. That can’t be good.

“No, no I wasn’t going for EMP I was going for charging the ray gun.”
“...Ray gun?” I can hear the judgment in his voice.

“What do you want from me? It looks like something straight out of Star Trek.”

“Utilitarian enough I suppose.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate you stopping me from blowing up my kitchen and blacking out the neighborhood and all, but was there any other reason that you called?”

I hear a few keyboard clicks across the line, and some mumbling about sinusoidal wavelength forms and frequency spikes. I’m almost about to hang up on him when he starts talking at me again.

“...Strange.”

“What is?” My interest is piqued.

“Place your fingers on the sensor pads along the grip.” He says ignoring my question completely.

“Huh,” I pick up the ray gun again and look it over until I spot four faint circular depressions built-in. “Kay, now what?”

“A moment...” There is the sound of more typing as the display starts rapidly scrolling through numbers and equations that I could never hope to understand even if they weren’t flashing past in milliseconds.

I watch as the chamber, which was previously dormant begins to fill with a sparkling green light interspersed with starbursts of orange that pop into existence and then just as quickly fade into the solid green. It’s almost like watching a hypnotic screensaver.

CALIBRATION COMPLETE

“Oh, hey, cool.”
Verde lets me ooh and aah over the now functional ray gun for a little while before speaking again.

“He was correct when he said that you have the self-preservation instincts of a stoned lemming,” he comments dryly. “You do realize that there was every chance that I could have killed you at that moment?”

“You wouldn’t though,” I shoot back without much thought.

“There is no evidence to support that hypothesis. In our previous interaction, I had my testers set to eliminate you and your brother.”

“Yeah, but, you said you wouldn’t do that anymore.”

“And you believed me?” The disbelief in his voice is palpable.

“Well, yes,” I say. “I mean if you really wanted to kill me you could have done it without calling first. Heck, you could have just waited until I blew up the house because I was fucking with something beyond my understanding. But you didn’t, which means that you don’t want me dead, and you probably want something from me.”

There is a drawn-out moment of silence. Not even the sound of typing to break it up.

“It was more of a passing curiosity as to why my system was being flooded with so many repetitive data points.”

I flush little at the jab. “I was experimenting!”

“By attempting the same sequence again and again and again,” he continues. “Did you know that Albert Einstein defined insanity as repeating the same actions and expecting different results.”

Verde is such a snarky bitch. I both love and hate it.
It also occurs to me that I should go wake up Reborn and let him know that his Arcobaleno buddy that tried to kill us a few days ago is calling me. That would be the smart thing to do. But as Verde is so clearly pointing out now I am not the sharpest tool in the shed. And besides, I got a ray gun out of it.

“Okay point taken you don’t have to get all snarky about it.”

He chuckles lightly and starts typing again.

“If you are interested in further ‘experimentation’ I may have some things for you to assist me with in the future.”

“Uhhhh, doing what?”

“I’m sure you will see.”

And then he hangs up.

He just hangs up without waiting for a yes or a no. I think he is just assuming that I’m going to end up going along with whatever mad science experiment that he ends up throwing at me. Which is fair.

Reborn was accurate when he said that I have the self preservation instincts of a stoned lemming... also, does Verde have us bugged? I don’t know when he would have heard that lovely descriptor that Reborn came up with. Just how many people have been spying on us? I am starting to feel all violated and shit.

Whatever, I’ll worry about it later.

I down the rest of my, now cold, tea in one gulp and make my way back upstairs. Being careful to skip over the creaky floorboards and to quietly open the bedroom door and sneak back into bed.

Where I sit cross-legged and stare up at Reborn in his hammock.
He stares back down at me with half-lidded eyes.

“Monello,” He greets in a hushed whisper.

I’m not quite sure what that means but I think I might have been demoted in terms of the affectionate nicknames.

“Hey.”

I lay the ray gun on the bed next to me in full view. I had thought about hiding it from him. But that would be pointless as I intend to use my fun new toy. And besides, we need to have something approaching an honest conversation.

“I need to talk to you about some stuff.”

He shifts in the hammock before silently dropping out of it and onto the bed next to me. He doesn’t move any further than that, but he does give the ray gun a very pointed and curious look.

“What’s on your mind?”

Chapter End Notes

Questions, questions, questions!

What do you think?

Let me know in the comments.

As always I always love hearing from you guys :)

Let’s Try for Honesty

Chapter Summary

Sometimes all you’re left with is even more questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trouble with starting a conversation with something like; “I need to talk to you,” or “we need to talk,” or anything to that general effect is that you need to actually follow that up with something. Really, if it’s anything other than dead fucking silence you’re probably doing it better than me. I have to wrestle with myself to not immediately spout off some random bullshit like I usually would when I’m expected to convey anything with any degree of seriousness.

I want to be honest here.

Sort of.

The point is, I need Reborn to trust me. On a more personal note, I want Reborn to trust me. But in the immediate now I’m going to need him to take a lot of shit on faith right now, and preferably not shoot me.

“Brat?”

“Give me a second,” I request. “There’s a lot.”

He makes a motion of acquiescence and makes himself comfortable.

Great, good, perfect.

Where the hell do I even start?
“You know that I know shit that I shouldn’t know,” I start, might as well start on the previously trod ground. “You know that right? We covered that bit back in the hospital.”

“Your ‘premonitions.’”

“Yeah, those, whatever,” I sigh deeply and scoot myself back on my bed to brace my back against the wall. “Point is, I had one of those ‘my brain is screaming at me’ moments last night, this morning?”

The look he’s giving me is one that is quickly losing interest with my blathering nonsense.

“We’re being watched,” I blurt out suddenly and unceremoniously.

Reborn immediately twists around so that he has eyes on Tsuna. When he sees that my brother is still fast away and snoring his eyes begin to roam the room. It’s difficult to track his gaze, just because his eyes are impossible voids of impenetrable darkness. But, even I can see the climbing levels of anxiety.

“Relax man,” I attempt to soothe before he starts shooting. “We’re not being watched right this second.”

Or maybe we are? I have no idea how any of this supernatural surveillance stuff works. But I’m pretty sure that Mukuro isn’t creeping on us right now.

I shoot a suspicious look at the tree outside the window. Just to make sure"

“Explain. Now.” He grinds out.

I still find it amazing that he can pull off intimidating while looking like an infant.

“Back at the school there were a lot of scary fuckers running around but, at the end there, there were the two that were the really scary ones,” I need to take a moment to banish the extremely upsetting memory of jagged crystals shlorping out of the flesh as jawless monstrosity screams silently in agony.
“The woman with the stitches and the crystal monster thing.” I finally manage to clarify after fighting off the wave of nausea.

“Shamal disposed to the monstrosity and you and Dame-Tsuna—” He trails off at the end and I have the sudden, horrible, realization that he thinks that Tsuna actually killed someone.

He didn’t.

He couldn’t have anyway because...

“She was already dead.” I blurt out before he has a chance to get any further along that train of thought.

Reborn fixes me with a stern yet sympathetic gaze, “Inari.”

“I know, I know, but trust me it's about to get even more unbelievable in here. So just hold on to your logic and objections.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t argue. However, the disbelief across his face doesn’t entirely melt away. Which is fair considering I’m about to tell him all about zombies, human experimentation, and possession. I could script a horror movie with all of this.

“She was dead, but there was someone or something else in there driving the body.”

“And this has something to do with the house being under observation how?”

“This is the preface part of that, This part is important too... Anyway, it was her eyes. The way her eyes changed. They were all blank and then they were this super distinctive heterochromatic blue and red. And the weirdest part of that was the fact that the left eye had the kanji for ‘six’ instead of an actual pupil.”
I breath slowly trying to order my thoughts. I probably should have written this down before I started. I am well aware of how stupid this is sounding. Too late for that now though. I’m committed now, no going back.

“Everything about what happened after that was all sorts of fucked up and wrong. But the way she looked and moved was extra wrong. When she came at Tsuna it was like a puppet moving on wires.”

Thinking back there had also been a distinctive blue tint to her lips and skink that had been particularly off-putting. I hadn’t really had a chance to think too hard about stitch face when her partner crystal monster had been trying to squish us under his enormous fists. But I had gotten a few good looks at her.

And she had looked dead.

“And I’m telling you all this because I saw those exact same eyes earlier today.”

Tsuna’s snores stutter and we both quiet and stare over at him. A moment passes and he mumbles something about a hamburger and then falls back into a deep sleep.

It’s not that I want to hide things from Tsuna. It’s just that I don’t think he would appreciate being woken up in the middle of the night again to learn about the guy who literally wants to possess his body.

Because, yeah, I had remembered that lovely bit of plot.

I’m not sure if that is still the crux of Rokudo Mukuro’s nefarious plot. He might not. A lot of things have changed from that original story. But if he still wants to take down the mafia there really isn’t a better tool than the heir to the most powerful Family under his control.

I would never let him get that far of course.

Reborn looks extremely intent and interested now. On the edge of his proverbial seat waiting for the big reveal. Unfortunately, I can’t go spouting on about how a guy named Rokudo Mukuro wants to burn the mafia to the ground. I don’t even think that’s his real name, and if the Estraeno are still around there probably isn’t a bounty on his head for me to point to.
I nod my head pointedly at the tree.

“I told you all -Evil Owl.”

“An owl.” He repeats flatly.

“Everything sounds unimpressive when you say it like that.”

“Kid.”

“Don’t get all judgemental. I don’t know how else to describe it. It was an owl with crazy heterochromatic eyes, one blue and one red and it was watching our room.” I fiddle mindlessly with a loose string on my blankets. “I didn’t even see it there at first there was just something screaming in my head ASSASSIN, ASSASSIN, ASSASSIN!”

Reborn stares intently out the window into the darkness of the night. He looks incredibly stressed out by all of this. Maybe I should have waited until he had a full night of sleep before dropping all of this on him. I doubt he would have appreciated a delay on account of sleep deprivation though.

“So any ideas,” I ask him when he doesn’t offer any immediate response. “Because all I could think of is that there is someone out there with the power to take over people's minds or bodies. And I don’t know if it has to be dead or alive bodies. But there was also what that one asshole said ‘Estraeno’ and ‘Mists’ and I have a feeling that it's all connected.”

Yes, this part is me fibbing a little bit. But only barely. It’s more or less just a nice big nudge in the right direction because I can’t think of any better way to get Reborn’s attention on the Estraeno.

I know jack shit about that Family other than the fact that they played an important part in Mukuro’s backstory and they were into some really bad shit. And that it was really bad shit even by mafia standards. And if they haven’t already been wiped out then I’m even more worried about why they have their eyes on Tsuna.

Reborn pinches the bridge of his nose and clenches his eyes shut tightly.
“I need coffee,” He mutters forlornly.

“I think you drink too much coffee dude. Haven’t you heard that caffeine stunts your growth?” I tease him lightly. “You should cut down on the coffee. Maybe switch to decaf.”

Reborn stares at me with his wide void-like eyes and slowly blinks.

“There are very few earthly pleasures afforded to me Monello, don’t even think about fucking with my espresso,” he threatens.

I raise my hands in submission and laugh. “Ease up man, I wasn’t going to do anything to your sweet ambrosia.”

I do have to bite my tongue to keep from blurting out a dirty joke about ‘Earthly Pleasures’ though. I doubt he would appreciate it right now, and the more I think about it the more depressing it actually seems. He’s harassed enough as it is.

I do enjoy bugging him though. I can’t help it. Reborn, as I knew him, was always so unfazed and untouchable. It just makes me want to poke and tease him until I get those genuine reactions. And the fact that I have already managed to catch him off balance half a dozen times makes me want to do it even more. Don’t get me wrong I still think he’s the fucking coolest and if I can be even half as cool as he is when I grow up I will have done something right. But he deserves it for all the crap he gives Tsuna. It’s my own unique brand of sibling justice.

I wonder if I could make Reborn blush?

It would one hundred percent result in me getting shot and my body subsequently being dumped in international waters. But it might actually be worth it just to see what might happen.

I like to live dangerously after all.

....
Next time.

Right now we need to finish this conversation.

“I’ll have some of my contacts back in Naples do some digging on the Estraeno Family.” Reborn says.

He fishes out his phone and starts typing out a message. I think he’s actually writing out formatted paragraphs with proper punctuation and everything because he is secretly an OCD nerd. Which is fucking adorable.

“I will also let Dino and his boys know to be on the lookout for anyone with red and blue eyes that might be lurking around,” he stops typing and frowns. “Unfortunately, I don’t believe any of his Family are adept Mists which might make our rogue illusionist a bit more difficult to pinpoint.”

I watch as he deletes a block of text and proceeds to do re-writes. He’s muttering to himself now. I don’t think he’s entirely aware that he’s doing it with being dangerously overtired and all.

“Dame-Dino should be able to spot illusionists himself.”

“He just needs to roll a high enough perception check,” I joke.

“What?”

“Don’t you know anything about D&D? I bet you’d like it. It’s full of dramatic storytelling and math.”

He doesn’t even bother to dignify that with a response. He just goes back to typing out his orders to Dino.

“You should probably tell Pretty Dino to keep a lookout for any animals with crazy eyes too. Considering we were being crept on by an owl and indeterminate limits of the weird mind control
He sighs, backtracks again, and then finally sends off his epic.

“It’s always magic with you isn’t it?” It was probably intended as a criticism but there is enough levity in his voice that it doesn’t quite land that way.

I shrug and let myself flop down onto the bed so we are at eye level with each other.

“Oh, you know, in the absence of an actual explanation about why Tsuna is ignited and imbued with preternatural strength every time you shoot him with one of those fancy bullets of yours, or why some folks seem to be able to generate rainbow fire that gives them superpowers.”

A pillow smacks me in the face and I spend a good long moment sputtering on a mouthful of fabric.

“You need to learn some patience,” Reborn says, smacking me with the pillow once more for good measure. “Besides, you seem to have progressed well enough with your own self-directed research.”

I pull the pillow off of my face to find Reborn giving the ray gun a pointed look again. Fair, I would be pretty suspicious of a mysterious glowing gun-shaped object too if I didn’t know what it was or where it came from. But I have run my own cost-benefit analysis on this and have come to the conclusion that I am keeping the ray gun. After all, Verde has so generously bequeathed it to me.

Which brings us to part two of this evening (or is it morning now?) chat.

The mad scientist who may or may not have this room bugged.

I reach over and drag the weapon to me, and pick it up to give him a better look at it.

“Your buddy Verde is a snarky bitch,” I inform him nonchalantly. “But he builds some pretty nifty shit so I think I’ll forgive him for that.”
A range of emotions quickly pass across his face before settling into unhappy acceptance.

“Also, BTW, I am like ninety-nine percent sure that he has us bugged too. Or it might just be you. Unless I actually do bear a striking resemblance to a stoned lemming.”

He gives the ceiling a somewhat beseeching look, “Dio dammi la forza.”

“Oh yeah, are the Italian lessons still on the table? We got kind of distracted with rapidly escalating chaos but I still want to learn if your down for it.”

The glare that he shoots me speaks volumes. “You are quite possibly the most problematic individual that I have ever met.”

“Oh please, you love it. You’d be bored out of your skull without all the high-intensity bullshit that I summon,” I grin and make a mad swipe for his fedora which is starting to tilt dangerously off his head.

Even exhausted as he is he still manages to dance out of the way. I was expecting that honestly. What I wasn’t expecting was the entire world to suddenly spin as he grasps my arm with unnatural strength and flips me on to my face. My arms are pinned behind my back as very grumpy hitman perches on top of them. I am immediately caught up in a overpowering giggle fit. This is ridiculous.

Everything about this day.

These past few weeks (seven weeks now since he showed up here).

It’s been amazing. And traumatizing.

And I fucking love it.

I mean I could do without the imminent threat of panic attacks, but the rest is just so much fun that
I can even deal with that.

“Yes, I think Monello works much better for you,” He says idly before the pressure pinning my arms releases and I let them drop limply onto the bed.

“And that means?” I prompt.

“It means that you are an incorrigible brat.”

I take a moment to mull over my new pet name. I had just been ‘boy’ before right? ‘Brat’ actually takes into account the more stellar aspects of my personality. I think I can live with that.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“Of course you are.”

We sit in companionable silence for a little while longer. Or, as silent as things can get with Tsuna’s snores and dream time mumbling. At some point, Leon droops down from the ceiling as an iridescent droplet and reforms on the brim of the fedora with a grumpy look (for a reptile at least).

‘You’re keeping my human awake,’ comes the thought? Feeling? Intent?

I’m not sure if Leon is actually projecting words into my brain or if I am just really good at interpreting lizard. Either way, I don’t particularly want to be on the bad side of something that might very well be akin to a TARDIS.

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly.

“Hn?”

Because of course, Reborn doesn’t know that I’m having a moment of cross-species communication with his animal companion. And I am definitely not going to be opening the
‘hearing things’ conversation right now. I think we have both just about had it for the night without adding on that extra layer of confusion.

“You know, I’m sorry that I’m keeping you up... again. I know that you must be fucking exhausted right now and I just keep making shit more complicated for you.”

He waves it off.

“It’s fine,” he replies. “I prefer to know about problems before they have a chance to become problematic.”

“Uh... you’re welcome then?”

He sighs and his gaze noticeably softens.

“Honestly, the fact that you seem to have quickly developed a talent for detecting illusionists is more of a benefit than anything.”

“Cool... I’m pretty sure Tsuna could do it to. I mean he punched corpse lady when she was all invisible and shit and I didn’t even notice her at that point.”

“Tsunayoshi is progressing much better than I could have hoped for considering how he was when I first arrived.”

“Bro-bro is tenacious when he wants to be. It’s just that he usually doesn’t want to be.”

Reborn rolls his eyes.

“Stubbornness seems to be a Vongola family trait.”

I can’t entirely keep the twitch off my face at the mention of ‘Vongola Family Traits.’ Because I might not want to talk about the hole musical accompaniment thing but there is something that I do need to ask about.
“What?” he asks flatly. Because Reborn is literally a mind reader.

“You know that whole bardic inspiration thing that I have been rocking? What the fuck?”

“Monello. I haven’t slept in four days, please stop with the metaphors and speak in plain Japanese.”

Holy shit! Four days!?

How is he still alive?!

“That thing that I do when I say a thing and the person that I say it to does the thing but also cranks the dial up to eleven when they do it.”

“It is a passive ability usually associated with the flames of harmony, and even then it is exceedingly rare,” he just explains without trying to be mysterious at all.

And then he lays down on my pillow, pulls up the blankets and starts snoring.

It’s fine. He can have the bed. He has earned a good night sleep in a nice fucking bed for once. Seriously, he has spent most of the past month and a half sleeping in a ceiling hammock.

Besides, I got way more out of that conversation than I thought I would.

Harmony huh?

I tip-toe over to the other side of the room and nudge Tsuna over and crawl into bed next to him.
“Buah?”

“Go back to sleep Bro-bro.”

“Ugh~”

For the first time since Reborn arrived in Namimori, he sleeps in. Me and Tsuna spend five solid minutes staring at him from across the room waiting for him to spring a trap or something. But no, he just keeps snoozing away.

At some point during the night, Leon had formed himself into one of those fancy sleep mask things and was covering Reborn’s eyes. It’s actually really strange to look at because his eyes are where Reborn’s eyes should be and they are big and yellow and glaring at us. I get the feeling that he wants us to be very quiet.

Cool.

We’ll play the quiet game then.

I raise a finger to my lips and motion for Tsuna to follow me out of the room. He nods nervously and together we quietly and slowly slide out of bed. Carefully avoid the creaky floorboard and silently shut the door behind us.

Lambo is outside the room waiting for us. He draws in a deep breath with a manic grin on his face. And I just know things are about to get very loud in here. So I quickly swoop down to pick him up and quickly whisper into his ear:

“Shush, we’re playing a trick on Reborn so we have to be very very quiet okay.”

If possible he looks even more excited now. He makes a show of zipping his lips and the three of us proceed to creep down the stairs. Lambo quietly starts snickering when we reach the bottom landing. This time Tsuna shushes him and puts on a show of miming out what he thinks Reborn will do to us if he catches us ditching him.
I don’t think it quite comes across that way though since Tsuna just looks like he is doing a very weird dance.

I usher them both through the living room and into the kitchen where the smell of cooking breakfast awaits us.

“My, you all look chipper this morning,” Mom greets us.

We all quickly raise fingers to our lips.

“We’re playing the quiet game,” I whisper to her. “Reborn is still sleeping.”

“Poor dear,” she says quietly with a fond smile on her face. “He certainly needs it. He was so worried about you boys after that mess at the school.”

“Sorry about all of that Mama.”

“Your both safe now and that’s all that matters to me.” She reaches over to pet Lambo’s mess of curls, “and now we have a new addition to our family too.”

She looks really happy about that. I remember once when we were visiting Grandpa he had told me and Tsuna that mom had always wanted a huge family. A husband, lots of kids, friends coming to visit all the time. She had been lonely as an only child and it had only been her and Grandpa since she was a very young child.

Things hadn’t quite worked out the way she wanted them too. But hey, you never know things can still change, Mom’s only thirty-one after all.

I settle Lambo down into the booster chair that Mom had dug out from storage and leave him to Tsuna to entertain. He gives me a somewhat panicked face when I motion from him to Lambo.

“Just do some magic tricks for him,” I whisper in his ear so Lambo can’t overhear.
Tsuna turns red.

I don’t know why. He is bizarrely good at magic tricks. It is like his one and only talent. The summer that me and Takeshi had gone to “Little Explorers” camp Tsuna had stayed home and had learned slight of hand magic tricks from Ms. Tanaka up the road.

Tsuna might not be the most coordinated person when in motion but he had spent hours and hours and hours working on those tricks and perfecting them. That’s the tenacity that I was talking about.

He reluctantly picks up the salt and pepper shakers and makes a show of displaying them to Lambo who looks somewhat intrigued about where Tsuna might be going with this.

Tsuna closes his hands over the shakers raises them up and then in one quick motion opens them up and where they should have clattered to the table, there is nothing there.

Lambo stares, eyes wide and glittering with wonder, he is utterly taken in by the magic already.

Tsuna looks much less uncomfortable now that he knows his act won’t be met with immediate ridicule and proceeds to summon back the salt and pepper shakers and proceed on with the rest of the act.

I take this time to slip on my own apron and sidle up next to Mom to help make the breakfast. I take over the omelet station as she starts mixing spices and fruits into the sweet-smelling oatmeal.

“Grazi,” she says.

I am so taken aback by the sudden Italian that I don’t immediately respond.

“Um, whatever the Italian is for ‘you’re welcome?’”

She giggles. “Prego.”
“Huh?”

“It means you’re welcome,” She clarifies.

“Oh...’prego’ Mama.”

“Bene.”

We work quietly for a moment before curiosity gets the best of me and I just have to ask.

“You speak Italian?”

She gives me a sly sidelong look, “Of course, I spent three years studying at a conservatory in Rome you know?”

“I knew you went abroad to study music but I didn’t know it was in Italy.”

Mom nods, “I live there from when I was fifteen until just before I had you boys. It’s were I met Iemitsu you know?”

I freeze at the mention of the old man's name. “I always thought you guys met here.”

“So dad was Italian?” Tsuna asks from behind us, apparently, he had been listening in.

I also note the past tense. Apparently he still hasn’t caught on to the whole ‘our asshole father is a deadbeat who is in fact still alive’ bit.

“Half,” Mom answers him. “Or perhaps more than that considering his family's history of moving back and forth between Italy and Japan.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Tsuna says.
“Did you guys get married over there too?”

“We did, but we had a traditional Shinto service once we arrived back in Japan at your Grandfather’s request. You know how he was.” Her smile turns sad.

She misses Grandpa, we all do.

He had been a rock for our family for so long. And the only male role model me and Tsuna had when we were younger. There had always been an easy patience about him. He never got angry or frustrated with us and had always taken the time to explain things and tell us stories.

...

It was because of Grandpa that I had learned how to walk again.

And talk again.

...

“Grandpa just wanted to take a million pictures of you looking beautiful in your Kimono.”

“I was eight and a half months pregnant,” she says with a mock challenge in her voice.

“So?”

“With twins.”

“I have personally seen those pictures and you looked gorgeous Mama.”
She laughs. She laughs loudly and at this point I’m pretty sure that the quintet game is well and truly a bust because Lambo had started getting roundly once Tsuna had pulled off the newspaper and milk trick.

“Inari-chan, you’re such a charmer. You’re going to make a very lucky girl very happy someday.”

“... sure.” I say awkwardly.

“Or a very lucky boy.”

“...Really?” I have to ask because we have never really talked about it before.

“Of course Inari-chan. But just remember that anyone you or Tsu-kun bring home will be subject to Mama’s strict inspection and high standards.”

“Fair.”

Reborn doesn’t actually make it downstairs until we have finished up with breakfast. I make sure to put on another pot of coffee once I start hearing movement upstairs.

We have since relocated into the living room where Tsuna has been coerced into giving Lambo a magic lesson. Of course, he had groused and grumbled about it but he had been smiling the whole time. I think he’s enjoying getting to be ‘the cool older brother’ who teaches something.

Not that I have ever thought of him as anything other than my cool brother.

Reborn appears in the doorway and spends a good long time staring as Tsuna juggles disappearing coins as Lambo and I cheer him on.

When it becomes apparent that he’s still a little too out of it to break out of Tsuna’s mesmerizing spell I disappear back into the kitchen to pour him an enormous mug of coffee.
He accepts the offering gratefully and proceeds to chug down the piping hot coffee. And he doesn’t stop until its empty.

Damn.

That’s both an impressive and terrifying skill.

“Grazi,” he mumbles.

“Prego!” I chirp back, happily showing off my new bit of vocabulary.

Mom had actually kept teaching us words over breakfast. Pointing at random objects and food and saying their name in Italian and having us repeat it. Tsuna had been less than thrilled about being forced to learn yet another language. He can’t seem to get a hang of pronouncing anything other than Japanese.

I actually get the hang of it quickly. The pronunciation part at least. Memorization is going to be something else entirely.

“Bene Inari-chan,” She had said. “You have Mama’s good ears, just remember to listen closely.”

“Buongiorno signore come stai?” Mom calls over at him teasingly.

He stares at her for a good long moment before answering, “Molto bene.”

I have a feeling that he just realized that he can do immersive Italian lessons in our own house if he convinces Mom to play along. And I have no doubt that he will convince her to play along.

The phone rings.

“I’ll get it!” Tsuna calls as he races out of the room to escape the impending continuation of the
Italian lesson.

Reborn stares at him as he leaves and then trots over to talk to Mom.

I flop down next to Lambo who is doing his best to make the coin disappear.

“Fratello! Fratello! Did you see it!? Did you know that Dame-Tsuna can do magic!?”

Still Dame-Tsuna though. Poor bro. One day that terrible nickname will be forgotten.

“I did. It’s really cool right?”

He nods frantically making a few bits and bobs that he has stashed in his hair come tumbling to the floor. It’s nothing explosive so it should be fine.

“He’s teaching me how to do magic too! Do you know how Fratello? Could you show me?”

“Nah, I don’t know how and Tsuna had to practice for a very long time before he got as good as he is.”

“Then Lambo-san will practice too!”

“That’s the spirit.”

I don’t have the opportunity to say anything else because Tsuna comes barreling back into the room and LAUNCHES HIMSELF AT ME. I don’t even have time to brace myself before my entire brother slams into me knocking all the air out of my lungs.

“We have to go now!”

“What?” I manage to croak.
“Go. Now. We. Us. Go now!”

He’s slowed it down a bit but he still isn’t really making any sense. And the manic intensity that he is directing at me is doing nothing to settle my still frazzled nerves.

“Once more with verbs please!” I snap and kick him off of me so that I can reacquaint myself with sweet oxygen.

It turns out that this wasn’t my best plan as Tsuna just takes this opportunity to grab me by the arms and start dragging me out of the room toward the stairs. The peppy bugle-horn that I have come to associate with my brother is blasting out the ‘Get the fuck up and get ready for combat’ tune.

“Dame-Tsuna, clam down and explain,” Reborn demands as he jumps up onto Tsuna’s shoulder and smacks him across the head.

This seems to snap him out of his manic state. He drops my arms and my head thunks against the floor.

Ow.

“Kyoko,” he says. “Kyoko-chan was on the phone.”

“Is she alright?” Reborn asks seriously.

“Date.”

“Huh?” We all say as a family as we stare at him.

“Kyoko-chan asked me on a date!!” He crows happily.
Bro-bro is adorable when he’s excited.

“What, like, right now?”

“Yes right now!” He snaps. “She’s already waiting for me at the cafe.”

I shoot a look at Reborn.

“Is it okay for us to go out right now?”

Tsuna’s face falls and he shoots some very pathetic puppy dog eyes at both of us.

I’m not entirely sure, but I’m pretty sure we are still on high alert because of the whole ‘assassins want to kill Vongola Decimo’ thing. I know the bounty was retracted an all, but still, better safe than sorry. Even Hayato and Takeshi needed to be escorted here and back yesterday so there is probably still a present danger.

“It should be fine.” Reborn says after a moment of careful consideration.

“YES!” Tsuna exclaims and starts rushing up the stairs.

“Just as long as I go along as a chaperone.” He finishes with a gremlin-like smile.

“Guh-What would a baby know about being a chaperone anyway?” Tsuna pouts.

And yikes I see that twitch of irritation at the corner of Reborn’s eye.

“More than you know about dating Dame-Tsuna.” He replies darkly. “Now go put something respectable on, it’s impolite to keep a lady waiting.”

Tsuna rushes upstairs apparently he doesn’t want to risk angering the overlord any further.
“Well, you guys should have fun,” I say as I head back into the living room. “Let me know how it goes.”

“YOU’RE COMING TOO!” Tsuna hollers down.

“What? Why? I don’t think you need to take your twin on dates with you.”

“KYOKO-CHAN TOLD ME TO BRING YOU!”

I’m not an expert, but I don’t think that’s how dates work.

“That’s not how dates work unless Kyoko is into some seriously kinky shit.”

Tsuna pokes his head around the corner and glares daggers at me.

“Just get ready.” And he throws a ball of clothes into my face.

This is definitely not how dates work.

We both sit stiff and straight as the server puts down lovely cake slices and lates with adorable foam pandas in them. Across from us is Kyoko, with her trademark serene smile on her face. She’s happily munching away on her own order called ‘death by chocolate’ which I believe wholeheartedly just by looking at it.

And then there is Hana who is dressed to the nines in a red and black power suit. Her arms crossed and glowing at all of us. I am half terrified that she is going to materialize a shotgun out of thin air and start shooting all of us.

“Hey Hana,” I finally greet after an agonizingly long beat of silence that no one seemed interested
“I am so angry with you,” she grinds out between clenched teeth.

When she doesn’t follow that up with anything I decide to do the smart thing and keep my mouth shut until she’s good and ready to have at me.

A quick glance over at Tsuna tells me that he’s not going to be any help dealing with the ticking time bomb that is Hana. He is trapped in a state of love-struck petrification as his eyes shift from Kyoko to Hana and back again. Its love struck because of Kyoko. Petrified because of Hana.

He’s been terrified of Hana ever since they met in that unfortunate ballet class years ago. I don’t know why the instructor always paired them up but she always did without fail. I think she had been hoping that some of Hana’s natural skill and grace would eventually rub off on Tsuna.

It never had, and eventually, Hana had gotten so fed up with Tsuna stepping on her toes and tripping her up she had aggressively switched roles and costumes with him. Forcing him into a glittery tutu while she danced the role of the dashing knight. Things had gone much better for them dancing wise after that, but poor Tsuna had never quite gotten over being forced to wear a dress in public.

Right now Hana is glaring daggers at both of us and tapping her foot against the floor. She has, what her mom calls, her court face on. Which can only mean bad things for us?

I take a sip of my latte and try not to wince at the overpowering flavor of sugar. No, that isn’t going to do anything to calm my nerves. And I don’t know where Reborn disappeared off to, but wherever he’s hiding I’m sure he’s having a good laugh at our expense.

“Tsuna-kun do you want to try a bite of my cake?” Kyoko offers, breaking the silence again. She offers him a bite-sized piece balanced on the end of her fork.

Any more of this and Tsuna’s eyes are going to transform into heart shapes. Don’t get me wrong this is super sweet and all and I am really happy for Tsuna that his dream girl is actually into him. But we are approaching critical levels of sweetness here. If this goes on any longer I’m going to start breaking out in hives.
“S-s-sure!” Tsuna stutters out in his strangled chicken voice.

And he leans over and eats the piece of cake off her fork.

I wonder if he realizes that this is essentially an indirect kiss? Probably not. If he had he would be squealing right now public setting or no.

However, judging by the cat-that-got-the-canary smile on Kyoko’s face she knows exactly what she’s doing. I’ve got to hand it to her for just going for things the way she does. Gangsters hurt her brother? She goes to fuck them up right back. Cute boys she likes? She spoon-feeds him a cake and wraps him around her little finger. There are people out there, lots of people, who are older and wiser who aren’t able to approach romantic shit with even a smidge of the confidence that Kyoko Sasagawa has. Girl has nerves of fucking steel.

“Tasty?”

“Y-yes!”

She giggles and reaches across the table to wipe away a lingering smudge of chocolate from the corner of his mouth and bring it back to her-

HOLY SHIT WHY AM I HERE!?

I do not need to be in such close proximity to these date like activities! This is extremely uncomfortable now. I mean, kudos to Tsuna. But I really don’t need this much visual evidence burgeoning romantic intentions. I make a show of looking away from the two of them and focus on the cutesy pictures on the wall.

Hana loudly clears her throat and I turn my attention back to the table.

“Okay, gross, enough. Kyoko don’t you remember why we’re here?”

“Oh, right, silly me,” Kyoko finishes licking the chocolate off of her thumb and straightens up in her seat, folding her hands on the table in front of her.”
“Tsuna-kun, Inari-kun, I believe that the two of you owe us an explanation.”

“Explanation?” Tsuna repeats dreamily as he continues to stare at Kyoko.

“Yes Sawada, an explanation and for your sake, it better be a good explanation or I will be very unhappy with you.” Hana threatens and Tsuna ‘eeps.’

She means what happened at the school I assume. Kyoko had said that me and Tsuna would explain everything to her later after all.

I’m suddenly very glad that I’m wearing long sleeves right now. If Hana had a chance to spot my brand new (permanently scared on) body art, she would never have let us dally this long. She would have jumped right into demanding answers, loudly and aggressively.

At least this way our group has the pretext of being a completely normal double date.

“You mean why all the assassins right?” I say with all the open honesty that I can muster.

Tsuna jumps and starts flailing around making loud denials and drawing way too much attention to us. I slap a hand over his mouth to quiet him down, not breaking eye contact with Hana.

I’m going to tell her the truth. I am going to tell Hana the truth because she is one of my best and oldest friends. I am going to tell her the truth because she has already gotten herself caught up in this mess.

“Yes Inari, what the fuck?” her defensive posture melts away, but she is still giving me this intense and worried look. She wasn’t expecting that I would tell her so easily.

I am going to tell Kurokawa Hana the truth about this shit because she is the smartest person that I know and I need her.

And I am going to tell Kyoko the truth because she has already kicked some serious ass with us on
two separate occasions. And benching the Angel of Vengeance with we’re playing on hard mode is just about the dumbest thing that we could possibly do.

“Inari,” Tsuna protests.

“Tsuna, they’re already involved. And chances are crazy shit is going to keep happening around here and keeping them in the dark isn’t going to do anything other than get them hurt. At this point, it's safer if they know what to keep a lookout for.”

Tsuna stares for a moment longer and then lets out a long quivering breath.

“For the record, I hate this,” He says.

“We all hate this Sawada,” Hana snaps. “Now spill.”

I look at Tsuna. This first bit is all him after all.

“There were assassins here because a whole bunch of people in Italy couldn’t work their shit out and so they killed each other and now I’ve been nominated, against my will, to become the Vongola Decimo.” He intones flatly.

“Vongola?” Kyoko asks.

“I know that name,” Hana says with a frown.

“Vongola is supposedly the biggest and most powerful Mafia Family in the world.”

They both stare blankly at Tsuna before Hana finally blurts out:

“And they chose YOU to run it?” her voice is thick with disbelief.
“That’s what I said!” Tsuna exclaims.

“I’m sure you’ll be a great boss Tsuna-kun,” Kyoko says encouragingly.

“Kyoko-chan, I can’t walk down a flight of stairs without falling on my face. I am routinely chased around the neighborhood by a chihuahua that I am terrified of. I have never been in charge of something in my life. I have no leadership qualities!”

She reaches out and takes his hand in hers.

“I think you're selling yourself a little short Tsuna-kun.”

He calms down almost immediately and looks at their intertwined fingers.

“Remember the motto of Mr. Monkey?” She asks with a soft smile. “You never know until you try.”

And I watch somewhat mesmerized as orange and yellow wisps dance around each other across their hands.

“Sorry to interrupt this adorable moment,” Hana cuts back in. “But when did you two find out about all of this mafia stuff?”

I have to do some quick mental math because Tsuna is incapable of answering at this moment. A lot has happened in a relatively short amount of time.

“Seven weeks ago? Give or take a couple of days.”

“Seven weeks? And it took assassins this long to get here? They must not be the brightest bunch then.”

Tsuna shakes his head snapping back to himself, “They aren’t only here because of the Vongola Decimo thing. Well, they are, but it mostly because some lady in Italy put a bounty of a hundred
million on the head of Vongola Decimo.”

Hana chalks on air when she hears the amount, “What lady?! Who the hell has that kind of money?!”

“Her name is Cassandra Della Rosa,” I tell her.

“...The model?” She asks.

And...what?

We all stare at Hana.

I honestly hadn’t been expecting a response to that. I hadn’t known who the hell Cassandra Della Rosa was other than what Reborn had told us about her. She’s a model? Is she a model? Or is it just that she shares the same name with an Italian model?

“She’s a model?” Tsuna asks me quizzically.

“I... don’t know?”

“Honestly, why don’t any of you follow celebrity news?” Hana huffs in exasperation and slides out of the booth. She heads back over to the waiting area and starts rummaging around in the magazine rack. She grabs several, seemingly at random before straightening and coming back to our table.

A woman in the waiting area attempts to stop her from taking them but immediately backs off when Hana literally growls at her.

Nothing gets between Hana and her trash magazines.

She returns to our booth and slams down the small stack of magazines and starts thumbing through the first one. When she finds the page she’s looking for she lays the whole thing down in the centre of the table for all of us to see.
Auburn hair, icy blue eyes.

She is beautiful, in an aristocratic kind of way.

And I hate her fucking guts.

“That,” Hana says pointing at the picture, “Is Cassandra Della Rosa.”

“She was the sole heir to the Della Rosa fortune and when her father passed away seven years ago she inherited everything. Including a mansion in Milan where she lives. She probably didn’t have to work another day in her life but she kept modeling and eventually started her own fashion line.”

Hana grabs the second magazine and starts flipping through it. She stops on another page and lays it down so we can all see. This one is from one of those paparazzi rags.

The Cassandra in this photo looks nothing like the last. She looks destroyed.

Whoever took this photo probably has a special place in hell reserved for them.

She is doubled over on herself clutching at her midsection and sobbing. Her eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed.

There is a heading and an article attached to it:

**Cassandra’s Heartbreak**

“She was almost constantly in the public eye, that is until sixteen months ago when her fiancé died in a tragic accident. And about a week later she had a miscarriage. It was all really sad and after that she kind of just faded out of the public eye.”

Please don’t make me feel bad for her.
Fuck I feel bad for her.

What the hell had the Vongola done to her?

Hana lays down yet another magazine. Its another paparazzi snapshot of Cassandra. She’s dressed to kill in this one. Black on black. Her hair pulled back in an intricate braided twist. And six-inch stiletto heels.

She is also flanked by two dozen suits with a familiar emblem on their lapels.

“There are reports that she got very paranoid after that. She stopped seeing her friends, hired a private security force and had some military-grade security features installed in and around her manor. I think a photographer was electrocuted to death when he tried to break in to get some photos.”

She stops for a moment while she thinks something over.

“Then about three months ago there were some news reports that she had gone missing while on a trip to Naples.”

She shuffles through the fourth and final magazine and sets it down on the table. Its a grainy unfocused image of a window in the manor house.

“Apparently she turned up again about eight weeks ago but she hasn’t left the manor grounds. I don’t get why she would have it out for you two in particular though?”

She, Tsuna and Kyoko start going around talking it out. But I am focused on this last photo. Because there is something off in it. Something that shouldn’t be there. She is looking straight at the camera from the window an unsettling smile stretching across her face warping it into something terrifying and ugly.

That’s not what I’m focused on through. I’m focused on the figure standing behind her.
A young man. Tall and pale with a very distinctive hairstyle.

Fuck.

There is no doubt in my mind that that is Rokudo Mukuro standing there. I have no fucking clue why he’s standing there. What’s the connection?

Why does he seem so much more dangerous than he was supposed to be?

What the hell happened in Naples?

“You have quite the knack for research don’t you Hana?” Reborn says and he descends from a light fixture in the ceiling.

He wanders around the magazines laid out across the table. “This is an amazingly comprehensive timeline considering you only had magazines and fifteen minutes.”

Reborn actually sounds impressed.

“Good afternoon Reborn-chan.” Kyoko greets.

He nods at her but continues to examine the one article.

“Reborn did you know about her already?” Tsuna demands.

“Some, but not all of it,” He replies distractedly. “I lost track of her after Federico’s funeral. And then I was busy training Dame-Dino and by that time the Vongola had mostly lost interest in her.” He drops the magazine back onto the pile. “Apparently your newest Family member has better information synthesizing skills than Vongola’s best agents.”

He looks at Hana, and I’m sure he was going to be all polite and stuff and introduce himself to her. But he doesn’t get a chance. The second he fixes his gaze on Hana she screams blue bloody murder and bolts out of the booth and out the door of the cafe like a bat out of hell.
“Oh dear,” Kyoko signs and starts gathering up all their things before sliding out of the booth herself. “Please forgive her Reborn-chan, Hana has a bit of a phobia.”

And then she leaves to chase after our fleeing friend.

“Crippling infantaphobia,” I clarify as I tear the picture of Cassandra and Mukuro out of the magazine.

“She really hates babies,” Tsuna further reduces, and earns himself a withering glare for his trouble.

“Go settle the bill Dame-Tsuna,” He orders. “We have a schedule to keep.”

“What!? Why me!?” He protests.

“Because it was your ‘date’ Bro-Bro, now go do the manly thing and foot the bill.”

He goes, but he grumbles the whole way.

“So, where to now overlord?” I ask.

“I told you yesterday, Dame-Dino is going to help me whip you, kids, into shape.”

I wonder if he means with his actual literal whip.

No sooner do we leave the cafe, then a fleet of fancy fucking cars pulls up in front of us. These Cavallone boys aren’t really that great with the whole subtlety things, are they?
Dino himself steps out of the passenger side of a van with blacked out windows. His hair falls in perfect golden waves and his stupid perfect face is still way to pretty to be real. I can’t help but stare as he waves and saunters over to us.

And then he trips on a crack in the sidewalk and falls flat on his ass and I remember that Dino is also a doofus. And all is right in the universe again.

“Dino-san are you alright?” Tsuna panics and rushes over to help out his boss-sempai.

I huff a laugh and follow after him.

Reborn hops up onto Dino’s head with a little more aggression than is probably called for.

“Ow, Reborn, do you always have to be so rough?” Dino whines.

“With you lot, yes.”

Dino sighs and pulls himself back up.

“Yes, we’re ready to go. We were just waiting for our guests of honor.”

He winks at us.

And then the door of the van rolls open and I suddenly feel much less certain about the universe as a whole.

Because Takeshi and Hayato are bound, gagged and blindfolded on the floor of the van.

I make a frantic grab for Tsuna. We can still getaway. There is obviously something very, very wrong here, but we can still getaway.
And then my arms are pinned behind my back and bound together as a piece of cloth is tied tightly around my eyes and another is shoved into my mouth. I am shoved roughly forward and I tumble into the van right into a body that I immediately recognize as Takeshi.

What the fuck!

“Don’t worry kiddos, big brother Dino is going to take good care of you.”

Yeah, fuck you too Doll-Face.

Chapter End Notes

So... that was a lot.

Questions, comments?

Hearing from you guys always makes my day :)
Of Course You Realize That This Means War

Chapter Summary

Don’t make the moron with impulse control issues you’re spokesman.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Want to know a fun fact about me? I don’t generally enjoy being immobilized. It’s not my favorite thing in the world, but hey, if it happens it happens and I can usually talk my way around whatever panic attack is surely incoming.

What I really can’t deal with is not being able to move or speak. Let's chalk it up to childhood trauma which will never be spoken of. Too many bad memories that I would rather leave buried in the deepest pits of hell where they belong.

Before panic really starts to set in, at this moment I have to remind myself: ‘You can still move. Nothing is broken. It’s just rope and they were too stupid to tie your legs together. Now get your shit together you fucking moron. You have to ‘rescue’ Tsuna.’

Easier said than done.

But it does help that I can feel Takeshi against my back and my legs and Hayato’s have become tangled as I was unceremoniously thrown on top of them.

There is no way that Dino could have known the extremely specific ways in which this was fucking me up. There was absolutely no way he could know that he just went and stomped on the big red button labeled ‘DON’T!’

I don’t even think Reborn knows about it.

And I don’t know if that means that Iemitsu cares or that he really fucking doesn’t. I don’t really give a shit either way (lie). Part of me kinda hopes that he doesn’t know at all.
The Vongola kept him busy.

He hadn’t thought to ask.

...

Fuck this. I need to get out of this shit before I start getting all depressingly introspective and meander down memory lane.

So Doll-Face hit the big red button.

Of course, you realize that this means war.

I do have to hand it to him for managing to pull a fast one on us. Seriously, I hadn’t seen this coming. Though I should have considering Reborn had straight up told us that we would be doing some ‘training’ with Dino and his boys.

But still, props for the ambush, metaphorical slow claps all around.

And incase I am not entirely clear; yes I am incredibly pissed off right now. Being treated like a shitty piece of luggage doesn’t rank high on the list of things that do it for me. And while I do appreciate the fact that Takeshi and Hayato are at least in the same boat as me (this would be a million times worse right now if they weren’t) they could have at least had the courtesy to throw Tsuna back here with the rest of us.

As it stands right now the three of us can’t do much more than an extremely abstract rendition of the three stooges.

So yes, Doll-Face, you’re going to get it.

Just as soon as I get myself out of this shit and rescue our reluctant boss.

There really isn’t much room to maneuver in here. But hey, I am a relentlessly determined idiot.
Logical, spatial constraints mean nothing to me.

It takes a bit of doing. A lot of muffled exclamations, accidentally kicking Hayato in the stomach, and half flipping myself into Takeshi’s lap. But I finally manage to pull my legs through the bound loop of my arms to right myself. I can’t do much about untying them right now, however, I can rip the gag out of my mouth and the blindfold off of my eyes.

HA! Take that!

It is still unbelievably dark in the back of this van though. I guess the last thing you want to install in your creepy kidnapping van is windows. That would probably be a little bit awkward. As it stands the only source of light that we have is coming through the small crack at the bottom of the sliding door.

Not particularly helpful, but at least I can sort of make out Takeshi and Hayato now.

It doesn’t take much extra effort to reach up from my reclined position on his lap to remove the gag from Takeshi’s mouth and pull the blindfold down from his eyes.

“You okay man?” I ask him.

He has to blink a few times to clear his vision and focus in the extremely dim light.

“I don’t like these guys very much,” He says with an uncharacteristic grimace.

There is a bruise blooming on the side of his face, where I assume that one of Dino’s minions got in a lucky shot. I really hope that Yamamoto-san didn’t notice his son getting cold-clocked and kidnapped. If he did we might have an entirely different issue on our hands.

One with a very sharp sword who will kill anyone who dares to lay a hand on his baby.

“Looks like they roughed you up a bit there dude.”
“A bit,” he grins a bit then. “I’ll get him back.”

Hayato takes this moment to kick out at him and lets out an extremely indignant muffled curse. Which I am interpreting to mean, ‘get this shit off of me you dumb fuck!’

Which is fair. I assume he wants to be included in this first meeting of the kidnapped club.

It takes a moment to rock myself up so I can pull the gag out of his mouth and push the blindfold up off of his face.

“I’LL FUCKING KILL ’EM!” He explodes, and I am immediately blown back into Takeshi by the force of his rage.

Takeshi exhales harshly as the back of my head slams into his abdomen. And then all three of us go slamming into the interior wall when whatever idiot driving takes a turn way to fucking hard.

“Get off of me,” I grind out as I am now at the bottom of a human pile. “You fuckers are heavy.”

They are in the process of wiggling off of me when the driver takes another hard turn and we all go careening into the opposite wall. At least I’m on top this time.

Still, this is getting ridiculous.

“LEARN HOW TO DRIVE DICKHEAD!” I holler and bang my bound fists against the cold metal of the interior.

“I hate these guys,” I can hear the manic edge in Hayato’s voice. “I. Hate. Them.”

“Where’s Tsuna?” Takeshi interrupts.

Of course, this derails Hayato’s rant completely.
“Tsuna-sama? TSUNA-SAMA!?”

He somehow manages to work up the strength of ten men and throws us off of him (amazingly without the use of his arms) and starts frantically looking around for Tsuna. That is some dedication there.

“Calm down dumbass Tsuna isn’t here. He somehow managed to escape this terrible slapstick routine.”

“Where is he then!?”

“Hostage seat of honour I assume,” I say with more composure than I feel. “Right up front with the enemy boss.”

“AND YOU JUST LET THEM TAKE HIM!” Hayato demands.

“FUCK YOU I DIDN’T REALLY GET AN OPPORTUNITY TO RAISE OBJECTIONS!” I scream back at him, my momentary composure is broken.

“Hey now, calm down guys,” Takeshi cuts in an attempt to deescalate this stupidity.

I catch a quick flash of blue before it quickly burns out.

I take a breath, and another, “Okay, yeah, okay.” I look over at Hayato and continue, “sorry dude.”

He grumbles a moment before echoing the apology.

“I know you wouldn’t have let them grab the boss if there was something you could have done about it.” He says while uncomfortably averting his gaze.

The words are accompanied by the brief turbulent stirring of piano keys, and I spend a moments staring at him. Poor guy, he has absolutely no idea how to express concern. But it seems like we are on the same page here.
“Yeah, and you guys will watch him if I can’t alright?” I fire back at him, at them both really.

“But for right now we need to get him back so let’s do a brief review of our current situation.” I stop to clear my throat for dramatic effect, “So, bad news we’ve been kidnapped and our boss has been taken hostage. Good news, this is all an elaborate training exercise concocted by a pretty moron and as far as I know, we aren’t in any real danger.”

“Are you still on that ‘pretty’ thing?” Hayato interrupts me.

I glower at him as best as I can in the dark.

Takeshi laughs, “If you think this is bad you should have heard the way he used to go on about Hibari.”

I freeze.

Turning slowly, I give him a completely mortified look.

“Traitor,” I hiss. “We do not speak of such terrible things.”

Hayato snickers, “you had a thing for that-“

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” I can feel my ears burning.

This is Takeshi’s vengeance for making him worry isn’t it. This is cruel and unusual punishment.

“He used to go on and on about it, ‘Takeshi he’s so pretty make it stop.’” He continues on like the jerk he is. Honestly and he thought that I wouldn’t care if he threw himself off of a building. Ass.

I shove my, still bound, hands against his mouth in a desperate attempt to make him S T O P.
“Lies! Treachery!” I shriek. “How dare you betray me like this?!”

Hayato continues to laugh uproariously at my suffering.

Takeshi lets himself fall back with a mirthful laugh of his own and I tumble on top of him with a miserable whine.

“Takeshi~~~” I wail. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Hm? What’s wrong? You’re always so funny when you get like this,” he teases.

I give up.

This must be karmic retribution for all of those times that I teased Tsuna about his debilitating crush on Kyoko. This is a little bit unfair though...

And factually untrue.

....now at least.

I lay my head on Takeshi’s chest and let Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum finish getting all their laughs out at my expense.

“So do you still~” Hayato starts to say.

“N O.” I emphatically cut him off. “Hibari Kyoya is a cave troll with the conversational skills of a troglodyte. I much prefer our bond of mutual animosity. It’s so much more gratifying to punch him in his stupid face.”

I can feel the ‘you have issues’ look that they are both leveling at me.
“Anyway moving on to something that is actually important. Didn’t you guys hear that bit about our boss being in enemy hands... more so than we are now I mean.”

Thankfully, this seems to sober up the giggling idiots.

“Fuck,” Hayato intones.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like actual assassins or something again, because this this is like a pre-planned training exercise and all, but still-”

“It’s s matter of pride right?” Takeshi finishes for me.

“Vongola pride,” Hayato continues.

I make a face. I’m feeling a little bit ambivalent about the Vongola right now. I’ve come to the realization that once Tsuna takes over we are probably going to have to do a thorough cleaning of house (but that’s still years away now).

“Pride as the Namimori Neighbourhood Watch at the very least. I mean we can’t very well abide our citizens being taken off the streets.”

The driver hits a particular rough bump in the road and me and Takeshi are flung on top of Hayato.

“At this point I don’t care what the fuck we call ourselves,” Hayato wheezes. “Please tell me I can shove a stick of dynamiters this fucker’s ass.”

....

“Do you HAVE dynamite?” Takeshi asks with wary curiosity.

I’ll admit, I am also suddenly extremely interested in the answer to this question. How much
dynamite are we in this small inclosed space with? And also if it’s any number higher than ‘one’ where the hell is he keeping it?

“Do I have dynamite?” Hayato scoffs, “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to? I ALWAYS have dynamite.”

He pauses to pull one of his arms free from the dog pile and and pulls out a small capsule looking thing of indeterminate color.

“I have fucking nitro too,” he finishes, grinning like a lunatic.

In an instant me and Takeshi fly off of him and scurry over to the opposite side of the van. Not that it would do us any good if anything were to actually, you know, explode. But it makes me feel a little bit better.

Hayato should come with one of those warning labels that you find on chemical bottle. The one that literally means ‘Warning this thing can go KA-BOOM at any moment.’

“Kay, cool,” I say nervously and turn to Takeshi. “I don’t suppose you have a bat or some thing sharp and pointy hidden away on you?”

“If I did I’m sure you would have noticed by now.”

“Fair point.”

But it never hurts to ask. Stranger things have happened, and it is entirely possible that Takeshi could have access to his own hammer-space. I mean Hayato is apparently armed to the teeth with explosive materials and neither of us noticed that.

“And stupid me I didn’t think to bring my ray gun when I went to tag along on my brother’s date.”

I should have. I thought about it. And then I realized that I would somehow have to think of a way to conceal it and if it was spotted I would have to come up with a non-threatening explanation about why I was traveling around with a very gun-shaped object.
I’m pretty sure the actual explanation won’t prevent the police from arresting me either.

“Okay, fuck it, we can work with this.” I don’t know how, but I have faith that we can figure it out. “Also, where the fuck are they taking us? We’ve been driving forever.”

“You don’t recognize the route?” Takeshi asks.

“Nooooo? Dude, I’m not a homing pigeon.”

“We’re on the mountain road.”

“Oh...” there are all those traumatic summer camp memories coming flashing back. “We can work with this.”

Tsuna looks so very done with all of this.

He also looks like he’s about to go into cardiac arrest.

I’m glad that he looks like anything at all, to be honest.

It had occurred to me as the van started pulling to a stop that Dino could very well be possessed or in league with our mysterious enemy, and we could very well be driving to our elaborately plotted execution. That would have sucked.

But, no, if Tsuna was in any real danger I would have known it. I would have felt it. And moreover Reborn was with him. If I can trust nothing else I can trust that Reborn will look after my brother if I can’t.

The man himself looks completely unbothered by the whole situation. He is sitting perched on
Dino’s shoulder with a smug smile on his face.

Doll-Face himself has Tsuna tucked snuggly under his arm and is grinning at the rest of us.

“So kids,” he starts. “Your precious boss has been captured. What are you going to do about it?”

Hayato twitches violently beside me. Takeshi covertly grips his ankle so as not to blow their cover. We can’t have them know that we’re all untied after all.

Yeah, plan A probably would have worked better if I had any impulse control at all. Because the mention of Tsuna being in need of rescue combined with all the irritation that I am already feeling kind of all bubble over and I just feel...

Mean.

Sorry boys, we’re doing it live.

“Hey there Doll-Face, don’t you know it’s bad bedroom etiquette to tie a guy up and leave him hanging.” I pull my self up to my not so impressive heights and let the ropes fall to the floor. I grin lazily at him as I hop down out of the van.

“The least you could have done is left me with a safe word.”

Poor innocent Tsuna looks so confused by the words coming out of my mouth. Not so innocent Dino turns so red that it looks like his face is glowing. And he starts spazzing out so hard. It is glorious.

In fact, all the Cavallone boys look a little red in the face and off-balance. I guess I rolled a critical success on my intimidation check using nothing by bondage innuendo.

Who needs guns? I have words.

I also have an idiot wearing bandoleers of dynamite under his clothing and another idiot with a
pitching speed of 95mph who have better caught on to my new and revised plan and used my
distraction wisely.

I lock eyes with Tsuna and do my best to convey to him (using our super special bond of twin-
ness?) ‘when you get the chance; run like hell.’

The look he gives me back is completely deadpan and seems to say; ‘now what are you doing you
fucking moron?’

He should know better by now. I’m doing what I do best.

Improvising.

I survey the group slowly doing a quick inventory. He brought at least two dozen minions with
him. Doll-Face sure doesn’t pack light.

I wonder how many of them I can piss off at once?

Well, only one way to find out.

I saunter toward Dino, who is still stuttering and stammering awkwardly, and continue to speak.

“After all didn’t you say you were going to ‘take good care’ of us? I hope you have something
more satisfying planed for round two.”

Dino chokes on air.

“How old are you?” He wheezes.

“We’ll be fourteen in a couple of months,” I say with my best flirty smile.
“TOO YOUNG!” He shrieks and releases his hold on Tsuna to point a frantic and disapproving finger at me. “Way too young to be speaking about such things!”

Tsuna has apparently caught on that I am attacking our new teacher's assistant with sexual innuendo and he is giving me this look of horrified fascination as he sinks down to the ground.

I make eye contact with Dino again and give him a wink, “Meh, not a problem for me Doll-Face.”

The smell of gun powder starts creeping into the clearing and I’m going to assume that means that the boys are almost ready to really get this party started.

Now to put on my finishing touches on this powder keg.

“How now don’t you bust out that whip of yours and we’ll put on a nice show for your entourage.”

My smile turns all teeth and mean.

I look around at the Cavallone boys and consider... how far do I want to push this?

Fuck it.

All the way baby.

“Things must get really awkward in the bedroom considering your ‘coordination’ issues. Tell me Sweetheart; how many of them need to watch for you to get off?”

Silence.

And I mean dead fucking silence.

Even the surrounding ambient sounds of nature go quiet.
Dino himself has completely stopped breathing and has turned the most fascinating shade of purple. He looks absolutely mortified.

I’m not sure what the expression on my own face looks like, but judging by the way that Reborn is staring at me it is not nice.

And then all at once, the surrounding Cavallone hoard goes into a rage.

Attacking a mafia boss’s sexual prowess in front of his loyal followers probably isn’t the smartest thing I have ever done in my life, but it works so well.

Romario, who was at his bosses back, lunges at me with a fist raised, “Why you disrespectful little-“

He doesn’t get far. None of them do. I guess they didn’t get the message:

This is our surprise round.

I will say though, even I wasn’t expecting Tsuna to spring back up off the ground and slam a clog of dirt into Romario’s face. Good show Bro-Bro.

Then the explosions start and everyone starts screaming for an entirely different reason. There is a mass panic as detonations happen behind them, in front of them, left and right. As the chaos descends Tsuna charges forward and grabs me and together we book it into the tree line.

Off ahead of us I can just barely make out Takeshi and Hayato darting through the periphery. A duet of ringing bells and the hammering of ivory keys that reverberate around them.

The ground quakes as another round of explosions go off. The two of us take this moment to duck behind a large tree while they finish off their barrage. Takeshi and Hayato actually make an effective team when they aren’t taking pot shots at each other about stupid shit. Right now they are bonded together in their mutual animosity toward the dumb fuckers who had dared to lay hands on OUR SKY.
“You’re insane!” Tsuna pants, “You’re all insane! Dino-niisan said it was a training exercise!”

“Bro, they kidnapped us,” I say flatly.

“Yes but-“

Explosion to the west. ‘

“And they took you away from us as a hostage.”

Another explosion goes off and someone lets out a loud Wilhelm scream.

“Yes but-“

“And they had us tied up and gagged and drove us out to the middle of nowhere where no one would hear us scream. And they totally expected us to get fucked.”

“...yes,” Tsuna relents.

The surrounding area starts filling with a dense smoke which is our signal to regroup with the guys and plot our escape.

“I still think that you guys went a little overboard.”

“Noted.”

I nudge Tsuna to the ground, and together we start crawling across the forest floor toward our wayward party members.
“On another topic,” I start conversationally (as I pointedly ignore the panicked screams in the background), “You should probably talk to Hayato about his terrifying lack of self-preservation instincts.”

“This coming from you?!”

“I’m not the one who smokes like a chimney while wearing bandoleers of dynamite under his clothes.” I’m still not quite over the discovery that Hayato is quite literally a walking talking bomb.

Tsuna makes an unhappy strangled noise at that.

“Just let him know that we all love and care about him and don’t want to accidentally kill himself and everyone around him.”

Tsuna sighs, “I don’t think he’s ever had anyone take care of him before.”

“Yeah, well, now he has us so...”

“I’ll talk to him,” Tsuna says. “Once we get off of this mountain.”

“TSUNA-SAMA!” Hayato hollers as he charges toward us.

Ah, speak of the devil.

“Are you alright?! Did they touch you!? Did they hurt you!? I’ll fucking kill that horse idiot!!” Hayato has his hands all over Tsuna. Poking and prodding at him for any concealed injuries. All the while Tsuna yelps and squeals at the sudden invasion of his personal space bubble.

“GAH! Hayato-kun I’m fine, I’m fine. Calm down.” Tsuna says as he tries to escape the through pat-down.

“Hey Tsuna,” Takeshi greets easily as he flops down next to me and reaches over to ruffle Tsuna’s hair.
“Get your hands off Tsuna-sama baseball idiot, “ Hayato immediately hisses at him. To which Takeshi’s only response is to do it more.

Tsuna looks around at all of us and glowers.

“You’re all crazy,” he informs us seriously.

Takeshi laughs and hooks his free arm around my shoulders, “that was all this guy.”

And then in a lower voice, “I think you might have broken Dino-san Inari.”

Yeah, I may have taken that a little bit too far. I still say they all deserved it though.

“Dame-Dino will be fine,” Reborn announces as he descends from able and lands on Tsuna’s head. “Dame-Tsuna, you should praise you subordinates they went all out to ‘rescue’ you.”

There is a genuine smile of approval on his face as he looks at the three of us.

“Thanks,” Tsuna says somewhat begrudgingly.

“Did you enjoy the show,” I ask cheekily.

There is a microscopic spasm at the corner of this mouth before it smooths back into his usual expression of amused neutrality. But I caught that. And I also caught that short brief trill of a violin before it is abruptly silenced. For a moment I stare at him a little stunned.

I’ve never heard Reborn before.

“You are a menace Monello,” he says. And then he addresses us as a group, “I did warn Dame-Dino that he shouldn’t take you boys lightly. Apparently he still needs some training himself.”
Tsuna turns pink and buries his face in his hands. Letting out a groan of embarrassment at mention of my earlier ‘performance.’

“I can’t believe you actually said that stuff to Dino-niisan.”

“I can’t believe you said it with a straight face,” Hayato chimes in.

“I have a gift,” I say smugly and preen.

“Mean,” Takeshi observes with a somewhat strained look.

I stick out my tongue at him. “Oh come on, he attacks with a whip. Doll-Face is lucky that I didn’t jump straight into jokes about doming and exhibitionism. And besides, what the fuck else was I supposed to do? I’m kind of out of my weight class here.”

Tsuna peaks out from between his fingers and gives me a pained pleading look. “You shouldn’t say that kind of stuff in front of Reborn either, he’s smart but he’s still a baby.”

My brain runs smack into an error message as he says that. DOES. NOT. COMPUTE. DOES. NOT. COMPUTE. Because really? Still?

And then Hayato and Takeshi jump in with their own sheepish apologize about using vulgar language in front of small children. I just kid of stare at them in absolute incomprehension.

Really?

They all just readily accept this at face value. Yup, he’s a super-strong and intelligent baby who works for the mafia. Nothing weird about that. Nope, it is completely normal.

The fuck?
I just don’t get it.

All of his mannerisms and the way his speaks say ‘hey I am a grown adult.’ At least to me, they do.

I glance at Reborn himself, and he is doing his very best to bore a hole in Tsuna’s head with his eyes.

It must be a curse thing. It must be. I’ve thought about it before and now I am almost positive that whatever the curse is, and whatever it does, it must do some crazy force power mind-wammy ‘these are not the droids you are looking for’ kind of thing. Otherwise, people would be asking a lot more questions about this whole situation.

That is just so fucking depressing though.

And other than the surface level of irritation at being called a baby, yet again, Reborn looks completely resigned to it.

Fuck.

Gotta fix that.

... Somehow...

Unfortunately, I remember jack shit about the Arcobaleno other than the whole ‘adults trapped as babies’ thing. And I know that Reborn is one of seven (I think?) and Verde is one too. But every time I try to think further everything explodes into pain and orange starbursts. The information there. I know it is. I just need to find the right trigger to ‘unlock’ it.

I mean, I know Reborn is an adult, but I don’t even remember what he actually looks like...

Ow.

Ow. Ow. Ow!
Okay stopping that train of thought now. Before my brain actually melts out of my fucking ears.

Fine universe, keep your secrets. For now.

I snap myself out of my tangential train of thought to find Tsuna staring at me expectantly. What were we talking about again?

“So are we done now?” I ask as I desperately try to blink the spots and stars out of my vision. I think that almost made me black out.

“That’s no fun,” Takeshi says. “We just got here.”

“Not a chance,” Reborn fires back suddenly donning a referee outfit. “We’re just going to increase the difficulty. Capture the flag - Mafia Style.”

“Meaning?” Tsuna asks suspiciously.

Reborn gives him a gleefully vindictive look.

“Capture the boss of course.”

Tsuna blanks.

“Are you going to be on our team kid?” Takeshi asks.

Tsuna and Hayato immediately perk up at the thought.

“If Reborn is on our team there’s no way we can loose,” Hayato cheers prematurely.
Apparently none of them realize what the ref costume means.

“I’m not on anyone’s team. I’m the referee,” he answers with a smirk.

See?

“But they outnumber us!” Tsuna immediately protests.

“You’ll just have to use your heads Dame-Tsuna.”

“But - But -But!”

“And don’t think that you can count on a deathperation bullet. This time I want to see what you can do on your own.”

“But!!”

“And if I catch you slacking there will be hell to pay.”

“HIEEEEEEE!”

And with that Reborn shoots up a grappling hook and disappears into the canopy above.

Tsuna just lets out a long whine. I reach over and clap him on the shoulder as a show of moral support.

“Chill bro, they might have the numbers but we have the home-field advantage.”

“Home field- We’re on a mountain!” He exclaims petulantly.
“Exactly, we’re on Namimori mountain,” I turn to Takeshi with a grin. “Do you think any of the old rope traps will still be up by the ravine?”

He grins back, “Probably, we made a lot of them back then.”

Hayato and Tsuna look between us somewhat concerned.

“Rope traps?”

“You’ll see,” I promise him.

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Relax guys,” I say with a hopefully unthreatening smile. “Nothing to worry about. You're with two survivors of the Little Explorers Summer Camp.”

If possible Tsuna and Hayato look even more nervous than they had before.

“Survivors?” Hayato asks as Reborn blows a whistle somewhere above our heads.

I assume to signal the resumption of conflict.

“You had to have been there dude.”

And the four of us take off running into the woods, with the Cavallone hoard hot on our heels.

