**Karmic Balance**

by *Sanjuno*

**Summary**

The Transmigration of Souls allows those who have repudiated their dharma a second chance at enlightenment. Karma being what it is, how is a soul supposed to repay debts inherited from their past life if they cannot remember their mistakes? Hatake Kakashi is a ninja, and in the time honoured tradition of his people he bargains with Fate. Gambling not with lives, but with Death, Hatake Kakashi wins a second chance. Mind and soul reborn in a new world, Obito and Kakashi find each other once again. Despite the weight of their sins and the pain of their scars, the two shinobi look forward to a life of peace. Unfortunately for their retirement, Destiny, and a certain meddling Sage, have other plans...

The Vongola Tenth Generation had inherited the Dying Will of the First Generation. All was going as was foreseen... until a pair of ninja decided to meddle, and changed the Pattern before it could be set.
Notes

There is not nearly enough ObiKaka fic out there. I've decided to fix that. Plus, what few KHR/Naruto fic I've found is unfinished, so... bunnies. Bunnies everywhere.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Dokuro Obito was born with a massive network of birthmarks that covered the entire right side of his body in a latticework of livid red and white lines that resembled nothing so much as old scars. The infant’s eyes were mismatched, the right eye being red as blood and the left eye a misty indigo that looked nothing like the usual undecided infant blue. His parents were thankful when both of their new son’s eyes darkened to a near black shade of plum. They did love their son, but that did not change the fact that Obito was an odd looking infant.

Their attending doctor theorized that Obito might have started as a multiple pregnancy, but the gametes had fused early on in the mitosis process. In a way they were lucky to have a chimera child, because if the embryos had remained individually separate the lesser level of fusion may very well have meant conjoined twins. Such children often died during birth, or early in life due to health concerns. Disturbed by the idea that they might have been delivered an even stranger looking child the couple viewed the birthmarks in a new light. The doctors warned the new parents about the possible health issues that cropped up in a chimera afflicted infant and then sent the new family off home.

Obito grew up healthy and strong and clever, with enough energy for two boys, and his parents often thanked the merciful kami that there was only one of Obito to look after. Two sons with Obito’s energy levels would have seen them dropping dead of exhaustion.

The little baby they had fretted over grew quickly, and soon enough it was time for young Obito to start school. His parents were eager to see their son make friends, and worried that Obito would ignore his new classmates in the same way he had ignored their neighbor’s and coworker’s children in the past. They soon learned to be careful of what they wished for, because Obito did make a new friend that day. This friend was a silver haired little boy with a reputation for being a genius who was a year younger than Obito. A boy their son refused to let go of when they picked him up from his first day of school.

Obito had to be detached one finger at a time and bodily carried away every day for the next week. His stressed out parents and teachers eventually reached a compromise that was acceptable for everyone. The end of school day routine was much calmer on all accounts once Obito was allowed to bring his best friend home with him.

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In which Kakashi is reborn.

Chapter Summary

Kakashi is a troll. So nothing much has changed.

Chapter Notes

Setting up the pins, because ObiKaka are going to go crashing through the Mafia World like a pair of ballistic bowling balls.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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(In which Kakashi is reborn.)

(-28 years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Gokudera Kakashi was born with a birthmark cutting through his left eye like an unseen knife had sliced a line down his face from brow to jaw line. That red left eye was often kept closed, and the clouded violet of his right eye was perpetually half-lidded. The infant’s caretakers put it down to the Gokudera family’s traits of inherited albinism and made sure to keep the blinds drawn until both of Kakashi’s eyes darkened to the silvery-green common to his bloodline.

Unfortunately, Kakashi’s mother had died during childbirth due to reasons the doctors had not been able to discover. (A polite lie to neatly sidestep the damage a reputation for substance abuse would do to the family image. Kakashi had been subjected to an endless multitude of tests as a newborn, just to be sure nothing had been passed on that could cause the infant harm.) She had never named her son’s father, and she had shown a deplorable lack of dedication to her musical career. Kakashi was therefore shuffled off into the custody of an elderly semi-retired relative who then left the greater portion of Kakashi’s daily care to her domestic staff. (Gokudera Sayako had never married, too much in love with her music to entertain a man, and so Kakashi was an opportunity she had never expected to have. That did not mean she was in any way willing to deal with dirty diapers. What was she paying those people for, if not to deal with messes she would rather not be bothered with?)

At four years old, Kakashi started wearing a thin cloth mask everywhere, dodging questions from his caretakers with an uncanny amount of finesse. This caught his guardian’s attention, and Sayako decided that if the boy was old enough to play mind games he was old enough for structured schooling. So Kakashi was packed off to day classes a year early, and his great-aunt’s staff prayed exposure to other children would normalize the disturbingly intelligent child.

It rapidly became apparent to Kakashi’s teachers that the boy was a genius. It also rapidly became apparent that Kakashi and Dokuro Obito had an odd mutual fixation on each other that bordered on co-dependency. It was more effort than the results were worth to separate the two of them, and soon the boys were alternating homes every week.
Gokudera Sayako was pleased with her new freedom to travel without needing to arrange for extra childcare (people these days were so fussy about their paperwork) and both boys learned to play various instruments at a prodigious rate. Dokuro Kagami and his wife Tobiko were glad that their genius son had a playmate that could keep up with him, and the consistent string of childfree nights had renewed the spark in their relationship considerably.

The years passed in an idyllic sort of chaotic joy until Kakashi’s fourteenth birthday. Shortly after that day, Kakashi’s health began to decline. Obito grew more and more frantic as his best friend grew more and more ill. It was a wasting sickness that none of the doctors on Kakashi’s case could identify. They could not even find the cause, let alone come up with a cure. (Sayako muttered darkly about sins of the mother bringing harm to her ward.) Seeing his best (only) friend fade away by degrees lit a fire under Obito, who had until then been content with coasting along without really applying himself to his studies. Obito tested out of Junior High and High School in rapid succession, starting University by fifteen. Kakashi followed along, testing out of High School at the top of the class and starting University with Obito.

Unlike Obito’s now frantic drive, Kakashi drifted through life with a particular kind of condescending amusement. Kakashi studied Music Theory and Theater because it meant the Gokudera family would pay for him to be at the same University as Obito, rather than out of any real preference. (Except for the acting classes. Kakashi slipped into character for his roles so seamlessly that people forgot he was wearing a mask that covered half his face until the scene was over. It made the Drama Professors cry. It was beautiful.)

By twenty, Obito was a Doctor of both Immunology and Neurology, with degrees in bioscience and chemistry. Education completed (leaving more than a few PHD review boards convinced that Obito had a time machine stashed away somewhere) Obito got a job at a research lab with a very generous salary and partner benefits package. (For some reason, no one argued when Obito listed Kakashi as his ‘wife’ on his employment contract. Considering the reputation Obito had acquired over the last five years, having him on the payroll was enough of a coup for the company that Obito could have listed a badger as his spouse and no one would have blinked an eye.)

Using his signing bonus, Obito bought a house in a small town close to the lab that boasted the lowest crime rate in the region, and moved Kakashi in with stern admonishments to rest as much as possible. Kakashi smiled, and agreed that Namimori looked like the perfect place to read his books and raise his puppies. (Things usually worked out well for Kakashi in lands with the name ‘Nami’.)

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Chapter End Notes

I am contemplating writing some kiddie!ObiKaka adventures, since the first two pieces of the prelude are written in third person external POV. So it would be interesting to see things like their first meeting in a bit more detail. Plus, Gokudera Sayako is a brilliant amazing woman who deserves some screen time. The Dokuro ‘rents mostly spend their time going 'WTF?!!'!

Thoughts?
Some things change and some things remain the same.

Chapter Summary

Obito and Kakashi have been reborn. They are finding each other and growing up. It's all a little overwhelming.

They are not the only ones in the world to be doing this.

Chapter Notes

I want you all to know that I STRUGGLED with this chapter. It Did Not Want to come out in anything resembling coherence. And that's leaving aside the way all the characters were screaming "HEY YOU WANNA KNOW WHAT HAPPENS IN THE TEN YEARS LATER ARC?" instead of letting me play with bb!Obi and bb!Kashi. I mean, the 10YL Arc is going to be HARDCORE EPIC but that's not... that's not where we're at right now?

Yeah. So that was how things went.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(In which some things change and some things remain the same.)

(February 10th, -29 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

He was born red and white and screaming as the rising sun dyed the morning sky with a swath bloody crimson. The full moon hung low over the Southwest horizon, balancing the dawn like left eye and right. Misaligned but matching was the indigo twilight moon and the red dawning sun. Blood of the womb washed away by the waters, he was placed in his mother's arms, and she welcomed her new son with pride.

/.../

"Kagami, look! Look, he's smiling!"

"Over here, Obi-chan! Papa's over here!"

What the hell kind of face was that? These people have issues.