Two years ago me and Takeshi had spent a particularly hellish summer break running around in the woods with twelve other boys between the ages of nine and twelve with a dubiously sane camp counselor who had promised fun and adventure as we learned the basics of outdoors survival.
No one will ever believe what actually happened that summer.

We had made a solemn oath to never ever tell our parents what happened at camp on, because of how badly they would have freaked out if they had known how much danger we had been in.

We are both the kids of single parents who can be terrifyingly overprotective if the situation strikes.

...

One kid with a bowl cut had saved my life by wrestling a bear. I don’t even remember him being part of the camp. I think that kid was just deliberately there to fight a bear. I actually think he was pissed off at me for getting in the way of his quarry.

...

There had also been this red-haired kid with glasses who had been smart as fuck. His parents had signed him up for outdoors camp instead of space camp and he had complained from the get-go about how he was going to die in the forest. And that was before the counselor had gone batshit and started trying to sacrifice us all to his pagan god.

Yes, I agree that was really fucking crazy.

Anyway, Red had been crazy good at engineering shit, and he had designed all these crazy traps that we had placed all around the forest in hopes of capturing the mad man hunting us.

I still don’t know what happened to that guy.

Might have to look into that someday.

The point is, yes, a lot of those traps were still in place and thanks to some sort of engineering miracle they are still functional.
Unfortunately, they were also designed to subdue one raving lunatic not like thirty at once. But it was still worth it to see the looks on their faces as half a dozen professional mobsters go flying into the trees thanks to a trap that had been designed by a ten-year-old.

Red, wherever you are, I salute you and thank you for your contribution to this glorious chaos.

Takeshi leads another half dozen of them up the slope of the ravine before kicking over the trigger that lets loose forty logs that are still somehow suspended in the trees and sends them barrelling down the hill. He dives out of the way with a peel of laughter.

“This sure brings back memories right?” he calls over to me.

“They, all those good times with the threat of imminent death and constant terror,” I yell back at him.

Tsuna and Hayato are perched in a tree and are staring at us owlishly. As Dino and his boys rush around to make sure everyone is still alive. They should be fine.

As Doll-Face himself passes under the tree they’re camped out in they leap down and catch him in the large rope net. They cheer, but this is about as good as it gets. As I said before, this really wasn’t designed with an army in mind. Dino’s men who haven’t been run over or snared immediately jump on both of them and thus begins an all out brawl.

Above us, Reborn settles in for the show with a pair of green binoculars.

The next six hours play out like something out of a Hollywood war film, complete with fantastic explosions and overemotional dialogue. That last bit was usually reserved for when we rescued Tsuna from the Cavallone prison.

It happens a lot.
And every time we have to come up with a new crazier plot to free him. Because Dino’s boys aren’t dumb. They are a hell of a lot of fun to rile up but they are not as stupid as I thought they were.

They are also going easy on us which I find vaguely irritating. But I also don’t really want thirty-odd professional mobsters going all out on us. I do remember that the Cavallone Family is one of the more powerful Families that Vongola is allied with.

It would suck to loose them as allies for Tsuna.

I haven’t seen any of them bust out magic fire yet. I’m guessing at least a few of them must be Dying Will Flame adept. I doubt Reborn would have abided anything less, he had trained Dino for a year after all, I doubt he would have left his student with sub-par guardians.

Me and Takeshi have pretty much worn out our advantage at this point. It was fun while it lasted and it managed to get our team a couple of points, but they had overtaken us easily once they had gotten used to the terrain.

Now they are ahead on the scoreboard.

Here is how the game works, according to Reborn’s recently invented rules:

Two points every time the boss is captured.

One point every time he is taken back.

Its 12 - 8 now in favour of team Cavallone.

I’m in the middle of trying to come up with some clever way of snatching Dino out from under their noses when the man himself snaps me up from behind with his whip.

It’s always nice when prey comes to you.
Fuck, I’m starting to think like Hibari. That’s disgusting.

“Feeling frisky Doll-Face,” I taunt and lean back into him. “I’m down to party if you are.”

I can’t entirely repress my snicker as he completely freezes up. Honestly, how had this guy managed to become a mob boss? He’s so squishy.

“Illegal,” He panics to himself, “Very, very illegal.”

“So is kidnapping Sweetheart and that didn’t seem to stop you.”

“Gah! No! It’s not like that you have the wrong idea!”

“You had me tied up and thrown into a stereotypical child abduction van.” I say somewhat irritated. “How do I have the wrong idea?”

“I just wanted to impress my new little brother!” He protests.

“By kidnapping his actual brother!?” Yeah, I’m just pissed off now.

He startles a bit at this and I take my opportunity to hook my foot behind his ankles and pull his feet out from under him. I realize that in our current position I am going to fall do, but it will be oh so worth it.

We tumble down the slope in a high-speed tangle of limbs and land hard at the bottom.

Or at least Dino does.

I land on top of him and somehow while we were rolling down the slope our positions had been
reversed and now he is the one all tangled up in the whip.

“Well I’m all for a little role reversal.”

He squawks and violently starts wiggling until I am thrown off of him. He knocks the back of his head on an exposed tree route as he does this and his eyes start watering.

“Why do you keep doing that!?” He whines.

“Why do you keep falling for it dumbass?” I laugh.

His lip starts wobbling pathetically and I immediately feel terrible and horrified. Don’t cry! Please don’t fucking cry!

“I just wanted to be a good big brother for my new junior-apprentices!” He cries.

I puff my cheeks out petulantly as he says this, “...I thought that ‘little brother’ stuff was just for Tsuna?”

He sits bolt up so fast eyes bright and wide and manic.

“Ah! I see!” He exclaims.

“What?” I ask leaning away from the this obviously concussed idiot.

“You were jealous!”

I give him a flat look.

Jealous? He thinks I’m jealous?
Honestly, he is so painfully derpy and hopeful. No wonder his men are so protective of this goofball.

I hate it.

But he wants so badly to help Tsuna and get along with the rest of us that I can’t help but like him just a little. I’ll give him a break, but first we need to clear up this little jealousy misunderstanding of ours.

I pull myself up to my feet and take two strides back over to him and not so gently kick him back over into the dirt, planting my foot in the centre of his chest.

“Tell yourself whatever you like Doll-Face.” I tell him with a little more aggression than is probably warranted. “I am not jealous. But if it makes you feel better I’ll kill the innuendo and I’ll call you Dino-niichan and you can impart all your super special boss knowledge to Tsuna.”

He brightens up considerably. He also looks extremely unfocused which puts a check mark in the probable concussion column.

“But if you ever so much as think about betraying Tsuna or throwing me in to the child abduction mobile again the ENTIRE mafia is going to hear about you extremely kinky escapades, do I make myself clear.”

He doesn’t even have the grace to look properly intimidate. He just gives me an irritatingly cheesy smile and says, “you’re actually a nice kid aren’t you?”

He’s a goofball.

And still too fucking pretty. But I can work with this.

“Deal then.”
And with one swift motion I grab the end of the whip that is still wound around him and give it a strong tug, sending him spinning in mid air like a windup ballerina.

Once he lands he just kind of lays there in a daze.

“You really are a goofball.”

I have to smile a little bit now. He doesn’t look so pretty with his mouth open wide and drool dripping down his chin.

I would rather have Dino for an ally than an enemy anyway. Cavallone is a powerful Family, one with a longstanding relationship with Vongola. And when Tsuna takes over that bond will probably just get stronger.

And these guys are actually making an effort to help us out. They didn’t have to come here and patrol our town for assassins. They didn’t have to run this ridiculous training exercise with us.

But they are.

So, that means that I am going to have to make an effort to play nice with them.

I watch as Enzio wobbly crawls his way out of Dino’s jacket and starts to slowly stumble across the ground. Poor little guy. I didn’t realize that he was there too. That was too much spin for such a small turtle.

“Yo, ‘nii-chan’ you might want to check on your little buddy there.”

No response, other than a woozy little ‘wooo’ sound.

“Ho shit, did I actually break you this time?”

I reach over and prod his cheek and get nothing by drool in return. Honestly, he is like a big dumb golden retriever.
Which makes me feel even worse about poking fun at him earlier.

He’ll get over it.

I ruffle his hair, in the same way, I would Tsuna’s and look up into the canopy were Reborn is watching us intently.

“I think I broke him,” I inform him guilelessly.

He hops down from the tree and lands gracefully next to me. Observing Dino with a wan smile.

“I don’t think Dame-Dino is quite your speed Monello.”

I snort.

“No one is my speed dude, that’s half the fun.”

Reborn lets out a harsh bark of laughter and mutters something under his breath that I can’t entirely make out, but doesn’t argue with me.

Above us, I hear explosions and shrieks and laughter. It sounds like things are getting more wild by the second. I also know that Tsuna has probably just about maxed out his stamina for the day. He has been lagging for at least an hour now.

“So did I win?”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Darn.”
“However,” He says as he circles Dino like a bird of prey. “It does mean that tomorrow Dame-Dino will be doing this wearing weights. He has obviously been slacking off on his training.”

I ruffle the fluffy blond hair again, “Better let him sleep then.”

Reborn makes a non-committal sound and then glances past me.

“You might want to wake him to deal with that though.”

That?

I turn and see Enzio.

Not so little Enzio anymore.

Not so little Enzio and growing bigger by the second.

Apparently, Enzio had wandered into the steam while we had been chatting.

And I had stupidly forgotten about this particular magic turtle feature.

“Ah... That might be a problem.”

Somewhere above us, I hear Tsuna shriek, “HIEEEE! WHY IS GODZILLA HERE?!!!”

Chapter End Notes

Inari has more issues than he is entirely comfortable dealing with or admitting to at the moment.
Also, I think the first time I mentioned the summer camp from hell was in chapter one? Inari has always had something of an interesting life even before having interdimensional knowledge shoved into his brain.

Questions? Comments? Theories?

As always I love hearing from you guys :)
Chapter Summary

What else are you going to do if you have an antagonist with an army of assassins metaphorically knocking on your door.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“-Reports of a ‘dinosaur-like creature’ being spotted near the western peak of mount Namimori-”

Hinata Shoichi looks deeply skeptical and put-upon by the report he has been given to read this morning. He’s giving the camera a somewhat muted ‘what the fuck’ look which I am sure is mirrored by the largely white-haired and housewife demographics which he caters too.

“-Yamaguchi Minatozaki, who runs the ‘Heaven’s Gate’ diner and fun complex out by the Old Mountain Road and Expressway 7, testifies that he ‘saw the beast emerge in all of its ferocious glory and begin to stamped its way across the mountain and that when it roared it seemed almost mournful as if it knew the world that it had been apart of had come to an end.....”

We watch as the usually unflappable reporter just stares blankly for about thirty seconds before he clears his throat and starts to obsessively brush his hair behind one ear.

If I hadn’t born witness to the Godzilla monstrosity myself I’m sure I would be right there with him. I’m not so sure about the whole ‘mournful for the world it once knew, bit.’ Either whoever gave this testimony was keyed into some really next level shit, they are really stupid, or they are just trying to fuck with everyone.

“We have photographic evidence... Kenji what do you mean we have photographic evidence?” The reporter asks completely breaking character and addressing someone offset.

Me and Tsuna trade somewhat nervous and curious glances. Photographs might be problematic, to say the least.

The picture that appears on the television could be Enzio... maybe... if you turn it on its side and
look at it from a weird angle.

It’s like those old school photographs of the Loch Ness Monster; black and white and terribly out of focus. This could be a picture of a dog sitting on top of a tree stump...or Big Foot.

I think it actually might look more like Big Foot than a dinosaur actually.

Who took this photograph?

And why are cameras in this universe so terrible?

Not the most important questions that I have ever thought of, but I admit to a morbid sort of curiosity. Which of course means that one of these questions will result in me falling through a wormhole and having to do battle with a Demogorgon or something equally as ridiculous. My curiosity never leads to anything good.

Or it does but in extremely random and chaotic ways.

Like finding out that my camp counselor wanted to cut out my heart to open a portal to a supposed hell dimension. Or taking a wrong turn and ending up in a freaky sex party in the back room of a cabaret in the red light district.

“-Dear viewers I apologize for this ... ill-conceived report. This is obviously a hoax of some kind. I urge you not to attempt to go searching in the mountain for a ‘dinosaur.’ I will remind you all that the area between Kumonosu and the Western Peak is still closed off due to the old mine shaft collapse two years ago. So for your own safety please stay out of the area.”

We have played a hand in creating a terrible urban legend I think. I feel weirdly accomplished by this.

Tsuna breathes a sigh of relief, “That could have been bad.”

“I’m not sure how,” I say, “I don’t think they could have tied a dinosaur to either of us or to Doll-Face.”
Tsuna smacks me lightly in the arm.

“They could have if they took a picture of me ON TOP OF THE DINOSAUR TURTLE IN MY UNDERWEAR!”

“...Yeah, I can see how that could have been problematic.”

“And I thought you weren’t going to call him ‘Doll-Face’ anymore,” the disapproval in his voice is palpable.

“I’m not going to,” I grin, “Say it to his face at least.”

“Inari.”

“Let me have some fun at his expense please.”

Tsuna sighs.

“-I would like to welcome our guest for today. The Superintendent of Schools: Hibari Zhi.”

GAH!

The two of us both whirl around back to the television as a very familiar and much-dreaded name is spoken.

“Hibari!!”

“His mom,” I hiss at him not taking my eyes off of the screen.
The Dread Knight definitely got his looks from his mom. And the way he fucking stares at people like he wants to tear their throats out with his teeth. Good god is she terrifying.

“-Hibari-dono will be speaking with us today about the recent incident at Namimori Middle School and the ongoing school closure -”

“I forgot that school was still a thing,” I grimace, “Is it shitty of me to hope that it stays closed for a little longer?”

“Nnnnooo?” Tsuna draws the word out and gives a worried-looking side eye toward Reborn who is sitting on our shared desk sipping on his espresso. He probably thinks he’s going to get smacked for trying to skip out on school.

When Reborn doesn’t offer any response Tsuna visibly relaxes.

“-Reconstruction of the school building has begun. The focus will be on ensuring the the structural integrity of the building itself as well as adding some much needed for the student body for when the facility opens again. What happened at Namimori Middle School was a travesty the likes I have never seen before. Trust me when I say that every possible measure is being taken to ensure that nothing like this will ever happen again -”

I get the feeling that she knows that more fuckery went on that day than a busted gas pipe and a structural defect giving way. It kind of feels like she is saying ‘FUCK YOU,’ in an extremely roundabout way.

Scary lady.

“The current estimated time of completion of repairs is September,” She lets out a somewhat aggrivated sigh before continuing, “As there were multiple students who suffered from the ‘gas leak’ and trauma from the incident itself and are still recovering the school will be canceling all end of term exams and will be resuming session beginning in the new semester -“

And with that, she gets up and leaves the set. She doesn’t stick around for Hinata Shoichi to sign her off or anything, she just gets up and leaves. Seriously, Hibari is so much like his mom that it’s almost unsettling.
He probably gets his draconic possessiveness of educational facilities from her too. Their family must have buried treasure hidden under the school or something. I can’t understand why else they would be so possessive of it.

But that’s not important right now, what’s important is:

“WOOOOO! SUMMER VACATION CAME EARLY!” I exclaim suddenly and loudly.

“IT’S ALL OUR DREAMS COME TRUE!!!” Tsuna cheers and the two of us dramatically embrace.

Reborn rolls his eyes at the two of us and switches off the television.

“It’s only two extra weeks,” he says.

“It’s the principal of the thing,” I shoot back at him as Tsuna happily chants ‘no more homework, no more homework.’

Reborn gives us that look. That look of his that says, ‘I have come to sow the seeds of chaos.’

Suddenly, as if summoned from the abyss, a box the size of a shoebox appears on the coffee table between the two of us. Attached to it is a number pad and a flashing LED display.

“Just because your school has shut down, for the time being, doesn’t mean that you get to slack off on your education,” Reborn tells us with a devious smile curling the corners of his mouth. “Prepare yourselves for the Vongola Strengthening Program for the Mind and Body.”

The display lights up with a string of factions.

“Answer the questions correctly or face the consequences,” Reborn says with a smirk.

I stare at the equation with complete incomprehension.
Why is it always math?

I’m not great with math at the best of times, but at six-thirty in the morning, I think I’m even worse. Me and Tsuna both get doused in glitter after failing to answer the fifth problem correctly.

We stare at each other.

“We’re so... sparkly,” I say with a semi-hysterical giggle.

Tsuna immediately starts to frantically dust it out of his hair and off his clothes.

“Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!”

Meanwhile, with my sleep addled mind is impairing my processing power I just stare somewhat entranced at my own hands as they shimmer under the ceiling light.

This process goes on until eight at which point Reborn releases us from our glittery prison and we get to wash up and eat breakfast.

“You will be at something of a disadvantage today if you’re running around like that,” He says with barely concealed mirth. “Dame-Tsuna if your team loses again today you’ll have an extra punishment tomorrow.”

Tsuna squeals and bolts into the bathroom.

I slowly turn to Reborn and blink at him. He probably knows as well as I do that you can’t wash glitter off. You can try but it will be there for weeks to come. I don’t know how he managed to keep his suit as pristine as it is with all of this glitter floating around the room.
In a fit of petulance and vengeance, I shuck off my pajama shirt and flap it out in his direction sending a gust of glitter flying everywhere. Leon immediately transforms into an umbrella to defend his human against my counter-attack.

“He’s going to be in there forever now,” I huff in mock irritation.

He ‘hmm’s’ in a smug sort of way.

I look around the room. It is beautiful and chaotic and is also going to be a pain in the ass to clean later.

“Dude, it looks like we massacred fairies in here,” I have to laugh. “It’s awesome.”

Reborn looks away with a breathy laugh, “Still with the magic and fantasy with you.”

I grin back at him, “somewhere out in the multiverse we are totally a high fantasy adventuring party.”

That or we are literally a bunch of nerds sitting around a table playing Dungeons and Dragons. Both options seem like fun.

I run an experimental current of electricity through a handful of the glitter to see what will happen. There is a moment where the glitter hangs suspended with static over my hands before the entire thing bursts into a sparkler like a fireball and dies an instant later.

Interesting.

Not particularly useful, but interesting.

In the bathroom, Tsuna shrieks, “IT’S NOT COMING OFF!!”

“Then stop hogging all the hot water!” I holler back at him. “The rest of us want to shower too!”
He whines again and I just laugh.

Reborn takes my momentary distraction to drop a folder on top of my head.

“What’s this?” I ask as I take it and open it to words (?)

“Basic vocabulary.”

“Vocabulary?” I take a more careful look through and sure enough, I recognize most of the words in the right column as English. In the left column, there are also a few familiar looking strings of letters. One that stands out most ‘Ragazzo = Boy.”

“You’re so insistent on learning,” he doesn’t look back at me as he strolls out of the room straightening his jackets as he goes. “You better study hard if you want to keep up with me.”

I beam at his retreating form.

Just wait dude. I am going to be the fucking coolest one day.

I should invest in a hat.

Or a bow tie.

I think I could rock a bow tie.

This time when Dino and his boys pick us up we are not unceremoniously thrown into the back of the child abduction mobile. Which is appreciated, but also a little more boring than I had been expecting. We have to stop to pick up Takeshi and Hayato on our way back up the mountain.
Hayato just about flies out of the school dorm complex looking exceptionally irritated this morning. Once he gets settled in the car he takes one look at me and Tsuna who is still shimmering with the remainder of the glitter, visibly considers commenting on said glitter, and then wisely chooses to not. He also has a messenger bag with him which he keeps propped on his lap as he and Tsuna chat animatedly to each other.

He has explosives in there.

I don’t know exactly what kind of explosives he has in there. There is a distinct metallic chemical smell coming off of it. Oh well, I’m sure we will be suitably impressed when he busts out whatever it is. That or we will all be horrified when he blows himself up with it.

When we stop to pick up Takeshi, Yamamoto-san steps out on to their porch to stare down the fleet of very fancy and expensive foreign cars. He is also wielding a very large and very sharp knife.

So, chances are, he probably had noticed that Takeshi had been a little more roughed up than he should have been after spending a day handing out with his friends. I don’t think that he noticed Takeshi getting kidnapped because if he had he would be trying to stab Dino in the balls right now.

Today, Takeshi comes prepared with a heavy wooden bat slung over his shoulder and a smile that promises cheerfully delivered violence.

Unlike Hayato, doesn’t think twice about commenting on the fact that me and Tsuna are a glittery mess. He just looks at the two of us and burst out laughing.

“Did you guys go to a party?” He asks.

Tsuna pouts and makes another futile attempt to shake the sparkles out of his hair.

“It’s Reborn’s fault,” he complains.

I just laugh along with Takeshi and settle in for the long ride up the mountain. I shove my hands into the pockets of my hoodie where I have several baggies of stolen glitter, my taser, and my ray gun. I feel much more prepared for combat today.
True to his word, once we all make it up to what I am now calling ‘base camp’ Reborn throws a pile of weights at Dino’s feet.

“Put those on Dame-Dino,” he orders as his former student stares at the depression they made in the ground with a look of terror.

“Wha?”

He doesn’t move to put them on just stares.

“You’re joking right?” He pleads futilely.

Tsuna stares and lets out a long ‘hieeeee’ in sympathy.

I reach down to pick up one of the weights. It’s not that bad, this bunch of babies have no sense of fun. I chuck it at Dino and he has to scramble to catch it before it smacks him in the head.

“Come on ‘Nii-chan’ I thought you wanted to show off for us,” I taunt.

His eye twitches in a somewhat concerning way when I say that. I don’t know what he was expecting. I told him I would cut it with the innuendo, not that I would stop teasing him altogether.

A beat passes as he looks from me to Reborn to Tsuna and everyone else. And then he sighs in defeat and straps on the weights.

“I thought I was done with the punishments,” he sighs in defeat.

“You need to keep up with your training Dame-Dino,” Reborn threatens and then turns to Tsuna and continues, “And you better impress me today Dame-Tsuna or you’ll be wearing them tomorrow.”
At this Tsuna actually does wail in terror.

Weighed down by an extra fifty pounds it was briefly easier to capture Dino. And when I say briefly, I mean once.

The four of us only manage to corner him once.

He makes a play to grab Tsuna on his own and the rest of us converge and surround him.

“You kids sure that you can take me on?” He taunts as he tenses the whip between his hands.

We look at each other and then at him.

“Yeah dude, I’m pretty sure we got you outnumbered this time,” I say.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” He says, and lashes out with his whip.

I don’t think he realized that we had managed to isolate him from the rest of his men. If he had he probably would have thought twice about making such a wild attack.

Dino somehow manages to smack himself across his stupid gorgeous face. Got me across my ass, and Tsuna, Hayato, and Takeshi in various other awkward places judging by the surprised and pained yelps they let out.

“Ow! Fucking Christ that stings!”

“YOU DUMB HORSE ASSHOLE WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU AIMING AT!” Hayato shrieks.
“Ow! Ow! Ow!” Dino himself hisses clutching at his nose with his eyes watering.

I glare at him.

This is so stupid, and yet I still feel that a line was crossed.

“Oi Doll-Face, I know I said I would kill the innuendo and shit, but I just have to let you know that you are the most incompetent dominatrix that I have ever met in my entire life,” I snap at him.

Dino whines and flushes, while Tsuna and Takeshi both sputter, “Inari!”

“Know many competent dominatrixes do you?” Hayato inquires sarcastically.

I have to stop and consider for a moment, “At least four.”

They all stop their flailing and whining and stare at me. Even Reborn, who has perched in a tree a good twenty feet away, stops to stare at me. I have a unique gift for causing awkward silences.

“Are you okay kid?” Dino asks with all sorts of ‘brotherly’ concern in his voice.

I roll my eyes aggressively, “Get your mind out of the gutter you impossible goofball,” I snap. “It’s not like that.”

“What is it like?” Tsuna asks joining in with the brotherly concern.

Oh great, there is no escaping Tsuna when he gets into overprotective big brother mode.

“I might have maybe wandered into an establishment that is wayyyyy above my age restriction once.”

I had been trying to ditch Hibari and the DC at the time and taken a few wrong turns and ended up
smack dab in the middle of the red light district.

“Inari,” Tsuna looks so disapproving and authoritarian right now it’s hilarious. It’s actually a decent mob boss face. I’ll have to remember this for the future.

“It was fine, they were chill. I even got some hot chocolate out of it.” I had also gotten some extremely positive and affirming sage advice from a glorious and beautiful drag queen named Miki and an empathetic bartender named Max while I was still in the midst of a sexual identity crisis.

Seriously, the internet wasn’t a thing and I had yet to be mind wammied by extra-dimensional knowledge. I might not have been 100% chill about the liking boys thing at first, especially since I had a tragic hate crush on a very pretty boy who’s only interest in me was his desire to bludgeon me in the head.

It had been really nice to be told by someone that: ‘no kid your not a freak of nature for likening boys. But you shouldn’t emotionally invest yourself in someone who legitimately wants to hurt you.’

Of course, being the relentlessly curious idiot I am I started grilling them on about all the crazy bondage stuff and the party that seemed to be going on at which point the answer was: ‘If you really want to know come back in ten years and I’ll show you the ropes kid.’

Which is actually a little bit more than a little inappropriate now that I think back on it. But still, for that most part a positive and affirming experience which later led me to loudly and shamelessly complain about my tragic hate crush to Takeshi.

Not that these fuckers need to know all those specifics.

“And you accepted a drink from a random adult at some fucked up sex party!?” Hayato demands now looking more concerned than all of them.

“They weren’t all random adults I already knew some of them.”

“That doesn’t mean that you couldn’t have gotten hurt Inari,” Takeshi chides me as he too jumps on the disapproval train.
This is starting to feel more like an impromptu intervention for my weird and chaotic life rather than combat training. Though considering the first point maybe this is exactly the way combat training will go.

“I really don’t think anyone would have tried to roofie a kid in front of the district court justice,” I say rolling my eyes again.

This kicks on another round of choking on air.

When Kurokawa-san had noticed that I was there, at this very inappropriate party for a boy of my tender years. She had marched right over and grabbed me by the ear. And drug me away to sit with her “partner” (by which I mean her girlfriend who she has been with for fifteen years and raised a child with and yet still can’t legally say wife because people have fucking screwed up priorities) while she had some words with Miki and Max.

I’m glad that they had let me say goodbye to the two of them before they drug me out of that den of sin. Although, Kurokawa-san and her partner had both given me a stern talking to while they drove me home. Though before she let me go Kurokawa-san had ruffled my hair and said, “If you ever want to talk about it with someone who has gone through the same thing my door is always open Inari-kun.”

I had actually cried at that. Seriously, if I hadn’t wandered into that club I don’t think I would be even half as well adjusted with my shit as I am.

And Kurokawa-san has been great.

Though I did have to swear on my life to never blab their personal shit to Hana.

My lips are fucking sealed on that part. No child needs to know the kinky shit their folks get up to.

While they are all still staring at me, all frozen-like, I fish out one of the baggies of glitter out of my pocket and dump it over Dino’s head.

“I’m counting this as a point for us,” I call up to Reborn who is making a valiant attempt not to
burst out laughing at this entire thing. The referee cap that he’s wearing again is pulled down low on his face and his shoulders are shaking.

Rather than blow the whistle to signal ‘boss captured’ Leon transforms into an air horn that blasts out across the forest.

Moments later the Cavallone hoard appears to retrieve their boss who is sitting there covered in glitter with his mouth opening and closing like a stunned fish.

I laugh and grab Tsuna and start to pull him along before Dino’s boys can come and snatch him away for extra points. We had learned yesterday that there was no point trying to defend our prize from the invading force or and none of us are really strong enough to lung a full-grown man through a forest, especially one that is wearing weights.

So flee was currently our only option to keep us ahead in the scoreboard.

I look back at Takeshi and Hayato who still haven’t started running and call, “Hurry up you dumbasses. I’m not coming back to rescue you idiots!”

With that, they start running after us.

“Who are you calling an idiot you absolute moron!” Hayato snaps as he and Takeshi fall into the marching order. Takeshi upfront and Hayato in the back to cover our escape with some fancy flash-bangs.

“Why is everything in your life so crazy?” Tsuna whines as he lets me drag him along.

I laugh, bright and happy as I continue to pull him through the forest, “Don’t you remember what Grandpa used to say?” I ask him. “I’m cursed.”

The fact that me and Tsuna were leaving trails of glitter absolutely everywhere made it really easy for the Cavallone boys to catch up with us again flash-bangs or no flash-bangs. And after that first victory, they managed to capture Tsuna again and again and again.
Hayato almost blew us all to kingdom come after lighting his bag on fire. And Takeshi snapped his bat in two.

And I learn that I need a better system of deploying glitter than zip lock baggies.

So, all and all, it could have gone much better.

But they weren’t terrible.

And I did get to have some fun.

On the drive back down the mountain when the other boys are conked out Reborn asks me, “Cursed?”

For a brief moment, I freak the fuck out thinking that he is calling me out about knowing about his whole cursed situation and I am desperately trying to come up with something to deter and distract.

And then I realize that he’s asking about what I said to Tsuna and I calm the fuck down. But I can’t help but notice that the word seems to have put him a little bit on edge.

“It’s just something Grandpa used to say,” I tell him. A fond smile spreads across my face when I think about Grandpa out in his enormous garden as he laughed at my latest and greatest story.

“The curse of an interesting life.”

On day three of our new purgatorial training regime on top of a mountain Tsuna is, in fact, stuck with the wights.

And a backpack full of bags of sugar.
Because Reborn is a merciless sadist.

“I’m dying~” Tsuna pants and collapses across a fallen tree. “Just let them catch me. We’re not going to win anyway.”

Hayato collapses next to him wheezing and hacking up a fucking lung. I hadn’t really expected it, but I think his stamina is actually worse than Tsuna’s. He reclines there trying to catch his breath before fishing out his pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lighting one up.

“Don’t worry Tsuna-sama, we will defend you till the dea- WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING BASEBALL-IDIOT?!” Hayato’s emotional pledge is cut short as a stone faced Takeshi leans over him and snatches the pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and pulls out the one hanging between his lips. Takeshi then proceeds to crush everything into a ball and send it flying into the woods.

“Those things are bad for your lungs,” Takeshi informs with a terrifyingly pleasant smile stretching across his face. “If you want to keep up with us you should probably quit.”

For a full thirty seconds Hayato just stares at Takeshi. And then his eye starts to spasm in a somewhat concerning way just before he launches himself at Takeshi with an ear-piercing shriek of rage.

“I’LL SHOW YOU WHO CAN’T KEEP UP!”

Takeshi gracefully dances out of the way of Hayato’s wild swipes and laughs.

“I sure hope so.”

Me and Tsuna watch as they run around like dumbasses and completely forget about our objective. Oh well, it was getting a little late in the day for us to claim victory. And who knows, maybe Hayato will actually take this as a sign to stop smoking so fucking much. I don’t think he’s wearing as much dynamite under his clothes since Tsuna spoke to him, but there is still enough that his bad habit causes very real concern.
I’m still half terrified that I will accidentally shock him and we will both explode.

Tsuna sighs deeply and slumps completely over the log, “I give up.”

“No giving up Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn calls down from on high and fires.

The bullet hits it’s extremely easy target and a moment later Tsuna is ignited in a blaze of glory and rushes, clad only in his boxer shorts, into the woods.

“CAPTURE DINO-NIISAN WITH MY DYING WILL!!!!”

We still lose.

But we do better than last time which is awesome. And it’s a riot to watch Tsuna plow through Dino’s boys in his berserker rage.

Our team attacks are also starting to get a bit more coordinated. We are led by the trumpet of Tsuna’s bugle horn which is followed by dancing piano keys and ringing bells and my own frantic drumbeat.

It’s like being part of the weirdest marching band ever.

On day four the kid gloves come off.

Apparently, having Tsuna run around in Dying Will Mode yesterday had signaled to the Cavallone boys that it was cool for them to buts our their own magic firepower.

So, yeah, when a bunch of them start glowing and performing inhuman feats our battle strategy for
the day soon becomes - run like hell. Because out of the four of us Tsuna is the only one who is the least bit adept at using Dying Will Flames, and that is only after Reborn has shot him with a Deathperation bullet.

I don’t even know how I do the shit I do other than ‘embrace the dark side and use my rage.’ That’s kind of it for me, get super pissed off and then use the zappy-zap. I also have the ray gun but that seems a little excessive right at this moment. Considering the last time I used it in combat it blasted the limbs of a regenerating monster. I’m not sure if it will always do that but I would like to test it some more before I try it on a real living person who I don’t want dead.

Dino and his family might have some cool shit hidden up their sleeves but I don’t think any of them have the power to regrow their limbs. It’s probably a good thing that I also brought my handy-dandy taser with me today.

An incoming blast of red fire that blows apart a huge stump sends us scattering to the four winds. I stupidly run straight into a shimmery blue forcefield of rain flames that make me feel like I’m moving through molasses.

“Got you, you irritating punk!” One very big fucker growls as he plucks me out of the trap by the back of my shirt and holds me aloft by the back of my collar.

Where I just sort of dangle like a disobedient kitten.

There are burst of yellow light around his fists that tip me off to Sun Flames, meaning whoever set up the nifty little ‘slow’ trap is probably lurking around somewhere too.

I can’t help but notice that he doesn’t hold a candle to the divine light that Kyoko exudes whenever she uses her flames to kick ass. And no one will ever measure up the fraction of power that I have glimpsed from Reborn. I’m pretty sure he actually has a literal sun jammed into him.

I give my captor a charming smile.

“Yup, you sure do big guy,” I say antagonistically. “So what are you going to do with me?”

He snarls.
“I’m going to teach you some manners for disrespecting my boss the way you did.”

“What? Are you still sore about that?” I scoff and shove my hands into my pockets. Its kind of an awkward position considering the angle I am being held aloft at. But its good enough to get my hands on my weaponry.

“Dino-niichan is already over it,” I continue letting the new nick-name roll off my tongue. It still feels a little weird to call him that. But it is also much easier for me to deal with Dino if I just think of him as a bigger, dumber version of Tsuna.

“Besides I was only messing with you guys... *Unless it’s true and he actually needs you guys to fu-*“

“YOU SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH!”

He winds up to sock me in the head. Sun flames bursting around his fist. If I hadn’t come prepared today I might actually have been in trouble. I pull the taser and it jam it into his forearm.

And he lights up like a Christmas Tree.

The burst of electricity travels down my arm and the everything explodes into green and white. I feel as all his muscles seize up. His attack stalls out and he falls onto his back twitching.

For once I actually manage to land on my feet.

“Sorry about that dude,” I apologize to the smoldering form. He’s a little bit charred now, which I think is a vast improvement on the asshole look he was rocking before.

Before I can congratulate myself any further the smell of burnt plastic hits my nose and I look down to what is left of the taser in my hand. The frame is warped and melted looking and I have to quickly drop it to avoid being burnt.
“Oh God damn it,” I curse.

Apparently, regular weaponry doesn’t react well with magic fire. Good to know.

I kick at it a little bit to make sure that its not going to spontaneously burst into flames before I turn to look up into the tree where Reborn is perched.

“I think I might need to invest in something a little more stabby or bludgeony for close range,” I call up to him. When he doesn’t give any visible reaction I take my cue to scurry up the tree and perch next to him. I can just barely make out Hayato and Takeshi chasing after Dino who has Tsuna slung over his shoulders.

I can probably intercept them over by the Dead Mans Drop.

But before I run off and do that...

“And speaking of weapons, maybe something less breakable for Takeshi,” I continue, “Seriously he’s gone through like six bats today alone.”

“Hn.”

The next morning, when we arrive up at the mountain base camp, Reborn hands Takeshi a solid metal bat.

“Take this Takeshi-kun,” he says with a placid smile.

Takeshi drops the literally laundry basket full of baseball bats that he had been carrying to take it in his hands. He tests the grip and does a few test swings. He has to adjust his stance a few times before he’s gets anything resembling his usual swing speed.

I can tell just by looking at it that that bat has some heft to it.
“This is for me?” He asks.

Reborn nods and Takeshi grins happily, “Thanks kid, this is great.”

“Now swing as hard as you can,” Reborn orders.

Takeshi blinks, but complies.

He swings and everything is a blur of motion for an instant and when he settles again the bat is a sword...

The BAT is a SWORD.

...

Why?

Why is the bat a sword?

How is the bat a sword?

I think I knew that this was going to be the result here, but I still can’t seem to wrap my head around it. What sort of transmutation witchcraft is this!? What does velocity have to do with it!?

WHY IS THE BAT A SWORD!?

Everyone else seems to be completely oblivious to my developing mental breakdown.

“Wow!” Takeshi grins while doing some test swipes with his brand new bat-sword, “This is nifty.
Thanks little guy.”

“A SWORD?!” Tsuna exclaims.

And, thank you brother, because I could not even bring myself to form words at this moment.

“It looks like a bat,” Reborn explains, “but if it goes over 300km/h it will transform into a katana.”

“Good, that means you won’t have to keep stealing my dynamite baseball-idiot,” Hayato snarks.

“So Takeshi-kun’s weapon will be a katana?” Tsuna asks, SUDDENLY COMPLETELY OKAY WITH THE ENTIRE THING.

I don’t have an opportunity to make any commentary on my own because a moment later team Cavallone is open firing on us and we have to scatter into the woods. I am extremely distracted throughout the first round of combat.

Seriously, disadvantage on everything because all I keep doing is circling back to the bat of fucking transmutation. I just stare at Takeshi the entire time as he uses his new toy to slice through the rubber projectiles Dino’s boys are shooting at us.

One more item to my list of ongoing mysteries.

How the heck do these transforming items work?

And, more importantly, is there a way for me to weaponize glitter? I feel like this should be a thing. Glitter conducts electricity doesn’t it?

I’ll have to ask Verde when he inevitably kidnaps me.
On day six it pours rain and we all end up soaked to the skin and covered from head to toe in mud. By the time we make it back home we are all cold and sore and somewhat miserable from loosing yet again.

Takeshi and Hayato had started spending the night after day two. It was just more convenient that way. And let me tell you, with Lambo and Hayato existing in the same household that stupid bazooka has gone off so many times that it is not even funny.

I don’t know why Hayato lets what a five year old says get under his skin so badly (it might have something to do with the ongoing nicotine withdrawal that has him on edge) they just poke at each other until Lambo eventually has a meltdown and we are visited by his time traveling counterpart. It is a bizarre dissonant clash of a storming mash of piano keys and a blasting tuba bouncing off the walls.

And somehow even the fifteen year old version of Lambo ends up clinging to me and wailing ‘FRATELLO!’ In the face of Hayato’s irritation.

When we finally walk through the door Mom takes one look at the lot of us, dripping and muddy and orders us to strip down and head straight to the bath. We all do so gladly.

“It’s not fair,” Tsuna complains once we are all clean and in our pyjamas, tucked into our nest of blankets and futons that have taken over the living room floor. “I don’t know what Reborn expects us to do. No matter what we’re going to loose because they have us totally outnumbered.”

Even Tsuna has gotten fed up with our constant failure to defeat the Cavallone army and capture their princess. He’s not even trying to give up anymore. Though to be fair, Reborn had hammered in pretty firmly that giving up was not an option and would, in fact, just make this entire training montage more difficult for everyone.

“The kid really isn’t taking it easy on us is he?” Takeshi says with a grimace as he tries to work out a kink in his shoulder.

Tsuna glowers, “He’s so bossy for a baby, I don’t know why we have to listen to him.”

“Because he’s smarter and stronger than all of us combined,” I shoot back, irritated on the man’s behalf.
Tsuna ‘humphs’ and burrows deeper into the blankets in a fit of petulance.

“So what are we going to do about Dino and his boys?” I say changing the subject. It bothers Reborn when people call him a baby. He never says anything to dissuade anyone, but I can tell that it grates on him in an unpleasant way.

And I know that Tsuna is eventually going to get over this. They’ll bond and eventually, he will break out of the weird mind warping powers of the curse and this won't really be an issue anymore.

But right now I hate it.

So I’ll keep changing the subject.

...

Until I learn to multi-class into a curse breaker.

“We need more people on our team,” is Takeshi’s response. He is in the middle of rolling a shivering Hayato into a blanket burrito. Amazingly Hayato is just letting this happen without any complaints.

“Who would we ask idiot?” Hayato says through chattering teeth, “This isn’t exactly a team sport.”

And then he sneezes like fifteen times in a row which is somewhat concerning.

I can think of a hand full of people that would probably be down for a bit of violence. Hibari and the gorillas from the Defence Committee are chief among them. And right after them would be-

“...Kyoko-chan...” Tsuna says quietly.

“Yes,” I say immediately. Because Sasagawa Kyoko is a fucking badass and I would very much like to watch her crush our enemies beneath her functional Mary Janes.
“She is very strong.” Takeshi agrees thoughtfully.

Even Hayato makes a noise of agreement.

“What the heck would I even say to her through?!” Tsuna wails, “This is just too weird!”

“You say ‘Hey Kyoko do you want to come to kick some ass with us?’” I tell him.

“I can’t say that! She’ll think I’m a crazy person and never talk to me again!”

I give him a flat look. Apparently, he has forgotten that about two weeks ago we followed Kyoko on a mission of vengeance to take down the forces of darkness that had been plaguing our fair city. I really don’t think she will take issue with combat training.

Hayato and Takeshi immediately start helping Tsuna brainstorm the best way to pitch this to Kyoko. It all sounds like terrible dating advice to me. Seriously, the way these three are going on you’d think girls were an alien species. But they seem to be having fun with it at least.

However, once they get the idea into their heads to summon ‘adult’ Lambo to ask his ‘expert’ advice about speaking to women I decide to NOPE right out of there. I don’t really feel like staring into the jaws of the Erdrich abomination that lives in that bazooka right now. Sorry, little brother, you’re on your own for this one.

I extricate myself from the nest of blankets and as quickly as I can tiptoe up the stairs as the three idiots start to literally poke the sleeping boy who had been curled up on the couch behind us.

I am halfway up before I hear Lambo wail, “WAHHH, STUPID-DERA IS MEAN!!” And I have to resist the urge to throw something at Hayato’s head.

A second later there is the now familiar KA-BOOM of the bazooka and the living room is engulfed in cotton candy pink smoke. I take this as my cue to hurry the rest of the way up the stairs as for idiots try to answer the age old question of ‘how do you talk to girls?’ Because apparently my own method of ‘like they are real fucking people’ isn’t a valid response.
I walk into the bedroom and immediately flop face first down onto my bed. After a moment of laying there I peak out an eye and spare a side glance at Reborn. He has a laptop set up on the desk (if that brick can be called a laptop) as he reads through what looks like an extremely dense text file and sips on a mug of espresso.

He gives me a quick nod of acknowledgment before turning back to the screen.

“I thought you boys were going to be ‘talking strategy,’” he says casually.

“And somehow that became ‘let’s ask a time traveler for dating advice. He must know all about talking to women.’” I snark.

He snorts so abruptly that I think he startles himself.

“And they thought to ask the COW?” He asks incredulously.

“Yup, because apparently he looks like he would be good at it.”

Reborn pulls the brim of the fedora down to cover his face but I can feel the waves of amusement radiating off of him.

“Not that it matters,” I continue, “I’m sure that Kyoko will find whatever dumb thing they convince Tsuna to do adorable and endearing.”

“I was wondering when Dame-Tsuna would think to ask her.”

“I think he probably thought of it the first day up there and he’s just been agonizing about how to go about asking her ever since.”

Something that vaguely resembles fondness flashes across his face before it vanishes, “Dame-Tsuna.”
We settle into a companionable silence as he goes back to working on his ‘laptop’ (I wonder if I could convince Verde to invent better computers. He’s a smart guy. And then he could invent Google and the actual internet and my life would be exponentially better). I start reaching blindly under my bed searching for one of the jackets I know that I threw there the other day. There is still a lot of fucking glitter around here which is actually somewhat distracting when I am hanging upside down with all the blood rushing to my head.

When I find it I fish out I reach into the pocket to retrieve a folded and creased magazine page that I meant to look at long before this. It’s been a busy couple of days.

I unfold it and settle back into bed to give it a good stare.

Cassandra Della Rosa and Rokudo Mukuro.

Relinquish your secrets to me.

....

What the fuck are you up to Mukuro?

It would be nice if the picture would actually just tell me what the heck is going on here.

Actually, no, on second thought I really don’t want to deal with inanimate objects talking to me. There are enough horror tropes going on here to add haunted pictures to the mix.

Cassandra still looks as unsettling as she did the first time I looked at this picture. And Mukuro still looks as faded as he did before. Though his eyes stand out in an uncomfortably prominent way.

I feel a barely noticeable dip in the mattress and then Reborn is there pulling the picture out of my hands. I let it go without a fight. There is no point hiding shit from the smartest man in the room.

I watch as his brows pull together in a frown as he studies the image.
“She looks creepy as fuck right?” I say out of a need to say something.

“Unhinged,” He agrees and then goes back to studying.

I let it go on for a moment longer before I continue.

“There is something off about that guy.”

“Guy?” He questions.

I realize that our creepy illusionist stalker is a little bit difficult to spot. I reach my arm around Reborn in order to tap on Mukuro. Still really unsettling to look at, he looks like a fucking poltergeist or something.

“That guy.”

Reborn stares at the picture without saying anything. He stares at it for a full minute half reclined against my arm. With each passing second, the pit of dread in my stomach grows.

“...You can’t see the guy can you?” I ask him with a feeling of awful certainty.

He lowers the magazine page onto the bed continuing to stare at it with his fingers tapping rhythmically against his knee.

“No,” He finally says, “I can’t.”

I slowly lever myself up so that I can look at the page. I definitely still see him standing there. In fact, I think I can see him more clearly now which does nothing to calm my flaying nerves.

“Oh great, super,” the shrill edge of mania in my voice even takes me a little off guard, not that I care at the moment. “Haunted photograph. That’s just perfect, now we probably have seven days to live before he comes and eats our souls or something.”
I have never done well with ghost stuff. I don’t care if it’s all just a bunch of bullshit, something about ghost stories always rubbed me the wrong way and leave my skin crawling.

Reborn pulls his phone out of his jacket and takes a picture of the page. I don’t know why he would bother cell phone camera resolution in this universe is just tragic. Somehow we have things like functional time machines and robots, but somehow camera phones, and wi-fi continue to elude inventors.

“We’re probably all cursed now... or double cursed I guess.”

Reborn goes absolutely rigid next to me and I do my absolute best not to react myself. I am sure now that he doesn’t even like the word ‘cursed’ though. But it’s not the time for that particular conversation quite yet. We have slightly more pressing issues to deal with at them moment.

Is it possession?

“I don’t suppose you ever heard back from your ‘contacts in Naples?’” I ask aggressively changing the subject.

Reborn is silent for a long moment as he stares at me before he sighs and hops back over to the computer on the desk.

“I did.”

When there is no immediate follow up to this admission I realize that I’m going to need to prod.

“Yes? And? Care to share?”

Everything about his posture is screaming stressed. And that immediately puts me on edge. Something is wrong. I already knew that something was wrong with this entire situation, but this just cranks the dial of wrongness all the way.
“You are relentlessly curious,” He sighs.

“Knowledge is power dude,” I fire back, “I would rather be on top of this shit before it comes to try and murder us again.”

“Your brother isn’t even half as invested,” he says, “Are you sure you don’t want to go play with the rest of them downstairs.”

“Tsuna is plenty invested,” I grouse, “If he wasn’t invested you would have to work a lot harder to get him to do any of this training stuff. But investigations checks aren’t his job they’re mine. He gets to do the badass finishing moves at the end.”

Seriously, I am looking forward to the badass-ness of Hyper Dying Will Mode Tsuna.

Reborn rolls his eyes.

“I have no idea what to do with you.”

“You can start by telling me interesting mafia secrets,” I say cheekily which earns me a glare. “Please and thank you?” I amend.

“Sei un idiota.”

“Oi, I do know when you’re calling me an idiot, man.”

Reborn doesn’t respond to that beyond a small tilt of the fedora as he brings up some image files, that take a painfully long time to load on the string. They show a scenic shoreline of what I am going to assume is Naples.

“The Estraeno compound is located on a small privately-owned island off the Gulf of Naples.” He finally begins.

“Fancy.”
And it is. The picture shows what looks like a castle that has partially been carved into the rock of the island.

“According to what my informants were able to get from questioning the locals; specific members of the family used to make frequent trips to and from the mainland. They were described as polite yet off-putting, and apparently the family ‘had’ lots of children.”

Ah.

“They were always there to pick up the children. Though, apparently, only one of them was ever reported to be seen with the family on multiple occasions.”

“Not their kids?”

“Decidedly not.”

Reborn shuts the image files down and reopens the text file. Now that I have a better view of it I think it looks like a transcript or something. I still can’t read anything on it though.

“The Estraeno have infamously avoided dealing with other Families for generations. They have their territory and their ‘businesses’ but never sought to expand or to form alliances. They have mostly been left to their own devices apart from a small conflict with another Family in the region about seven years ago.”

He taps his fingers against his knee again and I hear a dark and sonorous flow of the first few notes played on a violin.

“Just about two years ago they approached the Vongola looking to make a deal.”

I am taken so off guard by the melody that has begun to play that I don’t even make a smartass comment. It’s nothing like the short burst that I had heard days ago.
And its nothing like the song that plays between me and Tsuna. Our song is a happy upbeat thing full of interplay in improvisation. Over the past week, little by little Hayato and Takeshi have begun to join our harmony. It’s not perfect, not yet at least. There are a whole bunch of missed beats and dropped notes but the more we level up our group social links the better it gets. We follow Tsuna’s lead and it’s a happy welcoming song full of fun and energy.

The melody that I hear from Reborn is so much more complex, and so much sadder.

“What did they want,” I ask trying my very hardest not to be weird and stare at him.

“The wanted access to some of Vongola’s weapons research, but more specifically they were interested in these,” He says and holds up a familiar-looking bullet between his fingers. “Their intent was getting access to the Deathperation bullet in exchange for some of their own research.”

“I wasn’t privy to the initial meeting that took place between Nono and the Estraeno representative, but the initial negotiations fell through and their requests were denied. That should have been the end of it, however...”

Reborn makes a gesture toward the text file and continues, “a ‘friend’ at headquarters managed to dig this up for me.”

“Let me guess; there was some sneaky double-dealing going on,” I say.

Reborn nods.

“A meeting went forward. A deal was struck,” the melody that Reborn is unknowingly or unintentionally projecting at me picks up. There is a baroquian elegance to it that is...lovely...

“Massimo might have been a spineless weasel, but he was remorseless when there was something that he wanted.

A note drops, and the entire piece stutters and stumbles in a lurching upsetting way. Outwardly Reborn doesn’t react at all, his expression remains neutral.
But that felt... painful.

“And he wanted the title.”

Something terrible clicks into place.

Fratricide isn’t uncommon in the mafia...

“Holy fuck, he got the Estraeno to kill Federico.”

Reborn gives me a sharp appraising look.

“He did right? That’s the connection.”

“It looks that way,” Reborn says finally. “I don’t quite have enough evidence to prove it. Honestly, if you hadn’t mentioned the name I wouldn’t have thought to look into them in the first place.”

There is an explosion of commotion from down stairs as Tsuna shrieks, Takeshi laughs, and Hayato starts yelling something at Lambo. It sounds like they’re having fun too.

“But wait, shit, that still doesn’t explain why Cassandra would have teamed up with them when they were the ones who took out her hubby-to-be.”

Unless of course something really fucked up happened when she went missing in Naples. And with the way this conversation is trending, I would not discount that for a second.

“No, it doesn’t,” Reborn says looking unhappy.

The music picks up again as he starts scrolling through the document. Hiding off to the side of the screen I can just make out an image of what looks to be a family photo with the three Vongola brothers and Timoteo himself. It doesn’t look like a particularly happy photo...
But now I know which of the brothers was his student.

Enrico.

The melody breaks again. This time it feels worse, but I think that’s because I know what I’m listening for now.

A drop, a stutter, a stumble.

It’s like there is the expectation of something else being there to catch it.

“But hey, look,” I say forcing a smile onto my face trying to distract from whatever the heck is going on with him. “I’m not a complete idiot after all.”

He chuckles, “No, you’re certainly not that Monello.”

I most certainly am an actual idiot. I just have a title bit of an advantage when I’m doing all of this Nancy Drew shit.

“So wait, I thought you said that your guys went to check in on the Estraeno compound too? What happened to that? Did they find anything?”

They must have found something. A lot of things might be different from that original story, but I have a gut feeling that is backed up by actual evidence, that the Estraeno Family are or were still involved with human experimentation.

... Using children.

Disgusting fucks.

“They might have found something,” Reborn says with an odd edge in his voice, “I’m not certain.”
“What happened?”

He shrugs and takes a somewhat passive-aggressive sip on his espresso.

“Their bodies washed up on the mainland about twelve hours ago,” he pauses, “what was left of their bodies at least.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

 FUCK,” I say finally, “I’m sorry, man.”

Reborn gives me a humourless look with something that vaguely resembles his usual unaffected smile. And yet it is still leagues away from normal.

“Noting to trouble yourself over Inari. They were criminals, nothing for you to lose sleepover.”

Liar.

His song starts up again. Lower this time. Somber.

It’s a lot.

It feels like a lot.

I have to force down the tears that suddenly sting at my eyes.

I hate it.
I haven’t known Reborn very long. It feels longer for me, but that’s because of all of the other stuff that I have jammed into my head. I haven’t known him for long and yet I still know that he’s sad. And it **hurts**.

There is so much there.

There is so much that makes things so unbelievably painful and depressing for him. He’s just resigned to it.

I want to make it better.

I want to fix it.

I hate it when my people hurt.

I hear it coming this time. The moment when the melody breaks. The moment where there should be something there to catch it and it falls to pieces. I don’t know what’s supposed to be there...

“It matters,” I say.

I have no idea what I’m doing.

Improvising I guess.

After all, it’s what I do best.

This time when the melody starts to fall and I hit a drum beat to bounce it back before it crashes and breaks.

“It matters to you so it matters to me too.”
I don’t know what’s supposed to be there... But it doesn’t matter because now I am.

Reborn startles and stares at me wide-eyed. I don’t know if it’s because he noticed what I did or because my little proclamation comes out of left field with a little more drama than the conversation necessarily called for.

Then he flicks an eraser at my face and beams me right between my eyes knocking me back over onto the bed.

“Ow! What the hell was that for!?”

“I told you before Monello; you’re still too green to be worrying about me.”

The tempo is still a bit off and I feel clumsy and unpracticed for this next to the multilayered complexities of Reborn’s song... but I’ll make it work. I’ll learn, it’s what I do.

I glower at him and then I petulantly throw the eraser back at him.

He catches it. Of course, he catches it.

“I’ll care if I feel like it,” I announce peevishly.

Downstairs Tsuna starts gleefully shrieking, “She said yes! She said yes!” Which breaks through the pointless tension growing in the room. At least that worked out for him. I knew it would. Kyoko likes him too much.

I sigh and flop back down onto the bed. I still don’t know what we’re going to do about all this Estraeno and Cassandra and assassin stuff. I still don’t know what’s up with Mukuro. But I have another piece of that puzzle to play around with now.

An illusion in a photograph.

And why would Cassandra go team up with the people who helped vaporize the love of her life?
And if all of them are still gunning to take out Vongola Decimo Tsuna is still in danger.

“My brain hurts,” I complain as the music in the room finally starts to fade out into wherever the hell it goes when I can’t hear it.

“Go to sleep then,” Reborn tells me sounding completely exasperated.

“Boring,” I complain.

The bedroom door slams open and Tsuna immediately launches himself at me landing hard and knocking the air out of my lungs, again.

“Inari! She said yes! Kyoko-chan said yes!!”

I still don’t think either of them understands how dating works but hey who am I to judge. With my track record, I think my ideal date is ‘random chaos punctuated by flirty banter.’

“Awesome Bro-Bro,” I say and start tickling him until he rolls off of me and lands hard on the floor.

“It seems like you aren’t entirely useless Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says with a devious smile crawling at the sides of his mouth. “Perhaps I should increase the difficulty for tomorrow?”

Tsuna immediately panics.

“What! N O! Please don’t, it’s hard enough as it is! If you make it any harder there’s no way that Kyoko-chan will want to keep hanging out with us!”

Reborn levels his lime green pistol at Tsuna making my brother let out a high pitched ‘HIEEE!’

“The boss doesn’t beg Dame-Tsuna,” He smirks. “You better prepare yourself, tomorrow you will
be running laps before we begin.”

Tsuna looks horrified.

“Laps around what?!”

Reborn pointedly ignores him and goes back to sipping on his espresso.

“LAPS AROUND WHAT!?”

As Tsuna begs and pleads futility with Reborn I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts until I hit the one that I’m looking for and make a face.

Oh well, if Tsuna is calling in our Paladin we might as well go all-in with the big guns.

I type out the message:

**Hey asshole, you up for some violence?**

Chapter End Notes

I think I have said it before, but Inari is a fucking mess who has no idea how to deal with his own emotions. He runs on impulse and trusts that shit will work out (eventually) even if he has no idea what he is getting himself into like 90% of the time. He really does suffer from the curse of an interesting life ;)

Guys I love you all so much. I hope you’re all enjoying reading this as much as I am enjoying writing it.

As always I love to hear from you all, so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
I wake up buzzing with so much energy that I am literally sparking. I somehow managed to short out the alarm clock when I went to smack it, and when I went to make coffee the machine sputtered to life without me having to plug it in. I spend five solid minutes standing in the kitchen holding on to the end of the coffee maker plugin while the machine does its sacred duty.

I’m the fucking energizer bunny apparently.

When I hand Reborn his thermos at the front door before we head out we both get this jolt like ‘BZZZT.’ Then we just stare at each other, and there is no universe where I could stop the enormous smile from taking over my face. Because I have said it before, but I feel it bears repeating-

“Oh my god,” I grin.

“Don’t,” Reborn attempts to cut my glee short. His fingers pinch the bridge of his nose as he glares at me.

“Your hair is fucking amazing dude.”

He lets out this long sigh as he attempts to bring some order to the curly and now frizzy sideburns.

“You are an unbelievable menace,” he says, but he sounds more amused than angry, though I have no doubt that one day he shall take swift vengeance upon me. Boldly, I continue on with my sudden impulse to attempt to snatch his fedora away while he is distracted.

Reborn grabs my hand in his unreasonably strong grip before I can grab it. He quirks a challenging
eyebrow at me and I absolutely dissolve into helpless giggles.

“I know,” I laugh and set down the thermos next to him, “Isn’t it awesome?”

“What are you doing?” Tsuna asks as he carefully walks down the stairs he’s looking at me half curled on the ground in the middle of a terribly stifled giggle fit.

“You’re too slow Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn tells him, “Hurry up or I’ll make you run up the mountain.”

“HIEE!” Is Tsuna’s shrill reply as he slips on the second to last step and lands on his ass between the two of us.

“Quiet down Bro-Bro,” I say, still unable to stop smiling like a lunatic, “The boys are still sleeping, you don’t want to wake them do you?” I motion toward the living room where Takeshi, Hayato, and Lambo are still in a tangle of limbs in the blanket nest.

I told them not to stay up so late.

He nods and the two of us quietly get our shoes on and slip out of the house.

And, as promised, Tsuna starts out the day running laps.

Lucky for him the circuit that Reborn has chosen for him just circles the neighborhood between our house and the school and back. I mean he has to do it ten times, but still, it’s better than having to run around the base of the mountain ten times.

I don’t have to follow them on the run. I’m not the one facing the punishment game after all, but I do because if I don’t do something to burn off all this excess energy I think I may actually make something explode. And as fun as that might be, we have some even more fun things planned for today that might be derailed on account of electrical explosions.

So we run.
It’s only six in the morning, but already it feels like it’s going to be a hot day. And combined with all the moisture in the air from the rainstorm yesterday it feels a lot like running through a sauna. Which even I think is a little brutal. It will be nice to go up the mountain again where the air is at least somewhat cooler.

It’s even harder on Tsuna, who doesn’t quite have my unflagging stamina, by the time were on lap three he is panting and sweating and ready to throw in the towel, extra punishment be damned.

“No stopping Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn reprimands as my brother half collapses against the fence breathing heavily.

“I’m dyingggg~” Tsuna whines and he sinks down to his knees.

“C’mon Bro-Bro I believe in you,” I try to encourage.

He glares up at me, “How are you not dying?”

I shrug.

“Obviously I’m part energizer bunny,” I tell him repeating my earlier thought.

He gives me a questioning look, “Part what?”

“Nothing,” I say, quickly brushing off my inter-dimensional slip up.

I start tugging on his shirt to pull him back up to his feet. He groans but lets himself be hoisted, and soon we are on the road again. Although this time we are going at a slower pace. It won't do anyone any good if Tsuna collapses from heat exhaustion. We go on in silence for another two blocks before Tsuna burst out:

“Are you okay?”
The very real level of anxiety that is suddenly coloring his voice is startling and I give him a somewhat worried look.

“I’m...fine? Are you okay? You don’t have heat stroke do you?”

I don’t really know why he’s asking all of a sudden.

“I don’t have heat stroke,” He says, “It’s just...”

“What?”

He grimaces, “You’ve been kinda...” Tsuna makes a wobbly hand motion in place of an actual descriptor, “More than usual I mean.”

I give him something of a cockeyed smile as we keep running. “So what you’re saying is that I have been extra special levels of crazy lately.”

Tsuna sticks out his tongue at me and then proceeds to almost bite it off when he trips over a crack in the pavement. I manage to grab the back of his shirt and haul him back to his feet before either of us can stop running.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he argues.

“I know.”

“It’s just...you got hurt really bad and then you freaked out really, really bad and I just...I need you to be okay, okay?”

It takes a moment for me to unscramble the word soup, but I get a warm burst of affection once I suss out the meaning behind the ramble.

“Because you rely on my stellar wit and charm?” I sass him.
Which he, of course, completely one-ups with a gentle smile and brutal honesty.

“Because you’re my brother and I love you.”

Sap.

We are both such terrible saps.

What the hell would I do without him?

**Die probably.**

I link my arms through his and give it a quick squeeze.

“Love you too Bro-Bro,” I tell him genuinely, “And I am fine, I just have a whole bunch of fun new obsessions.”

Tsuna snorts, “Like what?”

“Oh, you know; mafia stuff, magic fire stuff, attempted assassination stuff.”

He’s quiet for a moment before speaking again, “why I’m apparently Vongola Decimo but all the assassins had your name instead?”

I see he’s still angry about that.

“Of course I’m angry about it!” He bursts, apparently harnessing the powers of twin telepathy to read my mind.
“I’m angry about a lot of this mafia stuff, but I’m really angry that some asshole that we’ve never met decided that it was okay for people to hurt you.”

“To be fair I’m pretty sure they were just capitalizing on the fact that you come complete with a convenient body double.”

I mean it as a joke, but it does not land that way. Tsuna comes to a screeching halt and I almost fall on my face when he grabs my arm and whips me around to face him.

“Don’t.”

He looks absolutely **FURIOUS**. I can’t entirely suppress the ‘EEP!’ That escapes me when his eyes shift from brown to blazing orange. And this time when the music kicks in it’s different.

**It’s different.**

Under the force of dying will it is louder and more resonant than I have ever heard before. There is an edge of emotion and depth and the song usually lacks.

“Tsu-“

“Don’t,” he repeats, “Everything is always a joke with you but this isn’t a joke. Don’t you dare try to laugh it off and pretend that it isn’t important.”

I guiltily avert my gaze and mumble, “Sorry.”

Tsuna lets go of my arm looking just as uncomfortable as I feel about the serious direction this conversation has taken. “I didn’t...Look, you can make whatever dumb jokes you want and try to blow it off but,” his eyes transition back to their regular brown, “You’ve always looked out for me, even when things were hard for you too.”

“You took care of me too Tsuna,” I try to press.
“BUT I DIDN’T!” He snaps, running his hands frantically through his hair, “I didn’t because the world was grey and hard and nothing ever made sense unless you were there too and even that wasn’t the SAME, but it was better than nothing.”

“Things are getting better now, I feel **better** now so let me take care of you sometimes too.”

I hug him.

For once I can't think of anything else to say so I just throw myself at Tsuna and I hug him. And it's not for the reason he thinks. I hug him because I just realized, with horrible clarity, exactly what the seal on his flames had done to him.

I had known it was something like that, but to hear him actually say it out loud. And I can hear in his voice how much it hurt him.

I hate a lot of things.

But I think I hate Timoteo most of all.

I wish I could go back in time and stop him. I wish I could have stopped him back then.

I don’t remember anything about his visit to our home. He had come with the old man I know that much... and then nothing.

And then nothing...

Because that had been the year the world had stopped.

“You’re doing great Bro-Bro,” I mumble wetly into his shoulder.

He sniffls, “So are you.”
And then I jab him in his diaphragm and he flails and jumps away from me.

“What was that for!”

“We look after each over Bro-Bro,” I snark at him and aggressively rub the tears out of my eyes, “So don’t go trying to embrace martyrdom on my behalf. Things are cool, were both great, and it’s not just us. We have our whole adventuring party behind us now and we are all leveling up. If anyone tries to fuck with us they will be sorry.”

I sling a companionable arm around his shoulders and start pulling him along.

“And for now, we better get a move on so you can do your weird battle date with our paladin.”

The reference to Kyoko is enough to snap him back to his regular self.

“AH! Kyoko-chan!” He panics and turns to Reborn who has been sitting on the fence patiently waiting for us to finish our random heart-to-heart. “What time is it?!”

Leon transforms into a comically large clock and Reborn makes a show of checking the time. “Almost time to head up, you better hurry Dame-Tsuna or Kyoko will think that you’re standing her up.”

He finishes with that bit of provocation and Tsuna zooms off shrieking about terrible spartan tutors.

I laugh and move to follow after him. He has gotten fast.

“You weren’t incorrect with your assessment,” Reborn says with some gravity as he hops onto my shoulder.

“About what?” I ask him as I jog after Tsuna. There is a high pitched squeak from somewhere that has me looking around. When I can’t spot anything I just keep on my way.
I do have that nagging ‘I’m being crept on’ feeling that usually means trouble though.

“Vongola is using you to protect Tsunayoshi.”

“I figured,” I tell him and shake off the feeling. “They would be stupid not to.”

“You’re not bothered?” He asks and I feel a warm burst of Sunshine at the base of my neck that gives my the extra kick to catch up with Tsuna.

“No? I mean it’s my job isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“I’m the lightning rod.”

Reborn doesn’t say anything, but I felt that microscopic flinch.

Oops, that’s a spoiler isn’t it?

The Sasagawa family lives in one of the worst neighborhoods in Namimori. It isn’t the first time that me and Tsuna have come out this way, but the last time we had been pretty hyped up on adrenaline from the random bout of chaos that was brought on by playing Russian Roulette with magic bullets.

I still think that was one of the best things that could have possibly happened because holy fuck is Kyoko a badass.

I do wish she lived in a better part of town though.
Since the driver, a woman by the name Ginevra who is distinguished by the pattern of burn scars that cover the left side of her face and the awesome cane sword that she has been using to beat our assess with daily, turned into this part of town we have passed by a litany of crimes. At least three separate drug deals, a mugging and...

“What a shitty part of town,” Hayato observes as he shoves some more nicotine gum into his mouth.

“I just saw two people fucking in broad daylight,” I say flatly and watch as they all turn back in morbid curiosity, “It might have even been three, the number of limbs in that pile didn’t really add up.”

“Gross,” Tsuna wrinkles his nose, “Inari I didn’t need to know that.”

“But now you do,” I laugh, “And knowing is half the battle.”

“There are a lot of people looking at us,” Takeshi observes as he watches out the window.

“Sizing us up to see what they can steal,” Hayato says, matter-of-factly, “This car is way too nice for this place. They probably think we’re a bunch of dumb rich fucks.”

I can’t really argue with that. This ‘car’ has the plush interior of a limousine with plush seats that form a ‘U’ formation and a drink cabinet that is built into the partition between the passenger area and the driver.

“It belonged to the boss’s father,” our driver informs us in heavily accented Japanese, “He had a vacation home here in Japan. It was simpler to use these rather than attempt to barter armored vehicles from the local underground.”

Reborn makes a semi-interested noise and says, “It’s good to know that Dame-Dino hasn’t taken up any of his father's bad habits.”

“Bad habits?” Tsuna asks curiously and earns himself a condescending look and a shot between the eyes from a lime green slingshot.
“Not your business Dame-Tsuna.”

Tsuna hisses and rubs the red spot on his forehead, “And it’s YOURS?” He asks, voice thick with disbelief.

I roll my eyes and lounge back in my seat next to Reborn in order to stretch out and nudge Tsuna’s knee with the tip of my toe. “Give it a rest Bro-Bro we’re almost at Kyoko’s.”

That does the trick as he immediately forgets his irritation with our tutor and starts eagerly looking out the window. Unfortunately, outside is still featuring some pretty fucked up shit and I watch as the excitement on Tsuna’s face is replaced with concern.

“Kyoko-chan’s brother said they lived in a bad part of town but...”

“This is really bad,” Takeshi finishes for him.

“Someone should do something about this.”

It’s not the first time that Tsuna has said something to this effect. But he still looks so shocked that the words came out of his mouth.

“Want us to go bust some heads Tsuna-sama?” Hayato asks, only half joking. “I’m sure we could take out the shitty criminal element here no problem.”

Takeshi laughs and hooks a companionable arm around Tsuna’s shoulders.

“Tsuna could probably take them all out himself. Remember how he went all ‘FWA!’ And “BAM!” With that big turtle the other day.”

“Gyyyyssss~” Tsuna whines.

I laugh along with the two of them as Tsuna flails.
“Alright boys leave off, you’re going to give him an aneurism,” I say once Tsuna starts to turn purple from embarrassment.

“Relax Bro-Bro we already have plans today. We don’t really have time for round two against our incompetent local criminal element.” I nudge him again, “Maybe tomorrow.”

“It’s good that you have aspirations for your territory Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says joining in on my good natured teasing. Of course, he just gets Tsuna flailing even more.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Tsuna exclaims and curls up like an armadillo.

It doesn’t take much longer for us to pull up in front of Kyoko’s apartment complex. When Tsuna opens the door we are all treated to the sight of Kyoko on the sidewalk completely surrounded by a gang of that aforementioned incompetent criminal element.

“Kyoko-chan!” Tsuna yelps.

“Hello, Tsuna-kun!” She calls happily with a wave and makes to duck through the circle of punks around her. One of them seems to take issue with this and tries to grab her as she slides past him.

Unfortunately, he chose to get handsy with a vengeful paladin and suffers a wrathful smite straight to his balls.

A moment later Kyoko is sliding into the car next to Tsuna and slamming the door shut with a decisive little ‘umph’ before taking Tsuna’s hands in her own and smiling sweetly at him.

“Thank you for inviting me out today Tsuna-kun. I was hoping we would be able to spend time together again soon.”

Ginevra lets out a harsh bark of laughter, “Nice work there girly.” She turns back to look at Kyoko, the burn-scarred side of her face twisting into a terrifyingly awesome smile.
Kyoko smiles sweetly back at her and says, “Thank you, ma’am.” Which earns her another laugh.

The ride back up the mountain is certainly more entertaining with Kyoko in the car with us.

I will forever treasure the memory of Dino’s first meeting with Kyoko. Doll-Face has something of a talent for putting his foot in his mouth. It must have something to do with his chronic case of clumsiness.

“I didn’t know we were going to have an audience today,” Dino says with a charming smile and reaches out a hand to Kyoko. “It’s nice to meet you bella. My name is Dino Cavallone, Tsuna’s senior apprentice and new big brother.”

Kyoko smiles serenely back at him takes his hand and says, “Nice to meet you Cavallone-san, I’m Kyoko, Tsuna-kun is my boyfriend.”

SHE JUST SAYS.

I watch as Tsuna’s brain goes violently offline at this and he starts mumbling, ‘boyfriend’ over and over in disbelief. Takeshi and Hayato have to move fast to keep him from swooning and falling flat on his face.

And then she ignites her hand in golden sparkles and Dino lets out a loud yelp as she puts just a little too much pressure on his delicate bones.

“And I’m not here to watch Cavallone-san.” She continues and hoists him over her shoulder and books it into the woods.

Seriously, that girl is just about as chill and suave as a person can get.
And also apparently rolls very high initiative.

“Kyoko-chan!” Tsuna calls out and bolts after her closely followed by the boys.

It takes a moment for team Cavallone to understand what happened but once they do they are hot on their heels. At least half of them are lightning up with magic firepower.

“Tsuna is so lucky that girl likes him,” I tell Reborn as he makes his quick change into referee mode.

He gives me a wry look as Leon transforms into a grappling hook and he takes aim.

“Get moving you unrepentant troublemaker or you’ll be getting a punishment next.”

I laugh as he vanishes into the trees.

“Promises, promises.”

I take an extra moment to type out a quick message on my phone before booking it after Tsuna’s trumpet call.

Playing keep-away with an actual adult man is a hell of a lot easier when you actually have someone on your team who is strong enough to lug around said adult man while running through rough terrain.

Not that the terrain has any chance of slowing down Kyoko when she is on the warpath.

“She just kicked down a tree,” I hear one of Dino’s boys warble as he watches Kyoko skip across her newly created bridge with Dino still slung across her back.
“Yeah, she’ll do that,” I tell him I’m mock sympathy before dumping a payload of glitter onto him and the two dumb fucks next to him. As the last of the glitter leaves my hand I let out a charge which travels down through the sparkling nebula of static charge sending a brief zap of electricity through all of them before the glitter bursts into smoldering pieces and evaporates.

Damn almost had it that time.

I swing down from the tree and land heavy on his shoulders knocking him to the ground before pushing off to catch up to Tsuna. He has the big guy that I had fried a few days ago on his ass and I can’t abide by that.

Takeshi makes a swing at him with his magic bat of transmutation, but is parried by Ginevra. With a burst of red flames, he is sent flying back. I don’t even have a moment to process before he is crashing into me.

“Ow,” I groan and try to sit up but the world is spinning in a very not-fun way and I lay back down half crushed under Takeshi, “How nice of you to drop in so unexpectedly.”

“Sorry Inari,” he winces and pulls himself off of me.

“No, my bad, I should have been watching out for a pop fly.”

He laughs, “To be fair you don’t really expect the pitcher to be the one flying.”

“I seem to have a talent for catching you though dude. We could almost make a new sport out of it at this point.”

Anything else Takeshi might have to add to our new bit is cut off by Hayato shrieking at us, “MOVE IT!”

Which is all the warning we get before Romario comes out of fucking left field with a barrage of dynamite suspended above him in a prison of blue light. Me and Takeshi only have a moment to roll out of the way before everything detonates.
“Fucking hell.”

A moment later I hear Kyoko yelp as Ginevra slams her cane-sword into her midsection and snatches Dino off of her shoulders.

“Not bad girly,” The woman crows, “Let's see if you can get him back.”

I watch as Kyoko reignites herself in divine light and pulls herself back up and dusts off her pretty blouse. That healing factor is so fucking rad. She is about to lunge when we all hear Tsuna shriek as the big guy and half a dozen of the other Cavallone boys swarm him and take him down.

Shit.

“Forgot about counterattacks.”

I scramble on all fours toward Tsuna, ringing bells and thundering piano keys close at my back. A new sound is joining in with our melody now too; a harp plucked with power and elegance. The sound fades in and out not quite there yet but almost.

Kyoko crosses back over to Tsuna, but Ginevra gets right up on her after tossing Dino onto Romario.

What follows is one of the most brutal smackdowns that we have been treated to yet. But I think we have finally unlocked hard mode which means that we are getting close.

Takeshi and Hayato have been sectioned off by a dozen of them and are doing their best to hold their own. Kyoko has the boss and the mini-bosses on her and can’t get back over to us.

This leaves me facing off with the big fucking Goliath of a man and the other two dozen of them who have Tsuna captured now. My brother looks irritated and terrified and worried all at once.

“What are you going to do now you little punk?” Asks the Goliath patronizingly.
I meet Tsuna’s eyes and I wink.

Tsuna immediately looks more worried than he did before. I don’t know why. You’d think he didn’t trust my master plotting skills or something.

“Hibari Kyoya, Hibari Kyoya, Hibari Kyoya,” I chant like the troll I am.

They all look at me in confusion.

All of them, except for Tsuna who pales and mouths at me, ‘what have you done!?'

“What’s that?” One of them asks, “Some weird Japanese thing?”

“It’s a summoning spell,” I tell him with bared teeth and a manic look.

As a tonfa collides with the back of his head, and in an instant, eight of them are down on the ground.

“To bring forth the demon lord from the abyss.”

Honestly, it had been a long shot. It was the cave troll, after all, do you actually think he got back to me with a defined schedule?

Hell no.

Lucky for me I have always been able to tell when he is lurking around. And I had known that this bait was too juicy for him to pass up.

“Crowding herbivores disrupting the peace,” He licks his lips and his eyes gleam with a promise of pain, “You will all be bitten to death.”
Tsuna finally cracks and shrieks, “HIIIIIIIEEEEEE! Hi- Hi- HIBARI-SAN??”

Somewhere off to the side, I hear Takeshi say, “Oh boy.” Which is immediately accompanied by Hayato’s own, “What is that crazy motherfucker doing here?”

Hibari ignores all of them and continues on his violent rampage. The tonfa spins, bones snap. I think he probably has a little bit of excess rage built up, what with the closing down of his beloved school building. Oh well, better them than me.

I take advantage of the panic and distraction to grab Tsuna off of the big guy’s shoulder and drag him away from what is soon going to be a very bloody ground zero.

“Why is Hibari-san here??” He demands.

“I called him,” I admit guiltlessly as I hear a handful of the Cavallone boys wail out at once.

“You called him,” Tsuna asks flatly as we quickly skid around the group that has Hayato and Takeshi surrounded and duck into some raised roots.

“Yup,” I reply as I prep a glitter bomb.

“You CALLED him,” Tsuna repeats.

“Yeeees?” I stop in my preparations to stare back at him. Ten feet behind Tsuna a man goes flying into a tree and slams back into the ground with a painful sounding oomph.

“You have Hibari’s number,” He says, and I can’t help but notice that he has suddenly dropped the ‘san.’

“Uh-huh.”

“How??”
“... You probably don’t want to know Bro-Bro.”

He just stares at me.

“Quit slacking off Dame-Tsuna and go lead your Family,” Reborn cuts in and fires.

Tsuna is ignited. His clothes, sans underwear, burst off of him for the umpteenth time and he launches himself into the fray with a furious roar.

I distantly hear Hibari’s breath of, ‘Wao,’ as Tsuna busts in for a rage fueled sneak attack and proceeds to toss the big guy around like he is made of marshmallows rather than extremely dense muscle.

“I see you did some recruiting of your own troublemaker,” Reborn observes dryly as the two of us watch the chaos unfolding.

I cackle.

“I figured I owed him,” I tell him, “After all, I did promise a week of unlimited combat for helping out with that whole warehouse debacle.”

It’s not quite a week's worth, but I’m hoping he will accept this mass offering and forget about the whole thing.

“How considerate of you Monello.”

“I know, aren’t I just a peach?”

Reborn tugs me out of the way before another human projectile can knock me down.

“Not quite how I would put it,” he snarks playfully back at me.
I launch myself out from under the roots with a fistful of glitter in one hand. Hibari has the big guy nice and distracted and Tsuna has headed over to help Kyoko face off against Dino, Romario, and Ginevra. Which just leaves Hayato and Takeshi who are too hammed in to get their own momentum going.

Everywhere I look is bursts of color and action. It hasn’t taken long for all of team Cavallone to realize that Hibari means business and is willing and able to deliver on his promise to ‘bite them to death.’

I slide into two of the crowd that has Hayato and Takeshi surrounded, knocking them down. I use my momentum to keep moving bouncing back up and dragging my fist full of glitter through the air creating a stream of sparkles and shimmers.

Timing.

Timing and voltage.

It has to be precise.

The glitter cloud forms and electricity crackles in my palm and the charge is set. It travels through the cloud of metallic shards and-

It all freezes in mid-fall. A cracking and sparking nebula of green and orange that has a dozen of them trapped up in its net.

“HA!”

It’s not going to last long. I can already smell the burning. But at last its something!

Hayato takes advantage of their semi-paralyzed state to lob a few sticks of dynamite into the crowd. As he does that Takeshi whips out the bat and starts plowing through the other dozen.
This time we win.

Unfortunately for Dino, Hibari doesn’t measure victory in the same way us mere mortals do.

Inviting my sworn nemesis was both the best and worst decision I could have made today.

Of course as soon as our opponents were on the ground he turned on me. I knew he was going to do this. I had been expecting it, after all, I was the one who had promised him unlimited combat. The rest of this was just icing on the cake for him.

I hadn’t really taken into account the fact that my brother and my friends don’t actually know the full extent of mine and Hibari’s... animosity toward one another.

Tsuna knows that I bitch about him. And to the extent of his knowledge, we have had a few **fights** more than he is comfortable with ... Takeshi probably knows best out of all of them as he had once caught the tail end of one of our, let’s say, scraps.

He had also drug me to the nurse’s office and held an icepack on my head as I confusedly rambled about how fucking pretty Hibari was.

Tsuna has never actually witnessed me and Hibari Kyoya go at it.

Until now that is.

I have a split second to catch the full brunt force of the tonfa on my forearms as they come crashing down on me. Tsuna shrieks in the background but I don’t really pay attention.

“Sawada Inari,” Hibari says, and he doesn’t even have the grace to be out of breath from all the exertion. “You owe me.”
“Yeah, I owe you a kick in your ass.”

As irritated as Dino and his army have gotten me they are nothing compared to the animosity that I feel toward this psycho.

The moment the pressure lets up on my arms I have a split second to drop low to avoid the roundhouse kick. Which I take advantage of and sweep his other foot out from under him. He doesn’t land on his ass like I had been hoping, but it’s a near thing.

“Fucking hell can you just-“

He spins back around and this time the tonfa catches me hard in the shoulder on a downward swing and I have to struggle to stay on my feet. And then the dirge of our school anthem kicks in on the worlds most paradoxically chill metaphysical flute and I can only stare at him.

Of course.

Contrary fucking asshole.

What else would it possibly be?

It grates so badly on my nerves that I completely lose any semblance of concentration until I can block it out.

Couldn’t Tsuna have summoned a nicer fluffier Cloud? I know that’s against the 'nature of the beast' thing but it would have been nice not to be drawn into harmony with this fucking asshole.

But, no, Tsuna only attracts badasses and contrary fuckers.

Hibari takes advantage of my momentary distraction and backhands me across the face sending me sprawling to the ground.

Fucking OW!
I flip back up on my hands and kick him the side of his stupidly attractive face.

“Have you ever considered some sort of therapy to deal with all these extremely violent urges of yours?” I antagonize and dodge as his tonfa speeds mere millimeters past my head.

“Too noisy,” is his near monosyllabic response.

“Honestly, it is impossible to get any interesting conversation out of you,” I grumble, “It’s always biting something to death or telling me to shut up. Read a book.”

And then I throw one of my last baggies of glitter at him and watch with a certain level of vindication as it bursts into his face.

He goes stock still for a moment before he looks at me with absolute bloodlust in his eyes and charges straight at me.

“Eep!”

Not a second too late Tsuna rushes in and performs a daring rescue, dragging me out of the way of a particularly aggressive swing. One, I will add, that tore an enormous hole in the tree to my immediate left.

Fucking hell.

Kyoko might be able to do all the kicking down trees and moving boulders thing when she is bathed in a divine light. But Hibari does the same shit at his baseline which is fucking terrifying to me.

“Thanks, Bro-Bro.”

I say as Dino’s whip lashes out by us and ensnares Hibari’s arms.
“That’s just about enough of that,” says Dino looking both impressed and vaguely terrified by the amount of damage one teenager was able to enact against his army of highly trained mobsters. “You shouldn’t go attacking your own teammates.”

Which is exactly the wrong thing to say to a raging Hibari.

“Crowding herbivores disgust me,” he says turning his attention to Dino, “Are you the king of the herbivores?”

“Am I wha-?”

Dino doesn’t get a chance to finish that though because Hibari fucking bum rushes him. Bound arms and all. I don’t think Doll-Face is used to people running toward him once he has them insnared. I see that moment of ‘of fuck’ panic that flashes across his face just before the barbarian slams into him and they both go rolling down the ledge into the clearing six feet below.

“BOSS!” Romario calls out and slides down after them.

The rest of us just watch kind of stunned.

“What the fuck?” Hayato asks.

“That was actually relatively mellow for him.”

“Is Dino-san okay?” Takeshi asks.

I peek over Tsuna’s shoulder to see them both starting to pull themselves back up to their feet.

“He’s good. He should probably brace himself though.”

“Are you okay?” Tsuna asks, suddenly reanimating and running his hands all over my head and face. Checking for any severe brain damage I assume.
“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good,” Tsuna says with a sigh of relief.

And then he aggressively starts jabbing me in the ribs with his fingers sending me flailing onto the ground.

“What was that for!?” I demand.

“DON’T DO THAT AGAIN!” He screams back at me.

I consider for a moment, and then I peek over the ledge to were Dino is desperately trying to calm the raging beast.

“Yeah, I think I’ll have to learn command monster before trying that summoning spell again.”

“You’re impossible,” Tsuna says with a heavy sigh and then he wanders off toward Kyoko. I watch him go with a vague smile pulling at my lips.

He almost slips and falls off of the recently created bridge across the ravine. Kyoko reaches out and catches him one-handed and hauls him up off his feet and into her arm. They eventually settle into the awkward and extremely adorable pose with Tsuna’s legs hooked around her waist, arms around her neck as she just holds him up like that with no visible effort.

They are both giggling and blushing like a couple of idiots and it’s one of the cutest things that I have ever seen in my life.

They are the sweetest.

I will fight anyone who tries to come between these adorable beans.
Hayato and Takeshi managed to finish off their own opponents and now they are picking their way through Hibari’s ‘victim’s, checking to make sure none of them are actually dead. They’re all fine by the sounds of it, though their egos are in tatters after getting taken down by one very strong very pretty boy.

I don’t think any of them had expected a couple of tanks to roll in with us today.

I swing my legs over the ledge to the clearing where Dino and Hibari are now playing bull and Matador as Romario frets around them. And I shut my eyes and I listen to our Families little ‘symphony.’ The parts are starting to gel better than they had before. Notes are still missed and at times the melodies still grate against one another as they all try to adapt.

Apart from Hibari at least who is still just a ridiculously mellow flute blasting out our school theme song.

It all still sounds more like improvisational jazz than anything properly structured. But Tsuna, whether or not he knows it, is slowly starting to take the lead.

Tuned in the way I am I can’t help but catch the faint distant notes of a solo violin as small footsteps approach. It plays for a moment before abruptly going smile to again.

I crack open an eye and find Reborn looming (as best he can at his stature) over me. I let my eyes drift shut again, and I listen. It’s like tuning a radio. Only the radio is imaginary and lives in my brain. Searching for the frequency that I know is there.

And suddenly it clarifies, overpowering the rest of the music to the point that it is the only melody that I can hear and my own rhythm begins to shift around it.

Hello there.

Want to jam with me?

When I crack my eyes open again Reborn is staring down at me expectantly.
“Ciaossu,” he greets.

“Yo,” I grin back.

“You look inordinately pleased with yourself considering Hibari-kun almost took your head off,” he observes casually as he prods the growing bruise on the side of my face.

I bask like a happy cat in the warm feel of the Sun Flames.

Seriously, magic sunshine might be my favorite thing ever, potential unfortunate side effects be-damned.

“My alignment is chaotic neutral,” I inform him proudly.

“You’re what?” He asks flatly.

“It means crazy random shit like this is my whole thing.”

Reborn laughs a little at that.

“Brat.”

A few yards away Hayato has started to bitch the Cavallone boys back into working order, while Takeshi unknowingly (or maybe knowingly) continues to take seemingly innocent potshots at their egos. I actually think he got a kick out of my summoning spell.

Takeshi doesn’t exactly have the same hang-ups about random acts of violence that Tsuna does.

Though that might have started to wear off considering that Tsuna himself is currently wholeheartedly egging Dino on in his fight against Hibari. I might have accidentally created some discord in his destined spectrum. Oh well, they will get over it eventually.
I glance back up at Reborn who is surveying our surroundings with a contented look on his face.

“So,” I ask, “Do we pass?”

“What do you think?” He asks with genuine curiosity.

“Me?” This is new, “You want me to do our performance review? Why?”

“You have an intriguing talent for synthesizing information. Humor me.”

I blink.

Well alright then.

“Well, since this started Hayato has stopped shoving dynamite into every nook and cranny. He’s actually got a better way of storing and deploying his explosives now.”

When Tsuna had finally gotten a chance to talk to Hayato about his dangerous lack of self preservation instincts re: wearing bandoliers of dynamite under his clothes and in some cases literally trying to blow himself up. I hadn’t been involved in that particular talk, but whatever Tsuna had said had been enough to get Hayato to rethink his entire set up.

“I hugged him and he CRIED,” Tsuna had told me equal parts mortified and concerned.

“The shit he is putting together is getting way more rad too.” I continue, “Have you seen those capsule things he’s started using? Much more firepower there. He has become a much more powerful wizard than he once was.”

Reborn gives me a somewhat judgmental look as I once again segue into fantasy metaphors. I pointedly ignore it, he was the one who asked after all, and I’m hardly going to start censoring my inner nerd now.

Besides, I think he kinda likes it.
“Ever since you gave Takeshi the ‘Bat of Transmutation’ he has been killing it. When he actually has something to work with that won’t break on impact he is boss. His reaction time was already awesome before this, but now he’s gotten like some serious haste going on. And he and Hayato are... I don’t think getting along better is exactly the right word, but they are definitely playing off each other better especially when you get Tsuna in the mix.”

Thinking on Tsuna I can’t help the fond smile from spreading across my face.

“I actually think this has been great for Tsuna. Combat training aside, he was never really into exercise before this, but I think now that he has gotten used to it it’s helped him chill out a bit. Don’t get me wrong he’s still a goofball and a spaz most of the time, but his stamina has definitely increased. And he isn’t freezing up as much when people come at him swinging.”

I laugh, “I’m pretty sure if any of the fucking assholes that bug him at school try now they aren’t going to get very far.”

I glance over at Reborn again to see if he has gotten sick of me talking yet, but he still seems to be listening intently to my pontification. I’m still kind of tuned in to the whole ‘magical musical accompaniment’ thing which means I can’t help but notice that-

As I keep talking his melody has started to speed up a little.

Almost like it’s trying to match my own frantic rhythm.

**A happier song would suit him better.**

“As for Kyoko and Hibari... they are both badasses on the level that us mere mortals cannot hope to match. There were both fucking awesome secret weapons though.”

“And you?” Reborn asks.

“Hmm?”
“You’re not going to conduct your own ‘performance review?’”

“Oh, yeah,” This might be the perfect opportunity to do something I have been trying to do for the better part of a week.

I make myself relax as much as possible under his sharp gaze and lazily grin up at him. And then, as nonchalantly as possible I gently bat the yellow pacifier around his neck, just to make sure that he isn’t paying attention to what I’m doing with my other hand. As soon as I make contact it’s -

CACOPHONY

DISSONANCE

MADNESS

CONSUMECONSUMECONSUME

Leon’s eyes glow.

Child look away
What?

Did something just happen?

Weird... I thought I heard something...

“Monello,” Reborn grumbles.

After a mental shrug to myself, I announce proudly, “I am a glitter ninja now.”

And then my grin widens to Cheshire Cat proportions as a rain of golden glitter beings to rain down on top of both of us. The twilight breaking through the tree canopy catches the slowly drifting cascade in a particularly aesthetically pleasing way and I am momentarily taken off guard and stare at the lovely sparkly display that I have created.

Ooo, pretty.

Reborn goes stiff as his suit and hat are both covered with glitter. It’s not in a bad way. He’s not angry or upset about it he’s...

If a metaphysical violin ever had the ability to sound incredulous, that would be now.

“Impossible brat.”

I cackle again and graciously take my punishment. As he takes his fedora and aggressively shakes out all the excess glitter over my face.

And for a brief moment before I lose the connection and all of the music goes silent .... his song sounds happier.
I was right though.

We passed.

Two days later Dino and Romario show up on our doorstep in the middle of breakfast. Mom lets them in happy as can be. I think she is really impressed by Reborn’s super successful, super handsome former student. I think she is even more impressed that he had hit it off so well with Tsuna and that Tsuna was actually, for once, taking an active interest in a mentor.

I think it helps that Dino is just as hapless as he is.

And they both share a mutual terror of their home tutor.

The looks on their faces when the had seen me and Reborn both covered in glitter had been priceless. They had both started cowering like they thought he was going to snap and kill us all or something.

Honestly, they’re such wusses.

I wasn’t actually paying much attention to what they were saying me and Lambo have created a game where we will point at random things around the house and say what they are in Italian or Japanese. It’s helping us both out with our vocabulary practice.

And Lambo is loving the piggy-back-ride. He especially likes it when I go sliding down the banister with him on my shoulders.

I don’t really click into the fact that this is an important conversation until I hear Tsuna say, “You’re going back to Italy?”
I poke my head into the kitchen at that point to stare at them.

“I do have a business to take care of back home,” Dino says with a grin as he ruffles Tsuna’s hair. “But I have had fun getting to know my new little brothers.”

“Is there something the matter Dame-Dino?” Reborn asks, apparently picking up on something in his ex-students expression.

Dino trades a somewhat telling look with Romario before turning back to Reborn and Tsuna, “Not really. Paula said she caught someone snooping around on the compound. I need to go back and make sure that everything is in place.”

“So your not going to be sticking around for the ‘Festival of Impending Doom?’ I cut in.

The sentence has the intended effect of making all of our foreign compatriots, including Reborn, pause and slowly turn toward me. It’s Lambo who actually voices the pressing question though. He prods my head and asks, “Doom?”

Tsuna makes a face, “I forgot that was coming up.”

“Yeah, things have been kinda crazy what with assassins and impromptu battle camp. But we cannot forget the important things like the ‘Festival of Impending Doom’ and all of the wonderful memories that it has given us over the years.”

“I think I am mishearing something,” Dino says slowly as he looks from me to Tsuna in confusion.

“What’s that Dino-kun?” Mom asks as she sweeps back through the kitchen with a basket of newly folded laundry on her hip and a pile of compositions piled on top of that.

“Inari-kun was just mentioning something called...the Festival of Impending Doom?”

“Oh yes, Doom Day is coming up,” She chirps happily, “I’m going to have to go get our masks out of storage. I think I still have some of Papa’s so we should have enough for everyone. We wouldn’t want space demons eating anyone’s souls now do we. Though we will need to get new yukatas for
you two, I think you’ve grown again.”

And with that wonderful non-explanation, she continues on her way out of the kitchen and upstairs. The poor folks uninitiated to the strange traditions of Namimori stare after her in mute incomprehension.

Namimori is relatively small and out of the way city. But it is also one with a litany of rich local traditions that often baffle outsiders.

“Space demons?” Reborn repeats giving me an intrigued look.

“I think it all started because of a meteor strike back in the seventh century?”

“And something to do with the annual meteor shower,” Tsuna finishes for me.

“Despite the name, it’s actually pretty fun,” Tsuna adds in, “The city council usually puts on a fair in the city square.”

“I’m sorry that we’re going to miss it?” Dino says with a hint of trepidation.

I can’t really blame him for that, not many people associate the word ‘doom’ with anything positive.

“Maybe next year,” I say and slide myself into the chair next to Tsuna. “So about this break-in.”

“Are you sure it’s alright Dino-niisan?” Tsuna asks worriedly, “That crazy lady is still on the loose over there isn’t she.”

I can’t help but give Tsuna a somewhat surprised look at this. I don’t know why though, it’s a stupid oversight on my part not to assume that Tsuna is keenly aware of the person who wants him dead.

... Allegedly.
“I wouldn’t worry too much about Cas. Vongola has her pretty well surrounded now. Even if they can’t get to her directly she’s not going to be starting anything else.”

Which is a very interesting proclamation but not the part that I found the most interesting?

“Cas?” Me and Tsuna speak in stereo as we stare at Dino.

Dino looks instantly uncomfortable under the scrutiny. He averts his eyes and ruffles a hand through the back of his own hair.

“I mean Ms. Della Rosa,” He attempts to divert.

I shoot a look at Reborn to see if his expression gives anything away. It doesn’t if anything he has become more closed off as he gives Dino a hard look.

“You called her ‘Cas’,” Tsuna says.

“Which implies that you know her from more than just this dust-up,” I continue.

“Uhhh,” Dino shoots a desperate look at Romario, who for once does not instantly leap to his boss’s defense. Instead, he just sits there casually stroking Enzio’s back.

“I mean-“ He coughs awkwardly and focuses his gaze at the ceiling (a much less judgemental target, I guess), “Our parents moved in the same social circles so we always ended up at the same parties. And we went to the same school, so we crossed paths a lot even if she is a couple of years ahead of me. And-“

His voice gets a little tighter as he speaks and I start to come to a realization.

“She was getting married to Federico and he was in line to become Vongola Decimo after what happened to Enrico... and we were allies with the Vongola so I was at their engagement party. And the funeral.” He shoots a cautious look at Reborn now, “We were both there.”
“You’re in love with her,” Tsuna breaths.

As he crits on his insight check and tears through all of the sloppy subterfuge in one sentence. When he dials into that Vongola intuition Tsuna really is a sight to behold.

“Wh-what? No, I’m not that’s-“ He lets out a brittle laugh and if I hadn’t been one hundred percent convinced by Tsuna’s assertion I would be now.

“Holy shit you are!”

“Dino,” Reborn’s voice sounds almost sad when he says his former student's name. I don’t think he knew about this.

“Look,” Dino rubs a hand over his face and steadies himself a bit, “I haven’t even spoken to her in over a year. It doesn’t change anything. She is an enemy of Vongola now and in accordance with our alliance she is an enemy of Cavallone too.”

“You should have told me,” Reborn continues.

“What!? NO!” Dino exclaims as his mood abruptly shifts from morose to mortified. “Look I appreciate everything you did to make me into the boss I am today, but there is no way that I was going to be telling all my romantic issues to someone a fraction of my age legendary hitman or not!” He is so red and embarrassed that I almost want to give him a pass.

Lucky for me Reborn feels no such mercy and proceeds to smack him upside the head with Leon in the shape of a mallet. Lambo lets out a peal of delighted laughter as Dino goes crashing to the floor.

“Fratello, look he flew!”

“Yes, yes he did.”

Leon transforms back into a chameleon and scurries back up Reborn’s arm as his human strolls
menacingly across the table and looms over Dino who is comically cowering on the floor.

“You’re still way too early to be talking back to me like that Dame-Dino,” Reborn intones with a hint of danger in his voice.

“Hieeee~” Tsuna lets out a quiet whine in both fear and sympathy.

I feel much less sympathy and lean over the table to give him a somewhat threatening grin of my own.

“You okay there Doll-Face?”

This startles Tsuna into action and he wiggles out of his seat and drops down to pull Dino up to a sitting position. He probably has some cartoon stars spinning around in his eyes after that hit.

“Dino-niisan!” He frets.

“Haha~” He laughs, from the head trauma I assume, “Don’t worry Tsuna I’m fine. Weirdly I think that actually helped.”

I take a quick peek over at Romario who is still sitting calmly with the turtle. I get the feeling now that Dino’s right-hand man has been trying to get these dramatic soap opera reveal to happen for a while now. And I get why. This is some pretty relevant information.

It sucks for Dino that it is also extremely personal information. But it is pretty fucking important for us to know that if the chick he has a thing for tries to kill us again he isn’t going to start thinking with his dick and help her do it.

“I’m sorry that this put you in such an uncomfortable position,” Tsuna continues, in a rare moment of emotional maturity.

Dino gives him a soft smile in return and pulls him into a brotherly one-armed hug. “You worry too much for a kid your age. It’s fine. I meant it when I said that I’ve enjoyed getting to know my new little brothers.”
Tsuna’s face forms into a lopsided grin and I let the Goofus duo have their weird little bonding moment on the ground.

After a moment Reborn sighs and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“When is your flight?” He asks Romario.

The man digs into his breast pocket and pulls out a folded sheet of paper and checks their itinerary.

“Take off is at four. But it’s quite a drive to the airport so we should be leaving soon.”

He directs that last bit at his boss, who is still getting all cuddly with my brother on the ground. Dino sighs and levers himself up with a groan.

“This has been such a nice vacation,” he says wistfully, “I’m not looking forward to getting back to my piles of paperwork.”

“Paperwork!?” Tsuna squawks as he pulls himself up after. “Mafia bosses have to do paperwork.”

Dino stares at him stone-faced for a moment before bursting into peels of laughter. I don’t know if that means if he was bullshitting about the paperwork or if he really, really wasn’t. Either way, the look that it puts on Tsuna’s face is absolutely hilarious.

And he doesn’t answer.

He just starts walking to the door still laughing.

We follow after him. Mama taught us good manners, after all, you escort your guests to the door and you wish them safe travels. And if they are your worst enemy you make sure that they take some of the cookies on their way out.
Lucky for Dino, he is not our worst enemy.

“Come back and visit soon ‘Dino-niichan,” I tell him.

“Any parting words of wisdom Inari-kun?” He asks jokingly.

”Beware of sharks.”

I say.

And then I blink.

I try to THINK about it and my brain hits a wall of info locked static that feels **wrong**.

What?

“What?” Dino asks giving me a quizzical look, which I hope to God I am not mirroring.

“Beware of sharks,” I repeat, committing to the random glitch that just came out of my mouth.

Dino blinks at me, “I’ll keep that in mind?”

“And, you know, good luck with your soap opera-esque relationship drama.”

“Gah!”

“Thanks for coming here and helping us out Dino-niisan,” Tsuna says sincerely.

This seems to distract from the randomness that I assaulted him with and he refocuses. Tsuna’s
innate adorable-ness will defeat my absolute crazy randomness.

“Oh yes, before I forget,” Dino digs around in his pocket and pulls out a small piece of paper and hands it to Tsuna.

“What’s this?” Tsuna asks and I peek over his shoulder.

“Phone number?”

“That’s right,” Dino chirps, “If you need anything or just want to talk to Dino-niisan give me a call.”

“Thanks.”

And with that, our very pretty mafia mentor heads out into the sweltering afternoon.

“Beware of sharks?” Tsuna turns to me and asks.

I sigh, “I don’t know dude, it literally just popped into my head.”

Reborn sighs.

Honestly, I don’t know why anyone is even the least bit surprised when weird shit comes out of my mouth anymore, what with the ‘premonitioning’ and the overt antagonism that I am perpetually rocking.

I’m about to suggest that we all get out of the rapidly increasing heat when I get that ‘being crept on’ feeling again. I twitch and start looking in the sky for signs of an out of place snowy owl flying around.

Nothing there.
“Chicken?”

Lambo tugs incessantly on my hair from his perch on my shoulders.

“Huh?”

“There,” He points, and the three of us follow to find...

“A giant chicken?” Tsuna states slowly.

Or, rather, to be more specific; a person wearing a giant chicken costume. Perched on top of the concrete wall at the end of our street...Who is very overtly watching us through some binoculars? I don’t know how to feel about this very strange turn of events.

They must be boiling in there. It has to be at least forty degrees out here, what kind of crazy person would willingly wander around in that get up in this weather.

“Huh...”

The person finally notices that we are all staring at them.

“HAHI!”

And then we watch as they fall off the wall and very deliberately scurry away.

“What the heck?” Tsuna asks.

“I don’t know....” I say. But there is something oddly familiar about that giant chicken costume wearing weirdo.

I look to Reborn for some guidance, but our resident hitman is apparently already done with all of
this and is heading back into the house. To be fair this had all caught him before he had gotten a chance to finish his required three cups of morning coffee.

“And I really don’t care. C’mon Bro-Bro, I’m sure if it’s important it will come and try to kill us eventually.”

Tsuna sighs, “Right.”

Chapter End Notes

The training montage is complete and the kids have reached their milestone level up. And Inari keeps running face first into ‘locked’ information that he doesn’t know quite what to deal with. And obsessions that he may or may not realize he has :)

On another note, I think Namimori is now an eldritch location complete with nonsensical infrastructure, bizarre traditions, a para military operation run by a teenaged delinquent, and a population which seems to just shrug it all off.

And you know that something called the ‘Festival of Impending Doom’ is going to be crazy.

Thank you all so much for all the wonderful comments and Kudos! They all make me smile so much you have no idea :D

As always I love to hear from you all, so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
Strap on your Looney Tunes shoes and get ready for the madness.

In other news, we are currently experiencing the fucking heat death of the universe.

At least that’s what it feels like.

Seriously, I think standing in the center of an active volcano would be more pleasant right now. Namimori’s annual heatwave never lasts long, but it always hits hard and leaves you feeling like you’re trapped in a sauna with a sumo wrestler sitting on your back.

It sucks.

We have all turned to mush from the intensity of the heat. It is suffocating. Our entire household has moved into the living room where the only air conditioner in the house lives.

I think this is the most inactive we have been in the past two months. Mom had been lucky and had caught a ride into town with Nori-san. Apparently, the conductor for the Doom Day stage show had dropped out and she had been asked to take over. Which is totally rad. Mom had promised to return with ice cream and popsicles, but considering rehearsals are taking place in the extremely air-conditioned community theatre I don’t anticipate receiving those tasty icy treats any time soon.
Tsuna and Lambo have sprawled as close to the AC as possible which actually means that they are hardly getting hit by the cold air at all.

Being a smart person who understands air currents I slumped across the room from the AC and got the benefit of being hit with moderately cool air. Reborn parked himself next to me, he is the most ‘normally’ dressed down that I have ever seen him.

His jacket and tie have both been haphazardly discarded and thrown into the same pile as mine and Tsuna’s shirts. And his sleeves are rolled up. I don’t know why that last bit gets me, but it does.

Leon has transformed into a small motorized fan and is doing his best to cool down his human. I have myself tilted a little bit so I can sneak some of those extra air currents.

Reborn doesn’t actually look too bothered by the heat. I guess he’s made out of tougher stuff than the rest of us. He’s currently busying himself with disassembling his GLOCK and cleaning each of the individual parts before slotting everything back together.

And don’t get me wrong, it is always super interesting to watch our tutor work but... I need to DO something. Heatwave or no, I can’t just sit around and do nothing.

“Ahhhh~” I vocalize.

Just to break the silence.

Tsuna rolls his eyes back to look at me upside down, “Huh?”
“Boring~” I sing-song.

“It’s a million degrees,” Tsuna groans, “What do you want?”

“I dunno,” I say and tap my knuckles against the hardwood in a staccato rhythm, “We should go outside.”

“You’re crazy,” Tsuna states flatly and slumps back down.

“It beats melting in here.”

“The AC is in here,” He argues back.

Which would have been a valid argument if the power didn’t choose that moment to go out. The AC sputters to a stop and we all stare at it.

“Now it’s not.”

Tsuna gives me an incredulous look.
“Did you-“

“As cool as that would be I don’t have the power to control rolling blackouts.”

Once he notices that the cool air is no longer passing over him Lambo starts to whimper, “TOLERATE.”

Which only ever leads to one thing.

I only have a moment to brace myself before the purple abomination is pulled from its extra-dimensional pocket and the room is consumed by a cloud of cotton candy pink. There is an intense molten orange light that explodes behind my eyes. This is closely followed by the tearing pain in the center of my brain and the unpleasant taste of off-brand grape cough syrup in my mouth as the world twists and flips in a cyclone of eyes and teeth and malicious laughter.

Fucking OW!

Thanks so much for the migraine. I really needed that on top of the heatstroke.

When I finally manage the blink the orange starbursts out of my eyes I see Lambo. Ten years older Lambo...

Standing in the center of our living room in fancy dinner wear...
Wielding two handfuls of forks in a vaguely threatening way...

Looking extremely manic....

With blood splatters across the collar of his shirt and face...

Well alright then.

This should be fun.

Before I have a chance to make anything resembling a disarming comment, Lambo’s eyes zero in on Reborn. His expression flickers between confusion, recognition, and then finally settle into an increased level of mania.

He stiffly charges over to where the two of us are sitting and shoves the forks forward in a display. I press myself back into the wall to avoid the sharp pointy things. Normally, I would say that there was no way any version of Lambo would be able to hurt us. But this wasn’t a normal version of Lambo.

This is a fun new manic murder mode that I haven’t seen before.
Leon transforms into a baton in Reborn’s grasp as the man himself steps up in a defensive stance. Even though he is pint-sized I feel much better having him in front of me.

“Which of these do I use to declare blood vengeance!?” He demands his voice uncharacteristically shrill.

I blink, “what?”

As Tsuna exclaims, “BLOOD VENGEANCE!!”

This gives Lambo a momentary pause as he glances over his shoulder at Tsuna.

“No time to explain boss.”

“HIIIIII!!?”

Reborn stares at Lambo in brief consideration before gesturing toward a small fork with curvy prongs.

“The oyster fork,” he states blandly, “Unless you also want to declare war or propose marriage.”
Mafia rules are strange.

“Blood vengeance!” Tsuna repeats in the background sounding more strangled.

I have never really considered the perils of silverware before this moment. But as interesting as that rabbit hole might be, we seem to have more pressing matters to address. And a time limit.

“Or, you know, just come grab future me and I’ll kick anyone’s ass,” I tell him.

The look he gives me is all sorts of complicated.

“He said that he would lock me in a room full of wasps if I interrupt your honeymoon again for anything less than the end of the world,” he tells me looking haunted.

“Wasps!?" Tsuna shrieks, missing out on the more interesting word in that statement.

“Honeymoon!?” I ask gleefully.

Lambo freezes. The forks clatter to the floor as he looms toward me and grasps my shoulders tightly. The intensity in his eyes is a little more than a little unnerving.
But not unnerving enough to deter my curiosity.

“Who-“

“Don’t,” he says and I feel his fingers dig into my shoulders in an almost painful way. This close up I can see a familiar-looking pattern of faded fractal scars that curl around his left eye and disappear beneath his hair.

Behind him, I can see Tsuna quickly pull himself off the floor and getting into position to lunge and tackle him if he needs to. Out of the corner of my, I see Leon transform into a handgun that Reborn cocks.

I feel so loved right now.

And also terrified.

And also still burning with curiosity.

“But-“

“Don’t create a time paradox!” He continues with an improbable increase in the level of mania in his voice.
“Wha-“

“No, trust me, Back to the Future might have made the hijinks seem cute and fun. But it’s not. It’s more like being teleported to the center of Mount Doom and suddenly having to fight a Tarrasque.”

I just STARE at him.

Dear lord, he’s my Padawan, isn’t he?

Of course, he is.

It’s nice to know that I manage to pass on my crazy randomness to a new generation.

“Cow,” Reborn growls threateningly.

Lambo ‘eeps’ and shoves himself off of me and straightens his hair and sleeves.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says, clearing his throat awkwardly.
He then bends to retrieve the oyster fork from the small pile of silverware on the floor.

“Okay, blood vengeance,” he repeats again. And then he turns to look at Tsuna again and says, “sorry about this boss.”

“What!” Tsuna shrieks.

Lambo doesn’t answer. Instead, he points animatedly toward the front window, “Why is there a giant chicken outside?”

And then he’s gone in a puff of pink smoke. In his place stands our ‘little’ brother sucking happily on a lollipop. I can’t help but notice that the bottoms of his footsy pajamas are stained red.

The future seems fucking wild...

It must be if there is someone who is crazy enough to marry me.

“Why blood vengeance!” Tsuna cries to me, Reborn, Lambo, and the uncaring eldritch god that guards the secrets of the multiverse, “Why sorry!”

“Worry about it in ten years Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn tells him, “You have more important things to deal with.”
He finishes with a motion toward the window and the chicken-themed stalker beyond it. They have perched themselves on the fence across the street and are staring intently into our living-room through the blinds. I don’t know what the point of the chicken getup is but if it’s to be inconspicuous they are failing, horribly.

“Hiieeee~” Tsuna whines and scuttles away from the window and presses himself up against the wall and out of eyesight. Which is fair, because that chicken thing is terrifying.

“That is unsettling,” I say as I lean closer to the window to get a better look at them.

“That is unsettling,” I say as I lean closer to the window to get a better look at them.

“Deal with it Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn orders.

“I don’t WANT to,” Tsuna replies emphatically.

“I don’t care.”

The shot rings out and Tsuna roars as he bursts into brilliant orange flames and goes bursting through our front window. You know, considering he was already stripped down to his underwear he is absurdly lucky that he did not just go crashing through a pane of glass in the buff. I’m sure that would make some kind of impression on our chicken stalker but not the one that we are going for I’m pretty sure that if he goes charging at someone butt naked he will for sure get arrested.

Also the mortification of running around with his dick hanging out would probably kill him.
I watch as he vaults over our fence and rushes at the chicken on the wall. He attempts to tackle them, but the costumed weirdo leaps off at the last moment, dodging out of the way and running off down the street with Tsuna in hot pursuit.

I know that I should follow after them, but I can’t help but stare at the re-broken window.

We just had that fixed.

I glance over at Reborn and quirk an eyebrow at him.

“That contractor is going to kill you,” I snark at him.

He quickly holsters his gun and slides on his suit jacket.

“He can try,” He says before following Tsuna out the broken window and down the street.

I sigh and bend down to scoop up Lambo who is still sucking on his lollipop as he watches the action with vague interest. I don’t really feel comfortable leaving a child unattended in a house during a power outage in a room with broken glass all over the floor.

“C’mon Padawan, lets go make sure the giant chicken doesn’t mess with big brother too much.”
I catch up with the action in progress four blocks away.

Our stalker has been unmasked to reveal a half boiled, extremely sweaty girl wearing the bottom half of the chicken costume like overalls.

I know this girl.

Or, rather, I ‘remember’ this girl from before.

Haru.

And that is about all the time that I get to process that bit of information before my brain is hit with one of the biggest information downloads that I have gotten in a good long while. The world tilts dangerously to the left and I have to stop moving and brace myself against the nearby concrete wall to keep from falling on my face.

“Fratello?”

“Fine,” I tell Lambo, “عالم العالم”
Only, no, I’m not fine.

Because it doesn’t stop this time. It just keeps going, and going, and going. But it’s not going anywhere because it all just keeps hitting against a wall of orange and pain.

I blink.

The world has taken on an oversaturated and badly rotoscoped that seems to glow indigo as the scene before me is overlaid with another that had never happened in a world that never was.

“Fratello!”

There’s nothing there.
“Are you alright young man?”

A gentle hand rests on my shoulder and I look up into the concerned face of a silver haired man with glasses.

“Yeah, I’m good, I’m okay,” I tell him with a grin and try to shrug of the random migraine that had come out of fucking nowhere.

Yuck, this heat must be getting to me more than I thought.

“Good,” He smiles, “You should be more careful when exerting yourself like that.”

I scratch the back of my head sheepishly, “That was pretty dumb, but I was trying to keep up with those guys.”

I gesture over to Tsuna and Haru who are now chasing each other around a lamp post arguing about something. I should probably get over there and intervene before one of them actually does pass out.

“I’m glad to see your doing better,” he says as he removes his hand from my shoulder and tucks them into the sleeves of his forest green yukata.

He’s actually kinda cute now that I’ve got a good look at him.
“Your brother seems to be doing well too,” he looks over to were Tsuna is trying to help Haru up off the ground while she yells at him for being a creep.

“I should probably go help him,” I say and look up at him again. “Thanks for stopping to check in on me mister.”

He gives a little half bow before turning to walk back down the street, “It was no trouble. I hope you kids have fun at the festival this weekend.”

“Uh, you too.”

And then he vanishes around a corner.

Weird guy.

But I guess its nice to know that we aren’t the only concerned citizens around.

“BWAHAHA!” Lambo laughs and points to where Haru has taken the top of the chicken costume and slammed it over Tsuna’s head, “Dame-Tsuna is funny.”

She then starts taking wild swings at him, which by the grace of Dying Will intuition he is able to dodge even blinded by a costume. She’s gesturing wildly toward Reborn who is seated on top of the wall with his gun in hand and a smirk on his face. He is enjoying this random bout of chaos at
Tsuna’s expense.

I wonder what Tsuna said to set her off so badly.

I mean, considering she was creeping on us I’m pretty sure she doesn’t really have a leg to stand on as far as situational outrage goes. But then Tsuna has a talent for putting his foot in his mouth at the worst possible moments. Usually completely unintentionally.

Tsuna pulls the chicken head off himself, and Haru smacks him hard across the face.

And that is just about enough of that.

“Oi, fucking stop it you crazy weirdo!” I yell and pull her off of him.

“What have you been teaching this sweet innocent child!?” she shrieks at Tsuna as she tries to burst out of my grasp.

I freeze and slowly turn to stare up at Reborn.

In what universe....
You know what, no, I’m not even going to try to perform the mental gymnastics needed to suss out the root of that tragic bit of misinformation.

Reborn still looks amused, but also sort of low key irritated at being down graded so dramatically.

“Who are you talking about!?” Tsuna demands.

“Reborn-chan of course!” Haru screams back with a finger pointed up at Reborn, “What kind irresponsible older brother would give a baby such violent toys and teach him about crime!”

“HE’S NOT MY LITTLE BROTHER!”

Haru pauses.

“Your son?”

“What?!” Tsuna shrieks in terror, “NO!”

“Why would you even THINK that?” I can’t help but join in.

“So you have been corrupting someone else’s child?” Haru continues, completely ignoring logic
and reason. “That’s even worse!”

I have to struggle to keep a hold on Haru as she turns to look up at Reborn and beseeches him dramatically; “Come with me Reborn-chan, Haru will protect you from this terrible boy.”

“That wouldn’t work, It’s my job as his home tutor to raise him into a great mafia boss,” Reborn replies, adding gasoline to this already out of control fire.

Haru makes another lunge toward Tsuna, “Your AWFUL for making a baby believe such evil things!”

Fuck this.

I have had just about enough of her screaming at Tsuna about how terrible he is.

I spin us around so that I’m in between her and Tsuna and I shove her away from me.

“That’s rude you don’t even know him,” I tell her.

Potential future bonds of friendship aside, I have never, and will never, be able to abide people smacking my brother around. Physically, verbally, or otherwise.
“I don’t have to! I can tell that he is a terrible influence,” She rages back at me, “Babies are sweet innocent creatures that need to be nurtured and protected not taught about a life of crime and violence!”

And then her eyes focus in on Lambo who is still clinging to my head like a koala and she glares at me.

“And that is not the proper way to carry a child you’re going to hurt him like that,” and then because this is the weirdness of my life, “Is that BLOOD ON HIS FEET!?”

Her finger waves in my face. Like she expects me to apologize or something.

“Of fuck off with that,” I snap.

“HA-HI!”

“You don’t really have a leg to stand on here what with all the creepy stalking you were doing. For all we know your some kind of pervert with a child fetish!”

“Pervert!?” She takes a shocked step back from us wide eyed and blinking. “I’m not a pervert,” She howls in outrage, “I’m a girl.”

“The two things aren’t mutually exclusive idiot!”
I get the feeling that this conversation is going to devolve into something very unpleasant very soon. Just judging by how pissed she already is and how rapidly my own irritation is escalating.

Tsuna grabs the collar of my shirt and drags me back behind him.

Which is a new and interesting turn of events. I guess he is really sticking to that older brotherly pledge that he had made the other day.

“He’s right,” Tsuna says in a calm, collected, and authoritative tone of voice. Leagues away from the panic he was in moments ago.

I rock back onto my heels and let him take the lead on this one.

“You don’t know anything about us, and we don’t know anything about you either. So don’t go accusing people of things if you don’t have any evidence to back it up.” He starts to fidget awkwardly as the Dying Will magic wears off and the seal slides back into place. “And, uh, besides... Reborn came to us a crazy baby. I had nothing to do with that...”

I resist the urge to smack myself in the face at that.

So close and yet so far from that moment of realization. I’ll give him a pass this time because the majority of that speech was actually really cool. Even Reborn is giving him a vague look of approval from his perch up on the wall.
Haru gives us both this adorably pissed off look with her face flushed and her cheeks puffed out. She looks like a pissed off chipmunk. She takes two stomps forward and picks up the top of the chicken costume from the ground next to Tsuna.

“I’ll prove you’re a couple of rotten apples,” she huffs before shimmying back into the chicken costume and storming away.

We all just stare after her.

“Why would she put that back on,” I wonder aloud, “It’s still a million degrees out.”

“That’s not really the issue here Inari,” Tsuna wails as he drops to the ground and curls around his knees in comical misery.

“I suppose not... I missed most of that anyway so I feel a little justified in asking ‘what the fuck was that all about?’”

“Her name is Haru,” Tsuna answer is muffled by his knees. “I think she’s in love with Reborn or something? Or wants to save him from a life of crime? It was all really confusing.”

“And now she has declared herself your mortal nemesis,” I say wryly.

Vengeance seems to be a theme today.
“AND THAT TOO!”

“Being able to deal with hostile parties is an important skill for a mafia boss Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn adds in to needle him more.

“How many mafia bosses have to negotiate with crazy people in chicken costumes!?” He demands.

“At least three.”

Tsuna doesn’t even bother replying to this, he just curled in on himself tighter. I don’t know where the original timeline pulled a lion from, Tsuna’s spirit animal is totally an armadillo.

Poor Tsuna, we haven’t even scratched the bottom of the barrel when it comes to the kind of colourful characters that we are going to have scuffles with. Haru is mild compared to Mukuro...

Who is also still a problem that we are going to have to deal with sooner than later. Because somehow I doubt he has suddenly lost interest.

I reach down and start to tug Tsuna up to his feet.

“We’re T-minus five days until the Festival of Impending Doom. Weird shit like this always starts to happen around this time of year.”
Tsuna groans loudly and continues trying to turn himself into a singularity and exit the universe.

“Really?” Reborn asks curiously.

Suddenly, I am super hyped. Because, Reborn doesn’t ‘know’ about the festival. He knows of the FESTIVAL OF IMPENDING DOOM now only because we have been chatting about it so much. But he has never experienced the chaotic randomness that this three day event brings.

“Man, you should have been here a couple of years ago when the Cult of Saint Bernard got started up. That was about the height of Doom Day madness.”

He gives and interested ‘hum’ and I make a mental note to find some old news footage from back then.

“That was the worst,” Tsuna bemoans with a shudder.

And he only says that because he wasn’t with me and Takeshi when the crazy camp guide tried to kill us both and awaken the ‘fury of the mountain god.’

“Yeah, it was great,” I laugh and haul him back to his feet.
“C’mon Bro-Bro, the powers still out so we might as well make the best of this rare summer opportunity and get some ice cream while there’s a blackout sale going on.”

I start dragging him down the road toward Main Street and the market district. We might even be able to get some glimpses of festival preparations. That should be in full swing right now, heatwave or no heatwave.

“Fratello, I want ice cream too!” Lambo squeals excitedly, directly into my ear and starts tugging on the back of my hair.

“Yes, yes.”

I glance up at Reborn, who is keeping pace with us as he trots along the wall.

“I always though Dream Cream was kind of a dirty name for an ice cream parlor,” I tell him conversationally, “But they make some fucking delicious ice cream flavors including espresso and java chip.”

Just in case we haven’t one hundred percent sold him on this impromptu outing for frozen treats.

And because, hey, we have to start expanding that list of ‘earthly pleasures’ somewhere and ice cream seems like an easy enough place to start.

I see the smirk curling at the sides of his mouth, “Are you buying Monello?”
I grin back at him, “What? Did you forget your wallet at home?”

Lambo has apparently decided that I make an insufficient steed and has taken my momentary distraction, and Tsuna’s proximity, to jump ship. He lands on Tsuna’s shoulders with a cry of ‘ICE CREAM!’ And starts spurring him on faster into town.

“Didn’t you hear with the nice young lady said?” He asks with a heaping helping of self-deprecating humour. “I’m a sweet innocent baby that can’t possibly take care of himself in this big dangerous world.”

Reborn is making light of it but...

It does bother him.

I already knew it, but this is about as close to admitting that it bothers him that he’s ever come. With me at least. I’m sure that there are other people out there somewhere that he has talked to.

I hope.

My pace slows and I watch him.
That pain in my head is still thrumming away. And it’s made worse when I try to think about the Arcobaleno curse. It’s one of the big locked doors in my head.

It’s getting to the point that it’s like picking at a scab. And I have to keep reminding myself to knock it off. We’ll get there when we get there. Stop trying to jump the gun.

I have to wait for Tsuna to catch up. Catch on. That’s still months from now... if we're following anything resembling the ‘canon’ timeline at all any more. Even if we’re not I need to wait for Tsuna because this is his story.

...

But it’s not a story.

It’s life.

It’s my life.

And right at this moment, it is about how my life has started to intersect with this other person's life and... I care way too much about this to let it fall apart because I’m trying to follow a script from Earth Prime.

“Bullshit.”
I say it without looking at Reborn. I don’t need to know his reaction. I can hear it in the sudden screech of violin strings.

And he stops.

He just stops and stares at me. As if I had just said something profound.

I didn’t say anything at all. I haven’t given anything away. It’s one word, and a watered-down cuss word at that. It’s no different than any of the other random shit that has come pouring out of my mouth recently.

It’s not like I said: “Hey, sorry that you’re trapped in this body that is obviously not your body and people seem to be constantly questioning your ability and personal agency. Or treating it like some sort of funny joke. It really seems like you got the raw end of this whole curse deal.... “

Because I don’t know any of that.

When you get down to it, I really don’t know anything.

I know words and concepts.

I know that I don’t belong here.
I know that I don’t give a flying fuck if that is true or not.

“Inari,” He says my name and he sounds all sorts of freaked out and lost.

It doesn’t suit him at all.

_This man wasn’t made for a dull grey sky._

“What?”

That stupid migraine is back. It feels like someone is driving a hot iron poker through the center of my skull. It’s starting to get irritating now. I really must have overdone it. My vision is full of orange and black spots that just seem to keep bursting.

Reborn is giving me a weird look.
I grin and hit a rhythm at him, “C’mon man if we don’t hurry up all that’s going to be left is lukewarm sugar slush and that’s just disappointing.”

The look turns into something a little more worried as he stares at me. I feel like I’m missing something. There’s strange turbulence in his melody that is taking its sweet time to resolve.

“And another thing,” I continue relying on my tried and true method of yammering until the world makes sense again to guide us both through whatever the fuck this is. “Why should I have to pay? You’re the one with a job and a salary dude if anything you should be treating me.”

I leave that with a cocked hip and a cheeky grin.

Reborn is quiet for a long moment before he hops down from the wall and lands heavy on my shoulder.

“Is that how this works,” he asks slyly.

I almost can’t repress my sigh of relief. I don’t know how much longer I could have withstood that lengthily perception check (or whatever the heck that was).

“Well yeah,” I say as I start following after Tsuna and Lambo, “I’m here to provide color commentary and witty antagonisms for entertainment.”

“You think highly of your own company Monello,” Reborn teases and I feel his melody settle and I tune out of his frequency.
“Damn right I do. I’m a fucking delight.”

He chuckles, “I don’t know Monello you may have to earn a treat~”

“Name your trial overlord.”

“Vocabulary quiz,” is his immediate response.

“Really?” I ask with a blink of surprise. I was expecting something a little more physically taxing.

“You’re going to have to learn fast if you want to keep up with me,” He challenges.

My eyes narrow, and I smile all teeth.

“Bring it on man.”
No, I did not score the required 110% on the Italian vocab quiz that would have unlocked ‘Reborn buys me ice cream.’ I have a good ear, but I do not have the memorization abilities to recall every word in that thirty-eight-page document and all of their Japanese translations.

You better believe that I will next time though.

It’s fine for now though. Besides, Himawari-san always gives me and Tsuna a discount when we come by. And combined with the impromptu blackout sale the literal bowl fulls of ice cream are basically free.

We had also picked up an extra party member for this little expedition too.

I don’t know were Tsuna and Lambo kidnapped Hayato from during their mad dash down here, but it’s cool. He looks just as done with this heat as the rest of us are.

When I settle into the booth with our ice cream I also notice that Hayato has collected a pile of pamphlets and brochures advertising the festival. And not the normal ones, no, Hayato is flipping through the conspiracy theorist ones about aliens with this excited grin on his face.

“- sounds like a creature made of radiation from the accounts that were recorded at the time,” I catch him rambling to Tsuna about the that very first Dooms Day centuries ago.

This is the happiest that we have seen him since we met. And it's all because of ALIENS. He is such a nerd, its awesome.
“- I can’t believe that this city has an entire festival dedicated to an extraterrestrial event,” He is smiling and Tsuna is smiling from the contagious excitement.

“Sort of,” Tsuna says, still smiling as he looks over at me, “There is something religious about it too, right?”

“Not really, other than the priest who first declared it ‘Doom Day,’” I tell them as I help Lambo add a mountain of sprinkles on to his mountain of ice cream. “It basically is the space demon festival.”

If possible Hayato gets even more excited and starts rambling on more and more.

“So you really like this alien stuff huh?” I ask teasingly.

Hayato immediately stops talking and goes brick fucking red and makes an intriguing choking sound. Stuttering and stammering with the Namimori Observatory clutched in his hands.

A closet nerd then.

I don’t know why it would bother him. All he really needs to do is ask around town and he would find out that at least eighty percent of what is written in those local conspiracy brochures are proven facts.

Namimori is an interesting place to grow up.
Whatever, I still owe him back for laughing at my ill-conceived crush on the barbarian.

“The festival is a lot of fun,” Tsuna says, jumping to Hayato’s rescue and ending the awkward silence. “There’s music, food, dancing, rides, and a test of courage and funhouse in old town by the shrines.”

Tsuna goes on listing all of the festival activities, his own excitement starting to build. I think he’s always wanted a group of friends to hang out with during things like this. I mean other than me.

Now he has this group of crazy assholes and mafia professionals following him around.

And a girlfriend that can kick all of our asses with one hand tied behind her back.

On that point...

“Did you invite Kyoko to the festival yet?” I turn my teasing on to him with a suggestive waggle of my eyebrows.

Tsuna’s ears turn red and it’s his turn to get caught in a stutter. However, rather than dignify my very important question with a response he passive-aggressively starts shoveling ice cream into his mouth.
“I mean she is your girlfriend now,” I continue with my good-natured ribbing, ignoring the unimpressed look Hayato is giving me.

He can stuff his objections about me teasing the ‘boss.’ Tsuna is my brother and it is my brotherly duty to tease him mercilessly about his blooming romance.

And also I would feel much safer with the sparkling paladin attending Dooms Day with us.

Tsuna makes an adorable squeaking noise and gets this doe eyed and drooly look.

“Girlfriend~” He sighs happily and drifts off into imagination land.

He is so elated feels amazing just being around it. Like a contact high with happy Bossa Nova Jazz beats. It’s relaxing and uplifting all at once. And from the look on Hayato’s face, he feels it too. In an instant, all of our edges are smoothed out in a happy harmony.

It’s so easy to get swept up in his melody when he’s like this.

I know I’ve said it before, but someone should really figure how to bottle this stuff and sell it.

Or box it up.
I reach across the table and snap my fingers in front of his face to snap him out of his daze.

“Alright lover boy you’re starting to drool all over the table.”

“A good Don needs to have perfect table manners at all times,” Reborn says, joining in on the teasing. “Maybe I should run you through the Vongola Etiquette Gauntlet before you embarrass yourself.”

Or he might be completely serious.

Tsuna yelps and starts chanting; “No, no more crazy mafia training. Too many weird things have already happened today.”

“That might actually be a good idea,” I cut in, thinking back to today’s time traveler interaction. “Since apparently there is a fork that means your declaring war and another that means your proposing marriage.”

“It’s the same fork,” Hayato grumbles and makes a face, “It all depends on the placement of the ring finger and how you point it.”

“Well, that’s nice and confusing and will defiantly come and bite you in the ass at some point in the future,” I tell Tsuna.

He whines and tries to drown himself in the bowl of now soupy ice cream.
I giggle manically as a scene starts to form in my mind's eye, “It will be fun to watch Kyoko declare blood vengeance against the allied boss that you’ve accidentally propositioned.”

An instant later I am beamed in the faced with a fist full of sprinkles. Tsuna just glares at me from across the table.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Joke about what?” Takeshi asks, coming out of nowhere and half tackling me into the booth.

I swear, he is basically an excited puppy that was accidentally transformed into a human shape.

“Takeshi, dude, I love you too but I can’t fucking breath,” I gasp into the plush seating and try to wiggle out from under him.

“Oops,” He laughs and pulls himself up and off of me.

“How did you find us Takeshi-kun?” Tsuna asks.

“I thought I heard your voice Tsuna,” He smiles and picks up my spoon and starts eating my ice cream, jerk. “So I thought that I would come and stop in.”
He makes a face at the extremely sugary and caffeinated monstrosity that he has just put in his mouth.

“Yukimura-sensei’s office is just down the street so it’s not like I had to go very far.”

Oh, yeah, Monday is therapy day, isn’t it?

I give him a quick appraising look. No red eyes this time which is a good sign. Last week they had unloaded some pretty heavy stuff I think and Takeshi had spent most of our forest training session with puffy eyes.

I shimmy up the booth and reposition myself with my back against the wall and my feet resting in his lap. Takeshi is a cuddly guy, and he gets particularly touchy-feely when he is emotionally charged. And while I don’t particularly mind being caught in his monster hugs I would rather not risk getting crushed even more than I already have been.

I’ll redirect him to Hayato or Tsuna. Share the love and all that.

“We were just talking festival details and the eccentricities of mafia marriage proposals,” I tell him in a quick summation.

I watch as Takeshi stares at Tsuna and a look of confusion breaks across his face.
“Isn’t it a little fast for you to be asking Sasagawa to marry you?” He asks guilelessly.

“HIEEEE!?? WHAT!? NO!” Tsuna immediately flails.

Somehow he manages to smack himself in the face with his spoon. He stops flailing to press against the sore spot with a whimper.

“Owwww~”

“You okay Bro-Bro?”

“Fine,” He warbles, “Just fine. It’s been a day.”

Hayato is absolutely glare line daggers across the table at Takeshi.

“Don’t take liberties with Tsuna-sama, baseball idiot,” Hayato hisses.

A competitive smirk forms across Takeshi’s face. I sigh and settle in for whatever this latest instalment of red versus blue will bring.
“Are you still on that Haya-kun~” He antagonizes in his usual friendly way, “Tsuna doesn’t mind. Do you Tsuna?”

“Oh, uh, no?” Tsuna says.

“Who are you calling Haya-kun?” Hayato asks darkly.

Takeshi smirks and reaches across the table to steal a spoonful of Hayato’s strawberry ice cream.

“You of course buddy,” He says and shoves the stolen treat into his mouth.

Hayato hisses like a vampire exposed to sunlight and launches himself across the table in a mad attempt to strangle our swordsman. Me and Tsuna both lean out of the way to avoid being drawn into the rumble and ruckus. Lambo cheers at the sudden entertainment, and next to me Reborn looks terribly amused.

“They’re still a work in progress,” I comment with a wry grin.

“They’ll need to get over it sooner than later,” Reborn murmurs back, as we watch Tsuna get drug into the cyclone.

“And I’m sure you have some sort of mafia themed trial that will bring them closer together,” I snark back.
He pointedly does not answer. The brim of the fedora dips down to hide the conniving grin.

The action goes on for a while more and the table bumps and shakes as teenage idiots have an animated ‘dispute’ over it. I see Himawari-san give us an exasperated look from behind the counter.

Normally I would be right in there with them, but my persistent migraine hasn’t completely gone away yet and so, I just sit by and watch. Until Tsuna manages to wind himself around Hayato and pulls them both down on to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Effectively ending the confrontation.

“You guys okay?”

“Fine,” Is Tsuna’s muffled response.

“Hey,” Takeshi leans over and murmurs at me, “That guy has been watching our table for a while.”

The sudden seriousness in his voice and the sharpness in his eyes immediately has me on edge. And I get that he is going for covert operations and attempting to keep a low profile as he points out our new creeper. Only, he decided to tell me and my ability to keep a low profile is severely limited by the fact that I am a flashy fucking idiot.

And Takeshi should really know better by now.
I immediately clamber over him to get a better look at this ‘Mysterious Watcher.’ Takeshi whimpers as my knee collides with an unfortunately tender place in an accidental critical hit on a party member.