/.../

"Kumori, you're pregnant! Think of the baby, if you don't care about your own health. Have you even picked a name yet?"

"Dunno... I was thinking maybe Kakashi."

/.../
“Tobiko, hurry! He’s standing up!”

“Oh, you’re such a strong boy, Obi-chan! Look at you go!”

*I look like a drunk! What the hell are baby legs even made of, pudding?*

/…/

(September 15th, -28 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

He was born silver and ivory and howling during the deepest part of a moon dark night. The stars hung cold and bright in a midnight sky that was draped in thin veils of clouds. The red light of Mars fought to match the white shine of Sirius. Blood of the womb flowed like a river flood, stealing away his mother’s breath and beating heart. Fatherless, given a name but little else, he was claimed gladly by an aunt who was fierce in her love as a mother wolf, and she gently bore him away home.

/…/

“I’m sorry we couldn’t save your niece, Gokudera-san.”

“It is unfortunate, but such things happen despite ones best efforts otherwise. Now please, Doctor, I would like to take Kakashi home.”

Maa… this will be interesting.

/…/

(-27 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Mama! Inu, mine Inu!”

“Ara, do you want the Shiba-inu, Obi-chan?”

“Mine Inu, Mama! Wan!”

*Oh kami… Kakashi…*

/…/

“Well now, Kakashi-chan. Walking already?”

“Hm.”

*Well, this is rather more difficult than I was expecting it to be.*

/…/

(-26 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Papa, watch me!”

“Okay, Obi-chan, go!”

“Whee!”
“Hands! Keep your hands on the bars!”

_Ugh, civilian limits. I always forget about those being a thing._

/…/

“Bachan.”

“Yes, Kakashi-chan? Are you here to have tea with me?

“Un.”

 Anything’s better than that ridiculous candy syrup they claim is fruit juice.

/…/

(-25 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Woohoo! Mama, Papa, lookit what I can do!”

“Oh kami, not again.”

“… He gets it from your side of the family, you realize.”

“T’d actually managed to block it out, thanks.”

_I think I’m starting to get the hang of this civilian thing!_

/…/

“Kakashi-chan, why did you bite him?”

“… He’s bad.”

“How do you know?”

“… Said I was pretty, tried to steal my obi. No please.”

“I see. He is a very bad man, with very bad manners. Don’t worry, Auntie will punish the bad man.”

_Ah, I do appreciate this woman. Now if only I could figure out what I’m missing here…_

/…/

(September, -25 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Gokudera Kakashi had met and mastered all of the usual infant milestones early despite the well-founded concerns of his Aunt and hired caretakers. The worry that Gokudera Kumori’s bad habits might have done damage to the child was clearly visible in the relief displayed by the adults in his life each time Kakashi proved his developing intelligence and motor skills were ahead of the curve. A mostly quiet baby, Kakashi had been content to sleep when his Aunt or a member of her staff was not entertaining him.

As an unmarried older woman who had always paid more attention to her career than romantic nonsense and sensibly avoided other people’s children, Gokudera Sayako saw nothing odd in the way her nephew watched everything and everyone around him, responded to verbal cues at a comprehension level that was far beyond his age, and had a regimented schedule of practice times
where in he exercised his ability to sit up, crawl, stand, walk, and eventually run. The Gokudera had a tendency to produce geniuses and early developers, so Sayako saw nothing out of the ordinary. The nursery staff, on the other hand, had far more exposure to average children and covertly procured anti-evil talismans while Sayako discussed simplified music theory with the alert and oddly engaged toddler.

Gokudera Kakashi was newly four by the time he actually understood on a conceptual level what made him different. Beyond possessing a level of genius that was impressive even for a Gokudera, Kakashi was simply more than any other child. As his developing brain established the neurological structures required to support memory retention and retrieval the abstract knowledge and instincts Kakashi had been born with settled into their proper order of experiences and events. Now capable of understanding Past and Future in addition to Right Now, Kakashi recalled a great deal more Past than should be available to a boy just turned four.

A lifetime’s worth of Past. A lifetime full of love and duty, of war and blood, of death and pain, of extended hands and the laughter of children. A leaf, a white mask, and a sword that glowed white even in the deepest shadows.

Hatake Kakashi shoved his head under his pillows and indulged in a screaming tantrum.

He was four. Having a fit was a perfectly acceptable reaction to the discovery that you had been reincarnated as a civilian child.

Once he calmed down from his self-indulgent bout of irrationality, Kakashi promptly obtained a cloth facemask, fighting down the uneasy feeling that he had been shamelessly walking around barefaced naked for four years.

Interacting with his Aunt after Remembering was… decidedly odd. In Konoha, civilians began taking on adult responsibilities at thirteen, and were usually considered actual adults at some point between fifteen and seventeen, depending on the individual and their level of education. Shinobi moved faster, becoming adults at thirteen, or once they made it to genin rank. Whichever of the two criteria was reached first. The first time Kakashi had been four years old he was already an adult by the laws and traditions of his Village. So to be considered little more than an infant and treated accordingly was very, very disconcerting.

Civilians were so strange. What made them think surviving to some arbitrary age made someone an adult? Kakashi had needed to throw a minor tantrum just to be able to choose his own clothes. What in the Sage’s name made them think Kakashi was inept just because he was a bit short now? Odd creatures, civilians.

/…/

(December 15th, -25 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

He was born dark and wet and wailing amid the shadowed roots of a tiny park forest. The wind shushed through the leaves and blood of the womb soaked the litter and dirt. Swaddled in muddy cloth while still red from birth, he was abandoned on the steps of a church, nameless and alone.

/…/

(March, -24 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Boooooored. So boooooored.”
“You start school in two weeks, Obito.”

“… Finally.”

Ech, civilian school. Still better than nothing. How do civilians live like this? There’s nothing to do.

“… Kakashi-chan?”

“Mm?”

“Why are you wearing a mask?”

“I’ve decided to save my face for marriage.”

“I see… I’m sending you to school a year early.”

“… Maa, that’s fine.”

I wonder how long it will take me before I die of sheer boredom? Ah well, there’s always global
anarchy if things get too tedious.

(April, -24 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

The civilian Academy was a madhouse. (Ah, they called it Kindergarten though. Depending on the
age and education levels of the students and the country the education took place in, the civilian
Academies were all called different things. It was ridiculous, and more than a little confusing for a
reincarnated shinobi who was used to trade schools and apprenticeships.) Hopefully the chaos was
not indicative of the educational standards this world subscribed to.

Dressed in a close approximation of his Jounin blacks under a green zip-up hooded cotton jacket
with a stylized white wolf head embroidered on the back, four year old Gokudera Kakashi eyed the
surging crowd of teary-eyed parents and wailing children dubiously. Yeah, no way was this going to
fly. Kakashi looked up and donned his most pitiful expression. “Obachan…”

“Put the eyes away, Kakashi-chan.” Gokudera Sayako hid her amused grin behind her open fan. Her
nephew could really work an impressive amount of tragic pathos into the set of his brows and eyes.
The boy had talent. “This is the best school in the district for children your age. Now hop to. We
need to find your classroom.”

“… Hai, Obachan.” Kakashi’s face was a picture of tragedy and betrayal. Sayako chuckled and led
her pouting nephew through the teeming crowds. Hopefully the place would calm down once the
parents left, otherwise Kakashi would no doubt resort to hiding in the air ducts again.

The seat next to Kakashi was empty, leaving the young genius with a desk that was all his thanks in
large part to some shinobi style trickery. Nose buried in a book, Kakashi did his best to ignore the
(other) children around him as they shouted and squealed and leaked everywhere, dear merciful
kami, why were small humans so gross? At least puppies made up for their messes by being cute and
growing out of the paper-training stage quickly.

It was enough to make Kakashi regret everything. All the things. So much regret. (Kakashi was
reasonably certain he had not killed nearly enough people in his last life to deserve this nonsense.)

The door banged open halfway through roll call. The sensei jumped, and Kakashi lazily flicked a glance up at the boy standing framed by the doorway, preening in glee over the dramatic entrance he had just made.

“Sorry I’m late, sensei!” The newcomer grinned and bounced up to the teacher, ignoring the way the woman who had to be his mother covered her face with her hands to hide the burn of embarrassment. “We meant to leave early but I forgot where I’d left my notebook and then a guy on a bike almost ran over a cat and hit a fruit stand instead and then took off without saying sorry so I helped pick up the fruit before anyone stepped on them but they kept rolling around so it took a while.”

“Ah…” The teacher blinked, looking from the sheepish mother to the boy to the attendance sheet. “It’s fine, as long as you try to be on time in the future.”

“Sure thing, sensei!” The cheerful grin grew wider.

“Good. Um.” The teacher shook her head and smiled back. “Take a seat then, please, and raise your hand when I call your name, okay?”

“Un!” With a nod the latecomer waved goodbye to his mother and scanned the classroom for an empty seat.