Sorry man. But seriously, you should know me better than this now.

“WHERE?!” I demand drawing the attention of the entire parlor to myself.

“By the window, “ he wheezes in pain.

I whip my head around to the windows and see...

A very, very old and odd-looking man dressed in tweed with an ancient Polaroid camera hanging around his neck.

My first thought is: I don’t know this person.

My second thought is: Why would a sane person wear that much tweed in this heat?

My third thought is: That man’s face is LITERALLY MELTING.
And then I blink and see that trippy fucking indigo rotoscoping effect all over this person. I’m hit with the sudden debilitating feeling of vertigo and I tip of Takeshi’s lap and face plant onto the floor.

When Haru had pledged herself as our moral foe I didn’t think she would be returning so immediately.

“You do realize that this is the definition of stalking right?” I demand and point a somewhat shaky finger in her general direction.

It’s a little hard to tell what with how dizzying looking at this illusion is.

There is a brief squeak of ‘HA-HI!’ Before Haru clears her throat and begins speaking in a very badly modulated ‘man’ voice.

“You shouldn’t go pointing fingers at people that is a very rude thing to do young man.”

“IT’S YOU AGAIN!” Tsuna bursts out and joins me in my rude finger pointing.

I watch as the seam around the hastily constructed ear prosthetic begins to peel away from the rest of her face. Once that has fallen off the rest of the indigo rotoscoping flickers out.

I think that is actually mist flames. I don’t know if Haru knows that she is casting a super trippy illusion spell. If so, rad. If not, still kind of rad, but also sort of terrifying that she has that kind of innate ability.
It makes sense though. What with her canonical penchant for disguises.

She clears her throat and looks away from us trying to cover the loss of the plasticine ear.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about young man, I have never seen you hooligans before in my life.”

At this point the fake nose falls off of her face and hits the ground with a gross sounding splat. Because it is still hot as fuck and everything is melting.

Hayato scrambles to his feet and gets into a defensive stance in front of Tsuna, “Who the fuck are you?!” He demands as he reaches into his shirt, “Another one of Della Rosa’s assassins?!”

Which of course sets Takeshi off and has him sliding out of the booth and taking up a position next to his frenemy.

See they can get along if they want to.

“Del who?” Haru asks, forgetting to do the voice.

Hayato is completely ignoring her though, “As if I would believe you. Don’t worry Boss I’ll take
“TAKE ME OUT!?” Haru shrieks and powers right through both Hayato and Takeshi and starts jabbing her finger aggressively into Tsuna’s chest. “I knew you were terrible! What sort of evil boss tells his subordinate to kill a sweet old man minding his own business!?”

We all stare as the rest of the mask SCHLORPS off of her face in an upsetting way and splatters across the floor.

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, but our perception check has trumped your disguise spell.”

“I have an advantage on deception checks,” she immediately turns and fires back at me.

And then blushes.

“HAHI!”

Well, that settles it. We are definitely keeping her. Tsuna work your crazy friendship magic.

Tsuna is giving her this comically horrified look. I assume because he is intimately familiar with my fantasy RPG metaphors.
“Look I think we got off on the wrong foot here,” Tsuna says in a valiant attempt to pacify Haru. “I think there has been a terrible misunderstanding.”

“So you’re not a mafia crime boss who uses his criminal empire to threaten the elderly and mislead innocent children into a life of crime.”

“NO!” Tsuna yells desperately.

Honestly, only one of those points is even vaguely true. Tsuna must look truly nefarious in Haru vision. He probably has one of those handlebar mustaches and a cape.

Also I think I might have broken something in my brain.

Logical thought processes don’t seem to be functioning right now.

“Then you’ll have to prove it to me or I’m going to report you to the police!”

“HIIIIIIIIII!”

Haru raises up the ancient Polaroid and presses down on the shutter release filling the room with a blinding white light. When my vision clears Haru is gone.
“Well that was.... interesting?”

“She is certainly a lively young lady,” Reborn comments as he puts away his randomly acquired sunglasses.

“I’M GOING TO BE ARRESTED!” Tsuna wails mournfully.

Apparently he has forgotten that the police in this city are fucking terrible, thus rendering Haru’s threat null and void. But I’m not going to say that, because I desperately want Tsuna to recruit me a D&D buddy.

“You just have to prove that your harmless Bro-Bro,” I tell him, “It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“She’s crazy I don’t think I can prove anything to her,” He shoots back.

“ Don’t worry Tsuna,” Takeshi consoles him as he pulls him up off the ground, “I think she just wants to be friends.”

“Baseball-idiot, you missed the part were that broad threatened to have the boss thrown in the slammer didn’t you.”

Takeshi just laughs, because he too remembers our fair city’s tragic law enforcement problem.
We part ways with Hayato and Takeshi before the sun goes down and make our way back home.

Tsuna keeps jumping at shadows the whole way back. He is convinced that Haru is going to apparate from the darkness and test his moral fiber (or whatever it is that she is planning to do).

When we finally make it home the window has been fixed and the lights are back on the inside, and we are greeted by Mom and the smell of freshly cooked dinner.

Before we go into the house I catch Reborn not so covertly handing an envelope to a heavyset man in a pair of overalls who mutters something that sounds like an entire sentence of swear words in Russian.

I told him that the contractor was going to be pissed.

Reborn flashes the GLOCK at him and the man stammers and scampers like a bunny.

There is still a dull throbbing pain in my head by time bedtime rolls around. I don’t know what the heck happened today I have never had a headache last this long before. I end up cracking and taking a couple of pain killers before flopping face-first into bed and directly into REM sleep.

And here’s something strange; I don’t usually dream. I don’t really remember the last time that I
could recall having a dream. I have nightmares though, though even those are few and far in between. And even then it’s mostly just memories.

Tsuna dreams.

I always like hearing him talk about them. They sound interesting.

I’m dreaming now.

And it’s a peculiar situation because I am fully aware that I am in fact dreaming.

I’m holding Tsuna’s hand as we walk down a hazy street that has been lit with neon lights. Not that we would need a light with the warm orange glow that Tsuna is giving off.

He’s like a lantern in the darkness.

All around us are people in masks who seem perfectly content to go about their own business. Somewhere in the background I can hear the dim music of the festival and the carnival rides. All around us things are floating, like gravity, forgot how to function.

Everything feels slow and hazy, but strangely pleasant.
I know just as long as I keep holding Tsuna’s hand everything is going to be alright.

It’s important that I don’t let go.

Something grabs my ankle with unnatural strength and tries to pull me down.

My hand holds tight to Tsuna’s and I feel something trying to wrench him away from me. It takes a Herculean effort to look up and see what is going on.

Hands.

Hands covered in stitches and strange grafts.

Hands with claws.
Hands missing fingers.

And behind them all, there is a set of eyes peering out of the darkness.

Hands reaching out of the darkness and grabbing at Tsuna and trying to wrench him away from me. They pull and tug and claw and Tsuna goes limp like a rag doll in my grip. The glow that he was giving off before begins to extinguish and drawback to a point at the center of his forehead.

The hands grab tight and start clawing up him reaching for that bead of light on his forehead before it is snuffed out again.

I reach out my hand and send a bolt of lightning into the darkness. The hands abruptly let go and pull back into the darkness.

And all of a sudden the two of us are falling.

Falling.
Falling.

And the only thing above us is the enormous blue moon.

“PINEAPPLES!”

I hit the bedroom floor hard as Tsuna shouts out his absurd word of the day.

“Ow.”

This seems like an inauspicious start.

“Pineapples?” I ask as I pull myself up.
Tsuna gives me a sleepy look.

“Pineapples on the moon,” He says, explaining absolutely nothing at all.

“Sounds like fun,” I tell him as I try to shake the sleep fog out of my head.

That had been a weird dream... nightmare... something?

We must have eaten wayyyyy too much sugar yesterday.

There is the soft sound of feet hitting the desk as Reborn lands. His hair is wild and unkempt and he is still dressed in his polka-dot pajamas.

“You’re finally up at a reasonable hour Dame-Tsuna,” he says with an air of mockery. “We should make good of this rare opportunity and get started early.”

“Started on what?” Tsuna asks with suspicion and an ear splitting yawn.

“The young lady challenged you,” Reborn says as he turns to face the window, “A Vongola Don never turns his back on a challenge.”
I pull myself up a little more so that I can peek outside over his wild hair. And they're standing on the concrete wall is a Namahage staring intently into our bedroom window.

Or rather a very determined girl dressed in a Namahage costume.

It’s T-Minus four days until the Doom Moon rises.

“Yeah, that seems about right.”

Chapter End Notes

Everything is fine here. Nothing weird is happening at all :D

But, yeah, Inari needs to be careful about what metaphysical wall he wants to slam his head against repeatedly. He has chosen a rather dangerous one that has a Boss standing behind it. But he is still DETERMINED.

Once again, thank you so much for all the wonderful comments and kudos :) They make my day, you have no idea.

And as always, I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
“This seems like a bit of an overreaction on our part,” I comment idly as I cling to Takeshi’s back like a baby koala.

“Is it though?” Hayato asks, his voice a few octaves higher than it should be, “Is it REALLY?”

I take a moment to consider, “Maybe not, but it still feels that way.”

“She followed me into the BATHROOM,” Tsuna interjects sounding even more freaked out by the weird shit in our life than usual.

“She tried to break into our bedroom, she tried to use a butterfly net to kidnap Lambo!” He continues.

And, yes, laid out like that Haru is much more frightening than I ever could have ever thought possible. However, we had also nearly set her on fire on three separate occasions and the Lambo thing was in the midst of a Hayato inspired tantrum.
The bathroom thing and the breaking and entering thing were completely unacceptable though.

“And there was the thing with the goats,” Takeshi adds. Even he doesn’t sound as jovial as he usually does when we're running our Neighbourhood Watch Mafia.

Honestly, I don’t know where our group sits on the alignment chart anymore. But I’m fairly certain that we are all way too violent and crazy to fit into the lawful good category. Tsuna is the best of us and I’m pretty sure that even he can only barely fit into neutral good.

“She also led an uprising of centenarians,” I say as placidly as possible, “Which brings me back to the earlier point of all of this being a little bit of an overreaction. We are willfully adding to the escalation of the insanity at this point.”

“This coming from you?” Takeshi laughs abruptly.

“Yes, exactly, when I’m pulling for de-escalation you know shit has gotten worse,” I shoot back ignoring the pointed looks of disbelief Hayato and Tsuna send over their shoulders as the four of us weave through the crowds of people doing last-minute festival preparations down Main Street.

“She just jumped you dressed up like a fucking water fountain,” Hayato says, “I’m pretty sure she is still following us in that weird-ass fucking get up too.”

Yeah, and that had just about given me a heart attack.

I don’t know if Haru knows what she’s doing with the illusionist stuff. I get the feeling that this is
all instinctual on her part. Which is an absolutely terrifying thought considering how thoroughly she masks her presence.

I can’t SEE her unless she willingly breaks her own illusion or it starts falling apart. And I cant HEAR her either. But that second one seems to require me to have at least a general sense of the person that I’m trying to deal with. And I have not a fucking clue what I’m dealing with when it comes to Miura Haru.

We are defiantly dealing with a master of the jump scare.

We might also be dealing with some sort of boogieman offshoot.

We are most defiantly dealing with an obsessive and relentless stalker that is surely plotting our untimely demise.

This is obviously a Doom Moon thing. People have a tendency to go an extra special kind of crazy around this time of year. I am in no way trying to excuse this extremely problematic behavior, but I can say with a fair bit of certainty that there is something extra special insane going on here.

“What is she even trying to prove anymore?” Tsuna hisses as the four of us duck through a row of colorful tents to cut into the market district. “I mean at the beginning she was trying to prove that we aren’t cut out to take care of Reborn and Lambo, but now she’s just...”

He doesn’t finish that sentence.
There are no words to finish that sentence because I don’t even think Haru knows what she’s going for anymore. Beyond thinking that Tsuna is the greatest evil since Lucifer himself. We have engaged in a dangerous game of brinksmanship with an opponent that shows no signs of backing down.

“Quick hide,” Tsuna says as his hyper-intuition seems to ping our stalker. The four of us quickly duck under a float and watch as a bipedal drinking fountain races by.

“It is still a million degrees out I have no idea how she can run around in those outfits and live,” I comment idly.

“Don’t be fucking impressed by that crazy bitch,” Hayato snarls at me and smacks me upside the head.

It takes a little bit of ingenuity to kick him back while I’m still clinging to Takeshi’s back.

“Don’t fucking smack me dick head,” I snap back at him.

We reemerge from under the float and begin to meander our way through the market district where the smell of festival foods are already filling the air. About five minutes pass in silence. I’m briefly enjoying being the tallest person in the group for once as I continue to ride piggyback on Takeshi. And I’m keeping a cautionary lookout for any bipedal drinking fountains running around.

Tsuna lets out an enormous sigh and slumps dramatically.
“This wouldn’t have even been a problem if Reborn had agreed to go play ‘house’ with her or whatever,” he complains.

“Yeah, that was never going to happen in this life,” I tell him as I remember the ‘look’ that Reborn had given Haru as she had baby talked to him with a colorful rattle yesterday. His eye had been twitching sooooo much.

“Whyyyy,” Tsuna whines even more, “It’s not like it would have been hard.”

“No just completely fucking emasculating.”

“He’s a baby what does he care.”

I wrap my legs tighter around Takeshi’s waist so I can lean over and smack Tsuna lightly upside the head.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“A flawed premise!”

Takeshi bursts out laughing as Tsuna and Hayato let out outraged noises in stereo.
“You’re so angry today.”

“Because this situation has reached critical stupid!”

I look back over at Tsuna who is still grumbling. Not that he doesn’t have a right to grumble in this situation. He most certainly does he has spent the past three days getting harassed by the Cosplay Stalker.

But once again, retaliation didn’t work, avoidance isn’t working, and sending Reborn at her feels more like a last-ditch nuclear option.

“You do realize that the most likely way that scenario ends is with Haru being very dead right?” Skipping over all that and going straight for the heart of the matter. “And as crazy and uncomfortable as she is I don’t really think you want her dead do you?”

The three of us stare at Tsuna as he pales dramatically, “Hieeeee~”

“Why don’t you just call Sasagawa?” Takeshi asks.

Tsuna stares back at him with an even greater look of horror and dismay. “And say what to her? ‘Hey, Kyoko-chan there is a scary girl stalking me?! She’ll break up with me for sure!’”

“They both girls maybe she can communicate with her telepathically or something Tsuna-sama,” Hayato suggests, and then pauses, “Or they might get into a cat-fight and that would solve everything because Kyoko-san would punch her through a wall.”
“Stop. Now. All of you,” I interject when it actually looks like Doofus and Dingus are actually thinking of going along with Hayato’s brain dead plan. Seriously, I don’t know why they seem to think girls are some sort of terrifying alien species.

Tsuna is so fucking lucking Kyoko is into him.

And has thus far managed to avoid hearing the stupid bullshit that comes out of these idiots mouths sometimes. It’s like their thirteen or something...

Oh wait.... right...

“We are fucking functional human beings we can have a normal straightforward conversation with Haru on our own,” I continue, “You know solve things peacefully for once.”

Takeshi tilts his head to look up at me with concern, “Are you feeling alright Inari?”

“What?” I feel my face flush with outrage, “I can’t be responsible for once.”

“No!” Tsuna immediately says giving me a somewhat horrified look.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence there Bro-Bro,” I say flatly with a roll of my eyes.
“Seriously though from where I’m standing we have two options. One: we talk this out with her and you know explain why stalking is bad and wrong and how this whole thing has been a really weird misunderstanding. Or two: we spend the next three days obsessively avoiding her while trying to enjoy the festival which sounds like just a barrel of laughs.”

“... Who are you?” Hayato asks incredulously as he gives me the most disbelieving look.

“The fucking adult in the room apparently,” I snark back at him, “And just stop and marvel at that.”

“She scared you so bad that you jumped on my back and haven’t let go since,” Takeshi snickers at me.

I glower down at him and pinch the shell of his ear in retaliation. Which is much more in line with my usual character.

And him immediately dropping me on my ass is much more in line with his. Though I probably deserve it considering that I kneed him in the balls the other day.

“Don’t just sit there she’s going to catch up again,” Tsuna calls back to me as the three of them continue to weave through the crowds milling around in the market district and disappear out of sight.

Assholes.
I’m pretty sure this avoidance thing isn’t going to get us anywhere. And someone really needs to have a serious talk to Haru about how stalking is never a good thing. And that using your unfair magical advantage makes it even worse.

Mist flames are probably the most dangerous weapon the universe could have given to a girl with her proclivities.

She is like a bad horror movie trope come to life and then covered with indigo blue neon.

Which has been giving me panic attacks for an entirely different reason that may or may not have something to do with the potential big bad of the story arc and the fact that my terrible English teacher had been an illusionist who had tried to strangle me to death only a few weeks ago.

As quick as I can I pull myself to my feet before some random passerby can step on me. Not that standing does much to help me see through the crowd since apparently I am the shortest person in this mess.

Mom was a lying liar when she had said I’d grown. I don’t think I have grown a millimeter since sixth grade. Where for once brief glorious moment in history I had been taller than both Tsuna and Takeshi. Of course, Takeshi had then decided that he was going to become a giant and Tsuna had overtaken me by that one precious inch.

Which isn’t really important right now when there is a bipedal drinking fountain with a girl’s face trying to hunt down our party. And no matter how I try to rationalize that it’s weird.
My phone buzzes and I take the moment to pull it out and check the new message from the overlord.

Reborn:  **Stop dawdling Monello.**

I roll my eyes and shove it back into my pocket.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I mutter with a smile.

I have no idea where Reborn has hidden away. But I know for a fact that he has been watching our progress like a sadistic hawk. I wasn’t lying when I said Haru had attempted to baby talk him the other day. I had seriously thought he was going to snap and shoot her once she had busted out the rattle.

There is a limit to the oblivious emasculating commentary that he can handle and Haru managed to instantaneously surge straight passed it. She has a talent for making all social interactions painfully uncomfortable. Which is a talent I can respect but not one I want to constantly and consistently be exposed to if I can help it.

I set back on my way through the crowds that are mulling around the soon to be open festival grounds. The actual festivities don’t start until tomorrow night. But there are already a few booths open for business. Mostly food vendors and some carnival games.

I think Tsuna and the guys may have accidentally ditched me in their flight from the psychologically draining illusionist. They probably assumed that I would have been tailing right behind them and not taking my dear sweet time getting up off my ass.
“Now where did those jerks get to?”

I’ll find them eventually.

If not I’ll go climb a building to get a birds-eye view. I haven’t done that in a while. I’m probably out of practice.

I start to meander my way through the crowds of people who are working frantically to finish with festival preparations. Lights are being strung, tents being raised. There are booths with games that passing children are begging their parents to try out.

It all seems so nice and wholesome.

I hope nothing too stupid or violent happens this year.

I’m so distracted by the sights that I don’t notice the bipedal water fountain before it barrels into my back and I fall face-first into the cement.

Ow.

Again.
I swear I usually have better reflexes than this. But then, my balance has been off since our first encounter with the master of disguise and the world went all indigo and rotoscoped. It hasn’t happened again since, which makes me think that it might not have been Haru that had caused it.

But she did cause this.

Her costume weighs a metric ton. How the hell has she been running in this thing.

“Please get the fuck off of me before your spout punctures my spleen,” I wheeze.

“HAHI! Sorry!” Haru exclaims and starts to rock her awkwardly shaped plaster and paper mache prison off of me.

This means that by the time she actually manages to roll herself off of me I feel bruised and half flattened.

“How the hell do you run so fast in these things?” I inquire while giving her an appraising side-eyed look.

“I do weight training for the gymnastics team at school,” Is her complete reasonable and yet somewhat unbelievable answer.

“You must have some serious constitution bonuses to do it in this heat though,” I continue with a
prod to the nerd that I know exists under all that excessive stalker.

At this point I am hoping that I might be able to take advantage that the subject of her ‘adoration’ and the subject of her ‘animosity’ are currently elsewhere, and have a normal fucking conversation with her.

And, yes, I am absolutely trying to use my supernatural power of persuasion on her. With god damn D&D metaphors. It might be a long shot but weirder has worked for me in the past.

She stops flopping around like a turtle flipped onto its shell and mumbles something.

“What?”

She looks at me with this somewhat embarrassed yet somewhat hopeful expression and repeats, “I said: I took resilient as a feat back at level one so I have a bonus to CON saves.”

I lever myself up and give her a cockeyed grin, “That seems to have worked out well for you.”

“Yeah....”

The crowd has started to part around us like the Red Sea. Though every so often a festival worker will give us a glare for blocking the path. I think most of the public just assumes that we are rehearsing for some kind of super bizarre play.
‘ATTACK OF THE LIVING FOUNTAINS.’

It would fit right in with the 1982 production of: ‘WHEN BLENDERS STRIKE,’ and the 1992 sequel, ‘WHEN BLENDERS STRIKE BACK.’

Something about the Doom Festival always makes people think their terrible ideas are really, really good. And that’s when things like murder cults and abstract performance art happen.

Grandpa used to say that the Doom Moon just amplifies the crazy in people.

Haru is quiet for a good long moment while I’m busy thinking about the extremely localized consciousness-altering properties of a lunar event. Her head and extremities all abruptly retract into the rectangular costume, like she actually is some kind of weird turtle.

I watch in fascination as her feet break through the bottom of the costume, which is apparently made entirely of wire and plaster and she shimmies the rest of the way out.

“Holy fuck, did you try to entomb yourself in there?” I ask, somewhat horrified and somewhat impressed. That takes some dedication.

“No,” A pause, “Maybe? It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Uh-huh, and how many people did you manage to terrify before we happened upon your elaborate
“disguise?” I ask.

Haru looks away in an extremely sheepish way and does not answer.

“Right then, so out of curiosity are you just about done with this creepy stalker thing?”

She turns back to me with a glare, “Haru is not a creepy stalker,” she huffs, “she is a champion of truth and justice.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you are not the lawful good in this situation, at the very best you are chaotic neutral. You do realize that you have spent the last three days terrifying random strangers in an attempt to do...something? Honestly, I have no idea what you're even going for with this anymore.”

“Says the right-hand man to a nefarious criminal,” Haru shoots back at me in outrage, “You're just trying to get into my head so that I’ll stop trying to save Reborn-chan and Lambo-chan from your evil influences.”

“And just for clarification unleashing a stampede of goats at a children’s playground was going to accomplish that how?”

“It would prove that your boss was an irresponsible caretaker for those poor sweet angels and then Haru would sweep in to save them from his evil ways and rehabilitate them,” she finishes this
declaration with a dramatic finger pointed between my eyes.

“You do realize the flaw in your logic right? Just because you think someone else is behaving badly doesn’t give you the right to behave even worse. Someone could have actually gotten hurt there,” I tell her as sternly as I can.

Because I am apparently doing this.

Fucking hell, when did I become the responsible one? Tsuna better get his ass back here and deal with this protagonist shit. I’m just the comic relief.

“Get out of the road you troublesome kids,” a festival worker holding a clear box of plastic ducks and frogs looks down at us disapprovingly, “your blocking traffic.”

“He immediately stiffens and starts walking past us grumbling the entire time about ‘teens today and their relationship problems.’

I resist the urge to smack myself in the face. Somehow, Haru’s very existence seems to cause uncomfortable misunderstandings. What a strange and dangerous power she possesses.

I feel somewhat better to see that Haru looks just as uncomfortable as I feel. She still isn’t trying to dispute my earlier point, so I’m just going to power on and see if this is a wall that I can
“Not that I don’t find you chaotic powers somewhat awe-inspiring. But seriously though you have to chill with the creepy stalker bit.”

“I’m not-“ Haru tries to protest again, but I’ve had just about enough of this.

“You are,” I tell her point-blank, “You ambushed my ‘boss’ in a public washroom yesterday and that isn’t just stalking that crosses the line straight into sexual harassment which is also a crime. And despite what you may think that is true no matter what your gender identity or orientation.”

Haru looks a little green and properly abashed now at least. She isn’t even looking at me anymore. She’s just staring down at her own knees that I can’t help but notice is covered in bruises and scrapes from the inside of that ridiculous costume. Excessive to the point of self-destruction. If we do manage to sort out all this stalking stuff she will fit right in with our crazy group.

She sniffles and I can see the telling red flush spread across her face.

“I j-just wanted to h-help,” she hiccups and then starts BAWLING.

AHHHHHHHHHHHH-

Tsuna where are you!? I can’t deal with all of this emotional turmoil on my own.
All around us, people are starting to turn and stare at us.

Great now we're a sideshow attraction.

Hey, Universe? Why do you keep sending all these disaster children to me? Don’t you realize that I am the biggest fucking disaster of all?

“You sure picked a weird way to show it, dude,” I tell her.

“And I just wanted to play with the cute babyyyyyyyyyy~”

Oh lord please stop.

“Alright, alright, alright, please stop crying,” I reach over and pat her stiffly on the head as she bursts into full-on waterworks. “It’s not too late to work shit out.”

I almost feel bad.

Almost.
It had to be said. And unfortunately, it had to be said by a dumbfuck like me. But I can’t really let her creepy stalking and abuse of the dark arts go unchallenged.

“I mean it will probably require some epic side-questing and a hell of a persuasion check, and you know, like, an apology.”

Haru sniffs again and looks up at me with a red and blotchy face. A fellow ugly crier then.

“You’re not entirely terrible Mr. Right-Hand-Man,” she says.

And I come to the sudden, depressing, realization that, “Idiot, you don’t even know our names do you?”

The way she immediately freezes up and averts her gaze away from me tells me everything I need to know about that.

“I know Reborn-chan, and Lambo-chan’s names,” she says petulantly.

I roll my eyes, “Great, and what about the poor fuckers that you have been using your dark magic to sneak attack these past few days?”

Haru gives me a brief confused look before furrowing her brow in concentration, “Dame-something and...”
“Yeah, no, zero points there,” I chide and flick her lightly between the eyes.

“Ouch!”

“Next time you feel the need to be a goblinoid creeper to ‘make friends’ DON’T. Just introduce yourself like a normal person. It will save us all a lot of grief and prospective lawsuits.”

She glares at me and rubs at her forehead.

“Well I bet that you don’t know my na-“

“You’re Haru,” I say with a wry grin, “You have a habit of transitioning into the third person at random intervals.”

“HA-HI!”

I watch as she starts to fidget with the hem of her shirt. I think the awkwardness of this social encounter is finally starting to get to her too.

“So, um.... What are your names?”
“The guy who you seem to think is the root of all evil in the world is Tsunayoshi,” I tell her.

I’m going to go with his full name here; one, because it sounds somewhat more impressive, and two, there is less of a chance that is will summon up the moniker Dame-Tsuna that seems to follow him everywhere he goes.

Haru blinks at me, “Like the Shogun?”

“‘Yes, like the Shogun,” I confirm with a sigh.

“And what about you?”

“Inari,” I answer somewhat distractedly as I start to search the crowd again for any sign of my brother and friends.

“LIKE THE GOD?!” Her exclamation is so loud and out of place in this conversation that I almost leap out of my skin.

Again.

Child of the Boogieman. I’m fucking sure of it now.
“No, not like the God,” I retort with all the exasperation that emotionally draining seriously conversations cause. “If you must have context; I was named after my grandfather.”

I start weaving my way through the crowd and she rushes to catch up.

“Your grandpa?”

“Yup,” I’m not really paying attention to her at all anymore. I still haven’t caught sight of my morons which means that I’m probably going to have to make use of the magical radio scanner in my brain.

“... My grannie used to play D&D with someone named Tsukishima Inari,” Haru says out of nowhere and brings me to a screeching halt, “He was nice. Grannie was really sad when he passed away.”

I....

I don’t......

I’m not sure what expression I have on my face while I stare at her. Shock doesn’t feel right. Neither does disbelief. Of all the people that I might have expected to bring up Grandpa’s name, Haru was near the last on that list.
What are the fucking chances?

And also who is her Grannie? It would have to be Kobayakawa-baachan. Now that I think about it I sense the influence of an affably evil gnome cleric here.

“I remember she told me that something had happened to his grandson,” Haru continues giving me this look with big curious eyes.

And I freeze.

Because I know what she’s going to say.

**You can’t. You couldn’t possibly...**

“She said that he got really sick and then he couldn’t mo-“
“As interesting as this segue down the dialogue tree is it really isn’t relevant,” I cut her off as quickly as I can, “Unless you are trying to infer something, in which case I will kindly ask you to Cease and desist immediately.”

‘Roll your intimidation check’ Grandpa says, his voice sly and his grin pulling at the crow's nests around his eyes.

‘Natural Twenty.’

I am breathing as deeply and as evenly as I possibly can in a desperate attempt to stave off the panic attack that I can feel growing in my chest.

I can’t have this conversation.

I can’t think about that.

This is done.

Haru stares at me like a deer in the headlights
‘It doesn’t count if you’re playing with loaded dice my boy.’

It does if I’m on the verge of a complete mental breakdown Grandpa.

“Sorry,” Haru says, dejected and apologetic all at once.

Apparently she doesn’t realize that I’m currently having a break from reality.

I need Tsuna.

I need to scream.

I need to hit something.

I need to never think of this again.

When Haru doesn’t get a response she continues, “you know a lot of words.”
Thankfully changing the subject to something I can deal with.

“Yeah, well, talking is my only consistently useful skill.”

She lets out an awkward nervous giggle at that, “you really are a bard then.”

“And you’re some sort of unholy amalgamation of rogue and sorcerer that I have never encountered before,” I shoot back, desperately trying to grab onto something resembling my equilibrium. “By the way how did you manage to pull off the crazy illusion stuff?”

We’re finally on the move again. And now I have instinctively locked onto Tsuna’s frequency and am following the sound of the trumpet-like a lost sailor follows the North Star.

He sounds a little worried, a little anxious. But the guys seem to be doing a good job of keeping him safe.

“Mostly paper-mache and plaster,” Haru answers as she tries to discreetly rub the last of the tears out of her eyes.

“I got that bit, I mean the magic that you put on top of it to convince people that it’s real.”

She pauses and gives me a strange look, “Inari-san, magic isn’t actually real.”
Well, that answers that at least. Apparently we have another magical fire prodigy on our hands. Only this one is much more problematic than Kyoko.

At least Kyoko wanted to beat the shit out of actual bad guys.

“Oh are you in for a surprise,” I mutter under my breath.

“Did you say something?”

I’m about to answer when I am interrupted by a series of familiar-sounding explosions, and an even more familiar cry of, “HIEEEE!”

And then a much less familiar, “REBORN DO SOMETHING!”

“C’mon,” I say grabbing her by the back of her shirt and dragging her to where I can hear the sounds of a random encounter starting up. “We should go before someone causes massive structural damage to the bridge trying to do something stupid.”

“HA-HI?”

“The world is a strange, strange place full of magical assassins.”
I really hope there is something there I can hit. After all of that stupidly intense serious conversation, I feel the need to indulge in some equally stupid and pointless violence.

There’s pointless violence.

Of course, there is pointless violence.

This is my life there is always stupid pointless violence around every corner.

I don’t quite know how things managed to get so wildly out of control on Tsuna’s side of things while I was occupied with Haru. But somehow the guys had managed to run into an important plot point in my absence.

And by plot point, I mean Futa de la Stella.

Futa, unlike some people, is not an ‘unlockable character’ in my brain. I had already known about him before now. Ranking Futa, one of the mafia’s most valuable informants. And, if I remember correctly, the only person on Earth who frequently communes with alien life forms.

There isn’t really any point in me trying to deny the existence of aliens at this point. This kid literally talks to something called the ‘Ranking Planet’ to get his strangely accurate information.
Magic, aliens, ghosts. Until I get hard evidence to the contrary I’m going to go with the theory ‘all myths are true’ in this universe. It seems like the safest bet.

But as certain I am that weird shit exists in this world I am now even more certain that Futa does, in fact, communicate with hyper-intelligent, statistically inclined alien life forms somewhere out there in the deep void of space. Because as soon as I see him I feel that familiar rush of oncoming information, and I brace myself for the mental equivalent of getting hit by a train.

Only it doesn’t come.

Instead a buffer of cool relaxing energy encircles my mind and the ‘knowing’ doesn’t hurt so much this time. And everything slots neatly into place under a mental heading titled Futa de la Stella.

Thank you strange alien presence?

I guess?

There’s no answer. And thank god for that, there is enough shit that goes on inside my head without adding mental communication with aliens to that list.

“What’s going on?” Haru hisses at me, and I am brought back to the present.

Where Tsuna and the guys seem to be protecting our newest addition to the family from some
dumb fucking punks who obviously have no idea who they're dealing with.

Which is stupid, because three of them look extremely familiar.

Ugly face tattoo guy, too many piercings, and bad mohawk.

There are at least a dozen others, but those ones stick out as this is now the third time that we have encountered these particular assholes. The first was when they did a really terrible job of kidnapping me. The second was when they were being subcontracted as an ‘expendable workforce’ for Verde and Kyoko declared vengeance upon them.

They seem to be prone to making terrible life choices.

And also have a tragic case of short term memory loss because Tsuna himself has kicked their heads in himself. And yet they don’t seem to remember that. Though of course according to anime logic underwear is equivalent to a master disguise.

I’m still waiting for the legend of the boxer short vigilante to start spreading around town.

“Hand over the kid and the book and no one has to get hurt,” ugly face tattoo threatens as he repeatedly smacks a crowbar into his hand. Doing his best to look threatening, while confirming that is is, in fact, a kidnapping.

And sort of succeeding... I guess? Random bystanders look plenty intimidated. Tsuna and Futa look about the normal amount of intimidated.
Takeshi and Hayato look just about ready to throw down.

Too bad they are super surrounded and outnumbered.

“At a glance, I’ll say attempted child abduction,” I finally answer Haru as I scan the scene for Reborn. I spot him posted up on top of a nearby food stand with a lime green sniper rifle.

“Tsuna-sama told you fucks to back off,” Hayato snarls as he takes a step forward.

At the same time, Haru shrieks, “CHILD-“ In my ear and in my hear and I have to smack my hand over her mouth so that she doesn’t give away our somewhat strategic position to the actual bad guys.

She does give us away to Reborn though. And from what little I can read from his expression at this distance I’m pretty sure the thought is ‘What are you doing you, idiot?’

Recruitment? Reformation? I honestly have no clue beyond cessation of hostilities between our group and the illusionist stalker...

Who knows one of my most closely guarded secrets thanks to a shared backstory connection. I kind of want to keep an eye on that.
I give Reborn a shrug and turn my attention back to Haru, “Can you try not to give our position away to the enemy?”

She glares at me but thankfully doesn’t start screaming again.

Team Neighbourhood Watch and Team Idiot Gangsters seem to be in the midst of some serious pre-fight dialogue.

“You’re just going to leave this to your criminal boss?” She hisses, “That poor boy is going to be sold into slavery.”

I roll my eyes and give her an unimpressed look, “That kid went to Tsuna for help and I can promise you that he isn’t going to let anything happen to him.”

She doesn’t believe me. That’s fine. I know Tsuna better than anyone else and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that nothing is going to happen to Futa on his watch.

He’s going to protect that kid with his dying will.

One of the goons, the one with the mohawk that looks like it was shoved through a lawnmower, lunges for Tsuna and Futa but is stopped as Hayato sticks out a foot to trip him and Takeshi brings his bat down hard on the back of his head.

“He said he doesn’t want to go with you,” Tsuna says, amplified by the sound of a trumpet call.
I feel a grin pull across my face and I start to move away from Haru to creep toward the action.

“Where are you going!” She whisper-shouts at me.

“I’m going to go do a thing to make sure we get the advantage,” I tell her and continue moving, “Help out of fuck off I don’t really care at this point creeper.”

“What!? Creeper!?”

“Prove me wrong,” I say and duck into a tent full of scarves and bangles and pretty sparkles that I may have to take.

I do a quick check-in my pockets to make sure the glitter is good to go before I quickly pass through the neighbouring two tents and clamber up the side of the food stand that this dramatic standoff is taking place next to.

Showtime.

I clear my throat dramatically to get the attention of the class and slap on my biggest cheekiest smile as I beam down at them.
“HEY, YOU WITH THE UGLY FACE TATTOO AND THE EXTREMELY POOR LIFE CHOICES!” I call down from on high.

Might as well go with a classic for old time sake.

“You!” He shouts and points making sure that all of his cohorts are now looking up at me to. I love it when they play along it makes everything so much easier.

“Yeah me, what the fuck man I thought you went to prison after the ‘Angel of Vengeance’ beat your ass.”

The ones that were present for Kyoko’s first epic display of power pale dramatically. As they should.

“As if a jail cell could hold me.”

“....The police didn’t do your paper work did they.”

“Of course fucking not it’s Namimori.”

Maybe we should just give the power of law enforcement over to Hibari at least then if criminals were left to roam the street they would be legitimately to terrified to pull dumb shit like this.
“You really should start thinking of a better career path though-,” I continue to antagonize as the rest of my party gets into a better position. Hayato pulls out his fun mystery explosives. Takeshi drags his bat through the air in a high-speed blur of blue transforming it into its sharper pointer state. Tsuna picks up Futa and holds him close to his chest, ready to dodge at a moment's notice.

“-This whole criminal subcontracting thing really isn’t working out too well for you dicks.”

“That’s because of you meddling kids!”

“... Did you just use a Scooby-Doo line on me?”

“A what?”

One day I am actually going to have to go through this universes media library so I know what exists and what doesn’t.

“Never mind,” I say jamming my fists into my pockets and grabbing two fist fulls of glitter, “So tell me, have you thought about your DOOM today?”

“Wha-“

I launch the glitter at them and it rains down in a cascade of rainbow-colored sparkles. Half of them flat out laugh at me while the other half start approaching with their makeshift weapons
Come into my parlor, said the spider to the flies.

I snap my fingers and the current is set and lightning surges through the rainbow of sparkles in a burst of green and orange creating a web of pain that freezes a dozen of them in place twitching and shrieking at the sudden low-grade electrocution. That also has the super cool effect of bursting into flames around them which adds to the intimidation factor.

Three explosive charges in colorful capsules roll into the center of the web and detonate sending the lot of them flying off in all directions as Takeshi surges forward with his sword drawn to launch his own attack.

Who knew all of that protect the boss training in the woods would have such immediate real-world applications?

“That attack of yours is much more effective than it has any right to be,” Reborn comments dryly from his perch on the tent next to mine. He still has the sniper rifle poised and ready to go in case Tsuna needs that extra influx of magical adrenaline, but for now, he seems content to let the boys fight it out fisticuffs style.

“I know right?” I reply with a snicker and a flick f glittery fingers in his direction. Below us there are still at least five of them caught up in an ongoing web of electricity.

I think I almost have the charge right now. I do need to look into better quality glitter though.... and a better glitter dispensing system.
“That will teach you fucking pricks for disrespecting Tsuna-sama!” Hayato snarled and delivers a swift kick on one of their asses.

“You certainly took your time getting back,” Reborn says, as we continue to watch the action.

“I was busy using my powers of persuasion as a force for good.”

“And where is the ‘nice’ young lady?” He asks snidely.

Takeshi swings his sword and cuts through a pipe and two-by-four in one swift motion. In the same motion he gives one of the punks the closest shave he has probably ever had in his entire life and stops just before takin the pricks head clean off.

Unfortunately, as he is doing this two more break past him and Hayato and heads straight for Tsuna and Futa. Tsuna shrieks and starts madly dodging the flurry of blows and turns to keep Futa safe.

“Tsuna-niisan!” Futa cries and that goes straight to my heart. New little brother acquired.

Reborn raises the sniper rifle and is ready to pull the trigger to ignite Tsuna. But before he can fire or I can go barreling into the fray I catch a glow of vibrant indigo and the scream of an alto-saxophone.

“Lamppost,” I say as an answer to Reborn’s earlier question.
“What?”

I don’t even have time to formulate a response as reality warps around one of the lampposts and Haru swings herself around at high speed and collides with both of Tsuna’s assailants.

“Don’t worry Tsunayoshi-san Haru is here to help!” She chirps cheerfully and proceeds to use one of them as a box spring to launch herself off of.

“HIIIIIIEEE!?????” Tsuna shrieks. He looks around wildly and then up at me and, “INARI WHAT DID YOU DO!?”

“I got you a creepy minion Bro-Bro!”

“Haru isn’t creepy!!” Haru screams as she proceeds to meld into the background again.

“YES, YOU ARE!” I call back at her, “You can work on self-improvement later!”

Tsuna continues to flail and panic, but he looks moderately less stressed out but about a hundred and twenty percent more freaked out at having Haru of all people come to his rescue.

“You have an unusual talent for recruitment,” Reborn raises an eyebrow as he looks at me.
“All of my talents are unusual dude,” I shoot back at him and get ready to jump down into the action. “But this one was less unusual and more having to ‘adult’ at an idiot until she realized the error of her ways.”

He chuckles a little at that, “Stop lazing around Monello, you have work to do.”

“Right-o.” I grin and leap down landing heavy on the idiot with too many piercings shoulders sending him crashing back to the ground.

Things look like their getting a little dicey for Tsuna. He can’t really fight back while he’s holding the kid and he’s not quite as strong as me to be able to jump around while carrying another person.

I tuck and roll past Takeshi who conveniently blocks a sledgehammer strike and then he lets out a whistle as I stick a dramatic landing. Like we’re back at baseball practice and I’m doing one of my crazy dives to catch a line drive.

Thank you, thank you, I’ll be here all week.

“Fucking moron,” Hayato snipes.

Yeah, that sounds more likely.
“Right back at you octopus-head.”

The guys have taken out the majority of our assailants at this point however the ones that are standing seem to be gunning specifically for Tsuna now. I think Reborn must have caught on to my trajectory because he seems to be holding out on firing the Deathperation bullet.

First, retrieve small squishy target then Tsuna can Hulk out and kick-ass protagonist style.

I roll out and pop out Willy Wonka style in front of them and strike a ‘TA-DA’ pose with my arms outstretched. Futa cheers, because he is obviously a kid with good taste in performance art. Tsuna just stares at me with his eye twitching.

“Why is SHE here?” He asks as he passes Futa into my outstretched arms.

“She is trying to amend for her wicked ways,” is my immediate reply as I settle Futa into what I how is the best position for carrying an entire human person while avoiding getting hit by shit. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, she is still a creeper but she seems more or less interested in moving on from that.”

“Why do you do these things?” It’s not so much a question to me as it is a question for the universe at large.

I pat him on the shoulder and then I duck out the way as a bullet comes sailing in from behind striking him between the eyes and igniting him. The trumpet call comes louder this time with a jazzy be-bop riff and I couldn’t block out the music even if I tried. Our core group is getting pretty tight on our harmony now. It’s actually starting to sound like something and not just one big noisy mess.
I dance along the railing of the bridge with Futa holding tight to my back as half a dozen punk gangsters are thrown through the air by Tsuna’s might. Rage mode Tsuna might not be as cool as Hyper Dying Will mode Tsuna, he still has his own flair that I appreciate. Also, it adds to the legend of the boxer-shorts vigilante.

“So Futa what brings you to the fair city of Namimori?” I ask him conversationally as we jump past yet another idiot swinging around a crowbar.

“You know who I am Inari-niisan?” He asks somewhat surprised. I don’t know why he obviously knew mine and Tsuna’s without us having to introduce ourselves.

“I know lots of stuff kiddo. But there’s a lot of that going around.”

“I guess?” And then, “Look out!”

I dive into one of the tents as a sledgehammer guy strikes again and the two of us land in a soft pile of plush octopi.

“Thanks for that.”

“No problem, this is all my fault anyway, it’s me they’re after,” he says. Poor kid sounds so dejected about that.
“Not your fault, they’re assholes working for an even bigger asshole from what I can tell,” I say doing my best to be light-hearted and consoling.

Futa gnaws on his bottom lip nervously and I see his fingers twitching like they were holding a pen. Like he’s trying to write something out.

“I assume they are after one of your rankings,” Reborn says, appearing at the gap in the tent. He has his GLOCK in hand now rather than the sniper rifle.

Futa nods slowly, “That’s right. The scary man wanted some very specific rankings.”

“Specific?” Reborn asks, while my interest immediately goes to, “Scary man?”

Futa’s gaze wavers between us as sounds of combat outside of the tent start to die down... well mostly there is one very high pitched shriek of ‘HA-HI!’ A splash and then Tsuna shouting, “RESCUE THE CREEPER WITH MY DYING WILL!” This is closely followed by Hayato and Takeshi shouting after him as my brother presumably jumps off the bridge into the water.

I told him those swimming lessons would eventually pay off.

Futa reclaims my attention with a tug on my shirt giving me a scared and nervous look, “He was really weird he had stitches all over him and the way he moved was all wrong, like a puppet.”
Reborn has turned so that he can better keep an eye on Tsuna and the guys but I can see that way his shoulders stiffen at that description. It does sound uncomfortably familiar, doesn’t it? A lot like a creepy dead woman who had turned up at the school during assassin con.

“Hey, Futa, did you see his eyes?” I ask trying my best to keep the edge of hysteria out of my voice.

He glances up at me and gives me the tiniest nod, “They were very strange, one was blue and looked normal, but the other was red and had the kanji for ‘six’ in it.”

Of course, this is a Mukuro thing. Why wouldn’t it be a Mukuro thing? I had made a terrible joke about him coming to eat our souls, so of course, this is a Mukuro thing.

“When did you see him last?” I ask trying to keep my voice level.

“Back in Shang-hi.”

I exhale deeply, that’s something at least. I’m not sure how well we would be able to handle a potential army of stitch zombies right now. I should probably tell Tsuna about the potential army of stitch zombies anyway. That seems like something he should know about, what with him being Vongola Decimo and all.

“Shang-hi?” I ask trying to steer the conversation away from my bizarre paranoia about Mukuro and zombies.
I still don’t even technically know that his name is Mukuro yet, do I? That’s really fucking weird now that I actually have to think about it.

“A drug dealer connected with the Triads had purchased my services. For four months. I had to leave the contract early which is bad, but he wouldn’t protect me and the scary man and the others started turning up everywhere,” he sounds so upset at he says this there are tears in the corners of his eyes.

And I can’t get over ‘purchased my services.’ That sounds so fucking sceavy that I can’t even. This kid is NINE no one should be purchasing his services for anything.

I wrap my arm around him and pull him tight against my side, “He will have to fucking fight me kiddo.”

Outside the cover of the tent, I can hear Tsuna squawking in embarrassed outrage about something as Takeshi laughs his fucking ass off.

“And those guys too,” and then I think, “And there’s also a girl who I’m pretty sure is actually a deity of some kind and a cave troll and well Reborn will probably throw down for you too, right man?”

I look at Reborn again and....yikes.

He’s gone full-on murder doll mode with the terrifying eyes and the unsettling glow from the pacifier (which I am NOT THINKING ABOUT) that casts his visage into dark shadows. His fingers are twitching in a sequence against his thigh which seems deliberate, and yet at this moment unimportant.
I am abruptly reminded that the last time we heard from Estraeno agents, and these are most definitely Estraeno agents, several of HIS informants were chopped into pieces and thrown into the ocean.

“Of course,” he says, and the localized temperature drops to negative a million degrees with all the ice that is in his tone.

Futa doesn’t seem to notice the tonal shift and if he does he doesn’t seem to care. He throws his scrawny arms around my waist and squeezes me for all that he’s worth.

“What are you guys doing here?” Tsuna asks, poking his head through the gap in the tent to look in at us.

“Discussing the proper plural of the word octopus,” I lie immediately and chuck one of the plushies at his head.

It ineffectually bounces off and he continues to stare at me.

He looks like he has a million things that he wants to say to me, but the thing that comes out of his mouth is, “I don’t know what you said to Haru to get her to help us but you need to undo it.”

“Why? What happened it sounded like you guys were having fun out there for a minute.”
“She declared her undying love and devotion to me and thinks that we're going to get MARRIED NOW!”

“You’re getting popular with the ladies Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn teases him in deadpan.

“I don’t want to be popular with this one!” He complains.

Huh.... canon finds a way to happen one way or another I guess. But still trading one reason for obsessively stalking someone for another is in no way appropriate. She’s on thin ice as it is and if this turns into an escalation of stalking behaviors I’m probably

“I can’t promise I’ll succeed but I promise I’ll try,” I pledge to him as I pull myself and Futa out of our plushy octopi prison.

We step out of the tent and back onto the Midori bridge, which is now covered in the twitching, groaning bodies of unconscious gangsters. And to the sight of Hayato plays the roll of bouncer as Haru tries to break past him and get to Tsuna. Takeshi is happily amusing himself by providing sarcastic sports commentary for this most recent bit of stupidity as he sits on top of a pile of the defeated.

I’m about to raise my voice to comment on that whole ‘what did we talk about being a creeper?’ But I am interrupted by a familiar and even more irritating voice.

“Who’s causing a ruckus on my bridge?” Hibari asks looking every bit the toll bridge troll.
Kusakabe is standing tall at his side and shoots me a somewhat apologetic look as he surveys the scene of the recently concluded fight.

I stare at Hibari.

And then I very casually turn to Tsuna, “Run?”

“Run,” He confirms with a nod

And we flee.

Thankfully, Hibari chooses not to follow after us. I think he’s too busy collecting protection money from the festival booths. After the show that our group put on, I’m pretty sure there are quite a few of them willing to pay those extra premiums.

We also manage to ditch Haru on our mad dash home while we take a short cut through Lucky Taro’s Grocery Store. I doubt that will last long considering she knows where we live, but hopefully, she will give some serious consideration to my whole ‘don’t be a stalker’ monologue.

Hopefully, she will get distracted by the Doom Festival and will leave us alone for a couple of days. I don’t think I can handle her trying to break into our house again.
“Futa where are you staying right now? We can walk you home,” Tsuna addresses the ranking prince that is currently riding piggyback.

“What are you talking about Bro-Bro,” I answer for him, “Obviously he’s coming home with us.”

“We can’t just bring Futa home with us!” Tsuna exclaims and Reborn immediately smacks him across the head.

“Quiet Dame-Tsuna,” He orders, “Unless you want to your enemies know where you have him hidden.”

“Enemies? What enemies!?”

“A Don has many enemies,” is Reborn’s straightforward reply, which doesn’t really answer Tsuna’s question.

“I’m not a DON!” Tsuna immediately declaims.

“Of course not Vongola Nono is still alive after all,” Futa states practically.

Tsuna whines.
“We still can’t just bring him home with us,” he states again, “What are we going to tell mom?”

I have to think about that for a moment. What had he told her when we brought Lambo home? I had never thought to ask and mom seems to have adjusted to having a new mouth to feed without question.

“Here is a new son to add to your growing collection of sons?”

I’m only kind of joking with that. Reborn lets out a bark of laughter when I say it though so at the very least I know it should work as an icebreaker.

Reborn’s mirthful outburst seems to have startled Tsuna, though I don’t know why. He’s looking over at Reborn somewhat terrified.

“Maybe the reality-warping properties of the Doom Moon with a kick in and she won't ask any questions at all and will just accept that she now has four sons,” I go on.

Tsuna makes a tragically hilarious face and Futa starts giggling at him.

“C’mon Tsuna, you made a pledge to keep him safe from the forces of evil. You can’t really make good on that if he’s not within protecting distance.”

“No going back on your word Dame-Tsuna. I would look bad if Ranking Futa were to go missing
“on your watch.”

“HIEEEE! Why are you putting this all on me!?”

As it turns out we don’t have to explain much of anything to Mom. All we really need to do is point Futa at her and say, ‘he has nowhere to go can we keep him?’ And it’s done.

However, she does take a moment to tease me mercilessly about my fun new adoption habit as the two of us pull out the masks and the other festival gear from the attic.

“Moooom~” I whine embarrassed.

“Oh sweetie I think it’s cute you have such strong paternal instincts as young as you are,” She giggles and gives me a big hug.

“I can’t just leave him he’s alone and scared and-“

“And his song is so sad,” She finishes for me and I just have to take a moment to stare at her. She has a soft smile on her face as she continues looking through the trunk filled with Grandpa’s festival accessories.

“... yeah.”
“Your such a sweet boy Inari-chan, you and Tsu-kun both. Mama is so proud of both of you.”

“Thanks, Mama,” I say just as there is the sound of something exploding and Tsuna shrieking from downstairs.

Mom laughs again, “It’s so nice to have the house lively like this.”

“Sure keeps things interesting,” I agree.

We continue working as Tsuna and the kids laugh and run around downstairs. Every so often I’ll hear Reborn egging on the chaos in his own aloof way. When we finally have everything we head back toward the ladder and carefully pass the boxes filled with outfits and masks down to the floor.

“Alright boys its time to choose your faces for the festival!” Mom calls out summoning the chaos to us. “Remember if a space demon sees your true face your soul is forfeit to the void.”

She says that last bit with such a gleeful chirp that you would think she was talking about dessert. Mom reaches into the box as the other boys arrive and pull out her mask and carefully unwind the silk wrap.

Hello Mother Bear.
“There’s enough for everyone so choose wisely,” she mostly directs this at Lambo, Futa, and Reborn who are new to Namimori and it’s strange customs.

Tonight is the first night of the Doom Moon.

And somewhere out there Rokudo Mukuro is plotting something.

Chapter End Notes

Haru ended up taking over a lot of this chapter in a weird way. Mostly because of how problematic she is and how very much Inari wants her to stop harassing his brother. She will have to do some serious work if she wants to hang out with Team Neighbourhood Watch.

And now Futa is here and Inari and Tsuna have a new little brother to add to their growing collection of mafia siblings. But he does have the bad guys eyes on him.

It’s now time for the Festival of Impending Doom! And if there is a good place to hide a magical boy who is being chased by supernaturally imbued assailants it is a festival where everyone is in masks and crazy shit is already happening.

And for a quick guessing game: What animal masks do you think Inari and the other kids will end up with? Let me know your guesses!

Once again, thank you so much for all the wonderful comments and kudos :) They make my day, you have no idea.
And as always, I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
Bad Moon Rising (Part One)

Chapter Summary

It’s all fun and games....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From the outside looking in the Doom Day Festival looks pretty fucking wild. I assume it seems like a city was preparing for a completely normal summer festival and then everyone took a whole bunch of drugs and got super high.

They didn’t, but it sure SEEMS that way.

If asked people around town will say that they are obeying that order from times of yore: “THE WORLD IS ENDING LIVE LIKE TOMORROW WILL NEVER ARRIVE FOR IT WON’T! LIVE AND EMBRACE YOUR DOOM!”

I have empirical evidence that they are not just play-acting. Just going by the dramatic and dangerous shit people do. It’s like every person in Namimori collectively loses all impulse control.

And suddenly we’re dealing with a city of idiots, like me. Which is why I start looking sane by comparison.

And poor Tsuna, he’s usually the sanest of anyone because the Doom Day madness has never really been able to penetrate his skull.
I think it used to pre-sealing, but my memories of the before times are somewhat... inaccessible.

Whatever my memory is shit lately anyway thanks to paranormal interference.

The point is; The Doom Day effect has struck the Sawada household hard this year. Inhibitions are at an all-time low. Our neighbors the Tanaka’s had awoken the entire neighborhood at five in the morning by blasting rap music and break dancing in the middle of the street.

They are both ninety and apparently spry as fuck.

Even mom, who is generally immune to the madness, had been in a cocky suave mood before she had taken off with Nori-san.

“BWAHAHAHA! Bow before the great Lambo-Sama!” Lambo bellows as he strikes a pose on top of Mom’s sewing table. He looks like a mad miniature Viking with the massive ram horns and the ‘plunder’ under his arm.

Lambo has always been a brat, but the Doom Day madness has transformed him into an imperious little lordling. He had started the day by demanding we all swear fealty to him.

“Lambo I need back~” Tsuna whines (begs? Pleads?) as he makes vain swipes for the mask.

“Bring Lambo-Sama a hundred grape candies!” He demands and then his eyes brighten, “Bring Lambo-Sama a bajillion grape candies!”
“Hieeeeee!”

Tsuna warbles and Futa giggles uncontrollably from his position next to Lambo. Futa had very willingly declared his services to the great lord Lambo this morning. And for his trouble been dubbed Sir Fluffybuns in a moving ceremony with a cardboard tube sword and a beach towel.

Tsuna himself had been somewhat preoccupied with the deluge of rubber snakes that Reborn had rained down upon him from all angles. I have no idea where he got a thousand rubber snakes, nor do I know where they all went since.

“Dame-Tsuna, take this opportunity to practice your hostage negotiation skills,” Reborn calls over to him with an unusually wide smile under the flashiest mask.

“Hostage!?”

“C’mon Bro-Bro,” I call over encouragement from my spot next to Reborn, “use your charisma skill.”

“I have no charisma!”

“Then hit a melody and harmonize.”
“What does that even MEAN!?”

I don’t have a chance to answer him, because at that moment Lambo smacks him in the head with a pincushion. And Tsuna is pulled into a ‘combat round.’

I laugh and settle into watch the chaos unfold. Poor Tsuna, the eternal straight man in the comedy routine that is is life.

I lean back into the couch so that I can get a better look at Reborn through the eyes of my own mask. He has been wearing his all morning. You know, embracing the spirit of the eldritch holiday.

When he first pulled it out of the box with a sly smile on his face I was sure that he was just being his usual trolling self. But he’s such a flashy bastard, it actually suits him. Even more so now that the Doom Moon Crazies have set in.

I actually wasn’t sure if the psychic inebriation was going to get to him, what with him already being under the influence of a mysterious and paranormal force. And I’m still not sure if it actually has or if he is just playing along for shits and giggles.

What I do know for sure is that last night his melody had been somewhat more broken and brooding than it has been for a little bit. Probably because Futa’s Estraeno reveal had left him all sorts of stressed behind his placid smile.

The fact that home office hadn’t been picking up hadn’t done anything for his nerves either. Though I think it had added to the general air of bloodlust that he started wearing as soon as Futa had laid down the description of his mysterious pursuer.
He had also tried to call Doll-Face and hadn’t been able to get through which had just added to the stress I think. Though I doubt anything tragic has taken place in Italy. It’s more likely that this is a case of communication services in and out of Namimori getting fucked up.

It has been known to happen.

Now, however, it sounds like a mad fiddler has hijacked his metaphysical violin, and it is quite honestly amazing. Tsuna has been absolutely terrified by the extra layer of chaotic mania that Reborn has been rocking all morning.

I am digging it though.

Bring on the crazy.

“This suits you way too well man,” I tell him with a lazy grin as I playfully bat at the colourful plumage that is decorating the edge of the mask. “I don’t know why I didn’t think it would.”

Reborn magnanimously allows my intrusion in to his personal space bubble and pretends that he isn’t preening under the attention.

“You always enjoy dolling yourself up so much,” I continue and adjust myself so that I’m not going to throw my neck out trying to keep an eye on him and everything else.
He chuckles and averts his gaze in a way that is more showy and less bashful, “I don’t know what you’re talking about Monello.”

“Liar,” I boldly challenge, “The costumes are one thing but you go through the trouble of custom ordering all of those absurdly expensive suits too.”

“It’s important to take pride in your appearance,” Reborn rebuts with all the self-assured vanity that I have come to expect.

“And of course you’re too good for polyester blends,” I snicker.

A smirk crawls across his face, “as if I would wear something off the rack.”

Peacock.

Of course he’s a peacock. He is such a flashy, self-assured dude. What else would he be other than one of the most ostentatious birds in the animal kingdom.

And of course Leon has constructed himself a matching miniature get-up to match his human. It is so fucking adorable it hurts. I think I spend a good fifteen minutes cooing over how fucking awesome my little lizard buddy looks.

Reborn’s good mood is also probably in part because I have spent a great deal of the morning
playing along with his ‘Tsuna Training Plans.’ Though I’m not entirely convinced that it hadn’t been an excuse to bust out one of the most epic rubber snake pranks in history.

Like hell, I was going to miss out on that.

Our live-in-hitman enjoys having his genius appreciated.

“Aren’t assassins supposed to be all low profile, hide in the shadows, and all that shit?” I continue teasing him. Mostly because he is letting me get away with it.

“Amateurs maybe,” Reborn waves off with prideful aplomb.

Our attention is briefly diverted to Tsuna who is in the midst of being tackled by Lord Bighorns and Sir Fluffybuns.

Which is interesting, but not quite as interesting as the thought that has started percolating in the back of my imagination. Regarding Reborn and his outlandish costumes.

“What’s the weirdest thing that you ever wore to do a hit?” I ask, turning back to him with wayyyy to much excitement.

Though half of his face is obscured by the colorful feathers of the mask I can still tell that he is giving me that judgemental raised eyebrow look.
“Do a hit?” He repeats, “For someone who enjoys spoken language so much, you spend so much time butchering it.”

“You mean I make it more awesome,” I laugh, “C’mon man, you’re the most badass hitman in the world tell me a crazy story.”

I doubt that I can get away with this. Reborn’s backstory is a mystery, wrapped in an enigma, locked in a vault, that is filled with explosives.

“You want me to tell you a ‘story’ Piccola Volpe?”

“Pretty please with sugar on top~” I flutter my eyelashes at him. Which is pointless beneath the mask but I do it anyway.

Perhaps a fox is a tad predictable for me. But it is also a tradition. Grandpa had said so.

Reborn stares at me with a considering look. I narrow my eyes back challengingly. He’s already broken his million-year ban on story time with me before. Besides, it’s not like I’m asking about the secrets of magic fire or mafia info.

Just, you know, his personal backstory.

Honestly, at this point, four months have felt like a million years. To me at least.
Tsuna whinnies and my focus is diverted back to him and the kids. I watch as he rushes around the room on all fours with Futa and Lambo on his back. Capitulation is another way to deal with negotiations I guess. He did get his mask back. Even though he is now a magnificent steed for the imperious lord.

The look on Tsuna’s face tells me that the cost to his dignity might have been too high. But, hey, the kids are having a blast.

I want to make sure that Futa isn’t distracted by the ‘Estraeno Issue’ today. And Tsuna is doing a great job of that. Well, Tsuna and the aforementioned psychic inebriation.

If any hostile mafia forces to attempt to come at us today I hope they get stampeded by a pack of lamas or something equally ridiculous.

“I once killed a man while onstage dressed as a cabaret dancer.”

I was so distracted by Tsuna and the kids that I hadn’t noticed Reborn leaning in until he is whispering in my ear.

“And no one was the wiser,” He finishes and then hops off the couch to join the kiddos in their torment of Tsuna.

And I just STARE.
Was that an achievement?

Did I just unlock an achievement?!

I have no words.

Pics or it didn’t happen. I demand photographic evidence.

I look over at Leon who is still chilling on the back of the couch with me and asks, “Really?” With a mad grin stretching across my face.

Leon’s only response is to shoot his tongue out at me and stick it to the side of my face.

Well alright then.

“Inari help!” Tsuna calls, and I turn back to the action to see that my brother is now being used as a trampoline as he lays flat on the ground. I guess carrying around three bodies was too much for him.

I’m sure Reborn has plans to work on his strength and stamina more at some point. Though if he goes into Dying Will Mode normal strength stats are thrown out the window. So I guess it doesn’t really matter.
He reaches out to me with wide eyes behind the equally adorable mouse mask. I can’t say no to that.

“On it.”

I vault myself off of the couch and land hard in a crouch in front of them. I give the kids a long wide-eyed stare from behind the mask and give them a smile that is all teeth.

In an instant, I snatch them both up and off of Tsuna’s back. Between one drum beat and the next, an obnoxious BLART of a tuba and a sharp chirp of a clarinet, I have Futa tucked securely under one arm and Lambo under the other.

I spin the three of us around and around and around. Faster and faster until both of the kiddos are shrieking with laughter. And then I stop dead, posed on one food and in one swift motion I toss them both on to the couch. They land bouncing and still giggling.

“I’ve rescued you Mouse-san,” I declare with a mad grin and reach out with both hands toward Tsuna. He slides his into mine and I lever him up using myself as a counterweight.

“Fratello is so strong!” Lambo cheers.

I give them both a little bow and send a ‘thank you’ to whatever deity or alien life form it was that had seen fit to return my coordination to its former glory. It was getting somewhat exhausting, having to second guess every step that I took.
I’m just lucky that Tsuna had been too distracted by Haru and her relentless sneak attacks to notice. And that Takeshi hadn’t complained about giving way more piggy back rides than normal. He’s a good friend.

“Inari-nii ranks 69 out of 86,202 mafia members for pure physical strength,” Futa states matter-of-factly as he pulls out a massive red tomb, from seemingly nowhere.

He proceeds to flip to a page where he points to my name.

“Cool.”

Good number too, but I am going to refrain from making an off color joke about oral sex whilst in the presence of actual children.

Also, Tsuna might have a heart attack if he hears the words ‘oral sex’ come out of my mouth in casual conversation.

I’ll have to save it for a day when we aren’t all preoccupied with our impending doom.

“Futa, what is that book anyway?” Tsuna asks as he pushes the mask on top of his head so that he can get a better look at the names and numbers scribbled across the page.
He makes a face when he realizes that he is looking at words written in the Latin alphabet. Meaning that he gives up on trying to decipher them just as fast as he usually gives up on his English homework.

Immediately.

“That book is one of the most coveted items in the mafia,” Reborn explains as he appears behind the kiddos on the couch to retrieve Leon. “The information that it contains has the potential to bring wealth or ruin to entire nations. Futa-kun’s rankings are always one hundred percent accurate.”

He continues with more drama than is called for as he stares down Tsuna.

And of course Tsuna plays right into his ploy. My Bro-Bro is staring at the book in Futa’s lap with mounting paranoia. That familiar tick is going that the corner of his eye, which makes it seem more like he’s staring at a deadly reptile that accidentally took up residence on our couch, and not a book.

Though considering how it ignores realistic spatial constraints it is probably some sort of magical book.

I need to figure out how hammer-space works, it would make storing glitter so much easier.

“Do you want to use it?” Reborn asks challengingly.
“NOPE,” Is Tsuna’s immediate and emphatic response, “No thank you, that sounds like way too much pressure.”

He waves his hands disdainfully toward the book and does an immediate heel turn, Sawada. Of course, he turns straight into me and I link my arm through his and turn him back to the conversation at hand.

“Not to mention how much effort it would be to go for the world domination route,” I say. Maybe on the next playthrough.

Futa smiles at both of us and looks up at Reborn, “I already knew my book would be safe here,” he says, “Tsuna-nii ranks number 1 out of 872 mob bosses for having no ambition.”

He says it so cheerfully. You never would have expected that he just landed a critical hit on Tsuna’s pride.

“HIEEE! What kind of terrible statistic is that?!?” Tsuna complains, “It makes me sound like a directionless loser!”

“Rankings don’t lie Dame-Tsuna.”

Futa takes a quick moment to adjust the rabbit mask so it stops falling down past his nose, and flips to another page where he points to Tsuna’s name again.
“Tsuna-nii, you also rank number 1 in terms of mafia bosses that can’t refuse a request.”

And the hits just keep coming.

It’s not a terrible thing, but the way that its phrased leaves something to be desired.

“That’s even WORSE~” Tsuna whines.

“Even the stars know that you’re a doormat Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says with a mockingly placid smile.

I take advantage of Tsuna’s comical flailing to start getting the kids ready to head out.

Shoes for Lambo.

Adjust Futa’s mask so it stops slipping down.

Make sure that my bag of emergency necessities is packed.
Glitter?  
Check.

Ray Gun?  
Check.

Mace?  
Check.

Comprehensive map of Namimori’s sewage system?  
Check.... and still somewhat damp from last year which is upsetting.

Phone?  
Check and fully charged... I don’t actually remember the last time I charged this phone which is
somewhat off-putting.

Whatever, it’s festival time!

“Speaking of alien forces beyond our mortal understanding,” I interrupt picking up Lambo and helping Futa down from the couch. “It’s time for us to collect our compatriots and face our doom.”

And possible stitch zombies created by a morally deprived mafia family and controlled by a vengeance-seeking poltergeist/all-powerful illusionist.

It’ll be fine.

The crazy starts almost immediately after leaving out of the gate. No sooner had our little group had stepped onto the street then we had to leap back as we narrowly avoid getting flattened by a stampede of forty horse-faced men dressed only in loincloths.