Kakashi’s eyes drifted over familiar birthmarks (scars), over wild raven-black hair that shone purple-blue under the fluorescent lights, took in gleeful dark eyes, and lingered on the bright crescent curve of a trickster’s smile. Noted how the boy was dressed in black and red with a white uchiwa patch stitched on the shoulders of his sleeves. Watched how he kept bouncing on his toes with excited energy like a sapling in a windstorm.

Calmly, Kakashi pushed back his hood and closed his book with a snap.

Plum-black eyes met a silver-green gaze, met and held as the world faded out.

/…/

Static buzzed in his ears as he walked down the aisle towards a small boy with flyaway silver hair and too-old too-serious eyes, the half-lidded gaze sharp as blades above black cotton half-mask. The rest of the classroom was a washed out watercolour painting, smearing out of focus and lacking any details worthy of his attention. He sat down without a word, unable to tear his eyes away from the images of his dreams coming true.

“… Hello, Obito.” Silver-set jade was soft and warm and hopeful.

“Hi, Kakashi.” Obito whispered back, drinking in the sight of the boy who had once been the man Obito had spent most of his last life chasing and haunting and obsessed with. “… I missed you.”

Relief and affection shone from the visible portions of Kakashi’s face as he smiled under the mask. “I missed you too.”

/…/

Kakashi had been amused by Obito’s koala impersonation all the way up until Obito’s mother showed up at the end of the school day to take him home. That was when Kakashi realized that he and Obito would be separated (only overnight) when they had just managed to find each other again.
(for the love of… Kakashi you’ll see him again in the morning!)

Then it was no longer funny.

(Stop biting me!)

/…/

Kakashi was four.

To be perfectly clear, Kakashi was an elite Jounin, a retired Hokage, a former ANBU Captain, the son and student and teacher of legends, and a genius on a level rarely seen, but Kakashi was also a tiny four year old who had just found his soul mate again after having watched him die twice in the same lifetime.

So despite the intellectual knowledge that he would be able to see Obito at school again in the morning Kakashi’s emotions escaped his best efforts to control them. Again, four year olds are not known for their emotional containment. This resulted in an unsettling thousand yard stare and soft, heartbreaking keening that never quite stopped nor evolved into proper sobs even as tears rolled slowly down Kakashi’s lowered face.

What if Obito disappeared again? Someone was always, always, always taking Obito away from him. Kakashi could not survive losing Obito for a third time.

Sayako was reluctantly impressed by her nephew’s emotional manipulations even as she struggled to convince Kakashi to stop weeping gently into his dinner and actually eat the food. If this nonsense continued she may very well resort to child kidnapping. Even second hand, Kakashi’s sorrow was traumatizing.

/…/

Separation on the second day of school went much the same as the first, with an additional level of reluctance exhibited on the part of the adults who uniformly did not want to spend another night listening to the sounds of a heartbroken child.

(How long do you plan to keep this up? You saw him today, and you’ll see him again tomorrow! Oh for… where did you even hear those words?)

/…/

Obito had survived losing half of his body to falling rocks, been puppet to a madman, established and become the shadow leader of an international terrorist organization, become the avatar of a crazy moon goddess, hosted the ten-tailed Chakra Beast, come within minutes of brainwashing an entire world, see his first love commit suicide-by-comrade, killed a Hokage, gone toe-to-toe against every single jinchuriki and won thank you, and basically grown up to be the kind of overpowered villain that tended to cause the end of all life on the planet but for some strange unknown reason watching Kakashi get carried away once school was over had him crying like a little bitch civilian who had never had a limb graft done before.

(… Obito, you’re five. Cut yourself some slack here.)

An unexpected benefit of still having all his original organs was the ability to scream really, really loud for a really, really long time! Not that… not that Obito really got why he had spent the last two nights wailing like a murder victim’s ghost but… but Kakashi was not there. That was just not on Obito needed Kakashi back right now!
(Obito. You are a five-year-old child.)

Just… just go with the fact that Obito was living up to his old ‘crybaby’ moniker and leave it at that. Okay? Okay.

(Let’s also be thankful that Obito loved his parents enough to refrain from falling back on bad and uniformly murderous habits. Tobiko collected houseplants. It was either the best or worst habit she could have formed.)

/…/

Everything would be fine if those worthless civilian instructors would just leave Obito and Kakashi be. Who did they think they were trying to get between them? Trying to take Kakashi away from him?

(Well fuck. Somebody has issues.)

Silky-fine silver hair tucked under Obito’s shin, a shinobi-strong pressure around his ribs, a warm body in his arms, glittering chakra bright white and blinding as lightning flashes in a thunder-snow. It was everything Obito had dreamed of having again and the only thing he would ever need to be content. Obito pulled Kakashi closer, chest growing tight at the sound of soft, resigned whimpers escaping from underneath a black mask. Okay, yeah, no. The next asshole to try and touch Kakashi was getting set on fire.

/…/

Gokudera Sayako and Dokuro Tobiko exchanged commiserating looks as the gym teacher hit the ground screaming about fire. The two women eyed the entirely without flame or even the slightest hint of smoke schoolyard and resolutely ignored the hysterical man’s thrashing. Perhaps this very public embarrassing scene would prevent him from pushing his attentions on children where they were very much not wanted in the future. Perhaps if they crossed their fingers and wished very hard this day would be over with. Really, modern society had a lot to answer for given how many people involved in careers that required them to be responsible for children tended to make shameful spectacles of themselves during nervous breakdowns and lapsed into loud hallucinatory episodes.

It should probably be noted here that, thanks to the children they had been given the task of raising being the reincarnations of Hatake Kakashi and Uchiha Obito (all memories included) there had been a much larger percentage of dramatically public psychotic breakages presented in Sayako and Tobiko’s child rearing experiences than most parents encountered on average. This fact was why, rather than panicking the way the rest of the parents and teachers did when the gym teacher had his messy seizure, the two women focused instead on their children.

The unexpected emotional upset of the last few days had left both boys short on sleep. Clinging to each other in front of the school gates and shuffling away when an adult approached them with the clear intent of separating them from one another. Obito was oscillating between a rabid snarl that made the five-year-old look demonically possessed and endearingly wide-eyed concern for the smaller boy in his arms. On his part, Kakashi only stopped trying to climb into Obito’s jacket with him to give his aunt the biggest, saddest eyes the pair of women had ever seen.

Another look was exchanged over the boys’ tight clasp, and Tobiko sighed as she resigned herself to the inevitable. “Let me talk to my husband first.”

/…/
On the third day, Obito went over to Kakashi’s house after school. Things went well… until Dokuro Kagami showed up to take his son home.

The frantic tortured screams were the stuff of nightmares.

/…/

There was no fourth attempt to separate the two boys.

Looking in on the peaceful scene the sleeping boys made together, Sayako made a mental note not to bother setting up a cot for Obito on the next night. Shaking her head over the silliness of the last few days, Sayako swept off to report their success to the Dokuro couple. Now that they knew how to keep the boys calm, it was time to hammer out a visitation schedule.

Really, all that needless drama and worry over something the boys would grow out of in due time. Tch, commoners.

(They never really did grow out of it, funnily enough. They just learned to hide it better. Or their parents got used to it. Something like that.)

/…/

A week after finding Kakashi again in one of the most contrived coincidences Obito could think of, and he still could not quite believe it was real. Once again, Obito was sitting up in bed, watching Kakashi’s bare (pretty) face as the younger boy slept. This early in their development, the year wide age gap between the boys made a big difference. Kakashi was just so small. Obito could not quite get over it.

Kakashi had been four the first time they had met for the first time in the last life too (four to Obito’s eight) but Obito did not remember Kakashi being this tiny and cute back then. Did shinobi breeding make that much of a difference?

It made Obito’s chest ache, deep where the seal had dug into his heart, the way Kakashi curled up against Obito’s side, trusting and vulnerable in sleep. How could Kakashi do that? Obito’s eyes burned with tears. How could Kakashi just forgive Obito like this? After everything Obito had done? After all the people Obito had killed? (After Minato-sensei…) It was stupid. So, so stupid of the little bastard, Kakashi was going to get himself killed if he kept this up.

Unacceptable. Kakashi was not allowed to die. Not while Obito was here. Obito would fill this blind spot of Kakashi’s up until there was no more room for anyone else, and he would kill any asshole that tried to take advantage of Kakashi and his too-forgiving nature.

“Shh, ‘bito. Sleep.” Kakashi flailed with one arm, pulling Obito down until his dark head was on the pillow and Kakashi was sprawled half on top of the former Uchiha. “Shh… nothin’ to fight. Calm.”

Pinned under Kakashi’s slight weight, Obito felt the violent thrashing of his chakra calm.