And as unsettling as the sparing painted eyes on those masks are they are not the most eye-catching part of that scene.

“LOOK AT ALL THE BUTTS!” Lambo screams in hilarity as he points after the stampede as they round the corner.
Yup.

That is a lot of bare assess that just went running past us.

“Don’t look!” Tsuna reacts wayyy too late in an attempt to shield Lambo and Futa’s innocent eyes.

I don’t know why. I’m pretty sure both of these kids have seen worse. Which isn’t a great thing, but, you know.

It looks like its shaping up to be one of THOSE years. Less deadly and terrifying and more random and stupid. But it’s still early in the day so who knows there’s still time for someone to decide that the Witch Trials had been on to something and convince the city at large to start building pyres outside city hall.

It’s happened before.

I just hope if something does try to kill us it isn’t four dozen men in loincloths who have forgotten about the dangers of theme costumes.

“You don’t seem particularly moved by that,” Reborn murmurs in my ear as we head off.

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me if there is anything super out of the ordinary I will be screaming blue bloody murder and you will know it.”

“Hmm,” There is a pause and for a moment I think that’s it, but then he continues, “We’ll follow your lead then Piccola Volpe.”

My constant internal monologue comes to a screeching halt and I turn to look at him.

“What?”

“You are the most experienced party here,” he presses on with twinkling beady eyes. “Tsuna seems to be surprised at every turn.”

“Yeah, he always seems to forget about the weird right after it happens. Willful amnesia and all that.”

I pause.

I wonder...

“It must be that seal that Nono put on him affecting his ability to process.”
Reborn is quiet.

I don’t look at him. Instead, I keep my focus dead ahead on Tsuna who is already being pulled in all directions by an extremely excited Lambo who has caught the smell of sugar in the air.

“I’m working on it,” Reborn finally answers, “He has already made a great deal of progress on that front.”

“...Good.”

I’m glad that he doesn’t seem to feel the need to question how I came about this obviously top secret information. In retrospect that fib I told about premonitions was the best thing, I could have said. It has saved me so many uncomfortable explanations.

“Anyway, I shall be our guide into doom and madness. Just, like, let me know if you spot any assassin types milling around and I’ll let you know if I see anything terrifying that shouldn’t be there.” I hole up my fist to him, “Deal?”

It takes him a moment before he ‘baps’ it with no shortage of amusement.

“Cool, now that we’ve got that settled. Should we tell Tsuna about the Estraeno thing? I mean, he already knows that scary dudes are after Futa so I don’t know if it would help anything?” I ramble.

“I’ve concluded that Tsuna reacts better in the moment to conflict,” Reborn answers, “rather than giving him time to panic and dither about waiting for something to go wrong.”
“This is a fair and accurate assessment.”

“I got you a candy apple,” Takeshi says in lieu of an actual greeting and proceeds to shove the caramel covered fruit into my mouth.

He gives me a sharp toothy grin from beneath the wolf mask as I proceed to chock on said carnival treat. But my god is it tasty.

“Food on sticks is truly the height of human achievement,” I say, though it’s mostly muffled through the entire fruit that has been shoved into my mouth.

Takeshi is dressed in his normal street clothes and has the magical bat of transmutation in its container slung over a shoulder. I don’t think he leaves home without that now. We so often find ourselves needing to be armed these days. Better safe than sorry and all that jazz.

“What was that?”

I grab hold of the stick so I can actually chew and swallow the caramelly goodness before having an entire apple shoved down my throat. The thought is appreciated though.
“I said, ‘I can’t breathe you dick,’” I augment.

“Sorry, sorry,” he grins but doesn’t actually look sorry in the least.

“You should be,” I tease, “What would you have done if that had gotten stuck in my mouth? You would have had to go the entire festival deprived of my beautiful voice, and then what would you have done.”

“Play charades?” he pokes back.

I smack him lightly on the chest and snicker, “jerk.”

And then, “By the way did you see the horse-“

“Yup,” He says, “Some of the sempai from the team were running in there.”

“How could you -“ and then I actually think about it and I smack him again.

A little harder this time.

Takeshi laughs and looks over my head at Tsuna.
“Yo Tsuna!” Takeshi calls, before weaving his way past two people in neon pink leotards and dangles another candied apple in front of my brother's face, “I got you one too.”

Tsuna takes a moment to stare at the treat before he takes it from Takeshi’s outstretched hand with gentle reverence.

“This is the first time a friend has bought me festival food,” He says as he stares at the candy apple, “I will treasure it forever.”

Takeshi snickers and gives Tsuna a friendly smack across the back, “You’re a funny guy Tsuna. Eat it before it gets all rotten and nasty.”

When he still looks hesitant I call over, “I’ll make sure Takeshi gets you a candy apple next year. We’ll make a thing of it. Nostalgic candy apples to commemorate this momentous event of friendship.”

Tsuna gives me a flat look and takes an overly large bite of the apple. Signaling that he has gotten the point of my soliloquy and would like for it to stop before I start going on about bromance and emotional bonds of friendship.

Just to make things super duper awkward for him.

“And not that I don’t appreciate being assaulted with sugar-coated fruits dude, because I totally do,” I say as I casually swipe a couple of bags of doughnut holes for the kiddos (from a vendor who
has become distracted trying to sell the image of Kami-sama in the dough). “But don’t you usually go for the chocolate covered bananas?”

I do my best to waggle my eyebrows at Takeshi, “Were they sold out or did you decide that that was a little too phallic to go shoving in people's mouths?” I tease.

Takeshi goes pink but the toothy grin doesn’t drop from his face. Tsuna, on the other hand, squeaks very much like the mouse that he is impersonating and whines, “Inari can you not~”

I just keep snickering.

“Eat your apple,” He pouts as he takes a bite of his own.

“Eat a dick~” I sing-song as I take a much larger bite of my own.

“Isn’t that your job,” Tsuna immediately fires back unthinkingly. And for the second time, I find myself almost choking to death on this candy apple.

OH MY GOD TSUNA~

He looks at me in concern as Takeshi has started howling with laughter. It takes a moment for him to backtrack and then another for him to process the words that had come out of his own mouth. But once he does he goes bright red and looks absolutely MORTIFIED.
“SORRY! I-I meant, I, uh, I-“ He stutters and stammers out an apology. And by that time I have stopped choking on the caramel death trap and am laughing right along with Takeshi.

“Oh my god Tsuna!” I manage to gasp out, “That was the sickest burn you have ever done~ And you did it to me! Your own flesh and blood!”

“I didn’t mean-“

“It was fucking amazing!”

If there was ever proof that the seal on Tsuna is actually weakening I think this is it. The psychic inebriation is actually starting to get to him it looks like. Awesome. I hope he has been fully emboldened by the time it’s time for us to meet up with Kyoko for their ‘date.’

I’m still not sure if either of them understands how dates work vis-a-vis other people in proximity to their date like activities. Not that I care about their developing exhibitionist tendencies, but there is only so much of my brother’s developing love life that I want or need to be privy too.

“Still sorry,” He mumbles as he escapes the arm that Takeshi had thrown over his shoulder. He stiffly turns and motions into the festival crowd.

“We should probably go find Hayato-kun before he tries to eat the cotton candy or something.”
“Cotton candy!?” Lambo perks up, “Lambo-sama loves cotton candy get some NOW!” He demands.

I smile at him and hold up a doughnut hole for him to grab, “you don’t want this cotton candy buddy.”

“Why not?” Futa asks.

Reborn, who has perched on Futa’s shoulder, gives me a similarly questioning look.

“Because it isn’t cotton candy,” I tell them.

“What is it?” Reborn asks slowly.

“No one knows.”

It is one of the great mysteries of the Doom Day Festival. No one knows where the cotton candy vendor comes from, and no one knows what it is that he’s selling. But the bold writing on top of his kiosk clearly inform all customers, ‘THIS IS NOT COTTON CANDY.’

What’s even more concerning is that it’s free.
“But it’s best not to try eating any of it.”

The heard of horsemen with their proudly displayed posteriors cross our path again while we are on our way to find Hayato. And we end up having to divert through the park to avoid being trampled again.

I’m not sure what the original intent of the park was this year, but it has now become a battlefield for warring factions of picnickers.

“Duck and cover!” I call out as a volley of decorative cakes sails toward us.

I hit the ground in a protective summersault with Lambo still tucked to my chest and roll behind an upended picnic table. Takeshi, Reborn and Futa join us a second later.

“HIEEEE!” Tsuna shrieks and throws up his hands to block his face. Which is a rather ineffectual defensive move against pastries if I do say so myself.

Lucky for him a savior arrives.

Tsuna yelps as a tall, muscular woman in a qipao pluck him off the ground and gracefully moves him out of harm’s way. When his feet are back on solid ground Tsuna looks up at her all wide eyed
and frightened.

“There you are hon, you’re okay.”

Tsuna doesn’t know this person.

But I sure do.

“HI MIKI-CHAN!” I call out waving madly at her.

“Inari-chan, is that you sweetie?!” A wide smile blooms beneath the deer mask. In two long strides, she reaches our group with Tsuna in toe.

“Yup!” I chirp, “You look gorgeous today. I love your dress it’s so sparkly!” I gush as I am absolutely enchanted by the gems that have been painstakingly embroidered into the emerald silk.

“A charmer as always Inari-chan~” She waves the complement off bashfully. “You look pretty ‘sparkly’ yourself.”

I take a moment to examine my hand which just always seems to have glitter on them these days. Which of course means that all of my clothes and my hair are just always sparkling now. Because glitter spreads to everything.
“I like sparkles,” I state simply.

“I-Inari...” Tsuna starts nervously looking up at Miki-chan, “who is this person?”

Which is fair. Because to anyone who doesn’t know her Miki is probably a fairly intimidating sight to behold. She is an Amazonian beauty who stands at 6’2 without the six-inch heels that she is currently rocking, and is dressed to the nines with impeccable make-up.

Miki is also that drag queen that had given me very important affirming advice when I had been in the midst of something of an identity crisis.

“This is Miki-chan,” I introduce her to the group, “She’s awesome. She showed me how to punch someone without breaking my entire hand.”

And there was that too.

“Miki-chan, this is my brother and my friends.”

“Nice to meet you... ma’am,” Tsuna says, a little uncertainly, but still sweetly. He’s a good guy, Tsuna.

“It’s nice to meet all of you,” She says, and then her eyes brighten, “I should introduce you to my new friend as well.”
She starts looking around the crowd, an easier task considering she is currently 6’8 and towers over all of us.

“Where did the doctor go?”

I’m sure there are plenty of doctors in Namimori that she can be talking about. But there is only one face that comes to mind when those words are spoken. A very, very irritating face.

“Here I am Miki-chan~” Shamal calls out as he just about throws himself at Miki.

A very irritating face attached to an equally irritating man.

He’s looking lovestruck and drunk.

It’s been a while since we’ve seen this asshole in person. Though Hayato has kept us up to date on his continued presence in town. Freeloading in Hayato’s student apartment. Not helping to pay for utilities or groceries like a responsible adult should. Nope, just mooching off of his thirteen-year-old former apprentice.

Ass.
Irresponsible ass.

It takes a moment for him to realize that the lot of us are staring at him as he proceeds to embarrass himself with his terrible flirting skills and ‘affectionate’ touching.

“Shamal,” Reborn greets blandly.

“Oh, Reborn,” Shamal says snapping to attention, “Fancy meeting you here.”

And then he notices me, Tsuna, and Takeshi and grimaces even more. I’m pretty sure he just had the same thought I did. Only in the plural.

“And Decimo too.”

“What’s up doc?” I say with all the antagonistic nonchalance of Bugs Bunny at his best.

“If you must know I’ve been enjoying the festival with the lovely Miki-chan.” He answers, grabbing her hands and looking up into her eyes with absolute adoration.

“Oh, stop it Shamal~”
Well....

This is an interesting development.

I wonder if this is a ‘Doom Moon’ thing or if Shamal’s unusual and extreme gender bias has looser constraints than I thought.

Reborn shrugs when I shoot him a questioning look.

Oh, well, if he turns into an enormous dillweed about it tomorrow Miki can just punch him in the face. And if he doesn’t, cool... I guess?

Though judging by the shiner that he is currently sporting someone has already taken issue with the dear doctor.

“What the hell happened to your face?” I ask with absolutely no decorum.

“A-are you alright Doctor Shamal?” Tsuna adds in, with decorum.

Shamal looks between the two of us before decides that he would rather deal with Vongola Decimo rather than his irritating brother. Which is fine, because I don’t particularly want to deal with him at all.
Everything that I know about Shamal, combined with everything that Hayato has let slip about his leech-like house guest just leaves me with the certainty that Shamal is a sexual predator and he’s just so fucking skeevy.

And an asshole.

Though he might be able to tell us where Hayato is. We haven’t been able to find him and all the phones in the city seem to have forgotten how to function properly. When I had tried to call him I had ended up being connected to some kid asking about computer parts.

“I had a run-in with that psychotic friend of yours,” Shamal grimaces.

“You’ll have to be more specific than that,” Takeshi grins.

Or, rather, he does something that kind of looks like it could be a grin but is more like an actual wolf getting ready to lunge and rip someone’s throat out.

Takeshi REALLY doesn’t like Shamal. I remember he had spent the entire visit when he was giving me and Tsuna a check-up smiling a terrifying smile in Shamal’s direction.

“The alarmingly strong one that likes to bludgeon people with sticks,” the good doctor clarifies.

“The hell did you do to piss off Hibari?”
“NOTHING!” He protests dramatically.

We all stare at him. Even Futa stares at him with this disbelieving look. The kid knows just about everything about everyone in the mafia. He must know some pretty incriminating shit about Trident Shamal.

He probably ranks pretty high up there for ‘skeeviest louse’ in the mafia.

Shamal twitches under the combined scrutiny of our group.

“I might have attempted a dine-and-dash at the Takoyaki stand over by the bridge... But how the hell was I supposed to know that the food stands were under his ‘protection’!”

Because he’s Hibari Kyoya and he thinks he owns everything in Namimori.

If anyone was made for mob life it is defiantly Hibari. The fucker is already running a protection racket and I am fairly certain that he has a stockpile of illegal weaponry hidden away somewhere from all of his ‘conquests.’

....
Actually now that I think about it he probably has it stashed under the school and that’s why he won't fucking leave.

“So you deserved it then,” Takeshi states with brutal glee.

Shamal just sighs, “Of course, I forgot that you're a pack of monsters.”

“Shamal dear,” Miki interrupts, “I see Max over there. I’m going to go help him reconquer the shady grove back from Taro and his brood. Come find me again where your done~” She finishes with a swift kiss on his temple before she runs off.

“It was nice seeing you Inari-chan!”

“You too!”

Once Miki is out of earshot and engaged in an epic food fight against Taro-san and his wife, nine children, and thirty-seven grandchildren, I turn back to Shamal.

“Yo, speaking of our pack of monsters, do you know were Hayato is?”

“Last I saw him he was off by the bridge fighting with a girl over alien shit. That kid has no delicacy with the ladies.”
“Oh good,” Tsuna breathes a sigh of relief, “I was worried when we couldn’t get a hold of him.”

Some happy Bossa Nova beats kick in and a soft smile creeps across his face. He turns into the direction of the bridge.

“We all promised to have fun together at the festival after all. It wouldn’t be fair if Hayato-kun got left out.”

Aw Tsu, you’ve been leveling up your social links, haven’t you?

Seriously, I am so proud of him today.

“Let’s hurry and go find him. And then we can go check out the game booths,” he smiles and starts walking toward the bridge.

“Yeah, Haya-kun gets edgy when we leave him alone for too long,” Takeshi laughs as he trots after Tsuna.

Lambo leaps down from my arms and chases after them, complaining about boring adults and boring talking. ‘Lambo-sama wants cotton candy!”

“Trouble might be starting up again soon,” Reborn states seriously.
Unintentionally interrupting my intent to follow after Tsuna. My feet anchor to the ground as I stand next to him with Futa still holding onto my hand.

Shamal snorts, “I had a feeling when I noticed the Ranking Prince with you.”

Futa moves himself in closer to my side and clutches my shirt. I do my best to make myself look larger and more intimidating for his benefit. Which doesn’t work great because I am tiny as fuck.

For fuck sake, I need to hit a growth spurt at some point!

“You want me to keep a lookout?”

“If you don’t mind terribly,” Reborn answers with words that in no way match his tone of voice. Which even as pitchy as it is carries the very real promise of, ‘do what I say or I will fucking shoot you.’

Shamal raises his hands in submission.

“Gotcha, Gotcha.” He sighs and straightens himself up, “Anything, in particular, I should keep an eye out for?”
“Members of the Estraeno Family and potentially Della Rosa’s agents as well. Considering they have been working together recently.”

“Them again?” He frowns and looks at me and Futa.

I see the moment that something clicks in his head. Probably the realization that no one who is after dangerous mafia secrets and the heir apparent to the most powerful Famiglia in the world will lead to anything good.

“The Estraeno though?” He wonders aloud, “I thought they mostly minded their own business are you sure?”

“They are the ones who killed Andrew, Marco and Gabriella.”

In an instant all of the stupid, dithering idiot vanishes from Shamal’s expression and I am staring at a very dangerous assassin. I hold out my arm in front of Futa to push him a little further behind me.

“You don’t say.”

“They have also recently taken to collaborating with an extremely talented Mist,” Reborn continues, somehow equal parts irritated and detached.

“You must just hate that.”
“But fortunately it’s right up your ally Shamal.”

The manic fiddle that Reborn has been rocking all day has taken on a sharper edge the longer that he has been talking to Shamal. And while this conversation calls for a certain level of intensity I’m getting a little... concerned.

“And, you know, be on the lookout for anyone with crazy heterochromatic eyes who’s moving like they’ve got a bad case of early onset rigor mortis,” I cut in.

Shamal looms at me with raised eyebrows and an unimpressed look, “Aren’t you a little young to be sitting at the grown up table kid? You should probably go run along after Decimo.”

While I find this incredibly irritating and condescending and I will most defiantly get him back for it. I am also simultaneously struck with a feeling of immeasurable relief.

Because this is the first time that I have gotten external confirmation that Reborn is, in fact, a fucking grown man and not a magical infant. Or, fuck, he is but that is semantics.

But not only that. This is the first time that someone has acknowledged this fact in an overt way. And I am so grateful, because if Reborn was actually going through life with everyone thinking that he’s literally a baby that would suck so fucking hard.

There must be some sort of trick to seeing through the Arcobaleno Curse mind wammy.
He had seemed so freaked out when I had called him out on it the other day so whatever it is, it can’t be easy or straightforward.

Okay, now that I’ve had that little mental breakdown, on to the condescension.

“I’m a hundred and four. I’m a fucking highlander. Deal with it prick,” I shoot back at him in irritation.

Only to be met with a blank stare.

“You’re a what?”

“Highlander, you know like Sean Connery?”

The blank stare continues and now I feel Reborn and Futa’s eyes on me as well.

So, I’ve managed to bring down the intensity of this encounter but now I’m having an entirely different issue.

“Sean Connery? James Bond, ‘You Only Die Twice?’ He was in ‘The Last Crusade’ with Harrison Ford too.”
Nothing.

I feel my eye starting to twitch.

“Has no one ever watched a movie before?!”

“Inari-nii ranks number 4 for pop culture references that no one understands.”

I sigh.

At least I’m not alone. I wonder who out there is more fucked than me?

“Thanks for that kiddo.”

“Anyway, Shamal,” Reborn says, breaking us out of this bizarre and endlessly upsetting segue, “Keep an eye out and be prepared to act if need be.”

With that he turns on his heel and starts heading after Tsuna and Takeshi who are now almost out of sight. I am just about to follow after him when I am struck by sharp pain and a shattering orange light as I remember something.
“Yo Doc,” I address Shamal, “Did you DO something to Hibari?”

“Nothing but a little bug bite,” He answers immediately and unthinkingly.

I take Futa’s hand and we leave.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This has the potential of getting really fucking bad.

“Inari-nii?” Futa asks.

“Don’t worry about it kiddo,” I grin and hoist him up onto my back, “Let’s go catch up with Tsu.”

We find Hayato right where Shamal had said he would be. Outside of a street vendor kiosk having a fight with a girl over cryptozoology. And of course, that girl is Haru.... who is dressed like a squirrel furry.
She’s an interesting girl.

I don’t know exactly what is going on here, but from what I can infer at first glance. This seems like a game of trivia gone wrong.

“It’s obviously a Beholder!” Haru argues waving her one free hand toward the... thing on the table. “You can tell by the stalks.”

“Those are tentacles, you dumb wretch!” Hayato snipes back, “It’s obviously an Atmospheric Jellyfish!”

Both of them have their masks pushed up on top of their heads so that they can better scream at each other. A cat for Hayato. And of course a squirrel for Haru (If it was anything else I would worry about her costume choices... even more so than I already do).

They also each have a hold on one of Tsuna’s arms and are in the middle of tugging him back and forth between them as if they were a couple of preschoolers and he was the much-beloved toy.

Takeshi and Lambo are sitting close by munching on a bag of popcorn. Or, at least Takeshi is. Lambo is doing his very best to pelt Tsuna with said popcorn which is adding an interesting level of torment to his already strange situation.

“Tsuna-sama, you see that it’s an Atmospheric Jellyfish right?!"
"Uh," Tsuna, who knows nothing of cryptozoology stares at the thing in question.

"No! Tsuna-san agrees with Haru!" Haru says with a harsh tug back in the other direction, "Right Tsuna-san?"

"Uh!" He's panicking even more now. When he sees us approach he gives me and Reborn a pleading look and mouths the words, 'Help Me.'

“Resolving conflict within the Family is another job for the boss Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says derisively.

“Trust your instincts Tsuna!” Takeshi calls out to him laughing.

Tsuna whimpers, “I have no idea what this thing is!”

“It’s a Beholder!” Haru reasserts.

“It’s an Atmospheric Jellyfish!” Hayato counters.

“It’s actually neither,” I mutter to Reborn earning myself an amused side-eye.
“You seem rather sure of yourself Monello.”

“Of course I’m sure of myself,” I grin, “I am the biggest sci-fi fantasy geek around here.”

“Prove it,” He challenges in jest.

I narrow my eyes and give him a good long stare. By my own nature, I am unable to turn down a challenge, no matter how ridiculous it might be. It’s why I end up fighting Hibari so much.

“You want me to win you a plushy prize man?” I tease right back.

He laughs outright in place of an actual answer. So I’m going to take this as a, ‘Yeah, sure, go for it you dumb kid.’

I set Futa down on the railing next to Takeshi and Lambo and stroll casually past the squabbling children. And I look down at the little green thing with one big eye. I remember it from long, long ago and far, far away.

It seems like the universe has finally taken pity on me and thrown me a slow ball.

“It’s a brain slug,” I tell the vendor with a crooked smile.
“That is correct!” The vendor bursts out and hands the little brain slug over to me. “Congratulations on your prize!”

I take it and push past the three of them again with a cheeky grin on my face, and I toss it over to Reborn.

“Told ya.” I tell him with cocky bravado.

He snatches it out of the air with his ridiculous reflexes and turns it over with this look of amusement.

“Ridiculous.”

“Yes, yes I am.”

It takes a little while longer for Hayato and Haru to realize that I have defeated them in the contest of geekyness. I am the lord of the geeks all shall kneel before my RPG know how and obscure knowledge about magical creatures.

Tsuna breathes a sigh of relief when they finally let him go and drifts to the ground.

“Inari-san is really smart!” Haru blurts over at me.
“Of course he is,” Hayato snaps, “He’s the bosses right-hand man after all.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about brain slugs being the measuring stick for my intelligence,” I tell them.

Only to be ignored.

Whatever just as long as they are no longer trying to pull Tsuna’s arms off I’m happy. I mosey over the railing that Takeshi and the kids are on and hoist myself up so that I’m balancing on top of it. I’m going to let Tsuna mediate the rest of the stupid argument. Unless the two of them actually do start trying to rip his arms off again.

I tune out as I walk along the narrow beam and start doing a few flips around the bar to amuse Lambo and Futa. We’re going to have to find some games to play soon or else Lambo is going to have a tantrum.

“-Be like a date don’t you think Tsuna-san?” I abruptly tune back in when Haru starts aggressively pushing for a romantic dialogue option with Tsuna. This is awkward, considering he has an actual date scheduled with his actual girlfriend in about two hours.

“I know Tsuna is super cool and all,” I call over to Haru, “But he’s taken.” I don’t really see the point of letting this little delusion run unchecked. That way leads only to more stalking. And we’re trying to put a stop to that.
Haru freezes and stares at me, “Ohmygosh! I’m so sorry Inari-san I didn’t realize that the two of you are together like that.”

I fall straight off the railing and crash into the ground.

“What! No!” Tsuna shrieks in horror? Mortification? Disgust?

**THE GENERAL FUCKING EMOTION OF NO!!!**

“Brother!” I shriek, and ignore the uproarious laughter that is coming from Takeshi, “HE’S MY BROTHER!”

“We’re twins!” Tsuna cries out in humiliated distress.

“We look nearly the same!”

Haru blinks not looking nearly repentant enough for this grave misunderstanding that she has summoned.

“I thought you might have been doppelgängers that had fallen in love.”
“HIEEEEEEEEEEEE!” Tsuna wails, and I am emotionally right there with him.

“He meant Tsuna-sama has a girlfriend, you dumb woman!” Hayato chimes in looking just as embarrassed as me and Tsuna.


And then she looks at me.

“Inari-san, do you want to date Haru?”

Now it’s Takeshi’s turn to fall off of the railing as he laughs so hard he can no longer keep his balance. And he continues to laugh after he hits the ground. The jerk is having way too much fun at my expense today.

I summon up my most deadpan expression as I answer her, not so the heartfelt question, “Sorry not interested.”

She heaves a sigh, but still smiles, “I didn’t think so, but it was worth a shot.”

“I applaud your nerve.”
Haru hangs out with us for a little while longer as our group makes our way to the rendezvous point. We play a few carnival games, check out a few stalls, and buy even more sugary snacks.

She heads off when she spots a few of her friends from school but promises to meet up with us again later tonight for the firework display. Haru is an intense individual. But she isn’t all that bad once you move past the obsessiveness and the proclivity toward stalking.

And her great and terrible power to make things as awkward as humanly possible. We can’t forget that.

I’m not sure if Tsuna is ever going to recover from that grave misunderstanding.

We are weaving our way through the crowd again when a pair of arms reaches out and wraps around Tsuna’s midsection, and I have a brief moment of mind-numbing panic before a familiar voice speaks.

“Oh look, I’ve captured an adorable little mouse,” Kyoko giggles and pulls Tsuna close to her.

She is wearing the imposing mask of the lioness. And I see the sharp flash of canines in her smile.

“Oh-Kyoko-chan!” Tsuna squeaks happily and relaxes into the hug.
“Hello Tsuna-kun, have you been having fun today?”

“Oh, um, yes!” He stammers, while his ears turn red, “How about you?”

I share a look with Takeshi and Hayato and the three of us grab the kids and move to the nearby fishing game to give Tsuna and Kyoko some privy to flirt. Since neither of them seems particularly inclined to ‘get a room.’ They are still the fucking sweetest together though.

They don’t seem to keen to move on right now either. They are holding hands as Kyoko leads them around to different stalls. I am doing my best to keep an eye on everything while also being on the lookout for any suspicious characters.

Which could be literally anyone in this crowd of mask-wearing weirdos.

And then I start hearing a whistle.

It’s nothing really. Just the sound of someone whistling, which isn’t that unusual during a festival. It takes longer than it should for me to realize that I’m not hearing the whistling, I’m HEARING the whistling.

In the dangerous metaphysical way that I do.

And then I recognize the tune as it gets louder and louder. And this isn’t like the instrumentation I
hear. The pieces of harmony that people carry around with them. This is laced with a very pointed threat.

This is Richard Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries.’

It’s the piece that I have my alarm clock set to play.

And before I have a chance to consider what that means a spark of indigo fire is ignited beneath my feet and starts to spread. Neon lines rushing across the ground and over buildings firing up into the sky in a dizzying array as everything is covered in that dizzying rotoscoped effect.

And the sky goes dark.

A hand reaches out from the shadows and wraps itself around my neck pulling me back. It’s covered in rough raised stitches and is missing its ring finger.

I’m shaking.

All around people are looking at the sky and starting to panic.

I can’t see my friends or the kids.
I can’t see Reborn.

I CAN’T SEE TSUNA.

“Tell me Sawada Inari,” A light voice murmurs in my ear as the ice-cold hand presses a little harder into my throat, “Have you thought about your doom today?”

And with what breath I have left I scream blue bloody murder.

Chapter End Notes

The Doom Festival has begun and predictably Inari has found himself in peril once again. And while he’s collected a lot of the puzzle pieces he still hasn’t quite been able to put them together in away that will reveal all the arc secrets.

Thank you again to everyone for the kudos and comments :D They always make me smile so much!

As always I love to hear from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
Bad Moon Rising (Part Two)

Chapter Summary

This is going to hurt... isn’t it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You never want to be on the bad end of a surprise round. It never pans out well. And you can bitch all you want that, ‘but I said, I said!’ In the end, it doesn’t matter. The bones lay where they land, the trap can’t be unsprung. And no matter how hard or loud I scream, no one heard it.

Because by the time that hand grabbed me it had already been too late.

The bad moon has risen, and its time to deal with the consequences.

The hand clamps down around my throat with brutal efficacy and absolutely no finesse. My scream is cut short with a strangled ‘GACK’ and my vision narrows down to pinpoints in the middle distance. Darkening at the edges. Tunneling back and back and back.

Hands closing around-

The hand clenches harder and my windpipe is being crushed in the vice-like grip.
Fick no.

No.

Lightning gathers in the palms of my hand. I’m counting on the remnant glitter to act as a makeshift conduit. But it’s not enough, it’s not sable or sturdy enough, and the current sends a vaguely painful numbness up my arms.

I don’t care.

I don’t care. I need this fucker off of me. I need him off of me now before-

I can’t BREATHE!!!!

I can-

My head cracks on the corner of the desk as hands. Bigger than they should be they feel bigger and meatier than they should be and the body pressing me down is heavier. And they are clamping down on my throat and squeezing until I can’t breathe.
Lightning cracks heavy and hot in the palm of my hand and without being fully aware I shove it back into the body behind me. It tenses and shutters, and there is a momentary loosening of the grip before it adjusts and I am wrenched around and lifted a foot in the air so that I’m now being straggled at eye level with my assailant.
And above us in this terrible alcove between two stands the moon looms menacing and unforgiving.

The world has been cast into disturbing photonegative adding to the surreality of this moment.

Is this a nightmare?

Something about this fees so familiar.

A sharpness protruding from the raised stitches in the palm of his hand press in to my throat and my anxiety rockets up a few extra levels. It feels hard and not something that should typically be under the skin. What is it?!

There is a profound wrongness to this moment, to this thing, to the way the world has twisted and flipped around us.

But I’m not given any time to think about it, because no sooner does the thought creep across my mind than the hand starts squeezing again. The fingers dig hard into the sides not wrapping all the way around but focusing all the pressure on my windpipe and larynx.

It’s worse than before.

Somehow it’s worse. There is too much pressure all in one place.
It’s going to break. It’s going to BREAK.

ITHURTSPLEASESTOP

TSUNA

REBORN

SOMEONE

HELP

“Bruno had all the finesse of a butcher,” The stitch-man says as me meets my eyes, “But he certainly knew how to inflict fear.”

A Cheshire Cat smile crawls menacingly over a Glasgow smile and heterochromatic red and blue eyes glint in the darkness.

“It always irritated him that you refused to be appropriately intimidated by his imagined authority.”
The grip loosens ever so slightly and I suck in a desperate breath of air while I have the chance. The stitch-man still has me suspended a good two and a half feet off of the ground by my throat and the pressure is still present though somewhat more bearable.

“I don’t think he ever suspected how irrelevant he actually was. They never really were all that good with resource management. All ambition,” the hand clenches again and I choke.

“No brains.”

I reach up and sink my nails into the wrist and forearm. Digging my thumb as hard as I can into the mass of taught tendons in the wrist. This thing doesn’t even flinch. The illusionist grins at me with a strangers face.

Like I amuse him somehow.

“Lucky for them, new management has a much broader vision. And even poor Bruno was relevant in the end,” he starts squeezing even harder and my vision starts to bleed out into black, “Though being dispatched by one of the legendary Arcobaleno was probably a little too good for the likes of him don’t you think?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. He’s strangling me.

Like a fucking megalomaniacal dick.
“My apologies I don’t know my own strength, or well, his strength,” the stitch-man’s hand loosens again, but I am still being held and suspended in the air by my fucking neck and it is starting to get really, really painful.

“Fuck’n di’k,” I manage to spit out through the pressure and the pain.

“Delightful.”

The flash of irritation and rage that I feel toward this person spikes so hard and so fast that without thinking I am once again unleashing a massive current of electricity directly into the arm that is grabbing me.

It’s a sick fucking light show.

And I feel a little like Doctor Frankenstein as I do it (what with the corpse and the lightning), but unfortunately for me this particular corpse doesn’t seem to fucking react...like at all this time. It just keeps standing there staring at me like an impassive piece of shit.

Well, fuck you too stitch-man.

My arms drop down to my sides twitching ever so slightly and smoking in a somewhat concerning way. Should my own magic fire backfire on me this much? Somehow I don’t think so.

The stitch-man’s other arm raises and the hand brushes my cheek in a mocking show of affection. It feels absolutely repulsive. The hand is cold and clammy and mutilated to the point where it is
only a hand in the vaguest sense.

Behind us, in the street, there are the sounds of anxiety and fear that have given way to cheers of excitement. It’s Doom Day after all, what is a little celestial compared to some of the shit that has gone on in the past.

No one had heard me scream.

The only thing that is keeping me even remotely functional right now is the rage. I’ve got nothing else. Once I burn through this I’m pretty much just fucked.

Tsuna, if there was ever a time to tap into that twin telepathy it is now. Right now. Because I am in some serious fucking peril.

There are a few synthetic popping sounds followed by cheers as the sky lights up in brilliant indigo. Illusory fireworks burst in the sky and shower down upon the psychically drunken masses.

Me and my captor are also briefly illuminated before our little alcove of despair are plunged back into relative darkness.

“Unfortunately for you dear Arno tragically no longer has functioning pain receptors,” The smile twists into something darker and curler, transforming the already horrifying face into something worse. “Though I applaud your initiative.”

“Su’ks f’r him,” I wheeze out.
The heterochromatic eyes blink up at me in curious appraisal.

And then I am abruptly dropped onto my ass.

I don’t have time to process any further than that though because the next moment my left arm is grabbed and wrenched and twisted behind my back. He pulls up, up, up until there is a sickening pop in my shoulder and my vision turns to orange and static.

“Kufufufu~” He laughs a familiarly unsettling laugh, and if I wasn’t sure who I was dealing with before I am now.

“Oh dear, was that a little rough for you?”


“Only so much you can do while riding shotgun I guess,” I rasp out. “And by the way do I get to know who I’m being assaulted by today or should I just go with ‘the corpse formally known as Arno?’”

And, god, talking hurts like fire and it feels like there is something tearing or torn in my throat. But the longer that I keep him talking the better chance there is that someone will notice that shit has broken all kinds of bad.
C’mon, guys, I’m sending out a fucking S.O.S here.

“Corpse?~” He trills antagonistically.

“Locomotion ain’t bad, but your meat suit isn’t breathing.”

The stitch-man lurches over me. The other arm coming around the wrap around my neck in the promise of a chock hold. It shudders and then it exhales.

It smells of rot and decay and I wretch and gag from how disgusting it is. It only succeeds in further irritating my already ruined throat.

“Thank you for the reminder little Vongola,” he says with more threat than thanks, “sometimes I forget.”

That’s me full of helpful suggestions.

“...You can think of me as New Management.”

Great. Perfect.
“Does new management have a name of his own? Or are you a fucking corporate hive-mind?” I belligerently fire back.

And regret it almost immediately as my arm is twisted even further and there is another concerning ‘pop’ sound from inside my shoulder, followed by another flash of orange and static.

“I don’t think you fully appreciate the situation you find yourself in,” the lightness has completely left his voice now replaced with the brutal threat and malevolence.

I scream, but hardly any sound comes out my voice cracks and breaks on the first high note and then gives out entirely. Pain and fear are really starting to replace the anger now and I am starting to shake.

Calm down.

Fucking calm down.

I have been in worse situations before. Not by much but this still isn’t the worst. I could probably still get away. But considering the hold he has me in right now it is going to hurt like hell.

He grabbed the wrong arm though. My bag of tricks is on my right and my right arm is free. I just need to get something that will help me.
Like a ray gun, so I can blast this fuckers head off.

“Kufufufufu~ Have you gone and hurt yourself again? You really are such a graceless child.”

“Ju’s tryin’ to make conversation,” I manage to say. And, no, something defiantly feels really wrong in my throat now. “I’m friendly like that.”

“...Since you’ve already seemed to have worked some of this out you can call me Mukuro if it means so very much to you.”

I knew it.

I knew it, but I am still terrified to have it confirmed.

``Rokudo Mukuro only a million times more terrifying than he ever was before. And now apparently going by the moniker ‘New Management,’ which is somehow even more unsettling than literally naming himself corpse.

“So ‘Mukuro’ what the fuck do you want?”

I don’t know what I’m expecting. An evil monologue? His plan laid out before me step by step like the villain of a Saturday morning cartoon? I don’t get either of those things. What I get is one final wrench of my arm and the feeling of something tearing out of place. And sound is replaced by a roaring in my ears as everything goes distant and faded.
Dislocated now. It has to be dislocated. Cartilage and bone grind to get her in a sickening way that make my stomach lurch again. My body convulses at the overload of pain. My ‘free’ hand that I had been trying to dig in my bag with reflexively goes to reach for my now ruined shoulder, but something sharp is staring to press into my throat again. This time protruding from somewhere in the stitch-man’s forearm. What is it?

What is this thing?

‘The corpse formally known as Arno Estraeno.’

‘New Management.’

“Nothing from you,” Mukuro snarls, “not YET at least.”

Bearing down hard on me now.

AIRAIRENEEDAIRNOWINEEDAIRNOWPLEASEICAN’TBREATHE

The world starts spinning dangerously as he starts walking me forward out of this dark space closer to the street. Everything is covered in a layer of neon indigo. Pulsing lines of power like networking grids mirroring the moon in the sky. There are things that have been constructed that aren’t actually there is a wall or something directly in front of us that has been constructed to hide us from view.
In the street people have started to go about their business again. For the most part, ignoring the giant moon that is now hanging above us.

And Tsuna.

I see Tsuna. He’s still there with Kyoko and the kids and the guys are close by. Reborn has perched nearby and is watching then all desperately attempt to defeat what looks like the balloon pop game.

They’re okay.

... 

It’s just me that’s fucked.

“TSU-GAK-“

My call is cut short as the forearm crushes into my larynx with brutal efficacy cutting me off.

And something cracks.
I cough and choke and gag on what feels like a rock.

“Now, now, don’t go ruining the surprise that’s just rude.”

The world flashes in and out of focus.

Tsuna.

Reborn.

Someone.

Please.

“They all seem to be enjoying themselves... without you. Though I suppose that makes sense considering Tsunayoshi is Vongola Decimo and you are just... expendable parts.”

My heart stops.
“Cassandra finally decided that it would be easier to cooperate with me. Good thing too poor girl there isn’t much left of her now, and it would have been worse if she kept resisting.”

“She knows such fascinating things you know? Though I suppose she would after being involved with a man like Federico for over a decade.”

“All of Vongola’s well-guarded secrets, all neat and tidy inside that pretty little head of her’s. I wonder if they even know.”
“No, your right, they are much too incompetent for that. Vongola. The mafia. An empire built atop pillars of sand.”

A drumbeat frantic and fearful bursts out of me.

Help.

Please, if this is real, if this is something, someone please help me.

“I just need a few things. Errands really. Just the boy and the book and I’ll be on my way. I’ll even leave your dear brother and your friends alone to enjoy this celebration to the Hell Moon. And they will find you... eventually.”

FUTA!

Reborn looks in the direction of this stupid illusory wall or whatever the hell this thing is that is blocking me from their view. And for a brief moment hope wells in my chest.

And then it dies.
Because things abruptly get so much worse.

I watch as something walks out from me. It looks like a computer-generated copy of myself, only made of indigo blue gridlines.

“It’s convenient that the Little Prince and the Arcobaleno trust me so completely,” Not-Me says with a cheerful laugh.

The stitch-man lets out a repulsive throaty chuckle, “I suppose I lied about not needing anything from you. But then it’s not really you that I need. It’s your face.”

My breath quickens, rattling painfully in my throat. Getting caught in the damage. It feels like drowning, it feels like I’m drowning.

I watch as IT, the thing that is Not-Me walks confidently out from behind the wall and starts to head toward my brother, my friends, MY PEOPLE.

Get away from them!

I try to lunge forward to grab Not-Me, but all I succeed in doing is press my mangled throat further into the chock hold. The world greys out again and my brain goes to static.

STOPITSTOPITSTOPIT
“Kufufufu~”

Monster.

You fucking monster.

I stare helplessly as Not-Me weaves through the crowd until it comes to a stop next to the balloon pop game that my Family has congregated around to cheer on an impromptu competition between Kyoko and Takeshi.

This is-

I know what this thing is going to do.

I know what Mukuro is going to do.

I know what he is going to use my face to do and I can’t let it happen like hell am I going to let this happen!

Monster
“You don’t mind right?” Mukuro laughs cruelty into my ear, “Just say the word and I’ll stop.”

‘Stop!’ I try desperately to say it, but it’s no use, no sound is coming out.

And if things didn’t feel like a nightmare before they do now.

This can be fixed right?

Someone can fix this right?

I need to be able to talk, I just, I need too. It’s what I do. I’m the idiot that talks a lot. It is one of the only ways I have to not go crazy inside of my own head I need to be able to talk I need-

I need to focus this isn’t important right now.

Futa is important.

This thing wearing my face is the bigger problem.
Priorities.

I can worry about stupid shit like talking later.

This isn’t happening.

This isn’t going to continue.

And actually fuck this.

I brace my feet against the ground and slam my elbow back into the Stitch-man’s gut. And despite the fact that Arno, or whoever the fuck this guy is, does not have functional pain receptors it still reacts to impact.

There is a sharp exhale of air and suddenly there is a gap between its arm and my throat. Space enough to slide my free hand in between and grab the forearm.

This next bit is going to hurt. There really isn’t any way around it. But fuck it right? It’s an arm. It’s an arm that is already fucked. Fucking it up a little bit more isn’t going to matter much in the long run.

It’s nothing compared to Futa’s life. Nothing compared to whatever horrible thing Mukuro has planned for him. And I know he has something planned, he wouldn’t go through all this trouble if he didn’t have plans.
This is kind of an awkward position to work with, but I guess I can’t get choosy considering my alternative seems to be mutilation and death.

But once I caught an entire Takeshi as he fell at terminal velocity. I’ve gone toe-to-toe with Hibari Kyoya for over a year and a half now and have lived to talk about it. And according to Futa’s magical book of statistics, I am the sixty-ninth strongest person in the entire god damn mafia.

However unbelievable that might be.

And I am going to throw this corpse man on his fucking ass!’

In two swift movements, I kick back, knocking his foot out from under him and throwing off his balance enough that he starts to fall over me. I duck down and with all the strength that I have I use my arm to toss this literal dead weight off of me and on to the ground.

I have no words to properly describe what it does to my shoulder.

I can’t feel my left arm at all right now.

But on the plus side, it is still attached to me.
So, hey, that’s something.

The body hits the ground hard and I take off running faster than I have ever moved in my entire life.

Mukuro screams something after me, but it gets swallowed by the sounds of the festival. Talking and laughing and shouting punctuated by bursts of music.

I see IT there that thing. Not-Me. It’s talking to Hayato as the group continues to watch Takeshi and Kyoko attempt to break the balloon popping record. It’s standing much too close to my brother. And it has its arm around Futa’s shoulder.

And even Reborn is looking at it with something like fond exasperation.

THAT ISN’T ME!

YOU DUMB FUCKING ASSHOLES!

When this is all over I reserve the right to kick all these fuckers in their literal ass.

I’m getting close, I’m almost there. I just need to punch that thing in the face and then-
“Kufufufufu, you really are a tenacious one~”

Another pulse of indigo light erupts from beneath me and those grid lines start to crawl up and over me. Behind me, Mukuro continues to laugh like a lunatic. I can’t help but turn and give him a withering glare. Megalomaniacal asshat. Who actually cackles like that in real life?

“I’m going to enjoy watching Castor and Pollux murder each other~” And then he vanishes into the darkness like the creeper he is.

Are all illusionists creepers? Or is it only just the ones that I know?

Whatever, places to go, terrible body doubles to beat the shit out of.

Now I don’t know exactly what my face looks like right now. Or what my anything looks like right now thanks to the internal perspective on this illusory suit that Mukuro has been ‘kind’ enough to make for me. But going by the the screams of terror and the fleeing some people are doing when they lay eyes on me I’m going to go with ‘Mad Science Monstrosity.’

Which I guess fits since Mukuro alluded pretty hard to the fact that he has taken over management of the monster factory in Naples.

There are actually more people sticking around to point fingers at me though. And I think I heard one kid say, ‘It’s the space demon come to eat our souls!’
At least I’m thematic?

I’m going to kill Mukuro for this though. Right after I kill Not-Me. Because if I was unsettled before it is nothing compared to the gut-wrenching terror that I feel when I look at something wearing my face and trying to take over my life.

It’s watching me now as I approach the party. It has this stupid haughty smile on its/my face. I hate this thing. I hate this thing as I have never hated anything else in my life. It probably has something to do with the whole existential uncertainty I am perpetually dealing with.

But I digress.

I look at Tsuna.

Tsuna looks back at me and his eyes are filled with fear, anxiety, and that hard edge of determination that I am usually super jazzed to see.

I jab my finger at where Not-Me and Futa are standing a step behind the rest of the group. Not me has grabbed Futa’s arm with way more force than is called for. Careful with him, he’s a kid with kid bones.

“Fuck you!” I snarl.

But it comes out as, “Fuuu raaaah-“
This whole not being able to talk is going to drive me crazy.

Tsuna, Bro-Bro, my heart, if there was ever a time for you to tap into that patented Vongola intuition, NOW IS THAT TIME.

I have been doing my best to hit drum beats at Tsuna, at Reborn (who is staring at me warily with his gun in his hand), at the rest of my Family. Nothing though, at this point I’m not sure if this music thing that I hear is even a thing at all or if it is just a figment of my fractured consciousness and I am in fact just completely and totally insane.

....

This is what happens when I can’t speak. I start spiraling inside of my own head. Just wait in a couple of minutes I will be having an entire debate over baroque versus romantic musical styles and how Beethoven was an absolutely epic composer, but Bach is the only kind of mathematics that I can get behind. Because, dude, I can zone out in Bach’s compositions and-

**Focus, idiot, focus.**

This isn’t the time for place. Look at your Family they are straight up going to murder you right now.

I’m drowning in endorphins, my arm is hanging on by fucking tendons, and I don’t think I’m getting enough oxygen to my brain right now thank you very much, Mr. Logic.
Fuck you, Tsuna is talking to you right now!

Oh, right, thanks, me.

“W-who are you?” Tsuna demands with a stutter, “What do you people want with Futa-kun?”

That hurt more than I thought it would.

But at the same time, I am going to take this as a blank cheque for if/when I survive this clusterfuck. Tsuna will be doing all my chores for a year. He will be buying me that new Pokémon game that’s coming out during the Christmas season. He will be watching bizarre 1930’s American comedies with me without any subtitles.

“I’m your brother you moron,” is what I want to say, unfortunately with the crushed voice box it comes out sounding more like, “Rw ar gack nomv.”

And, you know, sounding like an actual zombie doesn’t help my case against the imposter at all.

“Stand back Tsuna-sama!” Hayato shouts and jumps to the forefront wielding his capsule explosives and hissing like an angry cat, “I’ve got this!”
I stare back at him with vague incredulity.

Good job Hayato. You protected your boss real good. But unfortunately for you, I am reserving the right to break your nose if you throw C4 at me.

I throw my arms open in what I am hoping is an adequate way of communicating the sheer levels of ‘what the fuck’ this entire situation has resolved into. Why am I the only person in this team of fools that can see through shitty illusions?!

Apparently, this action is much more threatening in this form because they all collectively brace themselves.

Takeshi and Kyoko step up next to Hayato. Kyoko has the game darts laced through her fingers like Wolverine’s claws and they are all glowing with sparking golden light. Takeshi swings his magical bat of transmutation turning it into its sword form, which he then levels at me. A wash of blue light travels down the blade like a waterfall, accompanied by the furious tolling of bells.

Takeshi, bro, dude. We have known each other since we were six. We have shared everything from juice boxes to underwear. We survived the Little Explorers together. And I swear to the Eldritch God who hast cursed me if you decapitate me I will haunt you. I will haunt you in the worst possible way. I will haunt you like a terrible soap-opera ghost. I will ruin every pot of rice you try to make. I will manifest myself with enough ectoplasmic might to hide comical sex toys around your room for your dad to find and ask you terribly awkward questions about.

“If you want Tsuna or the kid you’ll have to go through all of us,” Takeshi says, joining in on the group intimidation check. He looks appropriately wolffish and threatening. “I think that’s what you meant Haya-kun?” He finishes by chirping antagonistically at his feline-themed counterpart.
Because he is an asshole who cannot help himself.

“Who are you calling ‘Haya-kun’ baseball moron?” Hayato challenges darkly, apparently forgetting my existence as he turns his wrath onto Takeshi.

And these idiots might not be able to see my face right now, but I am giving them the biggest stink eye. This really isn’t the time to be squabbling kids. If I was actually an Estraeno monstrosity I would have already killed you because you are more interested in ripping on each other than ripping my guts out.

...

Not that that is a terrible thing at this moment. But it is the principal of the matter.

I send a somewhat desperate look over in Reborn’s direction. He is still watching all this fuckery unfold with his magic chameleon revolver in hand. He hasn’t shot me yet which is a bonus. However, he is also looking at me like he might change his mind in the very near future.

Remind me to come up with an ‘incase my face is ever stolen by an illusionist and I am transformed into a terrible monster,’ hand signal that I can share with him. It will save me the trouble the next time something like this happens.

There is a flash of golden light in the corner of my eye and I only have half a second to dodge out of the way as Kyoko’s sunshine enchanted darts come flying at me slamming into the pavement creating literal craters.
With plastic kiddie darts.

Jesus Christ Kyoko! I thought we were buds! Can you not for once go straight into overdrive! Remember we stared in an action spy thriller together in an alternate timeline? At this rate we will never get around to finishing that sequel.

Six more darts fly at me with deadly accuracy and burst into the pavement as I just barely manage to dance my way around them. Fissures of golden light burst forth in spiderweb patterns at each point of impact.

Kyoko is such a badass.

I don’t even care that she’s trying to kill me right now. She is at least competent about it.

“Boys, can we save the banter until we finish him please?” She asks sweetly as she bares her fangs.

Kyoko really is the only competent one of us chuckle-fucks.

“Sorry Sasagawa,” Takeshi laughs, not sounding sorry in the least.

Hayato grumbles and I find my self suddenly dodging and weaving through a barrage of flash bangs and explosives that has most of the onlooking crowed scattering.
All the while, Not-Me is standing there behind the rest of them digging his nails into Futa’s shoulder with a disturbingly gleeful smile and proving absolutely no color commentary.

C’mon guys. If there was ever a tip-off that something has gone awry it should be me not talking. The day I’m not providing witty observations and continuous banter is the day that the world is ending.

I make an attempt to lunge past the lot of them only to be stopped by the vicious swing of a sword that has me careening back into a booth. Because, holy shit, that came close to cutting off my stupid useless arm. And while my feelings toward stupid useless arm are less than kind right now, I have a feeling that I will, in fact, miss it in the morning if it were to be removed by the sword wielding maniac that is Takeshi.

Now, if it is still broken and lacking feeling and yet in excruciating pain tomorrow I just might let him slice the dumb thing off.

Please don’t go the dismemberment route. It never turns out well.

How so?

The robotic replacement usually malfunctions and tries to kill you nine times out of ten.

And the other one time?
It’s a fucking robot arm which is cool, but phantom pain is a bitch to deal with. Trust me, stick with the fleshy arm.

Fine.

I sprint back at Takeshi and slam my foot into his midsection sending him flying back into Hayato. And both of them tumbling back into the ring toss game. They land hard behind the partisan and suffer the consequences of a shower of rubber ducks pelting them on the head.

Morons.

I change my trajectory again. Making a b-line toward Not-Me and Futa. He has been slowly edging away this whole time and is getting dangerously close to pulling Futa completely out of sight.

I’m getting close.

It takes some doing to avoid Kyoko’s relentless attacks. Though I’m luckily that she’s decided to test out range attacks today and isn’t just wailing on me with brute Sun Flame powered force.

Because that girl once kicked down an entire tree with very little effort. And if today has taught me nothing else it has taught me that even though I am more resilient than the average asshole, my bones are still breakable.
I’m almost there-

“Don’t just stand there like an idiot Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says.

A shot rings out.

Deafening and familiar.

Because of course, this isn’t terrible and heart-shattering enough as it is.

Tsuna lets out that roar of rage and determination, “PROTECT FUTA WITH MY DYING WILL!”

The blow comes before I can properly brace for it, clocking me hard and fast across the back of my head and sending me flying forward and skidding painfully across the ground. My exposed skin scrapes and tears against the concrete and I feel oozy and drippy.

Is my head still there?
Something feels wet and sticky in my eyes. The world is swimming and the moon is laughing.

Somethings wrong.

Somethings wrong.

Tsu I don’t want to play anymore.
I try to move my arm, but I can’t feel it.

I try to scream, but my voice won’t come out.

Something loud goes off next to me. Or does it? I can’t tell.
I move.

I’m moving.

I rolled.

I hit something.

I can’t breathe and I think I’m drowning.

Mommy help I think I’m dying.

Mommy help there’s hands inside me.
Ripping, tearing, grabbing, stealing.

It’s not yours, It’s not yours, It’s not yours.

....

A boy pins me down his eyes orange and bright and furious and he raises his fist and brings it down hard at the center of my forehead. But it doesn’t hit flesh. It doesn't hit bone. It hits something synthetic and fabricated.

Mr. Fox is made of tougher stuff.

A laugh comes out. Or maybe a sob. The world is going dark as he raises his fist again.

Tsu, please don’t, this is going to kill you.
Grandpa chuckles a little at that and goes back to go his project. Colorful threads pulled together weaving and winding.

“Do you know what an illusion is my boy?” Grandpa asks me.

It takes a moment for me to be able to get my tongue working. But talking is easier than moving still.

“A magic trick?” I ask after a moment of contemplation.

Grandpa chuckles a little at that and goes back to go his project. Colorful threads pulled together weaving and winding.
“A magic trick is a type of an illusion, not an illusion itself,” he gathers up a bundle of the colourful threads in his hand and holds them out so that I can see them. “No, an illusion is a fabrication, a lie.”

“A lie,” I repeat slowly.

“Yes, and like any good lie, it must have at least one thread of truth in order to work. For an illusion to work it must first be believed,” he says as he holds one thread of brilliant orange away from the rest of the colors.

I follow eagerly.

I love it when Grandpa teaches me new things.

Words and games and secrets.

Especially the secrets.

“As long as there is a threat of truth the lie will take hold,” he stops talking and continues working for a little while. Weaving colors together until they come together in a picture.
Once it’s done he turns back to me and smiles. The corners of his eyes crinkling in that way which means that he is going to tell me ‘a very important secret.’

“Do you know how to break an illusion Inari?”

I shake my head.

It’s a little stiff and difficult to move but I do it because it will make Grandpa proud.

“I’ll show you then,” He walks around the colorful creation and carefully takes it down and turns it around and when he unfurls it again the picture is gone and has been replaced with knotted and jumbled threads twisted together in chaotic bunches.

“In every lie, in every illusion, there will always be a loose thread. A piece that won’t fit in quite right. A seam of reality that disrupts the fiction. And once you find it,” He runs his hand across the colors until he stops and grasps something that I can only barely make out.

A tail of a brilliant orange thread.

“And once you find it, once you see the lie, well,” he gives one hard tug on the thread and I watch in amazement as the entire tapestry starts to come apart from that point. Unraveling and unraveling and unraveling until knotted strings of colour are the only things left and they collapse to the floor.

“All you really need to do is expose it and the rest will come tumbling down.”
I only have a split second to act as Tsuna winds up for the next strike. I reach up to my face and tear off the fox mask and send one last desperate drumbeat in his direction.

‘Hey, brother.’

Everything stops.

Sound stops.

Movement stops.

Action stops.

Tsuna stops.

“Inari.”

There is a desperate broken wail of a trumpet that breaks through everything.
And then there is the sound of all the glass in the world breaking as once as the sky shatters. Unnatural night giving way to the waning light of day, as the illusion is shattered.

“Inari,” Tsuna says again, but it sounds like he is talking from very, very far away.

Or from inside a fishbowl.

Ha fishies~

“Move,” Sunshine and starlight orders, “Tsunayoshi, I can’t help him if you don’t get off of him.”

“Reborn what-“

"Monello, Inari, look at me."

Does he know what he's carrying I wonder?

“Inari!“
A hand, or is it an inferno rests against my forehead and a beautiful warmth starts seeping into my skull, my brain.

And as a madman starts to cackle and applauds, somewhere in the void a ring of orange fire ignites.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes it did hurt.

I think the alternate title for this chapter is trauma. Or, in which Inari meets his enemy looses his voice and then looses his mind. Seriously, so much of Inari’s mental state depends on his capacity to monologue and joke. Without that he has to face the fact that not is all well inside his own head.

Also, what did you guys think of Mukuro now that he has finally, finally made his appearance (well sort of), but what can you expect. Management is busy after all.

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. They give me the power to write every week.

And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?

Until next week :)
Chapter Summary

Please flip the track to continue....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It feels like death.

It feels like dying.

The quiet suffocation of silence where there had always been something before.

All the fire that had been burning in him extinguishes in and instantly replaced by a cold block of ice that settles in the pit of his stomach and refuses to melt.

Tsuna feels smaller and more alone than he has ever felt in his entire life.

Feels like he has been sawed straight down the middle and half of him has gone missing. Taking all of his essential insides with it.

He feels lost.
Inari?

Inari!?

....

Where are you?

“Fratello? Fratello!?”

Lambo is sobbing. It’s the first sound Tsuna is able to make out through the roaring in his ears. He’s on the ground and he’s watching as Lambo buries his face against Inari’s stomach and just keeps crying. Reborn spends a brief moment trying to get him off before he leaves it be and starts working around him.

They are both speaking in rapid Italian now.

Tsuna can’t understand a word of it.

He would ask Hayato, but his tongue has gone numb. And the world is greying out at the edges.
Takeshi’s katana clatters to the ground and it sounds so loud. And his usually cheerful friend is standing there staring at Inari.

Inari is on the ground.

He’s on the ground and he isn’t moving.

He isn’t MOVING, and the terrible memories associated with that though do nothing to stop the panic rising in Tsuna’s chest.

That can’t happen again. That can never happen again.

He doesn’t think Inari would be able to live though that again.

Tsuna wouldn’t be able to live with himself to be the cause of it.

He doesn’t understand what’s happening right now. Or he does but it doesn’t make sense. They had been fighting a monster. It had looked, and moved, and sounded like a monster.

It had eyes like Futa had warned them about. Like the eyes Tsuna remembered seeing on that woman who had attacked them at the school.
It had been a monster.

It hadn’t been his brother.

It hadn’t been his brother until he had it pinned down to the ground and was pummelling it in the head and it reached up and pulled off its own face...

But that didn’t make sense.

That wasn’t real.

And the face that he suddenly saw looking back at him filled him with the cold certainty that nothing he had just seen had been real.

Because that was his brother.

He had been with Kyoko-chan. They had asked Inari if he wanted to tag along but he had given them this somewhat pained look and said,

“Bro-Bro, I do not need to be so closely involved with your love life. If I keep following you around on dates people are going to start thinking that we are in some sort of weird incestuous polyamorous relationship with the lovely Kyoko. And I don’t really want to give Haru’s ‘friend fiction’ that much power over reality.”
“Hieee! Stop, stop talking please!” Tsuna begs feeling his face heat up uncomfortably. How the heck does Inari always make things so weird.

“You're not interested?” Kyoko-chan says teasingly as she cocks her him and smiles suggestively at his brother. Oh god, he had forgotten how they get when they start talking.

“Sorry sweetheart,” Inari’s tips and imaginary hat at her and gives a little bow, “maybe in another life when I am not so fucking queer~”

They watch as Inari spins gracefully on his heel and starts walking away.

“You kids have fun~”

Tsuna feels overheated and somewhat uncomfortable but not as much as he usually would.

“Inari-kun is funny,” Kyoko-chan says as she slips her hand into his and gives it a firm and comfortable squeeze.

“Yeah,” Tsuna sighs. There is a happy little buzz in his head that tells him that Inari is feeling very self-satisfied right now.
He’s such a brat. It’s not wondering that all the crazy mafia children like him so much. Even Reborn seems to get along with him and he is the craziest of all the crazy kids. But Tsuna supposes that he could have chosen a worse role model than his brother.

Does it still work like that if Reborn has a job already? He is still a kid after all.

“C’mon,” she prompts and starts dragging him along, “Let’s check out the games.”

And they do.

They wander around the fairway hand and hand and try out some of the attractions. Predictably, Tsuna sucks at all of them. But she doesn’t seem to mind. And Tsuna really enjoys watching her crush the strength game after the antelope-faced man running the attraction laughed at him for his pitiful score.

Kyoko is so strong.

It’s awesome~

And then the moon comes out. Night falls and there are lights everywhere in the trees in the ground and little fireworks of glowing butterflies are popping everywhere and it looks amazing.

They both start giggling and swaying together as they walk back toward the rest of their friends.
He sees Mr. Monkey, giant Mr. Monkey, at the balloon pop game and he points him out to Kyoko.

She takes one look at it and then turns back to him her eyes sparkling happy and takes both of his hands in her own and, “I’m going to win him for you Tsu-kun!”

“Hie? You don’t have to.”

“But I’m going to.”

She says it with such happy conviction and sparkles that Tsuna can’t bring himself to argue with her. Not that he would. Why would he try to stop Kyoko-chan from trying to show off how awesome she is?

Kyoko-chan’s determination is one of the reasons he fell so hard for her in the first place.

Tsuna feels sillier and lighter than he usually does when he is with her. When he is thinking about her. The usual anxiety that accompanies the butterflies in his stomach isn’t present today.

If it’s a Doom Day thing it is a good Doom Day thing. He will take it over having to follow Inari around through a sewer any day.

“Alright,” smiles and lets her guide him over toward the game.
All around them happy people are mulling about eating overly sweet carnival foods, playing games, shopping at the stalls. It’s everything that he always wanted from a Doom Day festival and never had because he had always been too useless to make friends and he had never really cared enough to try and improve himself.

The world had been grey unless Inari was around to fill it with color.

That is until the demon toddler showed up and started shooting him in the head with “magic bullets.” He’s not exactly sure what the deal is with the Dying Will thing is. Inari seems pretty convinced that it is magic, and though Tsuna doesn’t often agree with the sci-fi fantasy magic tangents that his brother goes on he’s pretty sure that he’s on to something with this one.

Tsuna doesn’t really have any way to explain how he catches fire and is filled with power and energy and is suddenly so much more than he usually is.

He can hold onto it more and more now too.

Suddenly darkness falls and Tsuna looks up into a stray night sky and an enormous blue moon.

“Wow, it’s so pretty,” Kyoko-chan says as the two of them look up.

“Yeah~” Tsuna has to make a very real effort so the words ‘not as pretty as you,’ don’t come tumbling out of his mouth. There is a limit to how cheezy things can get and even he knows that’s over the limit.
They are startled back down to earth by the sounds of popping fire works and sparklers. There are small explosions of light and color. Butterflies made of indigo fire flapping around.

“Hey, Tsuna are you seeing this!?" Takeshi calls out from where he and Hayato are competing at the ring toss.

“Pay attention baseball-moron or I’m going to beat you!”

“In your dreams Haya-kun.”

“It’s so cool!” Tsuna calls back over at them.

The world is floaty and soft and there is a wonderful sweet smell in the air now that reminds him of being at home with mom and Inari and watching as they pour over one of Grandpa’s old recipe books making something that none of them could pronounce but would taste amazing.

He and Kyoko sway and bump into each other giggling all the way over to the game booth.

There’s a Tanuki running the game. And vaguely, distantly, Tsuna realizes that this should be a strange thought, but here he is a mouse on a date with a lioness. He doesn’t really want to interrupt the perfect strangeness of this moment.
“How much to play?” Kyoko-chan asks bright and determined as she shows off her fangs.

“400 yen for ten darts,” The tanuki informs her, “If you manage to pop ten on your first go you can try for ten more.

She slams the money down on the counter with a smirk and gladly accepts the handful of colorful plastic darts.

And the game starts.

Takeshi and Hayato eventually tire of the ring toss and wander over in time to see some carnival shenanigans in the form of a trick balloon. Kyoko-chan is about to put down more money for a second round when Tsuna points it out.

“He’s cheating.”

Tsuna doesn’t want her spending on him. He knows money is tight for her family. He’s happy to spend time with her.

“Cheating isn’t nice,” Takeshi comments and the wolf head smiles threateningly as he uses his height to loom over the Tanuki.

“Now hold on, I don’t want any trouble.”
“But you were cheating,” Reborn says appearing out of nowhere, “Why don’t you give them a bonus round.”

“Bonus round?”

“Unlimited darts for one minute.”

“And if I refuse?”

Kyoko-chan and Hayato don’t give Reborn a chance to come up with a nasty alternative to his proposition. Kyoko-chan cracks her knuckles menacingly and Hayato opens his jacket and flashes something to the Tanuki that has him paling dramatically.

Tsunas hopes it isn’t dynamite. They just talked about that.

Everyone he knows is crazy.

But he supposes he is a little bit crazy too.

“Fine, fine, fine,” The booth keeper relents, “But I’ll raise you one more. If you kids can pop every ballon in one minute all the prizes are yours. If not, you're going to spend the rest of the night working for me.”
“Hieee!?”

“Deal,” Kyoko-chan says and shakes his hand.

Tsuna sees him wince.

She is so strong~

And the game starts.

They get two players and Takeshi gets nominated as Kyoko-chan’s second. And together the two of them proceed to absolutely decimate the game. Together Tsuna is pretty sure they are the strongest and fastest. He, the kids, and Hayato cheer them on, or in Hayato’s case shout obscenities at the booth runner and Takeshi.

Futa and Lambo are having a ball.

Inari joins them too.

He walks up behind and rests a hand on Futa’s shoulder.
And-

He hadn’t said anything.

Tsuna knows his brother better than anyone else. In someways he knows him better than he knows himself.

Inari would have said something.

He would have taken one look at the scene and have started a running commentary. Reborn would have come over and been listening to him talk and he would have picked up Lambo so he had a better view.

That’s what Inari would have done.

But Tsuna had been caught in a haze of fun and sweet smells and dazzling lights.

It had seemed perfectly normal.

And then the monster had shown up.
And now his brother is on the ground.

“Perhaps Cain and Abel would have been an apter allegorical reference.”

Tsuna looks up through the haze of guilt and confusion and sees a man. There is a man standing several feet away from them, thick corded stitches running across his mangled face. And a terrible smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

He is watching them and laughing and clapping as they all gather around his brothers beaten and unmoving body.

He’s laughing like something about this is funny.

Tsuna is immediacy terrified of this person.

There is something about this man that sends a shiver of dread down Tsuna’s spine. Something that has nothing to do with the twisted and strange way that he looks.

Something familiar.

“I remembered that you were able to spot me last time so I cooked up something extra special for
"you," the man continues stretching out dramatically, and for a split second Tsuna sees the outline of another person entirely standing there.

....a pineapple?

“Tsuná,” Reborn’s voice is low and warning. His hands are still on Inari and there is an intense golden light that feels terrifying and enormous coming off of him and curling around Inari.