Sleep had been where they had been able to meet each other, last lifetime. At the borderlands, on the bank of the river, whenever Kakashi closed the eyes they shared Obito had been able to look at him again, instead of seeing through. For decades after Kaguya’s defeat, Kakashi and Obito had met in dreams. For decades, Obito had been the ghost at Kakashi’s back, watching life happen through the twice-given gift of his eyes. For decades, Kakashi’s heart had lived torn in two, always with half of his spirit in the grave. Kakashi had become Hokage, as Obito had once dreamed of being. Kakashi had traveled a world that was at peace afterward. His eyes always wide open so that Obito could see it all with him.
Obito pulled Kakashi into his arms, face buried in soft silver hair as the old memories washed over him. Obito could spend the rest of his next three lifetimes trying and still owe Kakashi everything. He was going to try though. Damn right was Obito going to try. Kakashi was going to be the happiest fucking person in the world, so help him. Obito would make it happen.

Resolved to his new goal, Obito fell asleep, and dreamed misty dreams of cloud-soft smiles and silvered laughter.

/.../

*(October 10th, -24 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)*

He was born in squalor and madness and rage during a storm that sought to rip the heavens down. The clouds boiled in fury, rain hammering down while lightning beat the air like the strike of an angry god. He fought and clawed his way into the world screaming defiance to the sky. His first breath was a war cry, heat and anger and stubborn determination to *live* in every strident note. Mist rose thick and heavy from the sun heated stones of the streets. Blood of the womb painted his face like victory banners as his mother laughed her broken laugh.

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Chapter End Notes

I have a tumblr account. I had... forgotten I even had one, to be honest. I got it to stalk a particular author who posted tumblr exclusive easter eggs and omakes that I wanted to be able to track.

You can find me @sanjuno if you feel like helping me figure out how tumblr even works. No seriously, I have no idea what I'm doing on there. Looks like fun though.
Things are going well until they really are not.

Chapter Summary

Obito moves in with Kakashi, Xanxus becomes a Vongola, Kakashi has a birthday, gets laid, finds a dog, visits the hospital entirely against his will, a baby is born, and our intrepid duo enter University together.

It's a busy decade.

Chapter Notes

Assume that if I don't write about it happening in the fic then events proceeded as described by canon. In either fandom.

This has been a public service announcement from your Author.

Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(In which parents and child agree on the obvious solution.)

(March, -17 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Leaning against Obito’s shoulder, Kakashi only half paid attention as Obito’s parents explained that Kagami’s promotion meant that they would have to move. Irony had seen to it that Obito’s parents both worked for the Police Department in an echo of the Uchiha. Tobiko was in forensics, and Kagami was in Vice, which was really the closest a civilian could get to shinobi work in this new world.

“I’m staying with Kakashi.” The set of Obito’s jaw was mulish, dark eyes gone narrow and hard.

Kagami sighed and shook his head. “I expected as much, but I still figured I ought to offer you the choice.”

“You’ve always known your own mind, Obito, even when you were just a little boy.” Tobiko’s smile was tremulous but proud. “We’ll talk to Gokudera-san about you moving in with her and Kakashi-kun full time.”

“We’ll still be here to see you start Middle School, but we’ll need to move not long after that.” Kagami grinned at his son, who had relaxed the second he registered his parent’s lack of argument. Like they had failed to notice their kid had basically been married since he was five years old. Did the boy think they were blind? “The transfer isn’t far, only a few hours by car, so you boys can come visit on weekends or during breaks.”

“Or we can drop by when we have time off, or it there’s a festival.” Tobiko interjected brightly, visibly relieved by the lack of conflict. Obito could be a difficult child if he thought you were trying
to interfere with his access to Kakashi. “We expect you to keep your grades up, and be good for Gokudera-san.”

“Of course!” Obito laughed and rolled his eyes. “Sayako-obasan is way scarier than you creampuffs! No way would I want her mad at me!”

“Brat!” Kagami mock glared. “Show your parents some respect!”

“Maa…” Kakashi chuckled. “Are you saying Basan isn’t scary?”

All three members of the Dokuro family froze, sweating silently as they stared at each other. Tobiko cleared her throat. “… We never said that.”

The conversation resumed, Kagami providing more details about his promotion and how glad he was that his superiors were willing to open up a position for Tobiko too. Kakashi smiled as Obito and his parents chattered at each other happily. Despite Obito being far more independent than the usual preteen, the Dokuro family had a good relationship. It was nice to see Obito getting to experience something he had missed out on in their life from before.

The unconditional love and acceptance Dokuro Kagami and Tobiko gave their son had gone a long way towards healing the wounds to Obito’s spirit the Uchiha Clan’s treatment had caused. Both the way the Village had treated members of the Uchiha Clan, and the way the Clan itself had treated some of their nonconformist members. Either way it had been toxic to the extreme. Kakashi had never and would never agree that the Uchiha Clan had deserved to be wiped out, but he would never argue that to an individual the Uchiha Clan had needed all the therapy.

Forget the Curse of Hatred, the real issue with the Uchiha Clan had been their memorization abilities. Even before the activation of the Sharingan the Uchiha brain was wired to make recordings of everything the Uchiha went through. Uchiha never forgot a grudge or slight, not because they were all assholes, but because they literally could not forget. Their very physiology prohibited it.

Basically instead of isolation and threats the Elders should had pulled a Naruto and plied the Uchiha with hugs, praise, and pretty things to look at if they wanted to ensure the Clan’s loyalties.

Unfortunately for Obito’s mental health, healing and growth both required a living spirit to accomplish. Sure, Obito had turned back from the Pure Lands and nested in Kakashi’s spirit for several decades until Kakashi himself had died, but while Kakashi had been able to work on moving beyond the trauma Kaguya’s plot had caused… Obito had not. Not really.

As a chakra ghost you could learn but… healing was the domain of the living.

That was why reincarnation was a thing that happened, so that souls wounded in one life could heal if their lives had ended before they finished working through their issues.

The last eleven years, living the life of a civilian child during peacetime, had gone a long, long way towards stabilizing Obito’s mind. As an Uchiha what had been done to him would never fade away, not in the way it might for a less primed-for-total-recall memory, but the trauma could be overwritten with other things. Cold shoulders and malicious whispers buried under proud smiles and loud encouragement. Broken confessions to a cold stone monument replaced by shared secrets whispered under warm blankets. Aching, empty spaces filled with joyful, living companionship.

(Obito had not been the only one left more dead than alive after Kaguya’s final defeat. He had just been the only one left incorporeal.)

It was good to see Obito’s smiles come easily again.
(In which Xanxus becomes a Vongola.)

(June, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“So, this is the boy you say is my son?” His mother’s fingers dug into his shoulders as Xanxus was presented to Don Vongola Nono. (The old man in charge of the Mafia Famiglia and the blond man with the strange eyes glaring at Xanxus from the back corner of the office made Xanxus’ skin crawl, but Xanxus knew better than to show fear. There was danger here, and Xanxus needed to be strong.)

“Go on, my little King.” Mother murmured dreamily, nails catching on his ratty shirt like cat claws. “Show them your lovely Fire.”

The blond scoffed, and a surge of irritation buried the electric zing of instinctive warning. Xanxus’ spine straightened even further, his chin lifted up, a sneer on his young face. In response to their distain, Xanxus called up the deep amber flame that had saved both his own life and his mother’s so many times in the past.

“Ah.” Something dark flickered in the elderly Don’s eyes, caught by the blaze of Xanxus’ hands before it could be hidden again. “Yes… he is my son.”

The blond man grimaced, but Mother’s breathing shook with relief as she exhaled. The Don let orange flames dance over his fingers as he smiled kindly at Xanxus. Still suspicious even if the old man was his father, Xanxus only narrowed his eyes in response, stepping back to avoid the hand the old man aimed at his head. (Patronizing shit, trying to pat him on the head. Did he look like a fucking dog?)

The Don just laughed. “Come along then, my boy. We should introduce you to your elder brothers.”

Xanxus let the old man lead him away only after his mother nudge him forward. Away from her side (and no, no he could not leave, not when something was wrong something was wrong here. Looking back over his shoulder, Xanxus saw his mother wave him away with a pleased look on her tired face. It was the last time he ever saw her.) Hopefully his ‘brothers’ would be less triggering to his instincts.

There was no reason to worry about that, in the end. Although understandably shocked by the fact that Xanxus existed in the first place, all three of Don Vongola’s elder sons welcomed Xanxus warmly. His brothers were home and safety and freedom, and they were the only reason Xanxus remained with the Vongola after his mother abandoned him (disappeared.)

(He never knew it from them, but it was when the tiny, half-starved nine-year-old broke down crying in Enrico’s arms the very night he was taken in that Resonance took place. Burrowing into the eldest brother’s hold on instinct even as he screamed for his mother to be brought back, please give Mamma back. It was then, hearing his screams, seeing his tears, that all three of Nono’s sons swore to protect their unlooked for baby brother with everything they had. Even if it meant standing against their father. Even if it meant their lives. They would keep Xanxus safe, and happy. That was the first time four separate Harmonies Resonated as one.)

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(In which everything is wonderful until it isn’t anymore.)

(September 15th, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis)
Kakashi was fourteen for the second time, celebrating the day with his aunt and boyfriend and the random assortment of relatives who were residing at the main family residence at the time. The loss of his father was a wound that still pained him, even after all this time, but Kakashi had Obito and Sayako now and he had long since learned to focus on the small joys instead of a past that could not be changed.

Kakashi accepted cards from classmates and packages from admirers and laughed about his fan club when he and Obito got back to the main house. Sasuke’s constant bitch face made so much more sense to Kakashi now. Civilians were ridiculous. What even was this nonsense?

His blood family got him gifts Kakashi actually appreciated and instead of a cake he would never eat there was a selection of unsweetened fruit tarts in his favourite flavors. There was laughter and easy conversation and Kakashi easily spent the day smiling cheerfully.

Later that night Kakashi pinned Obito down and gleefully divested them both of their second virginities. Obito’s eyes bugged out and his face burned a deeply embarrassed red when Kakashi pulled his knees up and back to show Obito the plug he had kept in since dinner finished. Kakashi could not stop giggling through the whole experience, because Obito’s stunned goldfish expression would never be anything but utterly hilarious to him. Obito huffed and growled and ravaged Kakashi to the best of his unpracticed ability in a futile attempt to shut Kakashi up. It was fun and energetic and over much too soon for both of them, even keeping in mind that it had been fifteen years and more since they had been old enough to enjoy sex. That was okay though, because they were fourteen and fifteen and able to go three or four rounds a night without flagging.

It was one of the best days Kakashi could remember having in two lifetimes.

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(October 10th, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kakashi was fourteen and one month and feeling wistful. How would Naruto cope with this strange, civilian world?

/…/

Dark eyes opened, a frown crossing the heavily marked face they were set in when the other side of the bed turned up empty. With a sigh, Obito tossed back the covers and followed the sharp blaze of Kakashi’s chakra. The white pulse was heavy with melancholy, and Obito winced, wondering what had set Kakashi’s moping tendencies off this time.

“It’s late, you bastard, what are you doing out of bed?” Obito stepped out onto the porch, shivering at the chill in the October air. “Idiot, you could’ve at least brought a blanket out with you. Are you trying to make yourself sick?”

“Hm? Sorry.” Kakashi’s face was bare, tipped back to face the moon. Still grumbling, Obito hauled Kakashi into his lap, wrapping the quilt from the bed around them both. With a shiver, Kakashi sank back into his partner’s hold, relishing the heat of Obito’s body as it eased away the cold that had sunk into his bones while he communed with the night sky. “Maa, I was just thinking…”

“No shit? You’re always thinking. And you always forget to take care of yourself while you get caught up in your head. Dunno how you survived to adulthood last time, you absentminded twit. You must’ve drove your poor little followers nuts trying to keep you from walking off a freaking cliff because you had a cool idea.” Obito propped his chin on top of Kakashi’s head, enjoying the distinct height difference while it lasted. “You’ve been extra moody all week though. What’re you angsting
over this time?”

“It’s October, and I’m fourteen.” Kakashi sighed, and Obito hummed a questioning note into soft silver hair. “Last time I was this age… Naruto was being born.”

“Uh…” Obito blinked and lifted his head, (pushing down the memories of blood and screams and betrayal and Obito how could you sitting like acid in his throat) brow furrowed as he thought back. “No, wait. That’s still three years away.”

“Maa, you’re only a year older than me now, Obito.” Kakashi tipped his head back against Obito’s shoulder with a chuckle. “Last time there were four years between our ages.”

“Hn…” Obito twisted around, trailing his lips across Kakashi’s temple and down the sharp line of his jaw, murmuring gently into the shadowed curve of Kakashi’s throat. “I’m sorry, I… for what I did, back then…”

“It’s… not okay, but…” Kakashi turned into the kisses, briefly catching Obito’s mouth with his own, lips parting with a soft sigh and a weak but reassuring smile. “You were trapped in Kaguya’s plot more than any of us, with that seal on your heart. Naruto… he forgave you, when he had more reason than most to hate you, and you… you chose me, there at the end. You came back from the Pure Lands for me. Maybe it was a bit late, but it was enough. Then, now… as long as you don’t leave me behind again…”

“Never. I forsook my place in the Pure Lands to dwell inside your dreams last time, and if that were the only way I could be with you in this life I’d do it again without a second thought. I’ll take you any way I can have you, bastard.” A yank, and the loose knot at Kakashi’s waist came undone, Kakashi’s sleep robe falling open so Obito’s hand could delve under soft cotton to caress even softer skin. It was still a little strange to sense Kage level chakra and feel SSS rank Jounin muscles without a single scar to show for it, but Obito was not complaining. Rather, he revealed it, that they could be so strong for the sheer, simple joy of it rather than because they had a war to fight. They could enjoy their strength, and each other, without pain or threat of loss. “Shh, I’ve got you. I’m here. I’m never leaving you. Even the Shinigami itself can see how we belong together. Remember that? Fuck, you gorgeous fucking bastard, you’re mine.”

“Ah! Ahn, nnh… Obito.” Kakashi fell back, breathless and laughing as his arms wound around Obito’s shoulders, hands clawing at Obito’s back the way they both liked, pale thighs pushed back and open by Obito’s hips as they pulled each other closer, Kakashi’s whole body shaking in reaction as Obito’s fingers sank inside where Kakashi was still soft and wet and open from when they had joined together earlier that night. Mouth slack, breath quickening, Kakashi’s lashes dipped as he rocked shamelessly into Obito’s touch, shocks of heat flaring up his spine. “Mmngh, Obito, you ha-ah! Fuck, please, Obito!”

“Shaddup, accept my very sincere apology for being an asshole in another life.” Obito grinned, teeth trapping the pink skin of a nipple to better feel the way Kakashi’s laughter faded into a pleased moan when Obito sank home. “Fuuuuck… damn, Kakashi… you’re such a lazy bottom. Imagine if, if you actually ha-aah-ad to put some effort in, into getting some, you ass…”

“Thought, ah fuck there, though you liked my ass… and you’re still the asshole here.” A sharp thrust made Kakashi gasp, body clenching tight around Obito in every way possible. “Come on, come on, Obito, ah, ah! Ahn!”

“Fuck, yes, Kakashi. Mine, mine.” With a shudder Obito buried his face in Kakashi’s neck, mouthing one of the many marks ringing the pale throat. The press of their bodies was hot and damp and never failed to make Obito smug as hell. He did that. Obito made Kakashi feel that good. This
was the best thing. “Mmn.”

“… Heh.” Kakashi carded lazy fingers through Obito’s wild mess of too-long hair, laughing quietly as a self-satisfied grin was pressed against the underside of his jaw. “Ah… it’ll be nice when we’re older again. I’m looking forward to lasting more than ten minutes at a time.”

“… Excuse me?” Obito lifted his head, all crazy hedgehog spikes and narrowed gleaming eyes. “I am a fantastic lay. I’ll ten minutes you.”

“Maa, Obito, we’re still young. Don’t take it persona-ah, ah, ah!” Ankles slung over Obito’s shoulders, Kakashi squeaked in surprise as Obito reared up on his knees, hands clamped bruise tight on Kakashi’s hips. Kakashi gasped as his usually gentle partner manhandled Kakashi into place, none of Obito’s usual blushing fumbling in evidence. The blanket fell to one side, Kakashi’s fingers clamping down on the loose fabric in a futile search for an anchoring point. “Obito!”

“Fucking damn you’re pretty, bastard.” Keeping his pace nice and slow, (because that smartass comment had been a challenge to Obito’s prowess as a lover, dammit,) Obito was content to admire the way moonlight gleamed on silver-white hair and sparkled in silver-green eyes. The marks Obito’s mouth left behind bloomed like pretty pink flowers on soft milky skin. The only marks Kakashi wore in this life were Obito’s, and it was the best possible compensation for the unending boredom caused by a lifetime of civilian retirement. The long, lean body sprawled out under him, all soft vulnerable underbelly and bared throat a display of trust and confidence in Obito’s own ability to keep Kakashi safe. Elegant all-too-pretty features gone slack with the pleasure granted by Obito’s hands and body. A harsh thrust, skin slapping together loud enough to echo around the small garden Kakashi’s bedroom opened onto, and Kakashi’s eyes went wide, mouth dropping open with a broken cry. “Haa… gotta admit I’ll miss being able to fuck you inna row. You make…the best fucking faces when, when I… fuck you raw, yesss… like that, Kakashi? Like it when I, I don’t even bother pulling out, ah fuck, just keep going, use my cum to keep riding you.”