Tsuna’s first reaction to that light was to run away, it’s too much it’s too big it had to be hurting Inari.

But his brother actually seemed to relax under the intensity of it, and his bruises were starting to fade ever so slightly.

Had Reborn always been able to do that?

“Tsuná!” Reborn snaps, louder this time and Tsuna comes to attention. He pulls himself up off the ground and places himself between Inari and this person.

He had made a promise to himself after all. He was going to protect his brother. He would make it up to him. When he was better he swears it. But right now everything in him is screaming that the biggest threat to all of them is this person covered in stitches.

That’s staring at them with familiar red and blue eyes.
With the kanji for six inside of the red.

He’s seen these eyes before.

“W-who are y-you?” Tsuna demands, hating the way that his voice cracks and breaks from stress and panic.

“W-what do you want?!”

The man's face goes lax and blank as he stares back at Tsuna.

It feels almost judgemental.

“I hate repeating myself, it’s such a waste of time. The little chatty one can fill you in on the details when he wakes up.”

The man pauses, and then he smiles.

Only it’s not a smile.
Smiles don’t look like that.

“Or maybe he won’t. I had to get a little rough with him and broken some things. But if you think about it I did you a favor, all that talking must get on your nerves. He’ll be much quieter now.”

What. He did what?

The terror that the implication sets inside of him is immediate and all-consuming and Tsuna feels the flames start to lick up around his hands in somewhat painful spirals.

Good.

Let it hurt. He doesn’t care. He will gladly put up with whatever pain for the rest of his life if it means that Inari will talk again.

He has to be able to talk again.

What had this monster done to his brother?

A terrible inhuman snarl comes out of Reborn and a shot rings out. Tsuna doesn’t even have time to fully process the thought that is forming in his own mind. The implications of what this ‘person’ (is it a person?) said.
The bullet buries itself into the man’s shoulder with a sick THUNK. But he doesn’t stumble or fall. He doesn’t give any indication at all that he notices that he had been shot.

A moment passes and then he slowly raises his hand to his shoulder and then Tsuna has to fight to keep from throwing up as he watches the man jam a finger into the puller wound and starts digging around.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Hayato breathes in horror.

Kyoko-chan gabs his arm and squeezes tightly.

Takeshi still isn’t reacting. He’s still staring fixedly down at Inari, not moving, not blinking. He didn’t even flinch when Reborn fired that short.

This is bad, this is really, really bad.

“Did I hit a nerve Arcobaleno?”

The man has the guts to mock Reborn of all people.

Tsuna actually doesn’t know which of them is scarier right now, and he finds himself frozen in fear
trapped between the enormous burning rage that Reborn is exuding and the cold fever that this, this stitch-man puts into him.

Why couldn’t they have just had a nice day at the festival? Why did it have to turn out like this!?

Why does it ALWAYS turn out like this?!

Reborn’s eyes flash and for the briefest moment Tsuna swears that he sees rings of molten golden fire blaze in the centre of the toddler’s huge black button eyes.

“Hieeeee!”

What are the chances that he can grab Inari and drag him out of here?

Zero.

Less than zero probably.

Like negative a million because Tsuna is a wimpy looser who can hardly carry his own weight let alone another person.
Maybe if all of them work together....

No, he doesn’t know how safe it is to move Inari right now. Tsuna is about as far from a medical professional as a person can be and even he knows that his brother’s neck and arm don’t look like they should be moving around without being secured or fixed.

“You may still be able to fix the poor thing,” the man continues smugly apparently reading Tsuna’s mind which is all sorts of uncomfortable. “Too bad that you don’t have a doctor on call, Kufufufufu-”

He’s angry.

Tsuna is angry is so, so very angry. The world has started to sharpen and clarify around this person, around his enemy and Tsuna wants to hurt him. He wants to beat him until he is no longer moving.

All of that fire is ready to explode in his chest. He’s ready to-

He’s terrified that he’ll hurt his brother again if he lets himself fall into that pool of rage and fire again.

And he would rather die than let something like that happen again. Tsuna doesn’t care how good it feels he’s not going to go out of control like that ever again.

But he knows he’s going to need to use the fire again if they’re going to get out of this alive.
“Yeah, I never did bother finishing with that medical degree,” Doctor Shamal says as he walks through what looks like an invisible wall closely followed by Miki-san. Where the heck?!

Actually, no, never mind.

Miki-san slams her knee into the stitch-man’s midsection as Shamal walks casually past him. She follows it up with a swift elbow to the back of the head and a flip that lands him hard on the pavement.

“Thanks, sweetie~” Shamal coos back at her.

“Doctor Shamal!” Tsuna cries out with relief, “Miki-san!”

He might not like this man, but that dislike is easily overpowered by: ‘oh, thank god and actual adult person who can deal with this crazy shit.

Because as much as Reborn likes to boss him around and pretend to be in charge, Tsuna can’t get over the fact that he is still just a baby. A ridiculously strong and intelligent mafia baby. But still a baby.

“I’m going to go keep an eye on him,” Kyoko-chan says. She gives him a swift squeeze on his arm as she rushes over to where Miki-san has the man pinned down.
At least she is still able to function. Tsuna still feels too shaky and stunned to move. Takeshi is completely frozen in place and Hayato’s attention is buzzing around manically.

None of them really know what to do.

Usually Inari knows what to do.

Or Reborn with have some sort of plan.

Tsuna has no idea what he should be doing right now. The man who hurt his brother is on the ground and there is a doctor here. So are they done? Is it finished?

Can they call it a night and go home? Or rather call it a night and go to the hospital.

He’ll have to go find mom. She’ll know what to do. She always knows what to do to make things better.

“Where the hell have you BEEN,” Hayato asks, angry, and shrill, and yet so very glad. Tsuna already knows that as much as Hayato complains about Shamal he is actually happy that the man is there watching his back.

He’s still terrified that Bianchi will come back one day.
Terrified that his father will come and find him one day.

Tsuna wishes that he was strong enough that his friend never had to worry about such terrible things.

Shamal gives them all an incredulous look.

“I was a little busy,” He says as he gestures back with a wide sweep of his hand looking harassed and irritated.

“There are more important things to worry about than your new honey!!” Hayato shrieks.

“I meant the monster mask running around back there you dumb fucking brats!”

What?

He can’t see or hear anything past their little space here. Everyone who had been milling about the games had run off when the monster... when they had all started attacking Inari.

Shamal elbows past Tsuna who does him best to wiggle out of the way without completely taking his eyes off of either Inari or the stitch-man that Miki-san has pinned to the ground. It would be nice to be able to move his eyes like Leon. There is too much that Tsuna needs to keep track of right now.
He ends up backing up right into Takeshi who is still giving no indication of being aware of anything.

“Takeshi,” Tsuna hisses. Trying to snap his friend out of it.

Takeshi turns his head slightly so that Tsuna make out his expression past the wolf mask and-

He looks absolutely devastated.

He looks how Tsuna feels right now.

“What are you talking about,” Reborn asks Shamal, drawing Tsuna’s attention back down.

“You really need to get that block fixed, I told you what a stupid idea it was in the first place, but now you really are going to get yourself killed. And then who’s going to pay me?”

“Shamal,” Reborn snaps.

“YOU. ARE. ALL. IN. AN. ILLUSION,” Shamal enunciates slowly and deliberately.
And as soon as he says it the world starts to crack around them. That invisible wall that Tsuna had noticed, but hadn’t really been able to think of once Shamal passed through it shatters and breaks into a million pieces that briefly glow and intense blue.

The roaring hits his ears before anything else. And if the man had seemed familiar before, it is nothing compared to now when Tsuna can see those hulking monstrosities. Huge and bulbous and deformed bodies protruding growths of violet crystals.

There is an answering roar and the ground shakes. Tsuna whirls around to see another one. There is another one. They had only been barely able to handle one and even then Shamal had to save them from that.

It doesn’t look like either of them have noticed them here yet though.

They aren’t too close yet.

Which means they may still be able to get away.

With Shamal and Miki-san here they will probably be able to move Inari and get away and-

Screaming.

People are screaming.
And crying.

...

...

...

They can't leave it like this.

Tsuna could never forgive himself for it.

Inari wouldn't let something like this go unanswered.

....

And also...
It feels like he’s forgetting something.

Something important.

“Are you sure you should be doing that?” Shamal asks drawing Tsuna’s attention back down to where the doctor has crouched next to Inari and Reborn. Tsuna isn’t really sure what it is that Reborn is doing, other than the scary glowing thing that has been leeching the deep bruises out of his brother’s skin.

“If I remember right healing really isn’t your THING. Too much output, high risk of pain an burning.”

“Not with him,” Reborn says quietly, barely loud enough for Tsuna to hear. Not that it really matters he really isn’t following anything in this conversation.

“You must be joking,” Shamal says as he starts to examine Inari’s arm and throat. When Reborn doesn’t say anything else he snorts, “Congratulations, you finally met someone with an even more ridiculous capacity than you.”

“Is Inari going to be alright?” Takeshi’s voice comes out small and broken as he looks down at Inari.

He’ll be fine.

He’ll be fine, he’ll be fine, he’ll be fine.
He has to be fine.

One of the monsters roars again and the ground quakes.

“The little shit disturber will be fine. I just need to see what exactly has been done to him.”

“Well, first I STRANGLED him to keep him from screaming, and then when he refused to cooperate and stay still like a good little boy I wrenched his arm out of place.”

The man is THERE. He’s standing right next to Tsuna now. The hash stitches across his face are even more gross to look at close up. Tsuna can’t breath. There is something about this mans presence that feels so very wrong.

“You are much more irritating than I ever would have expected Trident Shamal.”

“TSUNA LOOK OUT!” Hayato screams and Tsuna only has a split second to move before something slices through the air dangerously close to his head.

He flails and falls. Slamming onto his back splayed out next to his brother.

Ow.
He needs to work on that.

A shot rings out. Loud so loud when he is basically right next to his head. And he watches as the man falls. His eyes rolling back, with a bullet hole in the centre of his forehead.

Takeshi’s katana slices through the body at breakneck speed cutting it in half entirely. His eyes are wide and mad and manic.

And then the body vanishes.

Into thin air.

“What the hell!”

Reborn swears. It’s in Italian, but even though Tsuna can’t understand what is said he knows swearing when he hears it.

“Illusion,” Shamal intones as he maneuvers Inari’s arm around and there is a sickening pop and crack as he puts it back into place.

The man appears again. Cackling like a lunatic.
A flash of blue light rippling out does something strange. Freezing and distorting the image as Takeshi’s katana rams straight through the man.

And Tsuna sees it again.

That afterimage of another person standing there.

It’s a crazy thought. It’s more of an Inari thought really. But Tsuna is sure now that there is someone else controlling this person.

“Can you tell where the real one is?” Reborn demands.

Tsuna really doesn’t like that Reborn seems just as lost as he is right now.

“I wish, no, this is way beyond my skill set,” Shamal chuckles humourlessly.

Takeshi is spinning around plowing through copy after copy. Each of them vanishing as he lands a hit on them. And they might not be REAL, but they are still managing to hit him back. One of them appears behind him and Tsuna’s breath catches in his throat, “TAKESHI!”

A tent pole slams hard across the man's chest and he is sent flying ten feet before vanishing.
“You have a hell of a swing Sasagawa,” Takeshi-kun says, sounding somewhat steadier now.

“Not too shabby yourself Yamamoto,” Kyoko-chan smirks back at him.

Tsuna exchanges a glance with Hayato who is also watching their friends closely. They aren’t going to just leave them to fight alone. Tsuna might still be scared out of his wits but he always feels braver when they are all together.

He has to be extra brave right now.

For his brother.

He starts pushing himself up, but he is stopped short by a hand grabbing his wrist tightly and a static shock running up the entirety of his arm up to his head. He has no idea how one person can generate so much static electricity as his brother. Every time they touch he gets a little jolt and shock and-

“INARI!”

His brother’s eyes are wide open. His pupils blown out and the usual bright amber of his eyes has turned a molten orange in the light of the setting sun. But his eyes are open and he’s looking at Tsuna.
Suddenly Tsuna can feel it again. That warmth in his heart and the continuous steady beat that tells him that he’s not alone.

Is Inari awake?

Had whatever Reborn and Shamal done fixed him?

Is he okay now?!

“Monello!” Reborn calling out too, placing a small hand gently on his brother’s face getting a look at his eyes.

Inari looks at him for a brief moment before his eyes slide shut again.

The hand on his wrist squeezes again and there is a pulse of SOMETHING and Tsuna feels a buzzing thrumming under his skin. Spots are swimming in his vision and he ends up rapidly blinking trying to clear it up.

Inari’s hand goes lax and drops back down to the pavement.

Tsuna blinks once more and when his eyes open again the world looks absolutely bizarre. Lines of deep blue neon are running across absolutely everything. The ground, the booths, the nearby buildings all the way down Main Street toward city hall and beyond. He can see people running
now. Running and screaming. Fleeing from the multiple and multiplying crystal monsters.

There are members of the Defence Committee that are attacking them but every time the crystals break they start to regrow into new crystal monsters. Smaller than the big ones with the fleshy bits, but they are sharper and faster and they are attacking the people of Namimori.

Hibari-san is probably somewhere out there having the time of his life smashing things. This might be one of the few times that Tsuna

It is absolute chaos.

Oh god.

Mom.

Where is Mom!?

“TSUNA-NII!!!!!” Futa screams desperate and terrified.

Futa.
He had forgotten Futa.

He had completely forgotten that he had been there, had been with them! How could he have done that?

These are the people that are after Futa!

“FUTA!” He calls out.

He sees him now. The bunny mask has completely fallen off of his face and he’s looking back at Tsuna with tears running down his eyes and faint thread of hope now that he realizes that he has been seen.

The curtain of dark blue fire that had been obscuring him from view extinguishes almost immediately and Tsuna knows without looking, without asking that everyone else sees him now too.

He’s being restrained by a teenager with short messy brown hair.

He doesn’t have eyes.

In place of eyes, there are violet crystals that reflect from multiple angles it looks super creepy like, like-
Like fly eyes!

Yeah, like that.

Tsuna is on his feet and half way to Futa before he even realizes what he’s doing.

“Stop struggling you little brat!” The fly eyed teen snaps at Futa as he struggles to keep hold of the huge red book and the boy at the same time.

“TSUNA-NII HELP!” Futa screams.

“He can’t see or hear you kid, just quit while your ahead. The boss’s illusions are top-notch. Decimo doesn’t even notice that you're gone.”

FUCK YOU ASSHOLE!

“LET GO OF HIM!” Tsuna yells. And the teen jumps and yelps as Tsuna throws a punch at him.

....You call that a punch... dude self defense classes are in your immediate future.
Yeah, Tsuna doesn’t really know what he’s doing with the violence thing. He mostly just swings and hopes for the best. Which turns out okay when he’s raging and hopped up on the ‘magic fire’ but not so well when he’s not.

“Shit, Oi boss, a little help here!” The teen calls out and the Stitch-Man looks over at them with absolute murder in his eyes.

“Tony, I told you to get him out of here.”

“Yeah, and if you wanted brute force you would have sent Ken to do this shit not me. The kid won't stop squirming and the book weighs three hundred pounds at least,” Tony snaps back at him as he still easily manages to dodge out of the way of Tsuna’s punch.

“I’m a little busy dealing with the Arcobaleno and Decimo’s cohorts right now, get one of your minions to do it,” One of the copies of the Stitch-Man snarls. There are so many of them now. Probably because between Reborn and his friends the illusions are being destroyed almost as fast as they appear.

Do you see those shots that he’s taking? They change direction in mid-air! That is so fucking cool!

It is pretty cool, but he has more important things to deal with now.

“They aren’t really gentle with fragile cargo you know.”
“I don’t need the boy in one piece. I just need him mentally functional.”

Tsuna’s stomach drops right now. He has to do something. He has to do something now!

Yeah, grab Futa, like now when he’s distracted.

Tsuna lunges and tries to grab hold of Futa’s arm to try and pull him back towards himself.

Tony yanks him back out of the way before Tsuna can get a hold on him. It’s not that he’s not fast enough, his reactions are just too sluggish and slow.

God damn it. It’s like your running Windows Vista in here. You need fucking admin access to do anything. Fucking seal.

...What?

He’s obviously been spending way too much time listening to Inari’s nonsensical monologues, even his inner voice is starting to sound like his brother.

Tsuna doesn’t have time to worry about it, because the next second an enormous crystal-like projectile is flying at his head.
MOVE IDIOT!

Before he can entirely process what is happening Tsuna’s entire body lurches in a dive to the ground. He braces with the palms of his hands in a way that he has done before, but never when he isn’t running madly on one of those bullets.

He springs back up to his feet and feels that familiar pulse of energy course through his entire body.

But no rage.

No blinding anger and single minded drive.

Give me a second I’m working on it.

The crystal collides with one of Hayato’s ‘designer’ explosives. There is no sound as it detonates in a flash of red and white-hot fire and the entire jagged thing just dissolves in mid-air before ever hitting the ground.

Tsuna has no idea how Hayato manages to make those things, but he has hundreds of them now and each of them has a different amazing effect. When Tsuna had told his friend to quit it with the life-endangering dynamite, he had no idea that these were the kinds of things that would come of it.
Hayato is a genius.

And he never believes it when Tsuna says it to him.

“Are you alright Tsuna-sama?!” Hayato asks as he skids to a halt at his side.

“I-I’m fine.”

“Dame-Tsuna stop him!” Reborn’s voice cuts through Tsuna’s stupor and he sees Tony beginning to back away toward a hoard of violet crystal creatures. He has somewhat ducked himself behind Futa’s body using the little boy as a human shield.

STOPHIMSTOPHIMSTOPHIMSTOPHIM

HOW!?

GO. AFTER. HIM.

But Inari-

Inari is going to kick your ass if you let anything happen to that precious start child.
“Cazzo! Shamal-“

“I got the walking disaster, go make sure that we don’t have a full-scale underworld war on our hands!”

Reborn doesn’t even say anything. In a second he’s past Tsuna his hair a wild mess the pacifier around his neck giving off waves of that unsettling golden light. The gun in his hand is a cold grey metal rather than the usual lime green that makes the weapon look like a children’s toy.

Where’s Leon?

That question is answered almost immediately as sticky tongue latches to the side of Tsuna’s face and suddenly he has a small lizard crawling up into his hair.

“HIEEEE!?”

Why!? Why is the weird lizard thing on him now!?

Worry about that later!

Stitch-man’s real body is behind the shooter game. Let Shamal and Miki-chan know and
“His real body is behind the shooter game!” Tsuna calls out as he follows after Reborn his legs not giving him an option not to.

“Tsuna!?” Takeshi asks.

“They can’t get away with Futa-kun!” Tsuna yells out to everyone, “Inari would never forgive us!”

As he yells for a brief hysterical moment he swears he hears a trumpet sound.

Bizarre.

That’s one word for it I guess.

Takeshi has caught up to him in an instant. His sword is drawn and there is a pulse of blue and white light rippling through the blade.

“You’re right Tsuna,” He says, “thanks.”
And then he’s blasting out in front of the pack, almost catching up with Reborn who is firing off shot after shot on the crystals creatures that keep throwing themselves into their groups path.

That is the propagation property of Cloud Flames taken to its absolute zenith. Whoever came up with that was either brilliant or psychotic.

Tsuna isn’t sure what ‘Cloud Flames’ are but he’s pretty sure that psychotic is the word to describe whoever created these things. Every time one of them breaks under the force of one of their attacks they just reform again. And the broken pieces just start to form together to make new ones.

Everyone is doing their best trying to break through the hoard to keep up with Tony and Futa. Tsuna is starting to feel more and more useless. He’s not as strong as them he can’t blast through these things the way his friends can.

He definitely can’t keep up with Reborn. He’s even surer now than he was before that the baby is an actual literally demon.

More of option A than B, but off on both counts.

He’s starting to feel sluggish again. And he’s afraid to reach for the fire.

Afraid that if he does he’ll hurt someone he loves again.

...
It wasn’t your fault.

Tsuna dodges past a sharp and jagged violet arm. It drags painfully across his cheek and he feels the blood starting to run down the side of his face.

It was his fault. He should have noticed. He always notices. That’s the only thing he has ever been good at.

We’re going to call this one on account of cosmic interference and a mind-controlling megalomaniac with an army of mad science experiments at his disposal.

It hurts, but he grits his teeth and scrambles between the monster's legs. He’s hyper-focused on Futa who has now been passed off to one of the crystal monsters.

He can’t do this.

You’re still on fire, you can catch him no problem.

And he’ll lose it again. He can’t...

No, you won’t. Not this time, not anymore.
There are tears stinging at the corners of Tsuna’s eyes now, and he fights off a wrenching sob. And he suddenly realizes-

“Inari?” He whispers amid the sounds of chaos and fighting.

Yeah, Bro-Bro?

“How?”

Who knows. I’m just doing this whole force ghost, Obi-Wan Kenobi ‘Luke I will be with you always,’ thing.

“You’re not dead!!” He says vehemently, “you’re not are you?”

It’s a terrifying thought that his brother could have died there while he ran off without him. He’s not. He can’t be.

“Please don’t leave me alone.”

Tsuna has come to a complete stop and it feels like time has come to a complete stop too. There is a warmth pulsing in the center of his forehead and can almost feel a hand slide into his and
squeeze.

No, no I'm not. But even if I was Tsu-

I would never leave you.

Not in a million billion gagillion years.

There are tears running down Tsuna’s face now as the world starts pulling itself back into frame into motion. He's going to have to move again. He’s going to have to fight.

The phantom hand in his own squeezes again.

Fortune favors the bold Bro-Bro. Say what you're going to do and then fucking do it.

The fire ignites.

The fire ignites and its nothing like any of the other times.

It’s not the slow painful drag of when he tries to reach for it himself.
It’s not the force that overpowers him completely when Reborn shoots him.

It’s easy and warm in his hands.

....

Like it used to be.

Close enough for now. I did what I could and Reborn has been doing his best to power through that thing. Remind me to buy him a cookie, I had no idea how hard that would be.

He’s going to protect his friends.

He’s going to protect his brother.

He’s going to rescue Futa.

And he’s going to KILL THE FUCKER WHO DARED HURT HIS FAMILY!
A ball of soft radiant white light and two yellow eyes blink at him from within.

That’s much better.

Take this gift and do us proud.

Tsuna reaches inside. He doesn’t think about the ‘why’s’ or the ‘how’s’ of this moment. He knows with absolute certainty that in his hands will be a weapon crafted from starlight and resolve.

It forms in his hands and finds its shape in his mind's eye. Nothing flashy. Nothing with any special connotations attached to it.

A weapon for Sawada Tsunayoshi.

I like it, I was never really keen on the whole history repeated itself trope.

Time starts again. Three of the crystal golems are bearing down on him. Kyoko-chan screams his name and a shot rings out in the distance.

And Tsuna is holding a stick.
He’s holding a big stick and it’s a really cool majestic looking stick, and he has absolutely no idea what to do with it.

It’s a bō staff Bro-Bro.

Great, it’s a cool stick with a cool name. What the hell does he do with it?! These things are huge, and, yes, he feels aware and empowered, but that does not mean he knows anything about fighting with a stick!

Inari laughs and warmth bubbles up inside Tsuna’s chest.

Alright, dude, chill. We got this. I got you. And you’ve got this.

Just consider this tutorial mode.

Tsuna widens his stance and tightens his grip and raises the bō staff to block the first blow. Fire blazes across the surface orange and white from the intensity. He hears the crystal begin to crack and shatter from contact.

“Get out of my way,” Tsuna says. His voice carries weight and purpose like it never has before.

He pulls the staff back and arcs it back through the air. It collides once, twice, three times.
And when he comes to a stop each of the creatures has been turned to dust.

Tsuna looks up and he fixes his eyes once more on the golem that has Futa. On Tony who has the book. To a young man sitting perched on top of a fence under the light of the natural full moon. A look of unholy glee on his face.

The face of his enemy.

Tsuna breathes. Focuses. And moves.

The bō staff cracks into the ground and he uses the force and momentum to launch himself further into the fray. He lands and immediately has the staff spinning to slam an end into the head of a creature that is harrying Hayato. It bursts into shards as well and Hayato takes the opportunity to launch a furious barrage forward in an maelstrom of red.

Tsuna takes the gift and rushes forward down the cleared path.

He honestly has no idea how he is doing any of this. He is trusting in his intuition. Trusting in fire and the drive.

Somehow he knows that if he ever expects this to go as easily as this again he will be in for a nasty surprise.
This ability that he has right now...

This brief moment of knowledge will vanish once this is done.....

This is guidance from his brother, through the strongest bond he has, and ever will have.

This is a gift from a VERY. ANGRY. LIZARD.

Kyoko and Takeshi are flanking him keeping the tide of creatures at bay with blades and fists and howls and roars. At this moment, he feels like they are all perfectly in tune.

A thirst for vengeance echoed through their bond.

For the piece of their harmony that is missing.

Tsuna, for the briefest of moments, swears he hears music.

The sounds of a trumpet, of a piano, of bells, of a harp.
Of two more instruments: a flute in a furious dance of violent dictation, and a saxophone lying in wait for the perfect moment to strike.

---

It’s nice to have external confirmation that I am not, in fact, crazy. Though considering our current situation and my current role as fucking Jiminy Cricket that might be a moot point.

The music fades just as soon as it starts and Tsuna summons up the strength for one last burst.

He breaks through the last of the crystal golems as gun shots ring out faster than Tsuna would think possible for a six-shot revolver. But then Reborn is something else entirely. He would have to be to create a meteor shower of gold and heat and malice.

The ground is pummeled, and the remaining creations near the front are reduced to a glittering haze of violet sparkles that reminds Tsuna distinctly of Inari’s strange glitter bombs.

Reborn must like shiny things too.

That or he is just so far gone in the rage that he was just breaking things into as many pieces as humanly possible.

Tsuna thinks either option is acceptable in this circumstance.

His tutor walks through the chaos of his own creation hair standing on end and radiating that terrible, consuming, heavy aura. The centers of his eyes are smoldering with that intense unyielding
And Tsuna doesn’t really like Reborn. He is a disruptive, sadistic, spartan tutor who relishes in making Tsuna’s life difficult.

He’s terrifying.

But in this moment for the first time, he and Tsuna are on the same page.

Because these fuckers had attacked Inari.

And that is a good a reason as any to team up with your nemesis.

Tsuna charges at Tony who has the book in his grasp as Reborn slams one of his tiny fists into the leg of the enormous crystal monster. It’s one of the big ones, like the thing they had fought in the school gym. It’s the source of the rest of the crystal creatures. It’s screaming and roaring as more and more of the golems slaw off its body.

And it has a sobbing little boy held in its grasp.

Tony sees him and yells, “Boss!”
Tsuna doesn’t give him a chance to say anything else. The bō staff cracks hard across the teen’s head and Tsuna sees a fissure form in his left eye. He hits the ground hard, the book flying out of his grasp. When he tries to go for it Tsuna plants the end of the staff in the center of his back to hold him down.

The monster roars as it is half obliterated by the force of Reborn’s strike. The baby hitman tears Futa out of is grasp dragging him away from it back and toward his friends who are now at his back.

They have Futa.

Have they won? Is it over?

“You really are something else aren’t you Decimo,” a voice that is both familiar and completely unknown says accompanied by the turn of a thick page.

“You, the legendary hitman Reborn, these lovely ‘friends’ of yours,” another page turns and Tsuna feels a terrible sinking feeling in his gut.

“Even the husk of spare parts that you call your ‘brother’ in fact I think I like him best of all.”

A childlike smile pulls across a pale face and a strangely colored set of eyes.

One a deep indigo blue.
The other a flat red with the kanji for one within it.

“Who are you?” Tsuna asks again.

The young man flips to another page and doesn’t respond. Futa has started to chant, ‘stop reading, stop reading-‘ in the background. This is bad. Tsuna knows this is bad.

They need to get the book back.

Reborn had said that the book has information that could bring ruin to the world. There is no way that they can let this person have it. This person has hurt his brother so badly.

If he moves he can tear it away from him.

Tsuna feels frozen and he doesn’t understand why. There is nothing particularly intimidating about this person. A pale, thin, young man with hair that strangely resembles a pineapple of all things.

Reborn fires his gun and the bullet passes straight through the persons head with out any effect.

How?!
“Nice try Arcobaleno, but I know better than to put myself within range of you.”

“You should probably start looking into space travel then,” Reborn snarls. There is a strange silhouette growing around the infant, long and lean, and much bigger than his shadow should be.

The shadow of a man.

“Because nothing short of Mars is going to be outside my ability to find you and kill you in ways that you cannot possibly fathom.”

Eep.

Tsuna’s heart is hammering in his chest. He actually doesn’t know who the scariest person here is anymore. The obvious villain? The screaming monster that is starting to pull itself back up to its feet? Or Reborn?

The book snaps closed abruptly. The young man's fingers are trembling and his eyes are wide as he stares at Reborn.

And then he starts cackling.
“He’s pretty crazy isn’t he?” Takeshi whispers in his ear.

“He’s a fucking fruitloop,” Hayato adds.

Tsuna nods in agreement.

He really can’t think of a better way to describe someone who thinks Reborn threatening to kill them is funny.

“It’s a little too late for that, I have the book, I have everything I need to start enacting the next stage,” he smirks wide and triumphant and if Tsuna thought it would do anything he would go and smash his stupid face in.

“The next time we meet Vongola Decimo it will be your end and the end of everything that you and your Family hold dear.” He holds out the book to the side, as if he is passing it to someone. “Tony get this back to the compound and tell Artemis and Phoebe that it’s time to die for something beautiful. I think I’ve just about had it with this nonsensical town.”

“Right-o boss,” A cheerful voice chirps.

The bō staff clicks against the pavement.

Tsuna hears his friends cry out in alarm as suddenly Tony is standing next to the young man’s hands outstretched to receive the book as a massive club-like arm of jagged violet crystals smashes to the ground behind them creating a crater.
This can’t be real! This can’t be happening!

“Reborn!” Tsuna panics, wails, his bravery and fire starting to fail in the face of the enormity of what is happening.

Did he just say that he was going to destroy Namimori!?

How?!

Why?!

The book is being handed over and the young man is still smirking.

And then the book is snatched out of his hand.

By a hand protruding from the water fountain that the two of them had been standing next to. And then the water fountain stands up and a cutesy voice that Tsuna has come to associate with fear says: “Stealing is wrong.”

And Haru bolts past both of them as the both stare in absolute incomprehension at what had just transpired and pivots to a halt behind Tsuna.
“... What.”

And maybe there was more to that thought and maybe there wasn’t, but at this point, Tsuna doesn’t really care because the monster behind them is trashing and more and more of those smaller crystal things are starting to close in on them.

“Tony get it back!”

“Mukuro do you always have to be so bossy?”

“Idiot do as I say!” The young man, Mukuro(?), shrieks.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Tony’s crystalline eyes flask and suddenly all the creatures turn and start lunging for them.

“He’s the one controlling these ones!”

Kyoko-chan’s fist slams into Tony’s face before he finishes speaking.

And that might have been enough to paralyze the hoard on its own, but it’s Takeshi’s sword that shoved through his back that has them all shuttering and convulsing.
“B-boss?”

He doesn’t say anything else. Because then he’s dead.

“Tony?” Mukuro asks.

Takeshi pulls his blade back and Kyoko-chan steps out of the way and the teen's body smacks into the ground and doesn’t move.

“Tony!” Mukuro repeats more insistent this time.

The big monster has started wailing and Tsuna can hear a reedy voice through the echoing roars ‘TONY, TONY, TONY.’

Mukuro’s eyes zero in on Tsuna.

“All right then,” he says and his smile twists into something terrible and cruel, “I was going to wait for this, but I suppose I just have to kill him now. Just so we’re even. Oh, and I hope you have fun with those things Decimo. Without Tony to control them, they will just be destroying things at random until the degradation factor kicks in, in, say, six hours, you may even be able to save a few innocents... Though I doubt it.” The face flattens into something menacing and cold, “Ciao.”
He snaps his fingers and he’s gone. And Tsuna is filled with absolute dread.

“Inari-"
WHY CRYSTAL MONSTER AGAIN!?

I am having terrible flashbacks to Assassin Con and combined with my barely-there thread of consciousness it isn’t adding up into anything good or useful.

And oh my god everything hurts so bad.

The crystal monster crashes hard through some booths and I see at least two dozen people that had apparently been hiding somewhere back there come bolting out and scatter through Main Street.

Unfortunately for them, Main Street seems to have been taken over by an army of grape sugar monsters.

What the fuck is going on.

How long was I unconscious for?! Did I miss the apocalypse!?

“Fratello are you alive?!” Lambo asks somewhat redundantly as he lobs a grenade over at the monstrosity that is starting to pick itself back up again. Its legs are blown out from underneath it and it collapses again.
I blink and then Hibari is there smashing his tonfa through the top of its head before he vaults off of it and lands in the fray of the sugar plum invasion and starts methodically smashing through the droves that are attacking the cities.

“No, I’m dead please try again later,” I say sarcastically.

I almost immediately feel bad because Lambo starts sniffling pathetically, “Thank god, I was so scared!”

Which is fair considering the current state of affairs, doesn’t really tell me WHY the current state of affairs exists and why I am awake when I should obviously be very, very unconscious right now.

Or why Miki-chan and Shamal have teamed up with Hibari and the Defence Committee to fight an army of sugar people.

Am I in an alternate universe?

Did a rift in space time open and start spewing alien creatures into the streets.

Wait.

ARE THESE DOOM MOON ALIENS!?
“FRATELLO!” Lambo snaps and I am once again brought back to reality. Right shits happening. Focus idiot.

“Where’s Tsuna?” I ask as I do my best to look around the battlefield using only my eyeballs because moving my neck right now isn’t an option.

“I don’t know. They were all gone by time I switched places with little me and I’ve been a little busy dealing with this fuckery.”

“Point taken.”

Had those assholes ditched me? Fuckers! The least they could have done after beating me up would be to drag my unconscious body around with them Earthbound style.

The monster comes charging back toward us again and I have to roll painfully onto my wrecked shoulder to avoid it. The world whites out and when my vision clears I throw up.

That was the worst possible thing I could do.

My throat was already feeling absolutely wrecked re: the sensation of steel spiders and the whole post strangulation thing. I am aurally surprised that I can talk at all right now.
Reborn must have worked some of his magic on me.

I really want Reborn right now if not for the whole he is monstrously strong thing, the thing where where he fixes me whenever I manage to fuck myself up.

“How much of my soul do you think I would need to sell for Reborn to let me cling to him like a hot water bottle full of magic morphine for the next month or so?” I ask Lambo in a terrible raspy ramble.

Have I mentioned how fucking happy I am to be able to talk again? No? Well I am really fucking happy.

Lambo quirks an eyebrow at me, “Why would he-“

The end of that thought is swallowed by the sound of explosions and shrapnel sailing past us at high speed.

I watch as at least six members of the Defence Committee and Civies fall to the ground in bloody heaps as the crystal shrapnel tears through them.

Okay, so apparently the sugar plum army can detonate at will. Good to fucking know. I don’t know what I’m going to do about that, but you know knowledge is power.

Oh god I think they might be dead.
What the hell is going on?!

What had Mukuro been here for again? Futa? Futa’s book of great and terrible secrets? Which are both really, really bad things that I absolutely do not want him to have but in no way explain why we are being besieged by the endlessly propagating cloud flame crystal army of doom.

Other than the fact that I always almost die on Doom Day.

“There you are,” Mukuro says and I almost jump straight out of my skin as Mukuro himself appears next to us. This time it’s the kanji for one in his eye.

And he looks a lot more... crazy than I was anticipating.

Lambo yelps and starts trying to drag me back, but unfortunately he is contending with Crazy Mc’Gee over here who has already shown that he has no problem with trying to rip my arm off.

I scream as agony jolts through me as he kicks Lambo off and starts dragging me by my bad arm out of our hiding spot into the clearing.

Toward the monster.
And my brain isn’t working super good right now but I know I don’t want to go there. I am vaguely aware that Mukuro is doing some whole serious monologue about costs and balancing the scales and something about Tsuna.

I need him to shut up now.

I manage to grab a bent piece of metal tubing that my pain addled mind has decided is a magic wand. Cool.

I don’t have my sparkles.

They always burn up anyway.

I don’t have the ray gun.

It never seems to charge right.

I have an imaginary magic wand and when Mukuro throws me on to the ground and tells the monster to kill me. I point the wand at him.

“Hey asshole,” I grit out through clenched teeth.
“Last words Sawada Inari,” He asks with a sickening smile, “I will be sure to pass them on to your dear brother.

“Sure last words... ABRA-KA-FUCK-YOU!” And a blast of orange lightning, more powerful than anything I have managed before shoots out of the end of the wand and strikes him dead on.

And he laughs.

For all of one second, and then he starts screaming.

Screaming and screaming and screaming.


“Because I am a more powerful wizard than you are you COLOSSAL DICK!”

The body vanishes into what looks like television static made of indigo.

I hear heavy breathing from behind me. I roll my eyes back to see that he has remade himself. Only this time he is panting, sweating and shaking.
“YOU ArE GooING tO DiE SLowLY anD PAiNfuLLy.” And he raises a trident up above his head and over mine. “YoU ANd THIs CIty ANd ThE VOnGolA anD tHE MaFIA.”

Lambo screams and I hear Shamal swearing; “fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

People are screaming.

The monsters are winning.

I’m so far out of juice now that it isn’t even funny.

And then the speakers crackle on and music starts to play.

It’s soft at first and fades in an out.

But it gets louder.

And louder.

And louder.
As the music swells into a familiar form. It's louder than the speakers now. It is everywhere it is the loudest thing I have ever heard and it’s surrounding Namimori like a title wave.

“What is this?” Mukuro asks as his body flickers in and out of existence. He looks honestly terrified.

“You don’t recognize it?”

“What-

And then it comes crashing around us in four of the most infamous notes in music.

I know them well.

It’s her favorite after all.

You probably know them too.

The first four notes from the first movement of Beethoven’s 5th symphony.
“DA-DA-DA-DUMMMMM~” I sing along as the notes rock through the streets freezing the sugar plum army in their tracks. They shake and shudder and crack.

Mukuro rises shaking and he looks at me with such terrible confusion on his face that I almost feel bad for him.

I don’t.

Instead, I grin at him bearing my teeth and squinting my eyes down to slits the way that Grandpa used to do as the refrain hits and the crystal army starts to shatter.

Mukuro is flickering in and out of existence now and the people of Namimori, the ones that are still within my visual range who aren’t unconscious have frozen and are staring around in wonder.

And they are starting to light up with colors.

With blues and yellows.

Greens and reds.

Purples and oranges.
In fabulous and fantastic shades that swim and shine beneath their skin.

“KILL THEM ALL!” Mukuro screams at the monstrous creature that is still standing there creating more and more of the little constructs.

He doesn’t notice that the music is still playing. Through the speakers through the wires.

It is Beethoven’s 5th played in the sickest dubstep that shakes the ground and pounds with each furious footfall of the bear that is charging down the causeway.

She is enormous and radiant and made of hard light.

She smashes straight through the hoards. They dissolve just by being near her.

And she smashes right into and through the giant screaming monstrosity.

‘Mama?’ The voice of a tiny lost child asks.

‘Fly away home dear.’
And then there is silence and stillness.

She stops and looms over me and I stare back up at her with the goofiest smile on my face. She is nearly fifteen feet tall and made of impossibilities and light and music. Everything hurts and I am exhausted, but I have never felt safer in my entire life.

“And when I tell this story tomorrow not a living soul will believe me,” I giggle stupidly.

This time when I shut my eyes I don’t wake up again for a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit guys this chapter was a monster in more ways than one. And I have no idea if it worked out well or not.

If nothing else writing from Tsuna’s POV was interesting (Tsuna why don’t you know as much as Inari?). And unfortunately for everyone you can’t punch an illusion in the face (though apparently you can electrocute it with SKY LIGHTNING!). But the kids aren’t quite finished with Mukuro yet.

Please let me know what you thought of this one I know it was a little different than the usual.

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. They give me the power to write every week.

And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
I’ll be back next week :}
A Break To Breathe

Chapter Summary

Sometimes what you need some time to heal, a chance to catch your breath and reevaluate your place in the universe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So... I had to have surgery.

Which on a list of fun things to do during summer vacation probably ranks somewhere near the bottom.

Actually, a megalomaniacal nutcase with the power to project his visage across continents and seas to command an army of constructs shorn from the body of a screaming child experiment to kill us all, also probably ranks pretty low down the list.

I’ll have to ask Futa. I’m sure his intergalactic statistically minded pen pals can drum up that data lickidy-split.

The kiddo has been pretty devoted to entertaining me with lists of amusing factoids since I have been aggressively ordered on bed rest.

I still think everyone is blowing this out of proportion. It’s only a separated shoulder.
And a shoulder fracture.

And torn ligaments.

And bone fragments.

And a broken collarbone.

Some pretty severe bruising and abrasions.

And a concussion.

And whiplash.....

When listed out like that it is actually kind of a lot. But still, it could be worse.

I could be dead.

And then Tsuna’s sudden interest in Star Wars and Force Ghosts might actually make sense. But hey, I checked and Star Wars is a thing that actually does exist in this bizarre universe.
Just with a different cast.

It is so weird.

Anyway, yeah, I had surgery. I lived. Everyone in our little adventuring party lived.

I think we all leveled up too.

Or, at least Tsuna and everyone did. I was a little too busy being a useless piece of garbage.

I mean Tsuna got a majestic stick of destiny and everything. Which is super cool and is in no way shape for form gloves to match those worn by Vongola Primo. He has no idea what to do with the majestic stick of destiny which is actually pretty hilarious. A few days ago I had the absolute pleasure of watching Reborn try to run Tsuna through some exercises with a bō staff and Tsuna managed to smack himself in the face, break a window, and trip himself and Hayato so that they went flying into Takeshi.

It was like watching a slapstick routine.

Only this time I wasn’t part of it.
Though I will say I appreciate Takeshi using himself as a human shield to protect my fragile broken body from being crushed under the weight of two idiot teenagers. That could have gone so much worse and then I really would be stuck on bed rest for the rest of eternity.

Honestly, I appreciate that everyone has gone out of their way to bring the hijinks to the comfort of the Sawada family living room so that I haven’t been left on my own for the past two weeks. I’m pretty sure that being left in the terror and silence of my own mind while staring blankly at a wall would do nothing to improve my already decaying mental state.

It’s probably a good thing that no one has really been talking about what happened. I mean beyond the checking in to make sure that everyone is okay and not about to fall to pieces.

Everything has been strangely quiet on the mafia front though. The epic finale of the Doom Day festival completely annihilated the crystal army, the human propagation machines, and had banished Mukuro.

Reborn and I chatted a bit before I went in for surgery. Something to keep my mind off the fact that someone was going to be slicing me open and messing around with my insides. Anyway, we pretty much came to the same conclusion that Mukuro isn’t in Namimori.

He’s probably not even in Japan.

I think he’s in Italy.

Reborn really doesn’t like that theory.
It’s an unsettling thought, that Mukuro can project illusions across continents and overseas.

Tsuna is hoping that he’s gone.

That was the end of it. He exploded with the rest of his Fantasia army under the force of Beethoven’s 5th symphony and the light that swept through everything.

Which would be nice. But I don’t think we're that lucky.

At most I think we managed to buy ourselves a little bit of time. I have a feeling that we haven’t seen the last of Mukuro and the Estraeno monstrosities.

Reborn had tried to contact Vongola HQ to let them know what had happened and the clear and present danger that the Estraeno pose to us. This is the second time that they have tried to overtly kill their heir after all.

Unfortunately, trying to communicate anything that happens on Doom Day to the outside world always turns out the same way. Incomprehension and almost immediate forgetfulness.

On the plus side, I got to witness the world’s greatest hitman crush his cellphone with his bare hand. And that had been pretty cool.

There is still a lot of shit that our adventuring party is going to have to talk about. I’m still pretty
fucked up and I’m not the only one. Everyone got knocked around quite a bit. And that’s not really taking in the psychic damage that we all took.

We probably have to collectively deal with our PTSD before we can address the Mukuro looming on the metaphorical horizon.

Too bad we’re teenagers. I think we need some shots to have that conversation.

Or whiskey.

Hell, I would take a Hot Toddy at this point.

The point I’m trying to make is that I really want some alcohol.

I remember being old enough to drink. Which is weird.

A lot of things got knocked loose in my brain when I was... captured. And while I can suddenly vaguely remember some **THINGS**, being old enough to drink is one of the least upsetting things that I suddenly know.

Just as long as I don’t try to think about the situational aspects of the **MEMORIES**.
It’s easier not to think about it at all.

Things hurt enough as they are.

I know I’ll have to think about it eventually. I just need ... a little bit of a break first.

I can have that right?

I just...

It just...

**Hurts.**

...

It’s a good thing that Reborn can suddenly tell when I’m in pain and lonely now...
I wake up around five and my shoulder is absolutely killing me.

I’m alone in the living room and the house is dark and quiet. There is a soft light emanating from the kitchen. And a faint ticking of a clock which normally wouldn’t bother me but under current circumstances just grates on my nerves.

I could call mom.

She told me to call her if I needed anything.

She’s just upstairs.

I could even call Tsuna.

I pick up the remote and turn on the television. It’s almost time for Hinata Shoichi’s morning newscast. And if nothing else the beautiful newscaster should prove to be a decent distraction from the agony feedback loop.

Right now the highlights of yesterday’s Tigers game are playing.

It was a good game.
Takeshi had come over with his dad and we had cuddled up and watched the game and thrown popcorn at the television for four and a half hours while Mom and Yamamoto-san had some adult talk.

The adult talk had involved a lot of day drinking and tears.

Which me and Takeshi resolutely ignored.

Ow. Ow. Ow.

Tears are stinging at the corners of my eyes now and I feel like a complete and total baby.

It’s not that bad.

I’m fine.

Why does this hurt so bad?
Compounding injuries will do that to you. Not to mention the whole not sleeping thing that you’ve been rocking. That’s not healthy. That’s not how you get better.

I CAN’T sleep it feels like I’m being watched.

**Have you considered telling someone?**

Never. They’ve been fucked up by this enough. It will just make things worse.

**So will having you collapse.**

I’m fine.

**All evidence to the contrary dude.**

Shutupshutupshutup.

A hat drops down over my eyes and I breathe as a cascade of warmth and sunshine pulses into me taking away the pain and nausea. My over-tense muscles relax and I sink back down into the mountain of pillows that I have been reclining against.
“Monello,” Reborn greets softly as he reclines next to me.

“Hey man,” I greet as I use my good hand to prop the hat up and run my finger along the brim of the hat. Trying my best to rub the tears out of my eyes as I do so.

Not that he hasn’t already noticed.

“You know one day you aren’t going to get this back,” I tease as I continue to fiddle with the brim of the fedora.

I think this hat must have anxiety attack fighting properties. Every time Reborn drops it onto my head it seems to cut my panic off at the knees.

Even when I don’t realize that I’m wearing it.

He hums in place of a reply and settles in pressed lightly against my sore side.

A lovely baroquian melody with a little bit of that mad fiddler is playfully dancing in my ears prompting my own drumbeat into a much less solemn depressing beat. It’s nice. It’s different, but it’s nice.

I reach up with my good hand and run a finger along the brim of the hat. Fiddling with it and adjusting it so it is no longer falling into my eyes. I really don’t understand the physics of Reborn’s
fedora, but it is super cool.

A small sticky tongue affectionately baps against my finger. My little chameleon buddy saying good morning.

*You need to rest little one*

...

Or that...

On the TV the opening music of Hinata Shoichi’s newscast is starting to play accompanied by aesthetic shots of Namimori and I settle in and make myself more comfortable.

“I forgot your favorite program would be on,” Reborn observes knocking me out of my magical chameleon induced stupor.

Months ago he had commented on my obsession with the local morning newscast. And I had made up some bullshit about staying up to date with what's going on around town.

Considering he was recently treated to my disaster crush on Doll Face he’s probably caught onto the truth. Hinata Shoichi is a very pretty man with a very nice voice, and his newscasts are an endless source of amusement for me. There really isn’t any other local reporter who so perfectly exemplifies how very strange our fair city actually is.
“Weekday mornings at six am dude.”

“Brat.”

He pinches me very gently on the arm for the ‘dude.’ I giggle because combined with the Sun Flames it more tickles than anything else.

“Easy Sunshine I’m still horribly injured you know,” I say with silly theatrics.

I’m overtired and basking in the warm pain relief so I’m not really paying attention to what I am saying until Reborn noticeably doesn’t answer.

...

Fuck it.

I’m owning it.

He can’t be the only one who gets to come up with nicknames.
He’s staring at me.

I stare back with a raised eyebrow until he sighs and the corner of his mouth quirks into a grin.

“You really are a terrible brat.”

“Youp I’m terrible and incorrigible.”

I turn my attention back to the TV where footage of the disaster zone that the public park still is playing. This year's food war had really done some serious damage.

“Oh hey, looks like they’re finally recapping Doom Day. This should be fun.”

Reborn tenses against me and his melody turns a little more rage-y. As it now does whenever anyone mentions Doom Day. Well, part two of Doom Day anyway.

He kept the brain slug after all.

So it couldn’t have been completely awful and traumatizing.
We need to look on the bright side or we're all just going to end up in tears.

“-city officials have dubbed this year's Doom Day festival a resounding success with only minimal casualties,” Hinata Shoichi gives the audience a lovely smile through the television, “Good job everyone. Though anything would be an improvement over last year's hundred and fifty-four deaths and mysterious disappearances.”

Reborn gives the newscaster a look of absolute incredulity. I think he is finally starting to understand what a ‘unique’ town Namimori is. More so now that he is being faced with the post-Doom Day spiritual hangover in addition to all the other bullshit that we have to deal with now that our ‘enemy’ has shown his face.

“-clean up efforts are continuing in the park after the food war. The Taro family has been declared winners this year which everyone knows means that they get first dibs at all the prime picnic spots until next year and Taro Haruka will need to undergo the rite of initiation at city hall late next week to induct him as the next holder of the ‘special council member’ seat on the city council.”

“... Do I want to know?” Reborn asks me his voice filled with amusement.

I peek over at him through half lidded eyes.

“He is now the battle master of Namimori,” I inform him simply. If he’s going to be sticking around Namimori he should learn about our strange ways.

“Battle master?”
“Less like Dungeons and Dragons and more old school samurai code stuff. So if the city is ever besieged by brigands from the Edo period Taro-san is in charge.”

“-Special commendations are being given to Himawari Kikiyo for her creation of an ice cream ballista. Taro-san plans to name her ‘Master of Arms.’ So everyone, please remember to give her the proper show of respect next time you stop by Dream Cream for a bite of their fantastic ice cream.” The reporter smiles fondly, “A brief aside my favorite flavor of ice cream is the blood mango that was created by our own councilman Hibari. He sure does have good taste in ice cream-“

“And if brigands from the Edo period ever do attack Himawari-chan will have the weapons.”

“Have these positions ever had any actual power since the Edo period,” Reborn asks terribly amused if the soft violin playing in my ear is anything to go by.

I give him a cockeyed grin and say, “only once, but that was back in 1969 and no one really remembers it.”

Reborn obviously wasn’t expecting any sort of affirmative answer to that question because he just sort of blinks at me.

“Are you messing with me Monello?”

I laugh, “Only a little bit. It was a ‘historical reenactment gone weird’ situation.”
“Historical reenactment,” He repeats. I think by now he knows that when I start on with my odd little callbacks there is always a longer and stranger story attached to it. In this case, if Grandpa is to be believed, a tear in space-time opened and the souls of the actors were exchanged with the souls of actual marauders and bandits from the year 1669 and all hell broke loose. Fun fact, that was also the year that the ban on them consumes on Doom Day was enacted.

“Namimori is known for our devoted community theatre,” I inform him in lieu of the more complicated and less easily explained answer.

“A big kudos to our beloved Namimori Community Theatre,” Hinata Shoichi voice cuts in again to support my outlandish claim. “They really knocked it out of the park this year with their reenactment of the first Doom Day invasion. The special effects and costumes were out of this world! And that light show was something else too. I don’t know how they managed to light everyone up in distinctive chromatic shades but I will say bravo. I particularly enjoyed being a lovely C83F49. It went really well with my hair~”

Hinata Shoichi continues to gush about glowing such a beautiful shade of red. And all the while Reborn just stares at the television in mute disbelief. As I knew he would because this is the other important part of Doom Day-

“Yeah, that always happens,” I tell him wryly, “No matter how stupid or dangerous or crazy things get on Doom Day people will find away to logic it away.”

“How could they possibly~“ Reborn doesn’t even have the ability to put his incredulity into words.

“People are more willing to believe that the community theatre team put on a crazy good production rather than a megalomaniacal sociopath somewhere in Italy sent endlessly propagating mad science experiments to a small town in Japan to kidnap a kid who talks to aliens in a Dyson sphere somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy.”
Obviously it doesn’t affect everyone. Hence me and Reborn having this conversation and the fact that Takeshi knows for sure that some out of this world shit happened to us up on mount Namimori a couple of years ago.

‘Humans on mass are stupid,’ Grandpa had told me once, ‘People can be intelligent, but humans are stupid.’

... Now that I think about it Gramps had been pretty misanthropic.

That’s probably why he had been such a brutal Dungeon Master with his adventuring party.

“... True enough,” Reborn says and a sad look comes across his face. Turbulent notes coming back into his melody which just won't do at all.

I don’t really know what happened on Doom Day after I was taken out but I will say that I can hear Reborn’s music much clearer than I did before.

And it’s different than it was.

It’s more like.... mine. And less like the broken falling melody that he was playing before.
And neither of them is anything like Tsuna’s Bossa Nova brass beats.

I’ll figure out what that means later. For now, I send some happy beats his way perking up his end of this new duet that we’re rocking.

He relaxes against my shoulder minutely. And we continue to watch the end of the newscast.

It’s a Tuesday, which means very little other than the fact that I have a check-up later today at the hospital. And I have taken over the living room since I’m on fancy bed rest orders and stairs were all sorts of bullshit last week.

But since we’re down here I don’t have to worry about waking up Mom or Tsuna or the kiddos with my incessant chatter. Most often to myself.

“You boys are up early,” Mom says poking her head into the living room with a smile and a yawn.

“Mornin’ Mama,” I greet with a flash of a smile.

“Buongiorno Maman.”

She walks into the living room and kneels down next to me with a glass of water and my morning dose of medications. I’m actually reaching the end of what the hospital prescribed me now. It’s pain killers and an anti-inflammatory to help keep down the swelling.
I hope that I get to a point very soon when I don’t need these.

Not that I really need these with Reborn around, but I am starting to feel like a thief with the amount of healing magic that I have been stealing from him. Not that I (or anyone else) could ever steal something from Reborn. He just sorts of sets his mind to do something and reality bends around him.

“Tsuyoshi-san said that he would give us a lift to the hospital later,” Mom tells me, “Apparently Takeshi-kun’s appointment was postponed yesterday so he will be meeting Yukimura-sensei there rather than at her clinic.”

“Oh... convenient.” I say, “and also super nice of Yamamoto-san to come out of his way to get us.”

“I made appointments for Lambo-chan and Futa-chan to get check-ups at the same time. It’s a little too far for them to walk and when I mentioned taking a cab Tsuyoshi wouldn’t hear of it,” Mom smiles, “He’s a sweet man.”

“Yeah, Takeshi’s dad is cool.”

And also a literal samurai assassin. I mean a retired samurai assassin, but he still kept all his swords and knives.

“I think I’m going to make some cinnamon buns this morning,” Mom says abruptly changing the subject as I gulp down the pills.
“Maman enjoys spoiling us all,” Reborn teases lightly.

I don’t know what response he thought he would get. But it probably wasn’t Mom’s eyes flashing a divine white light as she stands and looks down upon us lowly mortals with a maternal smile.

“Of course Reborn-chan,” she says, “I take good care of ALL of my people.”

She pets my hair affectionately as she stands up and brushes out her dress. She heads to the kitchen and the two of us just sort of stare after her straight-backed and startled.

It isn’t until the sounds of Scott Joplin playing through the stereo start filling the kitchen that we both relax somewhat and Reborn lets out a low chuckle under his breath.

“You have a good mother.”

“Damn straight,” I laugh cheerfully.

Mom had been... less than thrilled about my whole post-Doom Day situation. Actually she had been livid.

I had been unconscious at the time, but Tsuna had assured me with a look of absolute petrification that she had threatened the surgeon with the sharp end of her conductor baton that if he did not fix me she would be ‘fixing’ him.
Permanently.

There was a reason that me and Takeshi had made that pact not to tell our folks about the ‘Terror on Mount Namimori.’

Because his dad is proficient will all sharp and pointy implements and my mom is an actual literal being of divine wrath.

Fucked up as I was at the end there I am pretty sure I know what I heard and I saw.

I just have no idea how to bring it up with her in casual conversation.

So I’m just going to leave it for now.

I am all nice and cozy and content here reclining against this ziggurat of pillows that Tsuna and the kids constructed for my comfort. And extra pacified thanks to the fact that Reborn has taken my off handed joke about him becoming a human hot water bottle extremely seriously. He’s still pressed up next to me as we watch this ridiculous newscast and is giving off constant radiating sunshine magic. I mean it’s not an all the time thing. Just in those particularly painful moments between doses medication when it feels like I’m about to fall apart.

And I am just thrilled about that.
Because being a happy cat with a heat lamp beats the fuck out of being the idiot with a separated shoulder and a fractured collarbone sobbing on the bathroom floor because he forgot that he wasn’t supposed to move his dumb arm.

I am still debating having Takeshi chop the whole thing off.

Say fuck it and have Verde build me a robot arm.

My other Arcobaleno acquaintance had actually called the other day (the first day I had woken up actually and that had been a fun time). And when I answered he had spent five straight minutes ranting at me about destroying that stupid ray gun. Because while I hadn’t gotten trampled by the rampaging monstrosity, my bad most certainly had.

“It didn’t even charge right dude get over it.”

“It charged fine the issue is your inconsistent frequency and output!”

He had hung up on me after that and I had just been left staring at my phone in abject confusion at which point the rest of my family apparently realized that I was awake and talking and I was subsequently assaulted by a shit ton of love and concern.

Which is super awesome, but also startling.
It’s been a weird week.

And that’s not counting the number of times I have been cried on. But I am going to be ignoring that because I refuse to give this depressing shit any power over me right now.

I don’t want to let what Mukuro did affect my relationships like that.

...

So it’s fine.

I mean, I know there is going to be a super serious and uncomfortable conversation at some point in the near future about how everyone collectively lost their shit and tried to kill me when they thought I wasn’t me.

Tsuna is still apologizing for that.

Which is getting old now.

I mean I appreciate the apology and all but when you really get down to it there were layers of mind-fuckery going on there. And it wasn’t his fault.
And he also had a really long and nonsensical ramble about ghosts and Obi-Wan Kenobi and how I was the voice inside his head... Which all sounds rad. It’s good to know that I have made such a lasting impression on my brother’s psyche that he will be forced to listen to my monologues even when we are apart and I am unconscious.

That’s pretty rad.

“In other news, repairs on Namimori Middle School have been progressing as scheduled and the building will be ready for the start of the new term which will be starting up in less than two weeks. I hope you kids out there have kept up with your studies—“

Holy shit I forgot that school was a thing.

We have been so wrapped up with all this magic mafia murder stuff that I had completely forgotten that we would be going back to school.

“You know, I never thought I would say this but I think I actually miss school. But it might be nice to have something somewhat normal to do everyday to balance out the mafia madness that we have been experiencing lately. I mean, I guess I could always get a job or something. But I don’t know if anyone would hire me without a degree of some kind,” I’m rambling again.

I think it is a side effect of the pain killers and the sunshine. I think it is also a large part relief that I can talk at all right now. Like my throat is still a little sore still, but nothing was broken in there.

Which is cool because I was pretty sure that something had cracked when I was being strangled this time.
I was actually pretty freaked out that I wasn’t ever going to be able to talk again.

So, yeah I have been indulging in my rambles.

Everyone has been super cool about me indulging in my rambles too. Which is super sweet of them.

“Do you have any specific career paths in mind?” Reborn asks.

“You mean other than Tsuna’s super awesome right-hand man/guardian and a badass wizard-bard, and eventual trophy husband?” I ask cheekily. “Because if you think I was kidding about that-“

Reborn hops down from the pillow ziggurat and gives me a somewhat judgmental eyebrow raise. I don’t know why, It’s not like world’s greatest hitman is on a career aptitude test either.

“GOOD MORNING FRATELLO!!!!!!” Lambo screeches as he comes barreling down the stairs interrupting this semi-awkward moment with childish glee.

“Lambo! Be careful!” Tsuna calls after him as he follows closely behind him with outreaches arms ready to catch the overtly excited five year old if he was to tip down the stairs.

As he himself has a tendency of doing.
Or did.

If one good thing came out of the bullshit that went down it was Tsuna regaining his sense of balance. Tsuna has now earned the achievement ‘can walk down the stairs like a normal fucking person HUZZAH.’

He is still a Goofus that is prone to spazzing out at the drop of a hat, but he is so much better than he was.

Lambo collides with me at high speed and flops across my outstretched legs. Tsuna yelps, “be careful!” with frantic worry, as Reborn hisses, “dumb cow!” and is back at my side in an instant.

They are both such worrywarts.

Lambo weighs next to nothing, and even if he did I am tempted to let my Palawan do whatever the hell he wants. After all I don’t think I would be alive right now if he hadn’t pulled that switcheroo with his future self at the exact right moment.

I would have been flattened by a rampaging monstrosity.

Tsuna comes over and scoops Lambo up off of me. Upside down, because he has no idea how to deal with squirming children.
“Lambo, you have to be gentle with Inari he’s still hurt,” Tsuna scolds with some protective Bossa Nova brass being sent my way.

A pulse of warmth runs through me as Reborn lays a hand on MY PERFECTLY FINE AND UNINJURED LEG and sends another note of healing into me accompanied by a Vivaldiesque melody.

Worry warts.

But also, can I just say, it is super weird to be caught between Tsuna and Reborn when they are like this. Since I’ve woken up there has been an overwhelming sense of dissonance whenever the two of them project at me at the same time. It’s like being caught between two radio stations and wanting to play along with both at the same time.

It is crazy.

I have a feeling this is another one of those: shit that went down whilst Inari was unconscious things. This just means that it is one more thing to add to my list of ‘serious conversations that will take place when I am feeling saner.’

That and evaluating all the new shit in my head.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” I assure them both, more irritated than anything. I’m hardly going to shatter to pieces from a little roughhousing.
I pat my legs with my good hand while giving Tsuna a challenging look.

“It’s fine the kiddos can hang with me the ‘Adventure if Sir Moonclaw’ is about to come on,” I lean myself over in overdramatic fashion to call out to a sleepy fidgeting Futa who is standing awkwardly on the stairs clutching his book tightly to his chest.

“Have you ever seen the ‘Adventures of Sir Moonclaw’ kiddo?” I ask and flail a little bit to keep the fedora pushed up over my eyes. I smile my best goofy smile and wave him over. “It’s awesome, but it’s no fun to watch on my own.”

“No,” Futa answers softly and curiously as he makes his way down the rest of the steps.

It takes him a moment, but Futa does make his way over and sits daintily on the edge of the futon. Lambo takes his chance and wiggles out of Tsuna’s grasp landing on the floor with a somewhat concerning THUNK. He shrugs it off and clambers onto my lap where he starts chanting excitedly for his favorite show to start.

Tsuna sighs, “just be careful please,” he beseeches me with older-brotherly concern.

“I’m always careful Bro-Bro,” I lie through my teeth and am instantly treated with pointed looks from ALL of them.

“I’m mostly careful?” I try again.
Reborn raises an eyebrow at me.

I fidget.

“Okay, okay,” I relent, “I am NEVER careful. I have terrible impulse control issues. I am so lucky to have you all around to make sure I don’t get myself dead.”

“We are going to be working on that,” Reborn threatens/promises.

“You’re not allowed to die!” Tsuna snaps in somewhat manically looking instantly stressed and I am instantly sorry for speaking the D-word.

I think I mentioned the PTSD.

I give them both a dead eye stare and reach out, grab Tsuna’s ankle, and tug hard making him fall onto his ass with a shriek.

“HIIEEE!”

“I. AM. FINE. TSU.”
Tsuna whimpers and clutches at his tailbone, “owwwwww~”

“We will be working on Tsunayoshi’s situational awareness as well,” Reborn adds giving Tsuna a wry look.

“Great,” Tsuna groans into the hardwood.

“Tsu-kun? Are you alright sweetie?” Mom asks in concern as poking her head back into the living room to witness Tsuna rolling around on the ground. “Do you need to come to the doctor too?”

“No, I’m alright Mom,” he reassures her.

“He has a date with Kyoko today,” I inform her in a stage whisper.

“INARI~ Tsuna shrieks in mortification turning beet red.

“What?” I ask all innocent-like.

Mom just laughs, “Alright then. Do you want to bring Kyoko-chan a cinnamon roll sweetie?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Thanks mom....” he pauses and fidgets awkwardly, “could you pack an extra for
Hayato? He’s going to be coming too.”

“Of course Tsu-kun~”

Before I can even open my mouth to comment Tsuna levels me with a glare, “Not like THAT.”

Of course, how could I have forgotten that Tsuna and Kyoko are weird exhibitionists who enjoy combining their dates with friend/training time so that they can make the rest of us endure their adorableness.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I laugh and do my absolute best to mask the wince when my shoulder jostles uncomfortably, “Make sure that Hayato is well-fed. Have fun on your weird not-date.”

Tsuna gives me a long quiet look.

“I can come along if you want me too,” he says, “I know you don’t like the doctor.”

“No.”

“Nari.”
“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Tsuna pulls himself up and slides across the floor so that he can rest his head gently against mine, “... Hurry up and get better. I don’t like doing this without you.”

“You’re never without me Bro-Bro,” I remind him sappily, “And I’ll be back to giving you all heart palpitations with my crazy antics soon.”

“You do that anyway.”

“Exactly,” I glance around him at Reborn, “And then we can all have that super important conversation about magic fire and what the fuck ever else we have been putting off.”

He gives me a stare, “Yes, I believe it’s about time we had that talk.”

Tsuna goes stiff for a moment and grumbles, “fine,” and proceeds to haul himself back up to his feet.

“Are you sure your okay to go on your own?”

“YES, I’m sure I’ll be fine all on my own with mom, and the kids, and Takeshi, and Yamamotosan all hanging around.”
“Takeshi’s going with you guys? Good he should be able to protect-“

I zap him.

“HIEEEE!”

“Isn’t it about time for you to head out Tsu?” I nudge him.

I might be injured but I am not a completely helpless invalid. The thought is more than a little insulting actually. He should remember who the alpha twin is between us...

It's actually probably Tsuna.

But I can dream.

He gives me a very ‘Tsuna’ look as I readjust the hat again and try not to slide off my pillow mountain.

“‘Yes, I know I’m a terrible brat,” I tell him, “Go delivery sugary goodness to my future sister-in-law and our disaster mafia brother.”
He blushes, whines, and warbles his way into the kitchen where I can barely make out him half collapsing into a mom hug as she hands him an adorable lunchbox.

Actually...

Did Tsuna grow!?

DID THAT ASSHOLE GROW AGAIN?!!

FUCK! BULLSHIT! THAT’S FUCKING BULLSHIT!

I am so absorbed with my outrage at this grave injustice that I don’t notice Reborn until he is perched next to me again and tugs gently on the brim of the fedora. And I am fully expecting that he is going to take it back now. I mean, he’s going with Tsuna and I can hardly expect him to leave the house without his signature accessory.

“Watch him,” Reborn orders.

And I am very confused now. Watch who? Who am I watching?

Of course.
Oh... Not me. Leon, the magical lizard buddy.

Who may or may not be talking into my brain.

I’m still not entirely clear on the whole magical lizard communication thing.

His long tongue darts out into my visual range and briefly sticks to Reborn’s forehead. The hitman responds with a fond stare and taps the hat lightly. This doesn’t really answer my unasked question about magical lizard speak, but I guess it does ask my unasked question about the hat.