“Nnh, yes. Yes, Obito!” Kakashi whined, struggling to draw breaths as oversensitive nerves screamed too much too good not enough, arms trapped against his sides by the pinned sleeves of his twisted robe. Obito’s grin cut though the nighttime shadows, wide and white and unspeakably proud of himself for reducing Kakashi to a mewling mess of broken one word sentences and wanton moans. It was heat and pressure and Obito, eyes always, always open and locked on Kakashi’s face. Nerves raw and flesh over stimulated but up for another round despite of because of so much time and so many chances lost in the last lifetime. Again, too quickly too soon to be entirely easy, Kakashi peaked. Body still young, still growing, lacking the height and strength and stamina of the adult Kakashi still was in his mind. Skin twitching as Obito fucked him ruthlessly through the aftershocks of the third orgasm of the night fuck puberty was exhausting. Kakashi sucked in cool air, muscles turning to water as Obito rocked into Kakashi they way he liked best after coming, and Kakashi sighed, smiling dopily. Good partner, best friend. “… Mm, love you.”

“Ah, fuck!” Obito’s hips surged, twice, three times, grinding deep, deep, deep as heat flooded Kakashi’s core and his lover went still, trembling and pressed tightly together enough to almost hurt. “Ah, cheater. Fuck, bastard.”

Kakashi laughed, soft and fond as Obito’s tight clasp on him eased up, bright spots of heat under Obito’s fingers that would bruise nicely in the morning. “You still love me for it.”

“Fuck, yeah. Love you. So much.” Kisses were pressed to Kakashi’s closed eyes, flushed cheeks, bitten lips. Obito smiled, untangling the twisted mess of quilt and robes. “Come on, genius, bed time for real now.”

“Hm, you’ll need to carry me.” Kakashi giggled when Obito sighed in resignation. Nonetheless,
Obito pulled the younger boy into a bridal carry before standing up on exhausted legs. With a pleased hum, Kakashi wound his arms around Obito’s neck with a cheerful smirk. “Be proud, lover mine. I can’t feel my legs.”

“Idiot.” Obito growled with a shake of his head, eyeing Kakashi with ill concealed concern as he deposited his partner on the unmade bed. “I know you like the overstimulation thing, but you’re allowed to tell me ‘no’ sometimes, you know.”

“Hmm.” With a yawn Kakashi let his eyes fall shut, listening to the sound of Obito tossing soiled fabric into the hamper, closing the door to the porch, the rustle of sheets as a fresh blanket was spread over the bed. Warmth in a strong, solid line against his back, a kiss pressed to the vulnerable nape of his neck, and Kakashi fell asleep with a smile.

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(In which Tsuna has been born.)

(October 14th, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

No one had seen hide nor hair of Iemitsu Sawada since he had received an international phone call that sent the CEDEF liaison to the Iron Fort running for the nearest airport with an incoherent scream.

Xanxus reveled in the peace while it lasted.

/…/

A week later the idiot was back, crowing loudly to anyone who stood still long enough about his adorable newborn son.

Nono dutifully examined the mountain of photos Iemitsu had returned with, complimented Iemitsu on his good fortune, and made pointed comments to the air above his eldest son’s head about how nice it was to see some branches of the Family growing new leaves. Enrico flushed an unattractive blotchy red as embarrassment and irritation warred for dominance in his Flames.

Xanxus rolled his eyes. You would think that a Mafia Don would be less blunt about his power plays, even if it was just needling his sons about providing him with grandchildren.

“Why couldn’t the idiot’s wife have called him a few days earlier.” Grumbling under his breath, Xanxus wedged his back more firmly into his chosen corner, irritated that his presence had been commanded and then promptly ignored. Why the hell did Nono make such a big deal over Xanxus skipping these little fetes when he never actually bothered talking to him? “Wouldn’t’ve had him at my fucking birthday party then.”

That would likely have meant sharing a birthday with Iemitsu’s offspring though, so maybe not. Hm. How much was Xanxus willing to pay to avoid interacting with Iemitsu?

… A lot, actually. The CEDEF agent made Xanxus’ skin crawl even more than Don Vongola did.

So that was fucking that.

Hopefully Nono would remember the results of Xanxus’ birthday party and not force his new youngest son into any further social obligations against his will.

Not for another year at least.
(November, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kakashi was fourteen and two months and wearing sunglasses because the light hurt his eyes, but that day was date day. It was date day and so the last thing Kakashi wanted was to be stuck in bed with a head cold, so he threw back a couple of tablets and slipped his sunglasses on and ignored the faint throb in his temples. He was fine. Kakashi was *more* than fine, because they stopped by the animal shelter on the way home to play with the puppies and there was a tiny ball of wrinkles and puppy pudge and incredibly soft paw pads and it was *Pakkun*.

Kakashi scooped the ridiculously excited baby pug into his arms and fought back tears, staring at Obito with huge pleading eyes. Obito sputtered and gaped but the chakra did not lie. It was Pakkun, *Pakkun*, and Kakashi skipped home cooing to the wriggling puppy in his arms while Obito lugged the supplies like a good boyfriend. It was the best date day, oh yes.

(December, -14 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kakashi was fourteen and three months and he was avoiding food. Anything too heavy turned his stomach and so he was sticking mostly to soups and vegetables and making sure to snack where Obito could see so that he could avoid having his overly dramatic boyfriend freaking out over nothing. It was just some indigestion, after all.

Nothing to *actually* worry about.

(January, -13 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kakashi was fourteen and four months and he had lost weight recently, but that was okay.

Kakashi was about due for a growth spurt soon anyway.

(February, -13 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kakashi was fourteen and five months and when he stood up the world spun, *lurched*.

And went…

… Dark…

/…/

The steady annoying beeps of a heart monitor greeted Kakashi as he opened his eyes. Groaning, Kakashi flailed blindly with his free arm, wanting nothing more than to turn that *fucking noise off*.

“Kakashi!” Oh, so that was why he only had one hand free. Obito was holding the other one. “Stay still, idiot, or you’ll knock your IV’s out.”

Kakashi blinked blearily at his boyfriend. Wow, Obito was *pissed off*. What had happened? Did Kakashi get ambushed on patrol?
“Awake then, Gokudera-kun?” The doctor that strode into the room gave Kakashi the kind of disappointed, judgmental look Kakashi had not received since he started training the Makengyo Sharingan. Now really! What had Kakashi done to deserve that sort of treatment this time? “Care to explain why you’re malnourished, Gokudera-kun? Do you have trouble eating?”

“Eh? But… I do eat.” Kakashi blinked in confusion, turning to Obito for support. “Maybe not… every meal, but I snack. Eat all my veggies, and tofu, and protein shakes if I’m in a hurry…”

“That’s… true.” Obito’s doubtful grimace faded into a look of deep concern. “And it’s not like he fakes it either. We usually leave the house right after meals, or eat during outings… and that’s why I was so freaked out. Kakashi eats more than I do, but…”

“If that’s how things are then we have a problem, gentlemen.” The doctor looked dubious, no doubt used to the strange habit of self-starvation some civilians were prone to. He checked the IV lines before glancing at his clipboard and making a quick set of notes. “We’ll check your blood levels every few hours. See if we can’t get you back to normal before letting you leave.”

“Sure. Doctor knows best.” Kakashi clung to Obito’s hand and waited for the world to make sense again. The paper covering his nose and mouth was no real substitute for his usual mask, but it was probably to best Obito could do against the civilian medic’s tendency to strip their patients of everything. Including, but not limited to, both their dignity and their pants.

One IV. Two IVs. Three. Four. Bad luck on bad luck. Pills and vitamins and nutrient packed gruel for the hypoglycemic. A week later and Kakashi’s test results still said that he was on the verge of starvation.

“Here.” A familiar round shape was presented to Kakashi, smelling of cloves and chakra. Obito grinned and rattled the insulated pouch he held in his other hand. “Took me a few tries, but I managed a bastardized version of the Akimichi Food Pills. Hopefully it’ll do enough good to get you out of here.”

“You’re the best boyfriend, Obito. It is you.” The gods only knew that Kakashi trusted Konoha medicine better than this swing and miss civilian nonsense. The shell crunched between Kakashi’s back teeth and the rush of energy made his head spin for a moment. “Hm. Tastes… different.”

“Well, I had to substitute a few things that don’t exist here, and force grow a few more with Mokuton, and I was working partially off a memory you only shared with me after I started haunting you, so.” Obito shrugged, tucking the pouch of soldier pills into his bag. “Still, that was the most effective recipe I knew of, and I figured if they can get an Akimichi back up to weight fast enough to work in a battle zone then they should do something for you even if the ingredients are a little off.”

“It’s working, I can tell you that much. How much good it’ll do without access to the chakra treated herbs…” Kakashi shook his head with a sigh. “At least you have Mokuton, that makes up for a lot. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

/…/

The soldier pills did their job in getting Kakashi out of the hospital at least. Although he never did manage to gain he lost weight back. With the food pills making up for whatever normal meals lacked, Kakashi’s body could manage to scrape together enough of what it needed to grow properly despite the dangerously hyperactive nature of Kakashi’s metabolism. By the time Obito turned sixteen, they had mostly figured out what Kakashi’s body needed to function normally.

“Rin would know what to do.” Obito muttered one too many times.
“Well why don’t you become a medic-nin then?’’ Kakashi snapped uselessly, (there were no medic-nin here to learn from) tired and hurting and in no mood to come second best to Obito’s long-lost first love again.

“That’s it! Kakashi, you’re a genius!” Obito swept Kakashi up into his arms, spun in a gleeful circle, dipped him thoroughly, and with a generous amount of tongue. Delicately placed a surprised and breathless Kakashi back down on the couch. Tucked the disordered blankets back into place, and then bolted from the room. “I’ll be right back, Kakashi! Oi, Basan! Do doctorate programs have a minimum age limit?”

“Ah…” Pakkun climbed back up into Kakashi’s lap as the young man touched two fingers to his tingling lips. The little pug looked like he dearly missed being old enough to speak a human language. So much sass to look forward to in the near future. Kakashi’s expression was bemused as he stared at the open doorway hurricane Obito had disappeared through. “Oh dear. I hope I don’t end up regretting this.”

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(March, -13 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

That next month, after pulling a truly ridiculous number of strings and paying out a small fortune in bribes, Obito was unpacking their things in the high-rise apartment they would share while attending University. Obito looked over at Kakashi. Who had been relegated against his will to a supervisory position, seated on the handsome leather couch that had come with them from Kakashi’s rooms in the Gokudera main house and was the first thing they had moved into the condo. Sometimes Kakashi was even allowed to sort out the books on to the appropriate shelves. Obito grinned at the disgruntled face his partner made when Obito hauled in another pile of boxes. “Any regrets?”

“Hm, no.” Kakashi smiled despite the amount of coddling he was being subjected to, lifting his face for a kiss when Obito leaned down. Pakkun was making exaggerated gagging sounds from where the two ninken were piled against the back wall, since Buru had wisely chosen to stay out of the way of Obito’s feet and Pakkun had chosen to remain seated on the newly found Mastiff’s blocky head. “Not a single one.”

=/=

Chapter End Notes

Paaaaaaaakkuuuuuuuuuun. I can’t wait until that little sass pot is old enough to talk. Eee, Pakkun!

Also: Xanxus! Hi, Xanxus! We’re gonna have lots of fun with you, oh yes... *maniacal grin*
It's Namimori time everyone!

Chapter Summary

Sawada Tsunayoshi has a very *interesting* fifth year of life. However, we all know that it could have been much, *much* worse. Thanks be to whichever meddling kami sent Kakashi and Obito to Namimori, because they manage to salvage the situation that Vongola Nono bunged up so badly.

(The Vongola would thank them for that, eventually.)

((Eventually is not Now.))

Chapter Notes

Tsu-chan's heeeeerreeeee! And Kakashi has a new dog! Aw, Ebi, you savage lil' yard piranha, let me love youoouooou~♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

=/=

(In which our heroes graduate and plan their future.)

( *January, -9 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.*)

“… How the fuck?” Obito fanned out the ornately written graduation notifications. “Music and Theatre I knew about. The History minor doesn’t surprise me, you gigantic overachiever. But *when the hell* did you have time to get a *teaching degree*?”

“Maa, with all my other credits I only needed a few extra psychology and specialty classes to earn it, so I figured ‘why not’? So I did.” Kakashi shrugged casually, hooking his chin over Obito’s shoulder and chuckling gently in his ear. “The special allowances I got for my illness was quite helpful. Don’t worry, *koi*, I didn’t do anything stupid like abuse Kage Bushin to keep up. Unlike *some* people I could name.”

“You shut up.” Obito pointed a finger at Kakashi’s face, growling when Kakashi playfully nipped at the digit. “It doesn’t matter *how* I kept up with the work as long as I got the grades, learned the lessons, and did all the work my very own self.”

“True, true. Although it’s more like your *several dozen* very own selves.” With a pleased hum at his own cleverness, Kakashi eyed the mass of paperwork taking over the table. “And what’s the rest of this then?”

“Job offers and real estate options.” With a shrug, Obito twisted around to hook an arm around Kakashi’s waist. “So the teaching thing, does that mean you want to live in a good school district? We need a place with a decent yard at least. I never noticed how much room your kami-damned
dogs take up until you crammed us all into a two bedroom shoebox together.”

“Ah, they’re used to it, and don’t insult our condo. I lived in much worse back in Konoha. A yard would be nice though.” A chuckle escaped and Kakashi grinned up at Obito, pointedly ignoring the whining complaints from the dogs sprawled out over most of the available floor space in the apartment’s main room. “So what were you thinking of?”

“Well, there’s this one place near that one really good research lab that offered me a job.” Obito reached for the papers with the details. “Two stories, decent sized yard, quiet neighborhood… close to three different school districts.”

“Hm.” Kakashi took the property information packet that had been provided by the realtor agency, looking it over with his usual speed. “… It looks good on paper. Worth checking out, at least. I know that lab is your top choice, so we’d need a place in that general area anyway.”

“Alright! I’ll call the estate agent and set up an appointment!” With a small cheer Obito bounced away to hunt down the phone, hop scotching his way around the obstacle course of canine limbs. “Namimori, here we come!”

Laughing quietly, Kakashi started sorting the papers on the table into something resembling a sensible order.

A yelp. A heavy thump.

“I’m okay!” Obito called from the floor by the stove, ignoring the wounded look Garuko was giving him for the accidental kick. “Oh hey… found the phone!”

Kakashi snorted and Pakkun jumped up on the table to watch Kakashi work as Obito muttered to himself over the phone. “… Your mate’s a bit dim, Boss.”

“But he’s cute when he trips over himself like a puppy.” Kakashi scratched behind Pakkun’s ears with a chuckle, thankful as he always was that his nin gen pack was so accepting of Obito despite their fraught history. “And that makes up for a lot of stupidity.”

=/=

(In which Kakashi proves once again that he should never be left in charge of his own health.)

(February, -9 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Waving Obito off to his first day of work, Kakashi leaned back in his armchair with a sigh, idly watching as his nin gen investigated the yard of their new home. The baby of the pack, a standard-sized tan and brown Chihuahua named Ebi, was curled in Kakashi’s lap as the ninja contemplated the circumstances that had led them to Namimori.

Kakashi was never going to tell Obito why he cared so little about his own health. Obito had suffered so much during their last incarnations, both physically and mentally. There was no reason to add more guilt to the pain Obito already felt over what he had done in the past.

The thing was… after inheriting Obito’s Sharingan the first time (after the cave and his failure) Kakashi had always dealt with chronic chakra depletion. The need to adapt to the constant drain on his reserves had been the main reason behind Kakashi switching career tracks from developing as a frontline threat (like the White Fang and Yellow Flash had been) to the more subtle ANBU missions. The Hatake Clan White Chakra had been the only reason Kakashi had even survived the activation of the Makengyou, and the chakra drain had only gotten worse from that point on.
Once the Fourth Shinobi War was over, and Obito’s spirit had taken up residence in Kakashi’s body, the chakra drain had persisted, albeit at a much-reduced rate. Honestly, Kakashi had been so used to the passive drain by then that the brief stretches without the threat of imminent chakra exhaustion had been deeply unsettling.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this was not the first time Kakashi had spent his life dependant on food pills and artificial chakra boosters for survival.

Kakashi was mean enough to let Obito flail around looking for a ‘cure’ for Kakashi’s condition, but he was also not cruel enough to deny Obito the hope that Kakashi could be fixed. If there was some way to fix Kakashi’s condition, if this weakness in Kakashi’s body was something other than just a side effect of his chakra system being adapted to constantly bleed off all but the bare minimum of his reserves, then Obito would find a solution eventually.

If not… well, then at least Kakashi knew how to handle living with this sort of thing and still be the most deadly person in the room. Below average chakra reserves had never stopped Kakashi from being the scariest Jounin in Konoha. (At least this lifetime was peaceful enough Kakashi could let Obito dote on him without feeling guilty about it.)

/==

(In which our plot begins to thicken and yes I gave Kakashi a new dog for this very reason so haha Ebi is NOT an original character neener-neener.)

(March, -9 Years to the Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Ebi ran as fast as his little legs could carry him, yelping in distress as he rushed up to the occupied lounge chair on the tiny back porch. “Boss! Boss! Gotta help! Ebi was bad! Help!”

Blinking, Kakashi lowered his book (not Icha Icha, but decent enough to get by on) and stared at the Chihuahua bouncing frantically by his elbow. Pakkun and the rest of the re-found nin-ken stared. Ebi was the first new dog Kakashi had trained since his rebirth and sometimes the lack of actual combat experience showed. The Chihuahua was an excitable little thing, and perhaps that was not the temperament best suited for shinobi training, but Kakashi had taken one look at the vicious little yard piranha and fallen in love. Pakkun had approved of Kakashi’s choice, and Obito had paid for the pup without argument.