Do I get to keep hat?

For today. I would never deprive Reborn of his signature hat, but it would be nice to have something to stave off my inevitable doctor based panic attack that will certainly happen later.

...

But really?

I’m getting all the warm fuzzies this morning.
“Don’t you need Leon to make those special bullets that make Tsuna go beast mode?” I ask tentatively.

“Not today,” Reborn replies with a vague sneaky grin, “We are going to be trying out a new method since Dame-Tsuna seems to be having a somewhat ‘easier’ time accessing his flames.”

“That sounds... interesting. Don’t tire him out too much.”

It also sounds like something that will have Tsuna complaining and flailing. I’m sorry that I’m going to miss it. Reborn’s ‘ideas’ are always so much fun.

Just one more reason to get better fast I guess.

An even more devious smirk stretches across Reborn’s cherubic face, “Dame-Tsuna is finally starting to understand the importance of making an effort Monello. It would be a shame to let him slip back into bad habits.”

“Have fun with that man.”

“I always do.”
Yamamoto-san picks us up about an hour after Tsuna and Reborn head out. And it is an hour of the most intense separation anxiety that I have ever experienced. Wasn’t I just rushing Tsuna out the door and telling him that we can have separate lives and shit?

I feel kind of hypocritical now.

But this is the first time that I’ve been without both of them at the same time since I woke up. It feels terrible. Like something in my chest is being stretched.

I’m a fucking needy bitch apparently.

I find myself obsessively playing with the fedora as Lambo catches Futa up on the greatness that is the ‘Adventures of Sir Moonclaw.’ I actually have to make a concentrated effort to keep myself from hyperventilating.

This is fucking awful.

Just breath moron.

Yeah, sure, easy for you to say.
“You alright Inari-kun?” Asks Yamamoto-san as he comes into view.

I just kind of look at him and give a pitchy, ‘yeah,’ which probably shows how not fine I actually am.

He and Mom exchange a look as he crouches down next to me to help me up.

“You kids need to slow down a little,” He chides fondly.

“Because we were all so careful when we were their age,” Mom giggles and gives him a challenging look.

Yamamoto-san gives her a surprised somewhat guilty look as I wobble between the two of them, “You’ve got me there,” he laughs, “But what is that thing that parents are supposed to say? ‘Do as I say and not as I do?’”

“And all teenagers will, of course, go along with that without question,” Mom says with a raised eyebrow.

“Right,” He sighs.
I’m doing my best to follow their conversation but my head is still a little too fuzzy to follow along with this thread. If I remember I’ll ask later... maybe. I’m pretty sure parents are allowed to have their own lives too.

I am peripherally aware that Futa and Lambo are clinging to my pant legs as we walk out the door. I would normally be able to navigate fine with, but in my current weakened state, I have relied heavily on Yamamoto-san to make sure that I don’t face plant on the pavement.

It isn’t until Mom and Yamamoto-san are helping me into his van that I really manage to snap back to myself. But that can probably be attributed to the cool calming wash of blue and the chiming of bells.

“You look terrible,” Takeshi says blunt amusement.

I am very, very glad that Takeshi has mostly gotten over the doom and gloom guilt complex that he was rocking. That was irritating as fuck. When I first woke up after the surgery he keeping his distance and giving me this terrible devastating look.

Eventually, I just threw my Gameboy at him and demanded that he catch me all the legendary Pokémon in the game and all would be forgiven.

Which is why I am now the proud owner of three legendary Pokémon.

Takeshi is very determined.
“Hey bro,” I greet Takeshi as I flop against him in an indecorous sprawl, “lovely to see you too?”

I continue to rebut sarcastically to him basically calling me out for my awful face.

I’m starting to understand why Reborn likes this hat so much it is really great for masking emotional output. I keep it pulled down over my eyes so that my bestie can’t see how fucked up I am right now.

Not that it matters. I’m sure he can tell just by how wrecked and shrill my voice is.

“Hey,” he answers and helps me to maneuver into a more normal sitting position. “You alright?”

“I might,” I say, “Did you know that school is starting up again in like a week? Because I did not. Dude, I feel robbed. Robbed I tell you.”

I reflexively start in on the deflecting ramble.

“Not that I didn’t appreciate getting to run around on a mountain chasing after Doll Face and his cohort or combating the forces of chaos and evil with you all. Because that was rad. But I’m pretty sure we missed out on like all the summer baseball practice, and the games and shit. And now I won’t even get to play for the rest of the year because my arm is super fucked.”

I’m not as invested in baseball as Takeshi is, but it is fun to hang out with him and the team. I’ll
miss it, but I guess in the long run it will give me more time to devote to mafia conspiracies.

“We’ll just have to watch from the stands together then,” Takeshi consoles me with such cheer and
good humor that I almost don’t process what he is saying.

“We,’ I repeat vaguely, “We meaning us, meaning you and me, meaning you’re not playing either.
Why aren’t you playing?!” Panic grips my very soul. Because I always knew that it would be a
cold day in hell when Takeshi quit baseball. So either the four horsemen are about the roll past this
van, or something is very, very wrong here.

“Are you HURT?! Are you DYING?! You ASS! You can’t pull shit like this on me!! Tell me!”

I’m shaking him back and forth with all the strength that I have. And the jerk only laughs at me
being infuriatingly unhelpful. I’m just feeling more irritated and manic as he goes on. I start
jabbing him in the side with my fingers which just makes him laugh harder.

Upfront, Yamamoto-san starts laughing uproariously along with his son.

“Relax Inari-kun, we don’t want you hurting yourself again,” he soothes.

“Ojisan! Did you know Takeshi quit the baseball team!?” I demand.

“I did,” he confirms, and before I can start freaking out again he continues, “Takeshi decided that
he wants to know more about the ‘family business’ so I’m going to be giving him some extra
lessons.”
There is a dangerous glint in Yamamoto-san’s eye. He doesn’t mean the sushi business, does he?

He means the stabby business.

I give Takeshi a sidelong look.

“You sure?” I ask.

“MmHm,” He hums with a bright smile, “Tsuna was right, baseball isn’t everything, and I think that if we’re going to do this we should do it right. Right?”

A grin pulls across my own face after a moment, “Damn straight.”

If we're going to be crazy mafia brats and fight against impossible foes with crazy necromantic sorcery and shit we might as well go all in. Preparation is key after all.

I hold up my good fist for a bump.

Takeshi bumps it back with purpose.
We flop back in our seats and watch the city fly past us. Lambo and Futa are excitedly pointing at things as we pass. The clean up crews are still going around getting the last of the debris from the festival.

This year was certainly messier than in previous years.

“So, anyway, switching tracks to something less dramatic,” I start again, “Me and Tsuna were talking a little while ago, and now that September is literally right around the corner it seems much more relevant, Hayato’s birthday is coming up.”

A big grin breaks out across Takeshi’s face, like I knew it would, “Is it?”

“Yup, on the ninth I think,” I say, “And like, I don’t think he’s ever actually had a ‘birthday’ before so we were thinking it would be nice too..”

“Surprise party,” Takeshi cuts me off, his eyes glittering with unholy excitement as he bounces in his seat. He has a thing for surprise parties.

“Yeah, only not so much with the anxiety-inducing surprises. More with the nice calm kind of surprise.”

I pause for a moment as we pass by a giant pile of violet crystal shards that are being swept up.
“I think we’ve all had just about enough of the bad surprises for a little while, right?”

Takeshi’s smile softens a little, “Probably a good idea.”

We spend the rest of the drive brainstorming surprise party ideas that we gain spring on Hayato.

Without giving the poor guy a heart attack.

______________________________________________________________________________

Namimori General Hospital is one of the fanciest complexes in town. It has state of the art facilities and boasts specialists in various fields. It is also huge. Like five city blocks huge.

Yukimura-sensei’s office is in the psychiatric unit in the west wing. Which is on the exact opposite side of the hospital that I am heading to. Me and Takeshi share one more fist bump before we go our separate ways to our appointments. We’re all going to be meeting up again later in the cafeteria and getting some lunch before we head home.

Me, Mom, and the kids head down into the East Wing of the hospital where the pediatric department and sports medicine are. The doctor that that I’m going to be seeing is going to be taking a look at how well my shoulder is healing up and going over my future rehab plans.

The surgeon hadn’t been particularly optimistic about me making a full recovery, but then he hadn’t known that I have a white mage in my party. Seriously, without Reborn I’m pretty sure I would have been completely and totally fucked by what Mukuro did.
Mom makes sure that I make it to the office and that I’m signed before she has to take Futa and Lambo down one floor to visit Kuroko-sensei for their check-ups. Apparently, my doctor was called down to surgery to for an emergency consult so they’ll be a little late.

“Call me if you need me or if you need help sweetie,” she tells me and gives me a kiss on my forehead before she and the kiddos get on to the elevator.

It feels like an energy surge.

Which is fun.

“So, Mom totally summoned the forces of the universe to save the day right?” I rhetorically ask Leon as we sit and wait for the doctor to show up. “Like, I have no idea how she did that but I’m pretty damn sure that she did it.”

*I’m sure she will tell you when she’s ready.*

...

“Are you going to tell me if you’re actually talking or if I have completely lost my mind?”
Nothing.

Of course nothing.

It would make my life way too easy if someone or something ever gave me a straight answer.

I sigh and sink down in the waiting room chair and stare at the ceiling.

This doctor is taking a really long time to get here.

Also, I am suddenly regretting saying that I was okay to sit and wait on my own. Because this is getting exceptionally creepy and anxiety-inducing. If I didn’t have Leon with me I think I would actually be freaking out right now.

Also, the receptionist is still around going through files. The shuffling of papers is both comforting and irritating at the same time. I do appreciate that I am not the only person in this big empty waiting room though.

And I wait.

And wait.
And wait.

... Still waiting.

I wish that I brought my Gameboy with me or something. Just to have something to pass the time with.

The lights above us flicker ominously.

“Oh fuck me I didn’t even say that out loud.”

Leon scampers down from the hat had rests defensively on my shoulder and stares intently out the doorway into the hall where the lights are flickering in a very concerning way.

And then he **HISSES**.

I have never heard Leon make a sound before and he **HISSES** aggressive and furious and a word
rings through my brain.

**YOU**

_Me_, The answer rolls like thunder, full of teeth and vague amusement.

“Who?” I ask quietly in desperate curiosity.

I’m pretty sure that I have just glitched through the preverbal game code and into a hidden level. What the hell is going on!?

I stare intently at the doorway, following Leon’s line of sight. And there sliding past the doorway is an enormous green tail. Scaled and ridged and disappearing out of sight.

“...We don’t tell Reborn,” I tell Leon as a push myself out of my seat and quickly walk out the door while the receptionist’s back is turned. It’s not like this doctor seems like they’re going to turn up any time soon.

_Inari_, Leon warns(?)

I step out of the door and watch as the tail turns down another hallway the lights flickering above with every lumbering step. I have a feeling I know what this is anyway.
“It’s fine,” I say. “I think?”

I speed walk after it ignoring the pointed sensation of disapproval and worry that is being very pointedly directed at me.

This is dangerous.

A deep chuckle rolls through the hall as the alligator comes to a stop and grins at us.

What happened to your sense of adventure Leo?

Leon hisses again, though this time it is much less aggressive but still unhappy.

What are you doing here? He grumbles.

An enormous toothy grin spreads across (honestly terrifying) enormous reptilian face. And the low rumbling voice speaks again, Satiating curiosity.

My eyes are daring back and forth from my little chameleon guardian to the huge fucking alligator that is staring us down in a way that is starting to feel more and more threatening by the second. This was probably a really bad idea on my part. Why the hell can’t I ever just leave a thing alone?
The fatal flaw, I know.

“Sooooo, I take it you two know each other?” I ask aloud... possibly to myself.

Because I am still not clear on how this conversation is happening.

*Far better and for far longer than you could ever fathom morsel.*

“Kaayyyyy~”

The door at the end of the hall opens and I am immediately assaulted by the ominous booming notes of a pipe organ. Scattered notes played in precise madness. Dizzying and unsettling.

A flickering light sines through the doorway and with it a shadow is projected against the wall as a dull green light emanates from within the room.

“Stop standing around like a halfwit,” Verde drawls as he appears in the doorway, “I have better things to do today than deal with your irritating brand of nonsense.”

I stare at the door. At the lights flickering beyond it. At the alligator.
This is a terrible idea.

I pull out my phone, just to check, and it’s fully charged. No service bars though which is probably a really bad sign.

But of course, I am incapable of walking away from something interesting.

I take slow even steps down the hallway, doing my best to ignore the worried lizard that is continuing to project worry and disapproval at me.

“It’s fine,” I reassure him by repeating my catchphrase of the day.

_You really are an impossible thing_, Leon chides.

It’s fine. It’s not like Verde tried to kill me not to long ago. It’s not like I’m horribly injured still and cut off from external communication and staring down an enormous reptile that survived the extinction of the dinosaurs.

“Hurry up,” Verde says, and a tiny bespectacled face peers through the doorway and glares at me. “You’re injured.... inconvenient.”

“I’m sorry that my pain is an inconvenience to you,” I fire back immediately. “Also, what the hell do you think I was in the hospital for if I wasn’t injured?
“No matter.”

I hear a click of a button and suddenly something is firing out at me at high speed and I am being grappled in an unrelenting metallic grasp and being pulled off my feet and into the room.

Leon hisses again, frills bursting from his neck as his face transforms into something a lot more terrifying (with a lot more eyes) as he leers down at Verde. The man himself gives us both a deeply impressed look as he turns his back and hops up onto the metallic counter top where he has a makeshift computer station set up.

“I thought it was about time that we met face to face,” Verde says as he pulls out what looks like a tape recorder from his pristine white coat.

“Shall we begin?”

Chapter End Notes

Or not, because Inari is incapable of staying out of trouble. But seriously though Verde has just been waiting for a chance to come and see what makes this brat tick.

Currently, all seems to be quite on the Mukuro front (possibly maybe), but well see how long that lasts for ;)
Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. They give me the power to write every week.

And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
“Begin what?” I prompt, as Verde has decided that he is now going to ignore me as I’m hanging a foot off the ground.

I’m teetering somewhere between terror at being once again captured, and irritation at being so immediately forgotten by said captor. Verde has turned on his tape recorder and set it down next to him as he begins rapidly typing on his computer.

Normally a grapple like this would be hitting all the wrong buttons in my head, but just being able to consciously swing and wiggle my legs around is keeping me from slipping into a full-blown blackout panic attack.

“Testing of course,” he answers without looking up.

“Testing what?”

Verde doesn’t answer. Instead, he reaches to a metallic briefcase sitting next to him and flips it open. It’s facing away from me so I can’t quite make out what’s inside, even at the somewhat elevated position I’m being held at.
“While I usually abhor interaction with my subjects I found it to be pertinent in this case. That the interference caused by that ridiculous festival disrupted or destroyed most of my instruments so I can't gather data by my usual means.”

“Enjoyed Doom Day?”

“I yes, I love watching the idiot masses lose what little brain power they have and descend into nonsensical madness,” he replies, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I’m sure you had a great time in whatever underground bunker you squirreled yourself away in,” I snark back. The anxiety is making me feel a great deal more antagonistic than usual. “It must have been nice back when we were experiencing the heat death of the universe.”

“...What?” Verde asks flatly.

He is suddenly staring at me with such a strangely intense expression that I can't help but fidget nervously under his scrutiny.

“You know,” I start nervously, “The heatwave we had a few weeks back? You were in town for that right?”

There is silence. An extremely judgemental silence.

“Idiot,” He says finally.
“Oi-“

“While your statement might not be factually incorrect you have grossly misinterpreted the heat death of the universe.”

“Oh... What does it mean then?” I ask.

He pinches the bridge of his nose in irritated resignation. His glasses pushed up toward his forehead.

“It is the death of heat, not death from heat,” He explains slowly, “There is of course more to it than that, but I’m sure if I tried to explain the second law of thermodynamics to you, your simple mind would implode.”

My levels of irritation spike so dramatically that I momentarily blackout as burning embers of orange start to spark in the corners of my eyes. It doesn’t usually bother me to have people call me an idiot. I am an idiot. But something about the way that Verde said it makes me want to make him eat his words.

Too bad I’m an idiot.

“Oh well,” I grin at him, “Some say the world ends in fire, others say in ice~”
He stares back at me with stunned incredulity, “Moron, are you trying to dispute science with poetry?”

I open my mouth to continue being smartass, but I’m suddenly struck by the strangest sense of déjà vu.

I frown as I stare at him.

“Has your stupidity rendered you mute? Excellent we can get on with the experiment now. One can only glean so much useful information from observational analysis after all.”

“Observational... Dude, how long have you been watching us?” I ask incredulously as my brain comes back online after it’s a momentary glitch. I’m pretty sure I already know the answer to this, but it would be nice to have my paranoia validated.

“Since you interrupted my experiment in the warehouse. Though I have been keeping tabs on Reborn for years. He tends to become ridiculously antagonistic when in my presence,” Verde drawls in irritation as he pulls out several smaller metallic boxes from inside the briefcase.

“I can’t imagine why,” I sass back sarcastically as I continue to dangle in the grip of the robotic arm.

“I attempted to have him killed on several occasions. Purely out of scientific curiosity you understand. There has never been another instance of a Sun quite as strong as him before and his healing factor was prodigious even before we were cursed.”
He looks up at me, the computer screen illuminating his face dramatically, “I wanted to see how much he could heal from. Though I will admit the chlorine gas might have taken things a tad too far.”

Verde smiles a manic and mad smile.

Around my neck, Leon has transformed further his body growing and his face elongating to accommodate the multiplying intense yellow eyes and a maw of needle like teeth that he bears at Verde and hisses.

“He should be grateful, really, now he knows that his lungs will regrow after being dissolved.”

There is so much that I could comment on right now. The fact that he flat out said ‘cursed.’ The fact that he has been ‘observing’ us for months now.

But I can’t. I can’t because I’m suddenly struck by a scene, a vision, a knowing of something that I have not possible way of knowing, but I do. And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that is true.

Reborn doubled over, his small body shaking and convulsing as he tries desperately to draw in a breath. Blood pouring out of his mouth in an endless stream.

Sun Flames burning and dying in rapid exchange as his body tries to compensate for a horrific amount of damage...
He’s fine, Leon reassures me frantically, long tendril-like fingers kneading my good shoulder comfortingly, Your Sunlight is fine.

And I hear him.

I do.

But the rage is almost overwhelming.

He said he hurt Reborn. Hurt him in such a terrible way that plays upon my growing fears of suffocation. Which amplifies my fear and anger.

He hurt MY person.

The fedora tilts down over my eyes.

“You will never do that again,” I command.
The thought of Reborn having to go through something like that-

No.

Verde freezes in place. His fingers and breath both stutter to a halt. His expression goes entirely flat as he stares at the computer screen.

And then he starts to laugh. If that pitchy shrieking can be called a laugh.

“That,” he manages to say after a moment of intense cackling that immediately has me feeling wary and Leon coiling more protectively around me.

“That is EXACTLY what I wanted to see.”

His excitement is so off-putting and out of place that my rage starts to simmer down into something more manageable.

I can’t say the same for myself, Keiman intones, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen that face, Leo. You should be careful or you’ll wear yourself out.
Speak for yourself, dear. Leon shoots back with dark intent as his twelve eyes light up.

And the massive alligator snaps his jaws at us.

Normally I would be freaked out by an alligator snapping at my feet. However, at this moment I seem to have acquired an eldritch creature for a protector. One that is starting to cast an extremely alarming shadow across the room.

A shadow that Verde seems to be completely oblivious to.

I have never felt safer in my life. I am pretty sure that if either Verde or Keiman try any funny business Leon will straight up eat them bones and all.

“See what?” I ask, defensively, but unable to mask my curiosity.

Verde holds up the thing that I initially thought was a tape recorder and shows me the LED screen that has a sine wave graphed upon it. The wave is coming down from what looks like an enormous spike to reform into a much flatter looking wave function.

“Inconsistent output and flame production,” Verde says his earlier moment of hysteria burning away. “I’ve been monitoring your flame production for weeks through the instrument you so helpfully dubbed ‘the ray gun’ and I concluded that your flame production is next to nothing. Even flame inactive children produce more than you at baseline. However, your levels will occasionally spike to such astronomical levels that even my instruments cannot properly map them.”
“That seems... strange,” I say nervously, as I try to force down the crawling terror and sick feeling of vertigo.

“‘Strange’ doesn’t even begin to cover this. You shouldn’t even be able to function with such a low level of flame output. And when examined next to your, frankly, the enormous capacity it makes little to no sense.”

The frustration is plain on his face as he hits a few buttons and a chord pops out of the bottom of the little machine which he connects to the computer terminal.

“Maybe your instruments are fucked up?” I say, desperate for this to end, but not understanding why. All I know is that it is vitally important that he stop talking about this NOW.

“That was my first assumption, but no, I recalibrated my instruments several times. Your production levels are just an irritating anomaly. And, unfortunately, I don’t foresee being able to solve that particular mystery today. Nor is that why we’re here.”
Verde presses a button and the robot arm finally drops me and I land on the linoleum. It’s only thanks to Leon sprouting a few extra tendrils that I don’t fall on my ass or back and injure myself again.

It would suck if I had to have surgery again.

I can’t go through that again.

I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.

“I don’t know why your here dude, but I’m here to have my shoulder-collarbone-neck situation looked at. What with me being all injured and shit.”

Verde has zoned out and is typing again. Small fingers flying across what I assume his custom-built keyboard.

This fucker...

“You know if you’re going to kidnap someone the least you could do is have the decency to stay on track. I have better things to do today than watch you beat your word count goal.”

He continues to resolutely ignore me. I hear Keiman let out a deep booming chuckle at my expense.
He gets like this, the alligator informs me, it’s best to wait it out.

Leon is in the process of shrinking back down to chameleon size and flicks his tongue at Keiman.

*Why are you two even here?* Leon asks unhappily, *Don’t you have better things to do than harass my human?*

*Your human isn’t even here. And even if he was it’s not like you can claim dominion of this place.*

They are just chatting now, as if they hadn’t been dangerously close to tearing out throats not too long ago.

*Or something like that. Once again, it’s not like words. They aren’t ‘speaking’ in the traditional way. It’s like nothing I have ever experienced before and it is weird as fuck.*

Are they talking?

And if they are, do they know that I can **HEAR** them?

I don’t want to conduct any of my own ‘experiments’ while Verde is here. I have a feeling the only
thing that will lead to is having a mad scientist literally poking around in my brain to figure out how it works.

No.

Just no.

So much no.

So much of this entire encounter is just giving me this overpowering desire to scream NOPE and run the fuck out of here. Verde pipe organ musical accompaniment isn’t making things any better either. It is the most not-music, music that I have heard yet.

There’s no melody.

Just sounds loud and forceful precise strikes that don’t so much resist my rhythm as they do ignore it completely.

There is something... off about him.

“Hold up your hands,” Verde says abruptly, snapping me out of my increasingly troubled musings.
“Whyyyyyy?” I ask cautiously, as I proceed to hold my one working hand up anyway.

Because I am an idiot with the self-preservation instincts of a stoned lemming.

Verde grabs another one of his sci-fi techno gadgets from his briefcase and holds it out toward me. When he sees that I only have one hand raised he frowns at me.

“I’m starting to get that you don’t do the whole human empathy thing very well dude, but you should at least be able to use your ‘amazing observational powers’ and vast intellect to keep track of the fucking sling, dumbfuck.”

He glares at my arm as if my broken appendage has committed some sort of grave offense against him.

“Irritating.”

I glower at him, “If I could fix it, believe me, I would.”

I’m about to lower my good hand when Verde clicks down a button on the side of the instrument that he is holding and a grid of green laser lights shoot out from a small circular indentation and overlays my hand.

Yeah, this isn’t concerning at all.
“If you cut off my hand I swear to God I will make sure that Reborn shoots you in the most painful ways,” I warn him.

He snorts humourlessly as he begins to press buttons and turn small dials on the box.

“Rest assured he has already done that.”

“GOOD.”

“Make a fist,” he instructs.

I do so with a roll of my eyes.

“Any chance at all that I could have some insight into what we’re doing here? I’m missing a very important doctor's appointment right now.”

“They were going to suggest that you have follow-up surgery to insert pins into the joint,” Verde informs me bluntly as he continues scanning. “Considering your elemental affinity this would do more harm than good. Further surgery also intervention at this point in your recovery would undo the, honestly remarkable, effect the Sun Flame infusions have had on your healing process and would reduce your chances of making a full recovery by a full seventy-nine percent.”

“What!” I ask, “What do you mean?!”
I’ve already done that and had the depressive episode, thank you very much.

Of course, Verde doesn’t answer me. He turns a few more dials not he machine and moves slightly to map the new angle. Another button is hit and the laser grid vanishes. After that, he plugs this machine into the side of his weird briefcase thing and a low hum starts emanating from it.

“That will take a moment to finish fabricating,” He says as he shuts the lid of the briefcase (?). “I might as well address this in the meantime, if you don’t have a full range of motion I will have to augment my data models and that would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“What!?” I ask again more desperately this time.

I’m still trying to get past the ‘follow up surgery bit.’

In an instant, I have been re-grappled by the robotic arm and pulled into extremely proximity with the mad man. Reborn’s fedora slips somewhat crookedly on my head but manages to stay on. Verde then grabs for the last instrument on the table, something that looks like an honest to god Tricorder from the original Star Trek series.

“Compounding tears and fractures. Not terrible. I see that the influence of Sun Flames are allowing the muscles and bones to knit together more quickly than they normally would or could for that matter. I had no idea that Reborn had such restraint,” his eyes glint dangerously, “I was under the impression that his ‘healing’ was a lethal technique all on its own.”
“Are you trying to start shit with me?”

That’s just what he does, Leon informs me. Try to ignore him.

“Easy for you to say,” I grumble back. “I’m feeling very harassed right now.”

“What?” Verde is giving me a very curious look.

“Nothing, I’m talking to myself.”

There he stares at me for a moment longer and then he abruptly starts prodding me in my fucked up shoulder and I yelp and whimper like a kicked dog.

“FUCK! What the hell are you doing!?”

“Stop squirming like a child, I do know what I’m doing. I am a doctor after all,” Verde reprimands me, and continues to prod and poke at my collarbone/shoulder region.

“Medicine and robots are two entirely different things,” I snap at him.

Continuing the trend he proceeds to ignore me. He takes it a step further and moves the collar of
my shirt out of the way so that he can get a better look at the faded bruises and the fun new stitches and incision scar that I got from the surgery last week.

Cool, this is super cool.

I would like to roll for a fucking retaliatory strike please and thank you. I know I keep rolling a critical miss on my initiative lately, but I feel like I should be allowed to hit someone at some point for all the shit I have gone through.

“I’m sure one of my doctorates is in medical science or was it biochemistry? I forget. Regardless, I do possess an in-depth understanding of anatomy and unlike the dullards that work in this institution I hold expertise in the applications and effects of Dying Will Flames and their augmentation of the healing process.”

“...How many doctorates do you have, dude?”

Once again there are probably more important questions I could be asking, but I find myself extremely curious about this very mundane topic. It seems important to ask for some reason though.

“Fifteen.”

BEHOLD THE MOST EXCESSIVE PERSON IN EXISTENCE!!!

“What possible reason would you need fifteen doctorates!??” I ask in bewilderment.
“Something vaguely interesting to repetitively do whilst waiting out the monotony of my cursed existence,” Verde replies as he holds up the Tricorder thing against my shoulder.

“Ordinary individuals are unable to retain information regarding our true nature. Which tends to get frustrating when applying for patents or submitting research papers. Or making anything resembling forward progress at all really,” He pauses to press a few buttons on the side of the machine.

“It is also infuriating when my scientific contributions are suddenly and inexplicable lost or miscredited.”

Holy shit.

Holy shit! Am I getting Arcobaleno lore?!!!!

Reborn is so tight-lipped about the curse that I hadn’t anticipated any of the other Arcobaleno that I might encounter to be any different. Apparently, Verde has no problems chatting about it. Seriously, I think he has a worse case of motor-mouth than I do.

“And what more frustrating is when, in the middle of a conversation, everything is abruptly forgotten and I am left staring into the maw of a slack-jawed yokel who proceeds to ask me if I need help locating my mother.”

“What? How?! Why?!” That sounds like something out of a nightmare. That all sounds like
something out of a nightmare.

“From what I have been able to determine it has something to do with flame frequency and will, which is an exceedingly inconsistent metric of measurement and thus I have been unable to extrapolate beyond that. There are of course individuals that can see past the veil, but even then it takes some fairly ridiculous mental gymnastics and even then it is hardly foolproof.”

He lets out a humorless chuckle as he pulls the Tricorder away and looks at it.

“I am not quite as desperate for human interaction as the rest of my spectrum to go hunting out companionship and going through the trouble of developing the minds of weak-willed idiots. Though I can understand the allure of reclaiming a piece of our former identities.”

He snaps the instrument shut and hops back over to the countertop just as the briefcase stops its humming and lets out a low tone, “Vongola Nono developed an amazing resilience against the effects of the curse about nine years ago, which is probably why so many of them allied with the Vongola Family.”

“...You really like to listen to yourself talk don’t you,” I prod him, because that was a lot of words just then. A lot of interesting words that I will have fun picking apart later in the safety of my own home, but a lot of words none the less. “And this is a known rambler telling you this.”

“Yes, and despite ninety percent of what comes out of your mouth being nonsensical drivel, I have been able to ascertain that you seem to be able to perceive past the curse at your improbably low baseline output which has now rendered years of careful research completely irrelevant.”

“I’m a mystery wrapped in an enigma,” I tell him snidely.
Leon and Keiman have been notably silent for this bit of our ‘conversation’ and both of them are projecting something that feels like... remorse? To be honest I have been subconsciously trying really hard to tune out the sheer SOUND that is everywhere around them. It is just so much that it's almost painful.

I’m going to have to talk to Reborn about the curse stuff after this. It doesn’t feel right leaving it unsaid anymore. Especially now that Verde is yammering on about it to me.

“You will be a useful rat.”

“You say the nicest things. Not creepy or threatening at all.”

Verde rolls his eyes and reaches into the briefcase and pulls out something sparkly.

My eyes immediately zero in on this mystery item and suddenly the only thought going through my mind is, ‘oooooh, shiny~’

It’s so sparkly and I want it.

Verde seems to have noticed my sudden laser focus as he dangles the sparkly thing out in front of himself with a smirk. Two sparkly things.
Are those... gloves.

“I believe I told you before that you would be assisting me with some experiment testing. This is my latest creation, though I can’t take all the credit your concept was rather ingenious.”

The robotic arm gently lowers me back down to my feet and he motions for me to hold out my good hand and I do so without question my eyes still on the shiny, sparkly glove that is now being slipped on.

“Run a charge through the glove,” He instructs as he steps back and put on a pair of safety goggles.

Shouldn’t I have safety goggles too?

Whatever.

I run a charge through to the glove. The crackle of orange sparks and then uniquely conducts across the material.

I have a moment to be nervous before I am just awestruck because suddenly I am in the middle of a sparkling nebula of orange light and prismatic bursts of color as the GLITTER reflects and refracts light in mesmerizing ways.

“Glitter?” I ask looking around in awe at the sparkling galaxy of light and color that has taken over the room.
“It is a highly experimental superconductive compound.”

“... Soooooo, it’s magic glitter then?”

Verde glares at me, “reductive as usual. You will be testing this rigorously and recording the results, up to and including dismemberment or if it burrows under your skin and makes your heart implode.”

I am not even listening to him anymore. I am too busy running my hands through the galaxy sending voltage through it and watching as bursts of lightning erupt in clusters.

And none of them burst into embers and turn to ash.

It is everything I ever hoped for.

Now if only I could-

Verde sighs and holds something long metallic out to me.

I STARE.
Because there is no way that he is not holding out a magic wand to me.

That is most definitely a magic wand.

“Are you specing me out like fucking Tinker-bell?” I say, somewhat irreverently as I reach out and take the wand.

“This is a wand, this is a magic wand, you made me a magic wand and magic glitter. Why have you done this!?”

I swish the wand through the air and my eyes go wide as saucers as the galaxy narrows into a beautiful shimmering stream of light that follows the end of the as I wave it around.

Holy fucking shit!!!!

“Curiosity, it was an interesting and useful concept. I look forward to seeing the results.”

“You are a fucking asshole and I hate you, but also, this is amazing.”

“I do hope you manage to kill yourself,” he shoots back as he turns his attention back to his computer and starts rapidly typing something again.
“If I do I’ll haunt you.”

“Are you still here?” He asks, “we’re done. Reject any further invasive surgery you don’t need it. If Reborn keeps up the infusions you should be fine in two to three weeks.”

“Thanks... I’m gonna leave now,” I look down at Keiman, “later gator, thanks for not eating me.”

As I turn to leave Leon peeks over my shoulder and leers down at Keiman, his face once more transforming into something horrifying to behold.

You should start giving some thought to this zero-sum game we’ve trapped ourselves in, dear.

“I hate his guts, but this is some of the coolest shit ever!” I gush to Leon as dance and sway down the hall toward the cafeteria as I wave the wand through the air conducting a trail of glitter behind me.

Leon has transformed back into tiny chameleon form and is riding along on top of Reborn’s fedora. He projects a combination of vague amusement and worry at me, but he doesn’t speak again. I get the feeling that the whole Eldritch horror thing that he was rocking back there took a lot more out of him than he was letting on.
“Thanks for having my back by the way. I know I’m an exhausting walking disaster and you probably weren’t expecting things to go so sideways when Reborn asked you to tag along.”

Don’t fret about it, darling, he says but it sounds cons away, We don’t trust those two, with good reason you know, so I was glad to support you in what little way I could.

“... Reborn’s okay, right?”

... For the most part... as well as he ever is I suppose. Better now since he met you and the children.

“I’m glad,” I stop to lean against a wall and slide down. I start to trace pictures in the space with the glitter, holding them there and then igniting them in blazing voltage.

“We’re going to fix it you know? Tsuna already would have eventually, I think? The whole curse thing I mean. I don’t really know how yet I can’t remember but-“

You have to be careful where you tread Inari. It’s larger than you could possibly imagine.

“And I don’t suppose you can just tell me, huh?”

....
I smile as I spin the glitter in a spiral.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure we’re still in phase one anyway. Miles to go and all that jazz.”

I’ll have to drop it for now. We already have so much going on, what with Mukuro and the mafia issues. I hope that the next time we get a nemesis it isn’t such a long-distance relationship. Someone a little closer by so we don’t have to wait around for them to decide to spring an invasion on us and we have a chance of retaliation.

It’s not like we can go jetting off to Italy, after all.

So we’re stuck waiting for the next time the Mind Flayer decides to strike.

Fucking beautiful.

Yeah, no more long-distance enemies, thank you.

“Weaponry is not permitted within city buildings, Sawada Inari,” Hibari fucking Kyoya intones as he glares does at me. Kusakabe is at his side, giving me a much more concerned look.
See, it’s much more convenient to have a nemesis close by.

“It’s a good thing that we’re all good little boys who would never ever play with weapons then,” I draw back sarcastically as I eye him reaching for his tonfa.

He looks like he’s about a second away from putting a nice new hole in the plaster of this very bland white wall.

“Relax, it’s just a magic wand,” I tell him and rest the wand across my lap and snap my fingers so all the glitter retracts back to the glove and settles back into its dormant state. “I’ve recently multi-classed as a wizard, you see.”

“Because you weren’t powerful enough as a bard?” Kusakabe asks.

I give him a blandly fond look, doing my best to ignore the way Hibari is rolling his eyes at the two of us.

“When are we going to play another campaign together, dude?” I ask him wryly.

He doesn’t say anything. Just raises an eyebrow.

Yeah, those days are done aren’t they?
I sigh and lean back heavily against the wall looking at the two of them with half-lidded eyes. I’m exhausted. I’m too tired to deal with the cave troll and his crap today.

Just let me sit and appreciate how pretty he is.

“What’s the matter with you?” Hibari asks, narrowing his eyes.

“So many fucking things,” I mumble, “what’s up with you anyway? I thought you were immune to mortal weapons.”

“I was feeling under the weather, so mother insisted I come for a short stay.”

He says as if this is some sort of spa and not a hospital. I know the Hibari family has some serious clout around town but this might be pushing it a little bit. Now that I think of it I’m pretty sure that his Uncle is the head of this hospital, so there is a chance that this is a spa to him.

Nepotism at its best.

But, then again, Shamal had said something about infecting Hibari with one of his fancy impossible diseases, hadn’t he? For all, I know the asshole needed some serious medical attention after that.

Not that he would tell me if he did. That’s not quite how our violent bond works.
“And here I thought you were just desperate for a new public building to make into your dungeon dwelling. And speaking of which, you must be thrilled that the school is opening again next week, you must be thrilled to be able to move back into your natural habitat.”

The corner of the Cave Troll’s eye twitches and a bratty grin spreads across my face.

God damn, I missed antagonizing him.

“We’ll try to keep the place standing intact this time~”

The tonfa slams through the wall an inch from my head, and I can feel the unbridled rage radiating off of Hibari.

“Make sure that Sawada Tsunayoshi keeps his herd in line.” He growls at me.

Because he is an excessive asshole and constantly needs to refer to people by their full names.

“You do realize you actually have to graduate in a few months, right?” I ask, being deliberately belligerent, “you already held yourself back once, if you do it again no one is going to be afraid of you anymore, you’ll just be the dunce that can’t get out of middle school.”
I should probably quit while I’m ahead. As fun as this has been there is a very high chance that Hibari is going to brain me if I keep pushing his buttons.

“So, uh, thanks for helping me out on Doom Day.” I say with as much sincerity as I can muster when it comes to Hibari, “I saw that the DC were actually performing a humanitarian service and getting the civies out of harm's way.”

Every one in a while it is nice to have a paramilitary force headed by a violent and sociopathic teenager. Not all the time, but definitely when supernatural forces are invading with intent to kill everyone within the city.

I nudge Hibari in the shin with the flat of my foot trying to get him to ease up on the looming. This close up its reallllllly hard for me to ignore how fucking pretty he is and it’s starting to get to me. Please back off so I can hate you with more clarity.

“Kyoya,” Kusakabe says with a soft warning.

Ah, Tetsuya, ever the voice of reason to the beast.

Hibari shoots a look over his shoulder, and slowly pulls the tonfa out of the newly created hole, raining drywall down on me. Because that is just what I need right now.

I slam my foot hard into his knee and am immediately gratified when he flinches.

“Dick,” I snap.
He just eyes me for a long moment before he holsters his weapon. And then he reaches down and hauls me up to my feet by the collar of my shirt. Holy fuck does no one see the sling!? Am I the only one who is aware that I’m wearing this ridiculously complicated thing to HOLD MY FUCKING ARM IN PLACE?!

“I realize that I kind of deserve this but seriously, fuck you,” I wince.

“Stop breaking yourself,” he says, “You owe me quite a bit at this point, and I will be coming to collect. From you or your brother, if you fail to pull yourself back together.”

“You would dump me for Tsu? Cold dude, I’m all heartbroken and shit~” I snark.

I already know that he wouldn’t bother starting up a rivalry with Tsuna. Hibari is an ambush predator, he doesn’t see the point of expending extra effort to chase down the ‘herbivores.’

Though it is interesting to note that Tsuna had somehow managed to impress him while I was out.

I’m so proud of him

Really I am.
He pushes me back into the wall and turns away and starts walking back down the hall. And it’s only now that his back is to me that I see what I had missed before.

“Stay away from Sakura Blossoms,” I tell him. Doing my best to pour as much of my bardic powers of persuasion into the command as possible.

Because Rokudo Mukuro is a dangerous man who knows how to use people’s weaknesses against them, and Hibari Kyoya is a powerful weapon we can use against him.

And there is no other reason why I would warn him.

... It’s not like we’re friends or something.

He doesn’t even stop walking.

Fucking ass.

When Takeshi and Yamamoto-san meet us in the cafeteria I immediately know that this therapy session had been rough. ROUGH with all caps and exclamation points.
And underlines.

Takeshi’s eyes are red-rimmed and weepy.

So are Yamamoto-san’s.

I don’t even let Takeshi make it to the part where he slaps a fake smile on his face and tries to laugh it all off. I’m at his side in an instant and have him wrapped up in a one-armed hug.

He stiffens for a moment before he goes lax against me and wraps me up in a hug of his own. Which in Takeshi’s case is more like smothering me, but fuck it, I’ll put up with it for him.

Even if he is getting my hair wet with his tears.

“It’s alright,” he tells me, “I feel better now.”

Which seems a little counterintuitive to me considering he’s still a little weepy. And either way, he isn’t trying to avoid the impromptu hug-fest.

Curse my short stature and my literal inability to be a shoulder to cry on. Whatever, it’s cool, I’m down for some cuddles. I need some cuddles after the terror of Verde and my close encounter of the Hibari kind.
Mom works some magic to get Yamamoto-san back into working order. Which, from what I caught, involved booping him in the middle and then messing up his hair when he sort of doubles over in reflex.

It is weird to see parents act cute.

Weird.

But sweet.

The ride home is quiet for the most part.

I chatter aimlessly at Takeshi about stupid shit and let him know that I had run into Hibari and Kusakabe. And that I’m on the mend, which makes him perk up a bit.

The kids show off their new sticker sheets that Doctor Kuroko had given to them for being good patients. She always gives prizes at the end of appointments once she had given me an entire 300-page coloring book and a box of 64 crayons. It was sweet.

But I was also something of a ... particular case.
We don’t get back home until the late afternoon and by that time Lambo and Futa are both exhausted again and they fall asleep on the couch after playing a few rounds of Luigi Cart Racing (Yeah... we are indeed in a strange parallel universe).

Mom tucks them both in with a soft smile and a dinosaur blanket that I remember from when me and Tsuna were small.

Then I’m mostly left to my own devices.

So I go into the backyard and lay in the grass and stare up at the periwinkle blue of the early evening sky. I take off Reborn’s fedora and rest it on my chest. Leon climbs down onto the grass next to me and starts to scurry around.

Today was a lot.

Today was more than I can think to put into words.

I snap my fingers and the experimental glitter shoots out from the glove and forms a galaxy of sparkles around me again. After a moment of just basking in how fucking cool, this is I reach into the pocket of my hoodie and pull out the magic wand.

As cool as these new magic items are, there is something about my most recent interaction with Verde that continues to rub me the wrong way. And it has nothing to do with Eldritch creatures or curse implications.
It’s not even the thinly veiled death threat at the end.

I’m tired of feeling helpless.

I’m tired of feeling helpless, and I’m tired of it being my stupid fault.

...

Tears are stinging at my eyes again. I bite down hard on my lower lip and will them away as I furiously scrub them out of my eyes.

I can’t cry. It’s just going to make everything worse for everyone.

I start to hum and trace shapes through the nebula. Igniting small clutters into nodes of light and then tracing a charge through them to draw constellations.

Ursa Major.

Cassiopeia.
Draco.

Leo.

Orion.

I should try doing this at night. It would look amazing in the dark.

I wonder if how much control I can have over this?

I have so many ideas.

As much as that interaction with Verde fucked me up, this is so fucking cool I may just have to forgive him for it.

....

Only for the part with me though.
I want Reborn and Tsuna back now. Before this starts taking a more depressing turn.

I focus inward to find my frequency. A panicked drumbeat running in a mad loop searing for the rest of its melody. If I focus harder I can hear the tuba and oboe playing their soft dream time tunes.

I’m pretty sure I’m one musical number away from becoming a Disney Princess at this point. I already have all the other prerequisites; daddy issues, latent magic powers, talking animals, instrumental accompaniment. The only other thing I’m missing is Prince Charming.

“What did you DO?” Tsuna’s voice breaks into my internal monologue and when my eyes refocus he is looking down at me with complete incredulity.

“What? Why do you assume I did something?” I ask looking back up at him and Reborn with faux innocence.

Dissonant contrasting melodies are being projected at me and both of them are screaming bewilderment and concern.

I quickly slap a smile on my face.

They look like they had a fun day too.
At least Reborn does.

Tsuna is looking a little bit charred.

Tsuna makes a wide sweeping motion with his hands to indicate the entirety of our sparkled filled backyard that I have been unconsciously sending volts of electricity through.

“What? Your the only one who gets some new swag?” I ask with a sly grin, “Don’t be jealous Bro-Bro you definitely have the more majestic stick out of the two of us.”

I punctuate this with a showy wave of the slim featureless metal wand.

“I meant the GLITTER.”

“Apparently it is an ‘experimental superconductive compound’ according to Verde at least,” I tell him as I snap my fingers again, reversing the charge and drawing all the glitter back to its dormant state on the absurdly sparkly glove once more. “It probably isn’t going to kill me.”

“What!?” There is such a shrill note of panic in Reborn’s voice that the already pitchy tone that it is stuck at climbs up another octave.
He is at my side in an instant and looking me over for any visible signs of new injuries or trauma. And I’m about to tease him for overreacting -

-lungs will regrow after being dissolved-

And where I meant for a laugh comes a terrible keening sound from deep in my chest. Because as much I can push down my own shit, I have never been able to tune out a person in pain.

It was a terrible thing that happened.

I don’t even know how long ago it happened.

I don’t know if it still bothers him.

I don’t know if anyone ever hugged him after it happened.

Not that I’m just going to assault him with a hug. Reborn doesn’t like being manhandled. It makes him uncomfortable. I don’t want to make it worse.

Why do I keep making everything worse?
Can I just stop fucking everything up?! Why do I just keep fucking everything up?!

I’m fine. It’s fine. There is no need for me to be such an overdramatic baby all the fucking time. I need to grow the fuck up and just be chill.

All at once I am enveloped in a protective cocoon of a melodious violin. Which is contrasted dissonantly with the concerned reaching notes of a trumpet.

_Breathe Darling._

I breathe. Clenching my eyes shut for a moment as I slot things back into place. It was a good day. I was fine. I shouldn’t be having a meltdown right now.

I shouldn’t be like this.

“What did he do?” He demands, voice low and dangerous. The pacifier around his neck igniting with the thrum of power and a distant sound of screaming. “I’ll kill him.”

Tsuna has started to panic. He drops to his knees next to me and his melody is picking up in a terrified intensity. He looks from me to Reborn and back again in confusion.

“Who’s Verde?”
“A dangerous madman,” Reborn growls.

At the same time, I say, “the dude who made the robots that joined in with the assassin convention a couple of months ago.”

“He’s an assassin!?” Tsuna shrieks, “You went to the Doctor! When did you run into an assassin!?”

“At the hospital,” I tell them both straightforwardly. They are both still projecting at me with concerned and protective intensity.

I need to step this down.

“I’m fine,” I reassure them both as I hit a heartbeat toward both of them. Steady and strong.

“Really, he just said something that upset me a little... I mean he kidnapped me too, and that kinda sucked, but he didn’t, like, torture me or anything. He just yammered at me a lot and then aggressively gave me experimental magic items.”

“You were kidnapped,” Tsuna states flatly, “again.”

“... In his defense, I wasn’t so much kidnapped as I willingly followed a Deinonychus through the halls of the hospital because I am way too curious for my own damn good.”
“Deinoc- what?”

“Biiiiiiig Alligator.”

“AN ALLIGATOR!?”

“Monello,” Reborn says sharply.

I really need to stop scaring Tsuna. He’s probably going to have a heart attack from all the stress that I keep piling onto him.

I’m making things harder for him, aren’t I?

He doesn’t even need me anymore, does he?

No one **NEEDS** me I shouldn’t even **BE**.

And Reborn shouldn’t even have to worry about a disaster like me. Hadn’t he said when he first got here, ‘My priority is Dame-Tsuna. Don’t think of interfering.’ He should have just stuck with that he shouldn’t have to deal with-
A small hand rests in my palm and I stare at it for a long moment as warmth pulses through me and abruptly something slots into place. My hand closes around Reborn’s and I let out a long shuttering breath.

Tsuna stops freaking out so loudly and is now just quietly petting my hair as the three of us sit on the grass in a weird Venn diagram of harmonization.

And it’s still pure dissonance between the two of them. But that’s fine. Because I am balancing between two harmonies and suddenly I feel a little less empty.

A little less broken.

Since I woke up everyone has been looking at me like they’ve been waiting for something. Waiting for me to crack and make everything worse. So I didn’t. I didn’t fall apart, I didn’t cry. No matter how much it hurt, no matter how scared I was, I didn’t cry.

Everyone was already feeling so terrible and guilty it was just going to make it worse.

Tsuna cried.

Takeshi cried.
Even Mom had cried as she held me after the surgery.

Reborn has spent hours every day glued to my side letting me steal away his magic like some sort of terrible parasite.

So I hadn't cried.

Because I hate hearing the hurt.

But that’s not how this works, is it?

Hibari is right, as much as I loathe saying that. Even the cave troll can have profound moments of insight.

I can’t keep breaking myself and expecting to get better by cracking jokes and acting like a moron.

You don’t get better by playing pretend. By walling off the parts that hurt.

**By pretending that I don’t remember...**

Big hot tears start rolling down my cheeks. My vision is blurred and my eyes are burning and
suddenly I’m sobbing. Loud, terrible, ugly sobs. I’m sure that my face looks like a horrible mess right now, but I can’t rub the tears away or try to hide them.

Reborn is still holding my hand, and it’s important that I don’t let go.

I’m curled half into a fetal position and his hat is still pressed up against my chest like it’s some sort of teddy bear or something, but he doesn’t seem to care at the moment. He’s speaking softly to me in Italian. I can only make out every third word or so, but its comforting none the less.

Tsuna has started crying too. His forehead is pressed gently against my bound arm and his chanting of apologies and reassurances and promises to do better to be stronger.

And I can’t say a word.

I can hardly suck in a breath.

I’m just bawling my eyes out.

I cry until there are no tears left in me and I am just dry heaving sobs into the lawn. I cry until I’m completely and utterly worn out and my eyes feel swollen and gummy.

It feels like poison being drained from a wound.
Like a dam breaking.

Like honesty.

Like connection.

Like I’m filled with something other than sharpness and knives.

I feel uncompromising, unyielding support from my brother at my back.

And when my eyes are finally able to refocus I meet Reborn’s and find understanding.

“S-s-so I m-mig-h’t’ve be-en ly’n abo’t being o-okay,” I blubber through the fading of heaving sobs.

“I know,” Reborn says as he rests his other hand on top of mine. Soft violin weaves easily around my new beat. And for the first time in a long time, the panic that has been twisting my insides fades and I stabilize on a new axis.

“Sor-ry,” I hiccup to both of them.
“Stop it,” Tsuna whispers, is own voice wet and wobbly. “I cry on you all the time. I’m crying on you now.”

I can’t answer. I think I might have run out of words for the first time in my life.

“We will talk later, Monello,” Reborn says, “About you're admitted ‘impulse control issues’ among other things.”

He gives me a wry smile, and I give him a watery laugh.

It will be complicated later.

But for now, I just breathe.

We have those important conversations little by little, starting with actually dealing with what happened on Doom Day rather than just shutting everyone down with stupid jokes and pointless monologues when they try to apologize.

There are more tears.
From everyone.

I tell them my side of the story, they tell me theirs.

And little by little things start to feel lighter.

And I do start feeling better.

We all do really.

“I’m sorry I keep running off,” I tell Tsuna, as we huddle together in a blanket fort.

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear you,” He tells me back.

There is a soft glow from the battery-operated night light set between us. A relic from years past when we would routinely build blanket forts that would encompass the entire living room and spend hours pretending that we were searching for treasure.
I used to have to build them because Tsuna would always knock the whole thing down when he tried.

This time he sets the whole thing up around me with gentle coordinated motions.

“Thank you,” Tsuna says suddenly, after a moment of quiet passes.

“For what?”

“For always being there when I need you,” He smiles softly, “For always looking out for me, for never giving up.”

“Except when I’m all unconscious and shit,” I say, with a tad of self-deprecation.

The night light flickers out and dies. But the light doesn’t leave the space.

There is a soft glow from the tiny flame that flickers on the tip of Tsuna’s finger. There is an intense look of concentration on his face as he stares at it, willing it into existence.

It’s still hard for him to grab it himself, but he can now.
He wants to now.

And that is amazing.

“Even then,” He says, not breaking his focus, “You’re the voice inside my head after all.”

“If I ever get brainwashed and try to blow you up again just punch me in the fucking face, idiot,” Hayato snaps, “don’t just stand there.”

“Yeah, yeah, I promise I’ll break your nose or whatever.”

“Not ‘whatever,’” He says seriously, “Tsuna would never forgive me if I hurt you and, well, the baseball idiot would be impossible, and ... we’re friends too... right?”

I roll my eyes dramatically, “Of course we are dumbass.”

Hayato flushes and abruptly averts his gaze looking super uncomfortable.
“Right ... right, uhh.....”

“Did you see that shit about the signal the Greenbank Telescope picked up last week?” I ask abruptly changing the subject so something I know he’ll like.

Aliens of course.

Me and Takeshi go and watch our teams last summer game together. We sit right behind the dugout and we cheer and holler and start silly chants.

The Namimori Green Demons win, of course, we do we are the fucking best in the Middle School Division. The team is probably going to make it to nationals this year.

But we won’t be going with them.

When all the celebrations are done we make our way down to the dugout together where the team is packing up. And we tell them our goodbyes.

It’s a lot harder than I thought I would be.
But Takeshi smiles, confident and determined.

And I know we’re going to be okay.

Our extracurricular activities are just going to be more violent and illegal from now on.

“We need a speed boat,” Kyoko says.

“Where are we going to get a speed boat?”

“Tsu-kun,” she says sweetly and turns to look at Tsuna and Reborn who are trailing behind us. Tsuna giving us a look of pained exasperation, Reborn one of delighted amusement (which looks a lot like his default placid smile, but I can TELL).

“Could you two not drag me into your imaginary crime spree,” he beseeches us.

“Tsu if we let them get away with those diamonds then the bad guy will be able to power his death laser,” I tell him, a wide grin spreading across my face.

He looks back and forth between us as we continue to give him our best puppy dog eyes.
He sighs, “Where am I even supposed to find a speed boat?”

“You have no problem-solving skills at all do you?” Reborn asks snidely, enjoying watching Tsuna squirm.

“How should I know where boats live!? A boat parking lot? I break into a boat parking lot and steal you a boat.”

“I think you mean a marina, dude.”

“Hieee~ Leave me alone I stole you a boat.”

“How?” Kyoko prompts, as she slides back into step with him and links her arm through his.

“Eh?”

“How did you steal me a boat?” She flutters her eyelashes at him and he makes a duck-like noise.

“Kyoko-chan has a point, Dame-Tsuna, you can’t just say something and expect it to happen, you need to show your work.”
He looks wide-eyed at the three of us as we stare at him expectantly.

“Wait, you actually want me to figure out how to steal a boat!?”

“It will be good practice for your future,” Reborn says.

“Yeah, Bro-Bro, you never know when you might need to quickly steal a boat to chase down a maniac plotting world domination.”

On the penultimate day of summer vacation, Reborn meets me down in the kitchen at around three in the morning. I already have two mugs of coffee set out (those same big mouth frog novelty mugs) for us by the time he settles in next to me.

He was acting weird for most of the day. He had let Tsuna sleep in, hadn’t insisted on any training.

He had also disappeared for about four hours, and when he had returned he was tense and his melody had taken on a shrill edge.

His fists were also glowing in a somewhat concerning way that just screamed ‘violence has taken place on this day.’
I have a pretty good idea where he went.

I’m sure Verde is still alive. He seems like a resilient asshole.

I’m not sitting there very long before Reborn joins me. There is a wave of warmth that settles into my dully aching shoulder that settles it into something more manageable. I slump over the table and give him a sleepy smile.

“Speaking as the person who is on the receiving end of your recent foyer into the wonderful world of healing magic, you are my hero~” I praise.

He rolls his eyes at me and takes a long drink of the piping hot coffee.

“Considering extenuating circumstances you are likely to be the only one who will ever be on the receiving end of my ‘healing magic,’ as you so eloquently put it.”

He puts his mug back on the table and gives me a somewhat challenging and expectant look.

As if he is waiting for me to say something.

To confirm his long-held suspicion.
“Is it because of the curse thing?” I ask straightforward, meeting his eyes dead-on.

It doesn’t feel right to keep pretending that I don’t know at this point. Especially considering the details that Verde gave me.

It’s a certain kind of hell to be constantly misunderstood.

To be forgotten.

He stares back mutely for a long moment. If not for his fingers tapping rhythmically against his mug I would think he was frozen. The moment is broken as his eyes slide closed and he laughs lightly.

“You really are an impossible thing, aren’t you.”

“It is one of my best character traits, dude.” I grin at him and then shrug, “I think it’s a little late in the day for me to start playing dumb.”

“You always do such a wonderful job of it though,” he teases.

“I play the stereotypical dumb blonde well,” I shoot back.
He quirks an eyebrow at me and takes another sip of his coffee.

“How long have you known?” He asks.

“Since day one,” I affirm, “You really don’t carry yourself like a toddler dude. I mean I wasn’t one hundred percent sure what was going on at first, but I knew you were an adult.”

Reborn lets out a long drawn out sigh, “You have no idea how gratifying it is to hear that, Monello.”

“You knew that I knew something was up though, right?” I coax.

“I had a feeling, but I wasn’t entirely certain how much you knew.”

“Full disclosure, thanks to Verde’s motor mouth I know a lot more than I knew before.”

Reborn finishes the rest of his coffee and starts eyeing my, mostly full, mug. I push it over to him and he accepts it gratefully and starts gulping it down.

“She’s somewhat more...unstable than the last time I saw him,” he acknowledges.
“...Out of curiosity was the last time you saw him when he liquified your lungs, or have you seen him since? And if so WHY?”

Reborn pauses mid-sip and puts the mug gently back onto the kitchen table.

“He has gotten chatty.”

He looks decidedly uncomfortable at this moment. I really don’t think he wants to talk about said traumatic experience at three in the morning either.

“I’m not looking for extrapolation, I just thought I ought to mention that he told me an upsetting little anecdote about your personal life and it felt weird for me to hold onto that without letting you know.”

His expression flattens out into his usual placid smile, “your concern is appreciated but unnecessarily.”

“...Kay... but I’m, like, here for you if you ever want to talk,” I say like the awkward moron that I am. “I do have lots of personal experience with asphyxiation now.”

I have way too many experiences with not being able to breathe at this point. It is starting to become a complex.
“Thanks for fixing my voice box by the way,” I say quietly, gratefully. “I know most folks would have seen the no taking as an upgrade.”

“Never,” he swears.

“Thanks,” I whisper again.

We sit in companionable silence for a while as we let this little moment of truth wash over us. There is more that I could probably tell him. I’m not going to though. Not yet at least. I think there have been enough personal, emotional revelations for three in the morning.

Time to move on to something more actionable.

“So any news on the Mukuro situation?” I ask.

“Nothing,” He says, as he meets my eyes with a strange intensity, “The Della Rosa and Estraeno compounds have both been disturbingly silent since meeting the man behind the curtain.”

“Or rather his astral projection.”

Reborn nods in acknowledgment before proceeding.
“However, I was finally able to contact one of my ‘friends’ in CEDEF and she apprised me of a developing situation that the Family is dealing with.”

I don’t say anything, and I try hard not to react when the external advisory committee is brought up. I don’t really want to think about the old man right now.

I had gone through invasive surgery and he hadn't even had the decency to call and check in on me.

“Over the past 172 hours three high profile Families have withdrawn from the Vongola Alliance without warning or explanation.” His gaze goes hard, “One Family has been annihilated.”

...Wait...

“He had Futa’s book,” I whisper in grim realization.

“Apparently, our enemy has a very accurate memory.”

“Fuck.”

What had Mukuro called himself?
New Management?

I think I know what he’s going for now.

Chapter End Notes

There were some important things that needed to be said and done. And now some important parts have fallen into place.

Finally the truth hath been spoken!

Verde is a motor mouth with no sense of morality or personal boundaries and despite adding somewhat to Inari’s growing load of trauma he actually managed to get some stuff moving.

He also made Inari some nifty magic items.

Inari is always a mess, but he managed to come to some important personal realizations and levelled up his social links.

All important things to face what’s coming :)

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. They give me the power to write every week.

And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?
Conversations

Chapter Summary

People Talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_BRRIIING... BRRIIING...._

_BEEP... BEEP... BEEP..._

“All circuits are busy right now please try again later....”

_BRRIIING... BRRIIING...._

_BEEP... BEEP... BEEP..._

“You have reached the Namimori call centre. We are currently experiencing technical difficulties. Please-SCHREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!”
“Ow, ow, ow!”

“Boss! Are you alright!?"

“Owww, I’m fine Romario don’t worry. There’s just something wrong with the phone...”

__________________________________________________________

BRRIIING... BRRRIIING....

“...”

“... Is that... music?”

...

“What the hell is going on there?”
“Reborn? Hello? Are you there?”

“Is this your answering machine? Can’t you at least say ‘you’ve reached the worlds only hitman tutor, please leave a message?’”

“It’s Dino... I might be in trouble... somebody stole the ring.”
“I know, I know, I’m a useless idiot and you told me to keep it safe.”

“Things have been getting a little crazy over here so... any advice at all would be appreciated.”

“Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”
“Dame-Dino, I’m a busy man answer your phone when I call.”

“Who is this what do you want!? Are you one of them?!” Comes the horrible caterwauling screech that answers.

“Fucking hell, man! Don’t scream into the phone,” I shout back, holding the receiver away from my ear. My now ringing ear.

God damn, I was not expecting that.
Tsuna looks up from his homework and gives me a startled look. He sits up again and peeks over at the phone book page I have laid out on the table between us.

He points at the number in the add and I check the display on the landline.

Yup. That’s the right number.

“Are you coming for my organs?” The rickety voice creaks and cracks again in manic suspicion.

“What!? No I don’t want your organs! I wanted to ask about your party rates for cosmic bowling!”

Maybe I did call the wrong number? I make another comparison of the number in the add and the one on the phone and, no, they still match.

“Is this the Heaven’s Gate Diner and Fun Complex?” I ask warily, “out by the Old Mountain Road and Expressway 7?”

My finger is already hovering over the end call button.

In case the answer is anything other than ‘yes,’ and ‘did you enjoy my delightful little prank?’ Because I am suddenly terrified that I have accidentally killed some sort of ax murdering serial killer who is going to track this number and come steal MY organs.
“... Are you a customer?”

“Yeeesss?” I answer tentatively.

“Well why didn’t you say so sir!” The man’s tone shifts dramatically into something more peppy and less paranoid. “This Yamaguchi Minatozaki speaking how can I help you.”

I give Tsuna my best, ‘what the actual fuck,’ look. Even though he can’t hear fifty percent of this conversation I am fairly certain that he has picked up on the fact that there is something abnormal going on.

I had said that bit about organs out loud after all.

He quickly scribbles something out in his note book and holds it up for me to see.

‘HANG UP.’

That would probably the smart thing to do right now.

“ Anyway, you wanted some cosmic bowling, huh? Wha’cha gonna give me for it?”
“... Money?” I reply slowly and cautiously, “As is traditional in business transactions such as these.”

“I’ve got money,” he says with slow curiosity, “what else you got?”

This is probably the strangest phone call that I have ever had. And I have spoken to Verde on the phone. I spoke to Verde on the phone last night when he had called to see if my ‘scientifically engineered glitter’ has killed me yet.

The answer to that had obviously been no. Which I assume he had already known considering how redundant it would be to phone a dead person.

I think he’s lonely.

It’s a weird thought particularly because he seems to be projecting his repressed desire for socialization upon me and I’m still sort of, kind of pissed off at him for the who ‘liquefying lungs’ revelation.

But apparently not pissed off enough to block his number.

I did let Reborn listen in on that call though. It seemed kind of rude to ditch him in the middle of Casablanca to his ... colleague? Nemesis? Fellow human sacrifice?
“What do you want to barter for magic items? Are you an NPC shop owner in an RPG? What’s wrong with money.”

At the table Tsuna has started to aggressively underline the, ‘HANG UP,’ sign and is tapping on it insistently.

“Do you have magic items?” He asks waaaaaaay to intensely.

“Not on me right now and none that I would be willing to trade for bowling.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

Yamaguchi Minatozaki makes a teeth sucking slurping noise that is followed by a high pitched whistle that, for reasons that I cannot determine, fills me with a sense of icy dread.

“... What’s yer name?” He asks with sudden clarity.

“My name?”
Tsuna throws his pencil at me and starts making wide sweeping X motions with his arms, indicating to me, ‘HANG UP THE PHONE NOW YOU DUMB IDIOT!’

I hold up a finger.

“Inari?” I answer, somewhat reluctantly. I don’t really know why beyond a morbid sense of curiosity.

“INARI!?” The man shrieks again. So loudly that I almost chuck the receiver at the wall. “I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD!?”,

I do, however, pull the phone away from my head and take a moment to stare at it.

“I don’t think so?” I say as I look myself over.

I’m a little bit concerned about how many people keep calling to check in on the current state of my aliveness.

“Are you sure?”

“... Less and less the longer this conversation goes on,” I tell him, as honest as I have ever been in my life. “I’m going to hang up now.”
“That’s probably for the best... GOODBYE!”

The phone on the other end is slammed down and then I am left listening to the dial tone. I then, very carefully and very gently, hang up the receiver on the wall mount as not to anger the restless spirit that now most certainly resides within our landline.

“What the heck was that!?” Tsuna whisper screams.

“That,” I tell him matter-of-factly, “was our decision to go with Takeshi’s plan to host the party at Take Sushi.”

“Why would you tell him your name?” He continues.

I shrug as I close the phone book and slide it back into the small shelf under the wall mounted phone.

“Just because he’s crazy doesn’t mean I have to have bad manners.”

“The first thing you said during that call was fuck.”

“And I stand by that because he screamed in my ear,” I fire back promptly.
He stares.

I smile.

“Who screamed in your ear?” Reborn asks as he walks into the kitchen, shoving his (new) cellphone into his pocket.

“Nobody,” I say at the same time Tsuna says, “A crazy person.”

I give him a flat look as he makes himself look busy. I have the distinct feeling that I have been thrown under the bus as a distraction because Tsuna has yet to complete his homework.

Because he spent the past two unsupervised hours texting with Kyoko while giggling like a goofball. I watched him doodle their names in hearts in stereotypical teenaged fashion.

“Monello,” Reborn sighs.

“It’s an old man who runs a bowling alley,” I reassure him, “It’s not like he’s some sort of nefarious assassin.”

“He asked you about organs,” Tsuna continues.
I glare at him as I feel Reborn’s attention intensify again. I don’t think Tsuna has caught onto the imminent panic attack that Reborn has been rocking for the past few days. Though to be fair, I don’t think anyone who can’t hear the metaphysical musical accompaniment would be able to pick up on it.

Because Reborn slams down on his emotional output hard.

This whole breakdown of the Vongola Alliance/imminent mafia war thing. He had actually told Tsuna about that little tidbit, and my brothers immediately blunt response was, “Good, they can deal with it then,” which was closely followed by a frown and, “You’re staying here through right?” While he gave me a concerned look.

I don’t know why...

“Which was a weird thing to ask about, I grant you that. But I called an actual real number advertised in a phone book to ask about rates for cosmic bowling. I don’t think there is anything nefarious going on here.”

Reborn stares at me in a fond, exasperated way.

I smile at him and send a steadying beat his way.

Because this time it actually is fine.
“Not every random weird thing that happens is going to lead to some terrible emotionally scarring bullshit.”

Both of them stare at me in solid judgement and disbelief.

I think we all need a vacation. An actual real relaxing vacation not one that is filled with high octane hijinks or traumatizing assassination attempts or brutal violence. I mean an actual vacation where we all just lay down quietly on a beach basking the cozy sunshine.

Maybe some booze...

I don’t know what’s with the alcohol cravings. It might have something to do with the fact that I now know that at one point in my existence I could legally drink and now I can’t.

Because I’m fourteen... Almost fourteen.

This is going to start fucking with me.

Isn’t there a tropical mafia island somewhere? Is that I thing that I remember or am I just imagining things? If not we should totally go chill on a mafia island resort once the Mukuro shit has calmed down.

On the old man’s dime of course.
If he can't even pay for my fucking surgery he can at least pay for a fucking vacation, right?

Right.

“Hieeeee~” Tsuna whines, as Reborn tugs the homework pages out from beneath his folded arms. He makes an abortive grab for the evidence of his procrastination and diversions in imagination-land.

Reborn smacks his hand with a lime green folded fan. As if Tsuna was a naughty child caught stealing from the cookie jar.

He spends about half a second looking at it before he quirks an eyebrow at Tsuna and says, “far be it from me to discourage you from taking your girlfriends family name in the event of marriage, but I don’t believe the answer to : Cells that conduct messages is - Sasagawa Tsunayoshi.”

Tsuna turns so red so fast that for a second I’m worried that he’s going to pass out. He stutters and stumbles and says absolutely no words as Reborn sets the worksheets back down in front of him.

“Neurons right?” I insert, taking pity on poor sweet Bro-Bro.

“No giving away answers, Monello,” He teases.
“But that’s an easy one~”

Tsuna groans as he tries to erase the evidence of his daydreaming, “Can we go back to talking about the organ stealing guy?” He asks, somewhat desperate for another diversion.

“Non issue, party at Takeshi’s,” I say as I rock back in my seat and stare at the ceiling, “that should make Mom and Yamamoto-san happy too, they seem to be enjoying hanging out together. And it will probably be easier to low-key kidnap Hayato to the restaurant rather than to the mountain. Now that I think of it that would probably just give him flashbacks of Doll-Face and his crew...”

Reborn twitches at the reference to Dino and the Cavallone boys. It’s barely there, a skipped note, a stumble, completely imperceptible before it resolves on its own.

He knows that I caught it though.

He holds my gaze for a long beat, and then turns his attention back to Tsuna and starts his tutoring session.

That... was concerning.

What’s going on?
“This is Dino. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“If you are deliberately screening my calls you useless idiot -“
“This is Romario. - What kind of answering machine message is that! -Boss wha- at least make it a little more interesting th- Hey! ... This is Romario, please leave a message after the beep.”

BEEEEEP.

BRRIIING... BRRIIING....

BRRIIING... BRRIIING...

BRRIIING...

“Greetings, you have reached the Cavallone Stables. Regular business hours are between 7 am and 7 pm Monday to Friday, and 10 am to 5 pm Saturday and Sunday. If you have questions about our boarding facilities please press 1. If you are calling regarding a purchase please press 2. If you are interested in hearing racing information including dates, times, and statistics please press 3. For all other questions please press 4 and we will get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you and have a nice day.”

BEEEEEП....
“Paula, I’m trying to get in touch with your boss, but he won’t answer. Have him call me back as soon as possible. It’s important... It’s about the ring”

“Hell-“

“What are you doing? Really spell it out to me because I’m trying to think of an explanation and the only thing that I can possibly think of is that you are actually as much of an idiot as everyone says.”

“I don’t really have time-“

“You never do.”

CLICK
I head over to Takeshi’s place bright and early.

Tsuna is still snoring away, mumbling and drooling into his pillow. Reborn is snoozing in his ceiling hammock and peeks over at me when he hears me shuffling around pulling my uniform out from under my bed. I told them both last night I would be heading out early and they assaulted me with the dissonant concerned musical numbers.

We worked it out. I’m doing this whole, ‘steps to regain my confidence and independence thing.’ And as much as I enjoy the cuddles and concern and the infusions of magical sunshine, I need to know that I can go places without one or both of them stapled to me like a security blanket.

It is getting better through. I’ve already reached the point where it no longer feels like my soul is being stretched uncomfortably when they’re both out of sight.

The lime green ceiling hammock opens two enormous, glowing yellow eyes and Leon stares at me alongside his human.

*Stay-safe-dear.*

I wave at both of them and Reborn falls back asleep.

With his eyes wide open...

He does it deliberately. I know this, because when he gets really exhausted he passes right the fuck out.
The kiddos are sprawled out on the fluffy futons on the ground. Mom is in the process of remodelling the old man’s study (that hasn’t been used in eight years and had been used all of once before that) into a new bedroom for the kiddos.

It’s not quite done yet. She still needs to repaint the walls and order the new furniture. She was talking to Yamamoto-san about it on the drive back from the hospital the other day. She mentioned her plan and he offered to help her out.

I’m not sure how well chef and composer skills translate into home renovations, but I’m sure they’ll figure it out. If not I’m sure I can convince Reborn to call in his contractor to come fix up the damage in the middle of the night.

Like a joyful little shoe elf.

A large, menacing, shoe elf who only speaks Russian and most likely used to kill people for a living... or hide the bodies.

“Where are you off to,” Mom asks me softly as I try to sneak quietly though the kitchen.

“Takeshi’s,” I say stoping to look at her.

Mom is perched on the counter and is spinning a LP between her fingers. She looks... sad.
“Mom, are you okay?” I ask as I hop up on the counter next to her.

She doesn’t look at me, but she smiles gently and slides the record back into the sleeve and sets it down on the countertop next to her. It’s not a regular record cover, it looks like it’s hand made.

It looks familiar.

And it’s only because I’ve been keeping up with my Italian lessons that I can read the handwriting on the front’

‘To my Lucky Number,

From Lavina with love.’

“I’m okay, baby. Mama was just thinking about some things,” she says and with a flash her smile brightens and she’s looking at me again. “So you’re heading over to Takeshi’s? Do you want me to walk with you?”

“No... not unless you want to I mean. I should be alright they don’t live too far away,” Mom has never really been a helicopter parent, but with all of the recent bullshit she has gotten a touch more overprotective than she was before. If it will make her feel better to walk with me then I have no problem with it.

Mom reaches out to me and smooshes my face between her hands and gives me an appraising look over. I blink up at her, and she laughs, releasing my face and ruffling my hair.
“I think you should be fine. Just call me if you get into any trouble alright?”

“And you will send a large spectral bear made out of hard light to come rushing to my rescue?” I ask cheekily as I hop down from the counter, careful not to jostle my arm too much. It’s almost healed but too much moving around still occasionally leaves me wanting to cut the damn thing off.

Mom raises an eyebrow, “I can’t exactly do that all the time,” she answers wryly.

But I notice that she doesn’t deny it.

“But you can do it, right?” I ask.

She looks at me for a loooooong moment.

“Yes,” she finally says, “But only under very specific circumstances.”

I was right.

HOLY SHIT I WAS RIGHT!?
What does this mean?! Does it mean anything!?

I mean we live in a world where magic and monsters and mad science all exist so it shouldn’t be too surprising.

HOLY SHIT!!

“You are the most epically badass Mom in existence, you know that, right?” I tell her, a little bit awestruck.

I mean, I had a feeling, but to hear her confirm it so readily is something else entirely.

“It’s always nice to hear it sweetie,” she says as she too hops down from the counter and straightens out her skirt.

“... um, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but what’s with the record?”

It looks familiar.

It looks so familiar, but I can’t manage to break past the wall of static in my mind.
“Oh,” Mom looks surprised for a moment before she reaches over and holds the record up for me to see. “You would probably recognize it if I played it. I used to always have it on when you boys were small before...”

“Oh...”

A quiet permeates the kitchen as we both are suddenly back in 1993 and everything is terrible and quiet and wrong.

“... A very dear friend of mine recorded this for me before I left Italy,” Mom says, as she carefully steers the conversation back into less treacherous waters.

Piano keys.

Being struck so beautifully.

A dance.

“Gershwin?” I ask suddenly

“The Rhapsody in Blue was always one of my favourites,” Mom says, and rubs her thumbs gently
across the sleeve. “And Lavina could perform it better than anyone I’ve ever known. She was so talented.”

She stops talking and just stares down at the record in her hands again.

“... Mama?”

“She was a wonderful and talented human. And sweetie,” She touches my face gently and looks into my eyes.

Her eyes flash.

A burning white light.

And-

“... Is this thing on?”
“I should have asked one of the seniors to record this for me. I think there should be a red light or something - there it is!”

“Okay, I think it’s going now. Hi Lucky, congratulations on your wedding and your good news. You better send me pictures once the baby’s born. I promise I’ll come visit you soon. I’ve always wanted to go visit mothers homeland and this gives me a good reason to take a nice trip.”

“Anyway, I’m recording this one special for you. I know it’s one of your favourites. Think of me when you play it.”

“... Maybe one day our children will be friends too.”
I make it to Takeshi’s around quarter after six.

He and his dad live in Old Town Namimori. Which is exactly how it sounds. It is the district that has all the historical architecture, the shrines, the perpetually sinking library that for some reason people still go to.

Their house is actually huge, not that you would know that when your approaching from the street. Take Sushi is a nice homey looking sushi restaurant that for the most part obscures the view to the rest of the MANOR that the Yamamoto family lives in.

All two of them.

It had belonged to his mothers family, and, well... it’s theirs now. Or to be more specific Yamamoto-san’s.

Seriously, their house has wings, and a dojo.

And its all conveniently on one floor. It was a lot of fun running around the place when we were kids. So many hallways. So many doors.

... So convenient for a six year old who was incapable of doing stairs.
“Your late,” Takeshi says, trying to look stern, but failing horribly.

He got really excited when I called him last night. One; because I had relented to his superior birthday party planning skills, and two; because I told him I would be coming over.

I hadn’t really thought about it until I hung up, but it has been a reaaaaaaly long time since I’ve been over to Takeshi’s just to hang out. It was like back in April... so yeah, I’ve done a great job of maintaining my friendships outside of mafia shit.

I’m going to do better at that. That is my new promise to myself. Along with the whole stop bottling up negative emotions thing and actually talk about things that hurt rather than waiting to have a meltdown in my backyard when it all reaches critical mass.

See, I can grow as a person.

Slowly.

Oh, shut up.

“Sorry man. Was briefly waylaid by Mom,” I tell him as I quickly send a text to Mom to let her know that I made it safely and there was no reason to summon the divine wrath.

“Everything okay?”
“Yeah,” I mean the way our conversation had ended was a little bit weird, but I don’t think it’s anything bad.

The way she said ‘human’ was weird though, right?

“Anyway, you wanted to talk party plans and other ‘stuffff~” I prompt.

Takeshi grins at me, “You’ll see.”

He grabs my good arm and drags me through the restaurant toward the kitchen with a little more force than is probably called for, but Takeshi tends to forget his own strength when he gets excited.

“Dad, Inari’s here!” He calls as he jumps up onto the counter and leans over the glass divider. “We’re going to the dojo now okay!”

He says so quickly that I almost don’t catch everything.

“Wait a minute,” Yamamoto-san says as he walks through the curtain divider. His eyes immediately lock on Takeshi and sighs, “Takeshi, knees off the counter, customers eat there.”

He says this with all the paternal exasperation of a man who has repeated these same words everyday for fourteen years.
“Oops, sorry Dad,” Takeshi laughs and hops off the counter scratching at the back of his head sheepishly.

“Mornin’ Yamamoto-san,” I greet.

“Good morning Inari,” He smiles a very ‘Dad’ smile at me, “You’re looking much better today.”

“Yup, apparently my healing has been unusual and unprecedented,” I grin, “Pretty soon I’ll be able to ditch the sling and once again all will be right in the universe.”

“That’s good to hear,” And then he fixes a still sheepish looking Takeshi with a pointed look, “What was that about the dojo?”

“You caught that did you?”

“Takeshi-“

“I just wanted to show Inari what I’ve learned so far-~” Takeshi pleads giving his Dad the best puppy dog eyes that he has in his arsenal.

Yamamoto-san gives him a hard stare.
Takeshi’s eyes widen even more and he sticks out his lower lip in an adorable pout.

Yamamoto-san narrows his eyes.

The lip quivers.

“Fine, fine, stop it with the look, Takeshi. Just be careful, I already told you a sword isn’t a toy.”

The pout immediately vanishes and is replaced with a wolffish grin.

“Thanks Dad, we’ll be back in a little bit to talk about the surprise party stuff,” Takeshi says quickly and starts dragging me through the ‘employees only’ door and down the long hallway that connects the restaurant to the rest of the Yamamoto residence.

Takeshi is notably quiet as we move through dimly lit halls. Not in a bad way, more in an barely contained excitement way. Whatever he has managed to learn in the past week of training with his dad is probably pretty fricken awesome.

As we take a few more turns we start walking down a very familiar hallway and my lips quirk a little as I notice the tire marks that even the combined forces of Mom and Yamamoto-san hadn’t been able to get off the floors the sliding paper door at the end of the hallway is still patched up with a patchwork of colourful tissue papers that have faded over the years.
What the hell else where two idiot kids with a wheelchair and a long ass hallway going to do other than race around through it?

Seriously, Takeshi had been one of only four good things that I had back then. And meeting him when I did had made a very unbearable situation a little easier to handle.

I grab his hand in mine and I squeeze it a little as we pass the hallway of immortalized childhood memories. Faded scribbles low down on the walls. Pictures drawn in permanent markers that Yamamoto-san had started to wash away, but had stopped.

Takeshi had told me once that he had caught his dad sitting there one night with a bottle of sake and smiling.

He follows my gaze down the hall and squeezes my hand back. We stand there quietly for a moment and just take in the nostalgia. And then Takeshi readjusts his grip so now he’s holding onto my wrist instead.

“So I was thinking,” he starts conversationally as he raises my wrist up.

I quirk an eyebrow at him, “That sounds dangerous.”
“Meanie,” He laughs in mock hurt, and then he wiggles my hand around a bit and he grins in an extremely worrying way.

“What?” I ask cautiously.

“I hate that that guy hurt you, and I’m going to stab him for that one day don’t worry,” He says with absolutely no remorse.

“Good to know,” I say flatly.

“Yup, but I was also just thinking, it’s a good thing that he didn’t wreck your right arm.”

“... Why?” I ask with extreme suspicion.

“You know, it would have make ‘things’ difficult for you.”

I narrow my eyes at him and he blinks back at me innocently.

“Like school work, and eating and-“ His smile is widening.

“Takeshi, I swear to god if you are about to make a joke about jerking off I’m going to kick your
ass.”

He starts laughing uproariously as we continue walking down the hall to the dojo.

Takeshi is a natural with the sword.

He’s using a Bokken right now because his dad said no bladed weapons indoors until he has a better feel for what he’s doing.

He seems to have a pretty good feel for it already if you ask me.

In a crashing of bells and a ripple of icy blue fire he decapitates the practice dummies that his dad has set up.

“Holy shit dude!”

There is a new ferocity to his grin now.

“Dad calls it Shigure Soen Ryu. That was only the first form... He says it will change the more I develop it on my own.”
He walks back over to the wall and puts the Bokken away, “Apparently, I’ll have to go fight other swordsmen so I can evolve it.”

And this is super cool.

Takeshi has a badass new sword-style...

“Is your sword style a Pokémon?”

He trips over his own feet and starts laughing so hard that he almost chokes on his own saliva.

The smile on my own face grows even larger, “Finding Pokémon might even be easier actually. Where are you supposed to go to find other master swordsmen in this day and age. It’s not like there’s roaming herds of samurai around in this day and age.”

“Inari ~” He manages to gasp my name out through the giggles.

“So you’re just going to be walking around Namimori looking for another swordsman? See a businessman-woman-person on their way home from work had a long day at the office, but what’s this! They have a broadsword strapped across their backs like this is a final fantasy game or some shit.”
“Inari~ Stop~ I can’t breathe~”

BRRIIING... BRRIIING...

BRRIIING... BRRIIING...

BRRIIING...

“This is Dino. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can...”

BEEEEMP...

“.... I just wanted to say .... for what it’s worth, I’m sorry it had to be this way.”

CLICK
“WHAT!?”

“Jesus, Lal, calm down. It’s me.”

“.... Colonello?”

“I’m busy right now I don’t really have time to chat right now-“

BOOOOOM

“What was- Was that CANNON FIRE!?”

“Yeah, your not the only one who’s busy right now!”

“Colonello! What’s happening there!?”

“Oh I don’t know. The break down of alliances. Faction warfare. COMPLETE FUCKING
ANACHY! What the hell is going on over there Lal? Why hasn’t the ninth said anything?!"

“... I can’t -“

**BOOOOOOM**

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...

So... School...

School is a thing that is happening again.

I’m not against school. Education is cool, yay education~

School though...

The trouble with returning to school after months of high intensity hijinks and and near death experiences, is just that. You can’t really compare sitting in a classroom for eight hours a day listening to some dick read out of a textbook to running around a mountain at the height of a
heatwave. Or fighting hoards of crystal monsters.

It is especially hard to get back into school now considering....

I... remember a lot of this now.

And I don’t mean ‘plot wise’ I mean I remember eight grade science. I remember twelfth grade math. I remember ... quite a bit beyond that ....

It’s weird.

But it also means that sitting in a classroom listening to som dick blather on from a textbook that I am perfectly capable of reading on my own just got even more boring than before.

It’s probably obvious by now but I don’t sit still at the best of times. And that was before middle school education became literally redundant.

So now I’m just kind of evaluating the state of our education system, and let me say... I’m not impressed.

I’m particularly unimpressed with the way that OUR TEACHERS have just defaulted back to calling Tsuna ‘Dame-Tsuna’ and belittling him every time he tries to ask a question in class.
He had only tried that back on the first day. He doesn’t even bother anymore. If he has a question he’ll just make a little note and ask Reborn about it later.

Because here’s an interesting fact; Mafia bullshit aside, Reborn is a really good teacher. And he actually ENJOYS what he does.

And he’s actually really good at teaching Tsuna in particular. Mostly because he isn’t just repeating the textbook at him.

School has always been difficult for Tsuna. In part because of the seal I think. In retrospect I’m pretty sure it was the seal that made it so absurdly difficult for him to concentrate and retain information. The only way he ever managed to learn anything is if it was broken down and repeated so many times that it became almost like muscle memory.

But no teacher has ever done that for him.

Now that I have a chance to look back on Reborn’s teaching methods with a little more clarity I can see how much effort he put into making a curriculum that would actually benefit Tsuna.

The repetitive (spartan according to Tsuna) drills combined with high stakes punishment threats where enough to get Tsuna’s flames to come out, ignite his WILL to fucking learn and then those very important building blocks were drilled into his head so many times that they became like muscle memory.

...
Tsuna just passed the first math quiz we’ve had since we got back. Sixty percent on long answer questions. It is the highest grade that he has ever gotten on a math test.

He’s tearing up as he looks at it.

“Way to fucking go Bro-Bro!” I cheer as our group gathers in the hallway and heads off for lunch break.

“You did great Tsuna-sama!” Hayato adds in, a little teary eyed himself.

Hayato has done enough study sessions with Tsuna at this point that he probably deserves a little bit of the credit too.

“So where are we eating today?” Takeshi asks.

“Roof?” Tsuna proposes.

“Sounds like a plan,” Takeshi smiles and loops an arm around Tsuna’s shoulders, “Haya-kun why don’t you and Inari go steal our spot and me and Tsuna will go get the food?”

The tick of irritation immediately forms on Hayato’s forehead, “How many times have I told you
“SURE FINE COOL SEE YOU GUYS THERE,” I cut in loudly, and loop my arm through Hayato’s and start dragging him to the roof access staircase.

If I read that right, I’m pretty sure that was Takeshi’s way of saying, ‘Keep Hayato distracted while me and Tsuna talk about party planning shit.’

He bitches and complains all the way up to the roof. Which actually works out well for us because he manages to scare away the first years, that were setting up camp in our spot, away without even noticing. Now that is a useful talent.

Not that Reborn wouldn’t have eventually scared them off anyway. I know he’s up here. I can feel it.

“So how are you liking being back at school?” I ask conversationally, once he starts to cool down.

He snorts and glowers at me, “Fucking useless shit box.”

“Yeah, you got that right,” I sigh and lean up agains the wall, “Is it just me or is it really fucking weird to be back at school after all the-“

“Yes,” He hisses, not even letting me finish the sentence, “It’s always fucking weird trying to put up with mundane bullshit after you’ve been shot up, beat to shit, or see some really fucked up shit.”
“... you’ve got a lot of experience with this sort of shit then?”

Hayato doesn’t say anything immediately. He takes out his pack of nicotine gum and pops three of them out of their packaging and then jams them all into his mouth and starts chewing aggressively.

“This time last year the loathsome piece of shit that I was working for ran afoul with the Sicilian Alliance. I’m not going to go into the details because you’re a god damn crybaby and I don’t want you blubering all over me-”

“OI!”

“You are, don’t even try to deny it. Anyway the point is the Overseers were called in to clean house.”

“Overseers? You mean like the fucker who Kyoko punted through a wall?”

“That guy was a fucking bitch compared to the Red Cardinals. They come close to the Vindice when it comes to mortal terror.”
I am hit with such sickening vertigo that I momentarily black out. If I was standing I think I would have fallen.

I know that name though.

Don’t I?

“Vindice?” The word falls out of my mouth like a brick and an enormous pressure crushes down inside my head.

“I always forget that you and Tsuna-same are actually civilians and don’t know this shit.”

“And you know much more than I though you did, Hayato,” Reborn says placidly as he drops the camouflage and sits himself down next to me. “I didn’t realize that you knew about the Vindice.”

“Nothing really,” Hayato says, “Just the usual rumours”
“Hn.”

Bandages.

Chains.

“Who are the Vindice?” I ask, trying to fight past the pounding in my head.

“They enforce mafia law,” Reborn tells me, “They make sure justice is served even amongst criminals.”

That is a strange enough statement for me to stop slamming my head into a metaphysical wall.

“Okay, so Mafia Law is some sort of bullshit oxymoron, right?” I ask, “Because if there actually is a book of mafia law then I am going to need a copy of that shit posthaste.”

Hayato looks extremely uncomfortable all of a sudden, “I don’t think you get what kind of people they are. They run the Vindice Prison. The mobsters that they take there... they say they take them straight to hell.”
I raise an eyebrow at him, and then look at Reborn.

“That seems a touch over dramatic. “

“Don’t take them lightly, Monello,” Reborn warns as Hayato pales.

“Oh, don’t worry... so they enforce ‘mafia law,’whatever that means...”

A very strange, and very terrible idea starts to form in the back of my mind.

And it is terrible. Don’t even say it. You’ll jinx it and then you’ll be sorry, idiot.

“Do you think they have an emergency hotline? Or an email address-“

“Don’t even think about it,” Reborn snaps looking much more harassed than I thought he would.

“Think about what?” I say blandly, “Calling up the criminal law enforcement agency to report an infraction and sicing them on Mukuro and the Island of Misfit Monsters? Would I do a thing like that?”
“The Vindice are dangerous, and if Mukuro and the Estraeno have violated any of the mafias laws, which they most certainly have, you can rest assured that the Vindice already know about it.”

“You don’t want them knowing about you, moron,” Hayato hisses for extra emphasis.

The door to the roof swings open and the sounds of Tsuna and Takeshi talking and laughing are closely followed by Hana and Kyoko’s voices. It sounds like we’re going to have a party up here.

“Yeah, but I haven’t broken any ‘mafia laws,” I sass.

The two of them stare at me.

“... I haven’t, have I?” I look at Reborn beseechingly, “You would tell me if the ‘Drag Me to Hell’ people were out to get me right.”

The corner of his mouth quirks in suppressed humor.

Of course he would, dear, Leon says, ... Or we would just steal you away somewhere they couldn’t find you...

“Thanks for that.”
“What is it Ken?”

“They don’t have the thing.”

“The book doesn’t lie Ken, they have it. Keep looking.”

“Mukuro, me and Kaki-pi have interrogated every single crazy cow person on this stinky farm. THEY. DON’T. HAVE. A. TIME MACHINE.”


CLICK

BRRIIING... BRRIIING....
“This number is no longer in service... Please hang up and try your call again...”

“... Dame-Dino, Where are you?”

I walk in on Reborn having an intense staring contest with his phone. For a moment I think I might get the chance to see him crush another cellphone with his bare hand. But instead he sighs and slides it back into his pocket.

That extreme line of tension is back again. He’s wound so tight right now that I’m pretty sure even the slightest thing might make him snap right now.

So its probably a good thing that Tsuna and the kids went party shopping with Mom.
I casually flop down next to him, projecting as much calm and chill as I am able to, “Didn’t Doll-Face say he had important business, right? He might just be busy...”

I’m trying to be reassuring, but we both know that the state of affairs with the Vongola Alliance means that Dino might have gotten himself caught right in the line of fire. Both literal and metaphorical fire.

He’s fine.

He’s too important to the ‘plot’ to get himself killed. So he’s fine.

“... His phone line has been disconnected,” Reborn says quietly, “And I can’t get a straight answer from anyone at headquarters, none of my informants are picking up, none of Shamal’s informants are picking up.”

He sucks in a deep calming breath.

“I don’t enjoy being kept in the dark.”

Because he is a control freak who likes to micromanage everything. It is actually a rather endearing character trait (coming from an idiot who can’t plan his way out of a wet paper bag and tends to fly by the seat of his pants) but it is really biting him in the ass right now.
“Is there anyone else you could contact over there?” I ask, trying to spark some kind of epiphany. “His dentist? Barber? The fucking local news station? Something?”

Reborn is a very telling quiet at this short list of suggestions.

“You literally called his dentist, didn’t you.”

It’s not a question, just a statement of fact.

He shrugs, “It seemed like a good idea as any.”

“The Cavallone are one of the Vongola’s big three allies. It’s crazy that they would just go radio silent when all this other shit seems to be going on. Somebody has to know SOMETHING...” I pause and make a face, “Have you tried calling my ‘Dad’?”

“The External Advisor is either very busy, or is screening my calls,” Reborn answers shortly.

“Well fuck.”

---

BEEP - BEEP - BEEP
“You have reached Consulenza Esterna Della Famiglia Please state your name for vocal verification.”

“Are you fucking- GINEVRA ROSCO YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!”

CLICK

“Hello Ginny, How nice to hear from you again.”

“Iemitsu, you TRAITOROUS BASTARD!”

“I think that’s my line Ginny. Considering the circumstances. After all it’s YOUR boss that as been caught red handed FUCKING THE ENEMY!”

“That isn’t true- “

“It’s not? Oh my mistake. It must have been another pretty boy blonde that we caught on camera going into the Della Rosa Estate. It mus be another Dino Cavallone’s signature on these documents that I’m holding in my hands. Documents that are deliberately inciting violence within the Vongola Alliance. AND IT MUST BE ANOTHER CAVALLONE SEAL ON THEM!!”
CRASH!

“You can’t fake WILL Ginny. You know that.”

“Look, I know this looks bad. Let me talk to Nono. These still time, Call off your dogs and me explain he’ll understand if you just let me-“

“Haha haha~”

“What? What’s so funny!?”

“Fuck, Gin, who do you think gave the order in the first place? I run CEDEF, do you really think I have any authority over Varia?”

“THEN GET TIMOTEO ON THE LINE AND STOP FUCKING WITH ME!”

“I’m sorry to say that the Old Man isn’t taking any calls right now. He’s a little indisposed at the moment, all this stress isn’t good for his ticker. You understand right?”

“Iemitsu please, don’t let them do this to him. Don’t-“
“I’m going to hang up Ginny. It was nice knowing you.”

“... I know where your children live.”

“HA! If you want to try threatening me your going to have to do much MUCH better than that.”

“...please...”

“Goodbye Gin, If you see your Boss again give him my regards.”

CLICK

Chapter End Notes

Happy Holidays everyone :)

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. They give me the power to write every week.
And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?

And there is now a Sass and Win Side Story called ‘Despite What You’ve Been Told.’
Chapter Summary

Do you remember your dreams?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Boss, you have to get out of here,” Romario’s face is close. Burnt and scratched.

There is a gash in his head and it’s bleeding so much.

“Are you crazy!? I’m not-“

The rest of the sentence is swallowed by the blast and the scream of fury.

A flash of silver.

I look down to see blood splatters on stonework, a pulse of pain erupts in my side and-

I wake up gasping for breath and grab at my side. I expect pain and blood for reasons that
completely escape me.

There is nothing.

Of course, there’s nothing. I was sleeping.

I sit myself up on my knees and look around the room. Still rubbing absently at my side.

“You okay?” Tsuna whispers from across the room, one of his eyes is peeking at me sleepily.

“Yeah,” I whisper back, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, “I think I had a nightmare.”

He frowns and sits himself up, squinting at me through the dark.

“What about?”

“I think I was stabbed?” It comes out more questioning than I mean it to, “maybe? I don’t really remember.”

“... Did it hurt?”
I stare at him, “No?”

His eyes narrow, “Why did that sound like a question?”

“This isn’t Inception, Bro-Bro,” I tell him flatly, as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, “If I die in the dream I don’t die for real.”

At least I hope not. I have a hard enough time sleeping without the added paranoia of going too deep or having Freddie Kruger come and murder me.

“Are you getting up? It’s three in the morning~”

Tsuna’s early morning grumpiness is starting to kick in now. The whine kicks in right on cue and he flops back down onto his pillow and pulls the blanket up over his eyes.

“I’m getting up. Feel free to go back to sleep.”

“Do you WANT me to get up?” Is his muffled response.

“Tsu, I am going to go downstairs and make coffee. You hate coffee. Go back to sleep so you’re at least halfway functional in school today.”
“...Kay.”

I pull myself out of bed and stretch. It still weirdly feels like something got jammed into my side. But it’s more of a distant sensation now. Why can’t I be a person who has normal dreams?

Why do I feel like I’m forgetting something important?

**Because your head is a fucking mess and you never take a second to think things through?**

Haha, very funny smartass.

**I thought so.**

I quickly burrow into my soft coat. My shoulder pulls a little uncomfortable when I put my arm through the sleeve, but it’s nothing unmanageable. Reborn’s Sun magic has worked wonders. I don’t even have to wear the sling anymore.

I do have to start doing physiotherapy next week though, which should be fun(?). It’s exercise and I haven’t had a chance to burn off my excess energy since the festival. I am so ready to run around like an idiot again.
The physio gym has a climbing wall and you know that I’m going to be all over that shit as soon as I can.

I will probably start climbing it one-handed just for the hell of it. I have done crazier shit before.

There is a strange tingling sensation in my side and I stop to rub at it absently.

Maybe it’s like phantom-pain, only with a dream sword.

I wonder if this dream thing is a ‘post-traumatic event’ thing.

I wonder if Tsuna has been having any weird dreams lately?

“Tsu?”

“Hmm?”

“Have you had any weird dreams lately?”

He doesn’t answer me.
Did he fall asleep already? That was fast.

“... I had a dream about Mukuro,” he answers finally, “Nothing really happened in it. He was just sitting at a table and talking.”

“What was he saying?” I ask carefully.

“Dunno, don’t care,” he pulls the blanket off his head again and glares at me, “don’t go obsessing about it either. Let the grownups handle it for once.”

I AM the grown-up trying to handle this.

I don’t say this. Because that would be an insane thing to tell my older twin brother.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry I’m not going to be hitchhiking to Italy to declare war on the dark sorcerer.”

“Don’t.”

“Uh-huh,” I say vacantly as I creep out of the bedroom.
Reborn is already in the kitchen when I get downstairs.

- “Things have been getting a little crazy over here so... any advice at all would be appreciated.”

... -

His cellphone is set out on the table in front of it and he’s just staring at it.

Again.

I don’t even know how many times he has played it. I only found out about it last night.

He doesn’t even react when I start-up the coffee maker and set out the novelty mugs. Something bright and funny to offset how fucking tragic this is.

One missed call, and now we can’t even call back because his phone has been disconnected. And we can’t get a straight answer out of anyone about what is going on back in the old country because even when the do answer their phones the stock reply is, ‘sorry busy can’t talk right now.’
It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Reborn is being deliberately kept in the dark.

Whatever is happening over there HQ does not want him knowing about it.

This is why we can’t leave shit to the ‘adults.’ None of them seem to know what the fuck they’re doing. If they did they wouldn’t be deliberately fucking with the world’s greatest hitman’s head.

The coffee finishes brewing. The machine puts and sputters quietly, but in the vast silence of the kitchen in the predawn hours, it might as well be gunshots.

Reborn still doesn’t react. I’m not sure if he would react even if it was gunshots. He’s the world’s greatest hitman. His weapon of choice is guns. He’s probably desensitized to the sound at this point. No reaction unless there’s an actual danger.

... His side of the song has gone sad, solemn, and lone-

No, nope, we're not doing that. Sorry man, you’re stuck with me now.

No lonely.

Not anymore.
I make a show of setting his coffee down in front of him. The huge eyes of the cat stare back up at him and he blinks back down at it in momentary incomprehension. He must have really been out of it if he didn’t even notice me walking around him for the last five minutes.

“I’m not sure if having a staring contest with your phone is going to make it relinquish the secrets of the universe to you,” I say with gentle amusement, “I mean, it might, but I’m not sure how long that would take. We’re pretty far off from AI right now... I think? Does artificial intelligence exist? I feel like I would know if artificial intelligence existed.”

I start rambling, giving him a chance to adjust to the whole, no longer sitting alone in the dark thing.

It takes him a little longer than I was expecting.

I stop dead mid ramble and stare at him.

“When was the last time you actually slept?”

He takes an aggressive gulp of the piping hot coffee and resolutely does not answer me.

I raise an eyebrow, “That bad, huh?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Reborn says simply as he sets the mug back down in front of him.
“Oh, but I do worry Sunshine, particularly when you start having staring contests with inanimate objects.”

He glares at me. Or, rather, he glares at the double vision version of me that he sees by my left ear.

Yeah, when Reborn is so tired that even his auto-regenerate skill isn’t kicking in I know we have a problem.

Unfortunately, I don’t think I can fix it unless Dino decides to call us to say that he and his boys had to switch their phone plan and they’re all totally fine.

So, I’m going to have to try a different Reborn relaxation tactic.

I sit down next to him and hit the message playback on the phone.

We might as well share the stress.

It takes a second for Dino’s voice to kick in, but as soon as it does Reborn’s posture stiffens, his eyes focus in sharply, and his fingers tighten around the mug.
The violin actually conveys the emotion of panic very well. The melody ramps up so dramatically that even I have trouble keeping pace.

“Reborn? Hello? Are you there?”

...

“Is this your answering machine? Can’t you at least say ‘you’ve reached the world’s only hitman tutor, please leave a message?’”

...

“It’s Dino...I might be in trouble... somebody stole the ring.”

...

“I know, I know, I’m a useless idiot and you told me to keep it safe.”

...
“Things have been getting a little crazy over here so... any advice at all would be appreciated.”

...

There’s something... weird about this message.

Something about those long pauses.

It sounds like there’s someone else breathing on another line. Which is all kinds of creepy and unsettling.

That is probably the creepiest way I could have possibly described that. Thank you brain for that wonderful mental image.

You’re welcome.

“In retrospect, I probably should have made you decaf, your stress levels are ridiculous,” I tell him with the barest hint of humor.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Reborn says, not taking his eyes off the phone.
“What did he mean about ‘the ring,’” I ask, letting the smile fall off of my face.

Rings were IMPORTANT in this ‘story.’ They were symbols, weapons, conduits used to harness the powers of Dying Will. They had been so important that even the memory static hadn’t been able to block that out.

The Vongola Rings.

Some things have come back slowly.

Some never left.

That word had come back to me spoken by lips curling in a cruel smile.

“I’m assuming he didn’t mean the ‘one ring to rule them all,’” I continue on my own trajectory away from the static. “Unless we are actually in Middle Earth, which I am fairly certain we aren’t. I think I would remember if someone mentioned Mordor in Geography class.”

When it becomes apparent that Reborn isn’t going to be answering me any time soon I just start in on my own ramble. It’s a tried and true way of combating panic attacks. I used to talk to myself all the time back when...
Or well, I used to think at myself all the time.

Though once the talking came back no one could get me to shut up.

It was the only way I could stay sane.

Whether or not I managed to succeed at that goal is open to debate. All things considered, I think I’m doing great.

“It isn’t the One Ring, right? You have to tell me if it is because I think we might have missed our moment to throw it into the molten fires of Mount Doom.”

Reborn slowly looks up and gives me a look of absolute confusion.

“You know,” I continue, ignoring the growing feeling of dread and certainty, “Because the only way to destroy the ring was to throw it into the flames in which it was forged?”

I swear to fucking god, if Lord of the Rings doesn’t exist in this universe I am going to be so upset. I am counting on the works of J.R.R Tolkien to get me through a University dissertation with minimal effort. Well, minimal effort in this lifetime.

I don’t think it counts as plagiarism if I am replicating my own research papers, right?
“One ring to rule them, one ring to find them, One ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them,” I recite dramatically hoping to spark some sort of recognition in Reborn’s eyes.

No recognition. I do get some manic intensity though.

Even Leon is looking at me with something approaching reptilian concern.

“What ring?” He asks with false calm.

“That’s my line, Sunshine,” I shoot back at him, “In the message Dino said that he lost the ring. What ring did he lose?”

Reborn continues to stare at me warily for a few more beats before he files away from my ‘dark prophecy’ for later analysis and starts talking again.

“I assume he meant the Cavallone Signet Ring.”

“Signet ring?” I repeat curiously.

Not quite the answer I was anticipating.
“Most of the old and powerful families have one or something like it,” Reborn answers, “It is an easy method of verifying and authorizing documentation. Dame-Dino’s ring displays the crest of his family, but it is also infused with the Will of ten generations of Cavallone Bosses which makes it impossible to forge.”

“And, what, he didn’t have it keyed to his biometrics so he’s the only one able to use it?”

Wasn’t that a thing? The boss ring can only be used by the boss? Or am I drifting off into the realm of Sci-fi again?

“I have no idea where you come up with these things, Monello,” he answers amused. At the very least I managed to make him smile a little.

Small victories.

“So, ring stolen equals very bad because someone out there suddenly has all the authority of the Cavallone family. On paper at least. I assume if Doll-Face would supersede the family ring if he said something in person.”

Reborn is pointedly quiet.

“Are you FUCKING kidding me!?” I exclaim, louder than I should at three in the fucking morning... Me and Reborn have to start having our intense talks at a more normal hour I think. Midday conspiracy theory meetings rather than three am in the kitchen conspiracy meetings.
It would help if Tsuna wasn’t so aggressively opposed to mafia talk. I don’t think he realizes that trouble for the Vongola automatically equals trouble for us now.

“This is why the ring should always stay with the boss. It is their job to protect it and their family.”

Was Doll-Face wearing a ring?

No, no he wasn’t.

I know this because I spent a hell of a lot of time staring at pretty Dino and his pretty face and pretty hands. There was no ring there. And the only thing that he had hanging around his neck was a small golden cross.

Well, there is one place that a ring could have been that I hadn’t checked for. But I somehow doubt that that Cavallone symbol of power and authority is a cock ring.

...Unless it is and I was actually on to something with those bondage jokes.

Fucking hell, teenage hormones are fucking with my head, this is in no way the time or place for this mental segue.
“Doll-Face wasn’t wearing any rings,” I power on, banishing the images of sex toys from my mind. I will leave the mystery of Schrödinger’s cock ring for another day. When we know that Dino is fine.

“No,” Reborn sighs (thankfully unaware of my mental tangent), “He wasn’t. And when I asked him where it was he assured me it was being kept in the most secure possible location.”

There is suddenly an overpowering wave of guilt and misery that comes from Reborn that it feels like a gut punch. His expression remains completely neutral and walled off though. There is definitely something more going on here than I know about.

“It was stupid of me to assume that he would have left it anywhere other than in his father’s desk drawer.”

“You sound sure that’s where he left it.”

(Of course it was,” Reborn snorts humourlessly, “I know that dumb kid well. He would always throw it back in there... I was in the process of working with him to get to the point where he would feel more comfortable wearing it when Nono contacted me.”

Ah, that explains the guilt then. He’s a perfectionist, leaving a job undone must have been driving him nuts. And it comes back to bite him in such a fucking terrible way. He had been so pleased when Dino and his boys had turned up for the training montage. I guess I know why now.

Bro-Bro and Doll-Face really have no clue how much their ‘Spartan Tutor’ actually cares about them.
Adorable Goofus's both of them.

“Not really the most important observation at this moment, but isn’t Dino in his twenties? I know he’s a goofball, but he is an adult, right?” As I say this I start sending a calm relaxing beat his way. Steady, low, resonating.

“Sometimes I wonder. Particularly when it appears that a fourteen-year-old civilian is more capable of conducting himself as a mature adult,” he gives me a pointed look as he says this, as he starts to droop.

Which is flattering that he seems to think so highly of my maturity, but probably erroneous considering I just went on a mental tangent about magical cock rings while amid a discussion about the health and wellbeing of his student and the potential outbreak of world war mafia.

Yup, super mature, that’s me.

Also, I have an unfair advantage.

“I don’t think I’m the best benchmark of adolescent maturation models, dude,” I tell him blithely.

I’m not sure how to bring up my whole...thing in casual conversation. Or if I even should. When you actually get down to it, my past life experience amounts to nothing. It has no actual impact on the here and now. The knowledge that I had of this world has mostly already been invalidated other than the broadest of concepts. And while I don’t particularly want to sound like Verde of all people; my past life experience is a very subjective phenomenon applicable to myself. It is not a circumstance that can be replicated under controlled circumstances.
And even if it could the results would have no discernible changes.

A remains A.

Sawada Inari remains Sawada Inari.

Who will be turning physically fourteen in a month, and mentally...

Paradoxically I think I might be older than my old man when everything is added up, which is a strangely gratifying thought.

“Though I can see what you’re getting at,” I continue before Reborn can start to question THAT, “Doll-Face did seem a little sheltered.”

The briefest fond smile flashes across Reborn’s face before returning to grim neutrality. There are the faintest dark rings around his eyes that I gain see now that I’m looking closer at him

“It somehow escaped his notice for nearly seventeen years that his father was a Don.”

“...HOW?”
Reborn shrugs, “The Cavallone historically ran a very lucrative business breeding and selling racehorses. Dame-Dino assumed that was where the money and respect came from.”

“And the dudes with guns?”

“Horse Guards.”

A peel of giggles escapes me, “That’s adorable. No wonder he and Tsuna get along so well. They’re both the same kind of willfully oblivious idiot.”

Reborn finishes the rest of his coffee with a small sleepy smile on his face. He has started drooping more and more as our conversation has gone on.

He needs to sleep.

“He was,” He speaks the words so softly that they are almost swallowed by the ambient noises of the kitchen.

No, we're not going down that road Sunshine.

“Is,” I say poking the back of his hand gently, “The word you are looking for is ‘is’~”
He doesn’t really react, but there is a hopeful little jump in his melody.

“I have a plan,” I tell him slyly, “Not really my area, but I think it’s a good one. We’re going to get through Hayato’s birthday party and what every random disaster that brings and if we still haven’t heard from Dino or Vongola or any of the assholes over there by then I’ll bust out Me and Tsuna’s passports, we’ll hijack a car and we’ll go sort shit out over there ourselves.”

“Really?” He says wryly.

“Yes, really, but first, and this is really the most important step of all so listen close,” I beckon him closer and make like I’m going to whisper something.

He rolls his eyes but leans forward ever so slightly to appease my dramatics.

I reach out quickly and tap my fingertip on his temple, “You have to fucking sleep.”

His eyes go distant and unfocused and I only have a second to make a mad scramble to catch him before his head cracks against the table.

Well... that worked better than I thought it would.
He’s going to be a touch irritated with you, dear, Leon tells me.

“In my defense, I didn’t think the sleep spell would be so effective,” I rebut as I slowly lower Reborn’s head down onto the table so he doesn’t instantly wake up again, “But if he’s not going to take care of himself someone has to, and we're friends now... I think? Right?”

You would be the first to claim that title in a very long time.

...

...

...

“Okay, yeah, fuck that,” I lean down and grin at Reborn’s sleeping face, “we’re friends now, dude, no take-backs.”

He doesn’t respond, he just keeps sleeping. If I listen closely I can hear the soft slow melody of a metaphysical violin that assures me that he is, in fact, asleep this time. Not just faking me out.

I reach over and pick up his cellphone again and give the message another look.
“He’s listened to this a hundred and thirty-four times,” I announce idly as I set it to sleep mode.

Leon is conspicuously quiet at this.

“Out of curiosity when was the last time that he actually slept?”

One hundred and forty-seven hours, sixteen minutes and eleven seconds, he answers immediately.

“Not quite the world record, but still not good for you all the same...” I look between Leon and Reborn and think, “I’m going to have to move him, so, how pissed do you think he’ll be if I pick him up?”

There is the weirdest sound that rings through my brain. It sounds nothing like laughter, but at the same time, I know with absolute certainty that Leon is laughing at me.

Damn, that’s weird.

Less so with you than anyone else, he says after regaining his composure(?) Though it would be best not to bring it up..... it conflicts with the lie that he has woven himself.

I think I owe Reborn a deep dark secret after this. I feel like I have learned too many of his now. We have to keep this even...
Later.

I’ll tell him later.

As carefully as I can I scoop his tiny body off the table. It is bizarre how weightless he is considering how hard he can hit.

I settle on the living room couch as our destination. Even though Leon said it should be cool I think I would be testing the limits of his patience if I was carrying him around in front of Tsuna. And knowing my Goofus brother and his tendency to put his foot in his mouth he would most likely say the worst possible thing at the worst possible moment and they’re slowly growing respect for each other would be set back another hundred million years.

Thankfully, there is still a pile of blankets in the living room from when I took it over as my sickbed. It’s easy enough to throw them out over the couch one-handed and set Reborn down. The poor man is still dead to the world.

We’re going to figure this shit out.

One way or another.

I sit myself out on the floor with my back resting against the couch, and I stare ahead of me into the darkness. My own vision is starting to blur and my eyelids are starting to droop. It’s only four, I still have time before school, I still have-
It’s dark, and the smell is terrible.

It’s so dark that I can’t see where my feet are, but I hear the crunch with every step.

My side burns with every step and it’s getting harder and harder to draw in a breath.

My feet stutter to a halt, but the hand wrapped around my wrist pulls me forward.

... No stopping.

I press my hand against my side again and it comes back wet.

I feel cold. That’s not a good sign.

“Keep moving.”

“Right.”
One foot in front of the other. This isn’t that bad. I have been through worse. What else was Reborn’s endurance training for if not to keep going when I have nothing left?

I ...

He.

What?

“So I talked to the mom’s,” Hana says as she falls into step with me as me and Tsuna pass through the school gate, “They agreed, so next year you’re coming with us to France. Doom Day near-death experience bullshit. We’re going to have a nice relaxing vacation and scope out hotties together on the French Riviera.”

“F-France!?” Tsuna stammers from my other side as he gives Hana a panicked look.

“Morning Hana,” I greet her with a pointed look, “You’re looking nice and tan.”

“Greece was lovely, thank you for asking,”
She slides her arm through mine and glares at him, “It’s rude to listen in on other people's conversations Dame-Tsuna.”

“Hieeee~” he whines, “Sorry ma’am.”

Hana rolls her eyes at him and nudges him in the back of his calf with her foot.

“Kyoko wanted to talk to you, Dame-Tsuna,” She tells him pointedly. “She was waiting with the loud new kid by the home-ec room.”

Tsuna brightens considerably and immediately starts moving toward the building. Stops. Turns. Walks awkwardly back toward the two of us and says, “I’m going to go and-“

“You’re keeping your lady love waiting Bro-Bro.”

He beams and starts skipping off toward the school.

“Honestly, I’m gone for a month and I come back to this nonsense,” Hana grouses as we watch him twirl through the crowds of students on cloud nine.

Bro-Bro is an adorable little love bird. Off to meet the bird of prey that has claimed him as her
I think the entire student body is still in a state of shock at the revelation that the school idol is happily dating the school dunce.

I don’t think there is any way that they could have misinterpreted the way she dipped him and smooched him on the first day back.

Sasagawa Kyoko: empress of the power move.

“You can go a little easier on him you know,” I say as Hana starts dragging me again.

“Oh, can I?” She snarks, and reaches into her mouth to pull out the flipper teeth, and smiles at me menacingly as she displays the gap where her front teeth used to be before Tsuna kicked them out.

“Can I really?” Without the front teeth in she has a noticeable lisp, but Hana is still super fucking cool no matter what.

And she would always and forever get a pass for calling Tsuna, Dame-Tsuna. Because he had kicked out her front teeth during ballet class. And SHE had had to comfort HIM about that while her mouth had been a bloody mess and he was bawling his eyes out.

I had been busy running through the community center looking for a first aid attendant or a competent adult because the ballet instructor had fallen over in a dead faint at the sight of blood and had concussed herself on the balance bar.

That had been a fun trip to the emergency room.
“I’ll make you a deal, Inari,” She tells me as she sticks the flipper teeth back into her mouth, “If he can ever look me in the eye without flinching like a bitch I will call him Tsuna. I might even call him Tsunayoshi for the fucking hell of it. But until that day comes he is Dame-Tsuna.”

“Harsh, but fair.”

She links her arm back through mine and we set off back toward the school. It doesn’t take her long to notice the extremely sparkly gloves that I’m rocking (and will continue to rock, school dress code be damned).

“While we’re on the topic of accessories,” She says, grabbing my hand and manhandling it to get a better look at the extremely sparkly material, “Why does it look like you raided David Bowie’s dressing room?”

I grin and snap my fingers creating a small ring of electrically charged sparkles for her to observe and be amazed by, “They’re maaaaaggggiccc~” I drag out the word and wiggle my fingers making the glitter nightmare dance for her.

They’re going to have Hibari on your ass for a dress code violation,” she shoots back, but she’s still impressed.

“The fucking Cave Troll can kiss my ass,” I sass.

“I’m sure you would like that,” she grins as she delivers the killing blow.
My face heats up sooooo much and I half double over in a giggle fit.

“I missed you, Hana.”

“Of course you did.”

I snap my fingers again and summon the glitter back to the glove before some unsuspecting normie sees me commanding the unstoppable force of glitter.

“... I did you, idiots, a favor by the way,” she says as we turn a corner and she pulls me into an empty classroom.

“What do you mean?”

“Since none of you seemed to know anything about the woman who is allegedly trying to kill you two, I did some digging on her on the Vongola to incase you were wondering. There are some wonderful archives in Greece.”

I stare dumbly as she hands three beige folders to me.

“What?”
“Records of the Vongola Winery and Vineyards located in scenic Tuscany. Though apparently, they have locations across Italy. There isn’t much about the Mafia stuff available in public records, but if you look between the lines you can see it. Business raids and arrest records. There is an interesting bit in there about how the family helped the Allies during the Second World War.”

“...Winery?”

“That’s the part that stuck out to you?” She asks, “I do expect some wine once Dame-Tsuna takes over the family business by the way.”

“You and me both,” I mumble as I flip through the folder and then open the next one.

A familiar face looks up at me.

Cassandra.

I haven’t really thought about her much since Doom Day. Not since Mukuro basically told me he was mind fucking her.

It’s so weird that our lives are so closely tied to this person that we never met. This person who I swear was never once mentioned in the original story. I wonder if she had died then... before Mukuro or the Estraeno could have gotten their hands on her and everything went to shit.
“That one is more interesting,” Hana says, “Apparently Federico Ferrino and Cassandra tried to take the business legitimate. He was basically running the Winemaking business, but the family head, Timoteo I think his name was refused to sign off on the paperwork that would make it official. So they were suing them for control of the business.”

The bell rings, but neither of us moves.

“The case was thrown out after he died, and since they weren’t married yet Cassandra couldn’t continue to try and seize control of the company in his name. She tried through. Right up until her own ‘accident.’”

She plucks the last folder out of my hand and opens it to show me a photograph of a beautiful fucking castle. I’m going to infer from context clues that this is Vongola headquarters.

“Holy fuck Hana,” I breathe, “Have you considered a future as a fucking information broker?! This is fucking amazing!”

She scoffs, “You better have a better position for me in your crime family than information broker, Inari.”

“I’m sure we can find something that better suits your many talents Kurokawa-san,” I tell her seriously as I take the offered folders and slide them carefully into my own bag. I love how Hana always has answers to questions that I never even think to ask.

The whole, what the fuck does the Vongola actually do? Has been bothering me since day one, but things have always been so crazy that I never even thought to ask.
Wine, huh?

I wonder if that means that the old man has an actual real job other than External Advisor. He must right?

I have so many questions, paramount of which right now-

“You’re coming to Hayato’s party this weekend, right? Did Kyoko tell you we’re having a surprise party for him at Take Sushi?”

“You always have your priorities sorted out, don’t you? Wine and parties, I can’t wait until we’re fucking legal and can get out of this hellscape town.”

“You’re a menace,” Reborn tells me after dinner has ended and Tsuna and the guys are working hard on their homework.

It’s English homework and I have been instructed not to help them under any circumstances. So I just get to watch and laugh as they try and fail to translate American tongue twisters. They actually managed to answer the first question correctly, but they refuse to commit because they refuse to believe that the answer to the question is:
“How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? He would chuck, he would, as much as he could, and chuck as much wood. As a woodchuck would if a woodchuck could chuck wood.”

“Did you have a nice nap?” I ask him with a cheeky grin plastered across my face. “Feeling any better?”

He stares back expressionlessly before he sighs, “I do actually,” he finally admits, ”I suppose I should thank you for that.”

“At this point, I think I owe you some good shit, dude,” I tell him honestly, “What with all the time and effort that you’ve put into fixing me up.”

A strange look passes across his face. I would almost say he looks... awkward? “You really have no idea, do you?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” he smirks and adjusts his fedora.

“Yeah, sure, we can save it for when you regale me with the wonderful story about how Tsuna is inheriting a Winery~”
He blinks, “How-“

“Hana, apparently we sparked her curiosity and she went on a research bender while she was on vacation.”

“She has a talent for information gathering,” He sighs, “I was saving the bits about the legal practices for a later date. Dame-Tsuna would probably try to flee the country if I told him he would be inheriting an actual business.”

“He did have a little bit of a freak out when Doll-Face mentioned paperwork.”

“He still has a long way to go.”

The world is fading in and out of focus. He’s in a dark metal space crammed between crates curled into a tight ball.

He’s alive though, and that’s something at least.

He’s doing his best to block out the cold. He can’t do much though. He lost the jacket at some point during the fiasco in Milan. He’s doing his best not to think about Milan at all.
Not think about her.

“You stopped breathing again.”

“I didn’t.”

“...Don’t fucking die on me, idiot.”

He’s not going to die.

This is his fault, his fuck up.

He has to fix it.

With his dying will.

Because nothing less than that is going to cut it.
Tsuna takes on the all-important job of guiding the birthday boy to the surprise party. This is in part because he elected himself to this job and in part, because Tsuna is the only person that Hayato would follow anywhere, no questions asked, without kicking up a fuss.

Which gives the rest of us time to hide out in the restaurant.

We actually don’t invite that many people. Mostly because Hayato is generally antagonistic to anyone who isn’t part of our core group… technically he is antagonistic toward the people who are part of our core group

In retrospect, jumping out at a teenager who we all know has some form of post-traumatic stress disorder in a dark room wasn’t the best idea. But it really was so much fun~

“HAPPY BIRTH-“

We get about that far before all hell breaks loose.

In the form of super-condensed flashbangs that go off in explosions of storm flames shimmering with a spectrum of other colors.

“GET BEHIND ME TSUNA-SAMA!”
The capsules hit the ground with a small ‘ting’ sound before they ignite gloriously and everyone is suddenly screaming for an entirely different reason.

“Hayato, calm down it’s just-“

“MY EYES ARE BURNING TO THE EXTREME!!!!” Ryohei exclaims, “WHAT AN EXTREME PARTY!”

“Brother careful you’re going to run into the wall!” Kyoko warns.

I am just laughing my ass off.

Yup, this seems about right for us.

Reborn sighs deeply next to my ear, “Of course, Dame-Tsuna really didn’t think this through.”

I don’t know WHAT he’s talking about this is perfect. 10/10 Neighbourhood Watch Brand Chaos.

“HAYATO-KUN ITS A BIRTHDAY PARTY!” Tsuna manages to shout over the sounds of chaos.
Hayato finally stops throwing shit and gives the rest of us a chance to blink the spots out of our eyes. He stares around the restaurant with this profoundly uncomfortable look on his face and the rest of us stare back at him with various degrees of success.

Ryohei is still running around blind. But Hana has him handled.

“Who’s birthday?” Hayato asks.

And his voice sounds so heartbreakingly small and fragile that I instantly forgive him for the crazy start to this.

“Your birthday, moron,” I call over to him, rely on Reborn to point my attention in the right general direction.

He had busted out sunglasses for himself, but apparently, the rest of us are shit out of luck.

“…My…” Hayato doesn’t even finish the sentence. He’s gotten all choked up and I don’t think he has a clue what to do right now.

It’s Mom that crosses the floor to where the two of them are still standing in the doorway of Take Sushi. She seems completely unaffected by the flash-bangs. I’m going to chalk up - unaffected by light-based attacks to her character stat sheet.

She comes to a stop in front of Hayato and Tsuna and music starts playing in the Restaurant through the little stereo system Yamamoto-san had painstakingly installed a few years ago.
A beautiful melody played on piano keys.

The opening notes to the Rhapsody in Blue.

“Happy Birthday Hayato,” she tells him, and her voice is so soft that I don’t think that anyone else can hear her.

I have her good ears though, so I hear it.

“I’m sorry that it’s taken so many years for me to have a chance to say.”

As the music continues to play and the rest of the party recovers from the impromptu attack, Mom and Tsuna guide a stiff-backed Hayato into the restaurant.

“You alright there Haya-kun?” Takeshi asks his voice light and teasing as he nudges Hayato.

“Who are you calling Haya-kun you ass,” He snaps back. But it lacks the usual heat. His voice is wet and thick with barely restrained emotion.

One of his hands is clutching Tsuna’s arm for dear life.
I don’t even think he realizes that he’s doing it.

The gentle smile on Tsuna’s face tells me that he isn’t going to mention a thing.

“... Maybe one day our children will be friends too.”

“You alright there?” I ask him.

“Yeah... It’s just...”

“Just that we’re all a bunch of dumb fucks who didn’t think about how dumb it would be to jump out at you guys in the dark? Yeah, that was pretty fucking stupid of us, but you have to admit it was just the right amount of stupid.” I blather on at him in a distracting way as Yamamoto-san sneaks the beautiful feast that he has created for our bizarre little family onto the tables.

Haru is doing SOMETHING with her magical illusion powers over there to make this go smoothly. Still have no idea if she knows what she’s doing, but indigo rotoscoping is all over everything she is setting out on the table.

Shamal is giving her a pretty serious side-eye too. And not his usual pervy side-eye. It’s serious, ‘there is fuckery going on here but I’m going to let it slide for now,’ side-eye.
I don’t even think he would try it considering he brought MIKI-CHAN ALONG AS HIS PLUS ONE.

APPARENTLY, THAT IS STILL A THING THAT’S HAPPENING.

Good for them I guess. But I still want front row tickets to watch her kick him in the balls if he tries pulling any skeevy shit on her.

“You’re all fucking crazy,” Hayato says, burrowing his face into his free arm, “How did you even know?”

…

Oh, right… I had just pulled this out of thin air, hadn’t I?

“I premonitioned it.” I snark at him, ducking my head out of the way so that Yamamoto-san can put down the final platter of this feast.

“You wha-“ His head bolts up just as the rotoscoping effect fades and he looks around at the lights the food, the pile of presents on a table in the corner and he starts to choke up again.
Wh-Wh-Wh-

Takeshi laughs and throws himself into the seat on Hayato’s other side, slinging an arm around his shoulders in a quick one-armed hug.

“It’s amazing, right? Dad went all out on this one. Everything is super fresh and healthy,” He says that last bit pointedly.

I’m confused for about all of a moment. And then I remember Bianchi.

Takeshi is such a fucking sweetheart sometimes.

It’s kind of a roundabout way to say it, but I can tell by the minute relaxation in Hayato’s posture and the gradual stabilization of his melody that he understood and appreciated the gesture.

Don’t worry, no poison cooking here.

“Get off of me baseball-idiot!” He snaps and shoves Takeshi off of him.

“I’m not even on the baseball team anymore, Hayato-kun~”
“That doesn’t make you any less a baseball-idiot!”

Takeshi just laughs at that. Tsuna is giggling too, he hasn’t really been saying much but he has been consistently sending some very soothing jazz beats Hayato’s way since they walked through the door. The two of them have been having their own little duet as we go through the opening phase of the party.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what was going on, Hayato,” He says softly as he leans into Hayato’s shoulder. “I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“… Maybe less surprising next time Tsuna-sama?” He answers honestly with none of his usual fanfare.

Tsuna just fucking BEAMS at the honest criticism. The more Hayato forgets to put him on that mob boss pedestal and instead treats him like a regular friend, the happier Tsuna is.

“I promise never to lead you into a surprise party again!” He vows, “I promise I will stop all future surprise parties!”

“You sound resolved, Dame-Tsuna,” Reborn says slyly, “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“What! NO! What are you planning you crazy ba-“

I shove a giant piece of sushi into Bro-Bro’s mouth.
“Dinner time!”

Considering how the party started the rest of it goes off pretty damn good.

Dinner is delicious. Yamamoto-san is the best and he really went all out for this. He is also doing this out of the kindness of his heart. No charge. Mom offered to pay and he wouldn’t hear of it.

“Some things are more important than money, Nana, you know that.”

He has always been a really good person though.

… and he makes Mom smile.

When she gives him a smooch on the cheek; me, Tsuna and Takeshi share a wide-eyed look.

All right then… Not really sure where this is going and honestly it's not really any of my business because Mom is an adult and is more than capable of making her own choices.
This one seems a lot better than the ball and chain that she’s tied to though.

But that’s just my opinion.

My brutally honest opinion.

Shamal and Miki-chan leave after dinner.

He stops by to give Hayato a quick, “Happy birthday, kid,” and hands him a thick envelope and messes up his hair before he promptly turns into a debilitated drunk and Miki-chan graciously picks him up and carries him out the door.

“See you at the rehab center next week, Inari-chan,” Miki-chan calls back to me as they leave.

“See you!”

“He such a fucking prick,” Hayato grouses as he gives the envelope a soft look.
“He really is,” Tsuna and I agree in stereo.

“What did he get you?” Takeshi asks, excited and curious.

Hayato rolls his eyes at him and opens the envelope….

“That… is a fuck ton of money,” I say when it no one else says a word.

“He’s still a fucking prick.”

Mom and Yamamoto-san abscond to the kitchen after presents which leaves the rest of us idiots to amuse ourselves with party games.

Haru schools us all at Nerd trivia. Mostly because I have yet to familiarize myself with the sci-fi fantasy of this universe. I think I need to though. Some of the titles on those cue cards sounded wild. We are going to have to start by binge-watching Star Trek: Orb, because Hayato and Haru both started gushing about that one.

I think Hayato momentarily forgot his animosity toward Haru as he was completely enraptured by her crazy fanfic recitation. Takeshi even got in on that adding in all the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhh’ in the appropriate places as she detailed an intergalactic love story.
Hana, Kyoko, and Ryohei take over the dartboard and start having an intense competition. Well, Kyoko and Ryohei do, Hana is apparently used to this and is acting as referee.

When the two of them start arm wrestling in to resolve a disagreement about a point me and Tsuna blink at her in askance.

“You should see them when they’re at home. Its jungle law in the Sasagawa household.”

Kyoko slams her brother's hand into the table and lets out a primal cry of victory, “You know the rules big brother, two thousand pushups~ You better get moving.”

“We have weird friends,” Tsuna tells me as we watch our friends (family really).

“We do, but I just realized that you are going to have a crazy meet the parents' situation so I’m kind of stuck on that right now.”

“Hieee~” He whines and presses his hands against his face, “I’ll do it for Kyoko-chan.”

“You’ll do it with me standing behind you with a video camera. I’ll need to memorialize you arm-wrestling Kyoko’s entire family for their approval.”

“You’re terrible,” Tsuna sighs.
“I’m your brother, it’s my job.”

Reborn watches everything from a comfortable position.

He hasn’t really tried to take control of the party or insight any random bouts of chaos (we did that all on our own). For the most part, he seems content to just watch us scream and run around like idiots.

It’s probably a good thing that he does this because Lambo and Futa are a couple of troublemakers together. I think they are playing some sort of imaginary explorers game and Reborn has had to snatch knives and other dangerous implements out of their hands on more than one occasion.

And while I would normally be having a panic attack about the health and safety of small children, I trust that Reborn is not going to let them hurt themselves in any irreparable ways.

Honestly, I’m just happy that the two of them are having fun playing pretend like ordinary kids. No weapons, no magic books, no eldritch abominations living in hammerspace in a five-year-olds hair…

Reborn is teaching them evasive maneuvers right now, isn’t he?
Leon has transformed into a nerf gun and he is shooting lobed volleys at them and instructing them to dodge out of the way.

He really can’t turn off the hitman home tutor thing, can he?

“Widen your stance Cow, you’ll just keep falling on your face if you move like that.”

“REBORN IS A MEANIE!”

And always unappreciated by his students—

“Lambo, if you’re closer to the ground it’s easier to roll. And then you can be like a cannonball,” I call over to him.

“Canon?” He asks, wiping away his sniffles.

“It’s also easier to trip people and make them fall on their faces.”

Reborn gives me a delighted look as he proceeds to shoot at the boys again with the lime green nerf darts and tells them, “You heard your Fratello, try again.”
Kyoko, Hana, and Ryohei leave after sundown they all have curfews and they say their goodbyes. They offer to walk Haru home too and she jumps at the chance to make some new friends. She is still an odd, odd girl.

Who is now discussing the finer points of a potential chainsaw based weapon with the other girls as Ryohei follows them out with a dumbstruck look on his face.

I’m sure Kyoko will explain things to him at some point… or she won’t and he will just keep turning up ready for a fight. Ryohei isn’t the kind of guy who asks too many questions.

At this point, it’s just our little core group hanging out watching a movie. Me and Takeshi took the liberty of rolling out the television from the main house and setting it up in the corner and throwing down some pillows and futons. When we went to check on Mom and Yamamoto-san we found them passed out with a bottle of sake and a stack of photo albums laid out around them.

Takeshi chooses the movie.

“Hayato will love this,” He tells me as he pulls the VHS out from the trunk, “He’s really into the crazy alien stuff, isn’t he?”

“Legend of the Star Eaters? What’s it about?”
He blinks at me, “You don’t remember?”

“No… Have we watched this before? It sounds vaguely familiar.”

“We watched it with dad when we were kids. I remember because you cried when we watched it,” He teases me.

“Cried? Wait are you choosing this movie to deliberately fuck with me?!”

He grins and leaves the room, VHS in hand.

“Takeshi!” I call out and race after him.

As it turns out ‘Legend of the Star Eaters,’ It’s a campy sci-fi horror film from the fifties that seems vaguely familiar. Hayato fucking loves it and Tsuna has half burrowed into the blankets in terror. He has never done well with horror movies, no matter how silly they are.

Takeshi laughs whenever one of the ‘scary monsters’ appear on the screen.

I have no idea why I would have cried at this movie.
About an hour into the film I still have no idea, but I can’t deny the growing pit of dread in my stomach as we watch this.

This kids have long since fallen asleep, and Reborn is watching the film in mild curiosity.

And then it gets to the part when people's insides are being ripped out.

And it looks totally fake.

It's crappy special effects from the nineteen fifties nothing special or believable.
But it still elicits such a visceral NO feeling in me that I stand up and start pacing around the empty restaurant. None of them really pay me any mind. It is a well-established fact that I can’t sit through a movie without pacing or twitching or talking.

Really this is nothing out of the ordinary.

**KNOCK - KNOCK - KNOCK**

What is out of the ordinary is the insistent knocking at the door.

**KNOCK - KNOCK - KNOCK**

I guess someone saw the lights on inside and thought that the restaurant is open?

**KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK**

“I’ll tell them that we’re closed,” I whisper to Takeshi who nods at me from within his cozy blanket roll.

I unlock the door and as I go to open it I have a dizzying moment where my vision splits and suddenly I’m looking at the welcome mat outside. I shake it off that’s weird. Even for me that’s
weird. I crack open the door intent on telling whoever is fucking banging to knock it the fuck off. Seriously, it’s after midnight the restaurant is never open this la-

“VOOOIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!!!!”

And I immediately slam the door in Superbia Squalo’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Of Sharks.

The rest of that sentence is Beware of Sharks :)

And as always I love hearing from you so let me know: Questions? Comments? Theories?

Happy New Year Everyone :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!