“Maa, what is it, Ebi?” Kakashi sat up and caught the little dog mid-bounce. “Did you do something naughty to Obito’s flowers again?”

“No!” Ebi’s ears flattened back. The flowers and herbs in Obito’s garden all pulled double duty as medicines and-or poisons. Ebi only had to have one encounter with the side effects to swear off digging up flowerbeds for life. “It’s the human pup, Boss! He fell and I tried to help but he set himself on fire and then his sire sealed him and it made him sick! Boss, it’s my fault! I didn’t mean to scare the human pup but I’m not allowed to talk to the civvies so I barked too much and now the pup’s sealed! What if it hurts him? He’s only little!”

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“… Are you talking about Sawada Tsunayoshi, Ebi?” The little dog nodded frantically, and Kakashi frowned. Tsunayoshi was one of the very few people in the boring, civilian infested world Kakashi and Obito had been reborn into that had the possibility for developing his chakra network into something useful. The shinobi value of useful, that is. The vast majority of the people Kakashi had encountered after his rebirth were all even worse off than Rock Lee had been. At least Lee had been able to utilize his Physical and Internal Chakra, the vast majority of people born to this world were unable to even do that much. Tsunayoshi’s father was an exception as well, but had obviously spent
his loyalty elsewhere. (The man had been in Namimori a grand total of three times in the course of Tsunayoshi’s life, and one of those times had been for his son’s birth.)

Kakashi had planned to approach Sawada Nana after Tsunayoshi began public school with an offer to tutor the boy in music, adding additional academics as needed. It would not be too strange to add some martial arts on top of that after a bit of time had passed, and soon enough Kakashi would have a troop of adorable little baby genin again! If this ‘sealing’ fucked with Tsunayoshi’s chakra network… “Well, fuck. Pakkun, take Shiba and Urushi. Find out what’s happening with the brat.”

“You got it, Boss.” The pug clambered to his paws and led the other two dogs off into the hedge surrounding the yard.

“Now, Ebi, calm down and tell Boss exactly what happened to Tsunayoshi.” Kakashi scowled as the Chihuahua described the yard, and the boy, and the orange flames that had sprung up around the boy’s hands and head. Ebi talked about Iemitsu, and the old man introduced as Iemitsu’s boss, and how they had ‘sealed away the warm orange fire with cold orange fire’, and repeated word for word the discussion that outlined how having ‘Sky Flame’ made Tsunayoshi a target. Ebi even did the voices, the precocious little mimic, and Kakashi sternly reminded himself not to growl at his dog when Ebi outlined the portion of Iemitsu’s conversation about ‘protecting the succession of Vongola’s Head’. “Kami damn it.”

“It’s my fault, Boss.” Ebi released a miserable whine as his tail drooped. “I scared the pup while his sire was home! The dam wouldn’t have noticed, and you could’ve trained the orange fire!”

“Don’t worry, Ebi. We’ll be able to fix this if it becomes a problem.” Kakashi sighed and cuddled the dejected dog close up under his chin. Now Kakashi had to help Tsunayoshi, otherwise Ebi would pine and Kakashi hated it when one of his dogs was sad.

=/= (In which shinobi have questionable morals and curious personal habits.) (April, -9 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.) Over the course of the month and change following the sealing incident, Kakashi and his dogs observed Tsunayoshi in a way that would have earned them all a restraining order if anyone had ever caught them at it. Obito spent the first few weeks huffing about overreactions and spoiled rotten dogs and whining about Kakashi ignoring him whenever Obito was not admonishing Kakashi about overstressing himself and ordering the silver haired man to rest more often. It very rapidly became apparent that something about the sealing Ebi had borne witness to had caused harm to Tsunayoshi. The shy but cheerful little boy who had attracted friends like magnets attracted iron shavings had disappeared. In his place was an outcast who constantly ran afoul of negative attention. Tsunayoshi’s body, previously a tumbling thing growing with hints of future grace, seemed determined to betray the boy at every turn.

“It’s like his nervous system is misfiring every other step.” Obito snarled and harshly dragged a hand through his hair. “What the hell did his deadbeat sperm donor do to him?”

Kakashi only shook his head and remained silent. Obito had always tended to side with the underdog, and Tsunayoshi was very much the underdog in this situation. In less than two months the issue that Kakashi had initially thought would be a minor cause for concern had become systematically abusive. Teachers went out of their way to mock Tsunayoshi during lessons. Classmates took advantage of every opportunity to tease and bully. Somehow everyone knew Tsunayoshi’s name, even in so little time, and the majority of the school population went out of their
way to target the boy. There were those among the horde of sheep-minded civilians who did not join in the taunting, but they were outliers, and it was not like any of them ever stepped in to stop the bullying.

The only mercy to be found was that Tsunayoshi seemed to fade away in people’s thoughts once he was out of sight, but Kakashi doubted that a friendless child would put much thought into it when everyone he encountered face to face strove to grind him down. A chill ran down Kakashi’s spine. This was the same situation the jinchuriki had faced back in the Elemental Countries, but the civilians here did not even have the excuse of fearing a Demonic Chakra Beast. Tsunayoshi was just an innocent little boy, being subjected to the ever-present aggression and distain that had given rise to monsters like Sabaku no Gaara and Orochimaru.

“This is insane. How can they be so focused on one kid like this? I know this country’s school system has a bad reputation for bullying, but this amount of attention paid to a single target is abnormal.” Kakashi gripped Obito’s arm as they spied on Tsunayoshi’s classroom from the concealing branches of a tree. “It’s as if the entire school is caught in some kind of malicious genjutsu.”

“If it were actually a genjutsu I could break it.” Obito murmured back, seeing the layered guilt in Kakashi’s eyes and hating it. “This is just… pure meanness, as far as I can tell. It’s like they’ve forgotten how to be decent human beings but only when it comes to this kid. They don’t even have the decency to ignore him when he tries to avoid confrontations. It’s stupid.”

“… Ebi is still blaming himself.” Kakashi sighed, and Obito grunted in acknowledgement.

Something had to change. Something had to be done to change things. While Obito was firmly against Kakashi overworking himself before Obito found a cure for the condition that afflicted his only friend (and Obito was going to find a cure for Kakashi’s illness) there was a good chance Kakashi would make himself even more sick with worry if Obito refused to let Kakashi help the kid.

“Allright.” Obito scooped Kakashi up and used shunshin to get back to the house. “Go make yourself look respectable and we’ll convince Sawada-san that her son would benefit from piano lessons or something.”

Kakashi’s approval of that idea took Obito by surprise and resulted in both of them needing a shower. Obito was not complaining in the least (and the ninken had been ritually traumatized by Kakashi’s peculiar habits long before the pair of shinobi had died the first time around.) Kakashi’s reward method was a beautiful and natural expression of their affections for one another that Obito loved to indulge in (again and again and again.)

=/=

(In which we see the aftermath of Enrico’s assassination.)

(July, -9 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Xanxus was screaming.

Even when he was silent, even when he was still, Xanxus was screaming. Had, in fact, been screaming since the first bullet tore through Enrico’s unprotected back.

Where was Enrico? Where was Xanxus’ eldest brother? Why had Enrico left him? Where was the one who had made the Iron Fort into home for Xanxus?

Why had Enrico been out alone? Where were Enrico’s Guardians? Why had they let this happen?
How had the enemy known where Enrico would be? How had Enrico been cornered so easily?

(Why had the old man said nothing about taking revenge? Did Enrico’s death mean nothing to the old man? Why was the enemy who had killed Xanxus’ brother still breathing?)

Unbalanced after the loss of a fourth of their Resonance, Xanxus’ Flames screamed his wrath to the sky.

=/=

(In which small children with artificially compromised intelligence tend to jump to conclusions in the MOST DRAMATIC WAY POSSIBLE.)

(August, -9 Years to the Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Tsu-chan was worried. Kakashi-sensei was the best teacher ever. Kakashi-sensei was never mean to Tsu-chan, and never got nasty when Tsu-chan messed up the lesson. Kakashi-sensei had apologized even! That first lesson, Kakashi-sensei had sat Tsu-chan down and explained that Ebi-kun had wanted to help Tsu-chan when he fell down from the tree, not scare him. Ebi-kun had apologized too, in human words, like a real person! Kakashi-sensei had tapped his nose and told Tsu-chan to please keep his secrets from the people outside the house. Tsu-chan had promised right away, thinking of how mean people could be about things that were different. Kakashi-sensei had smiled, eyes crinkling, and had promised back to keep Tsu-chan’s secrets too!

Tsu-chan was still scared of strange dogs, but Kakashi-sensei had said that was a smart thing. Strange dogs could be dangerous, and trained to bite people they did not know. Then all of Kakashi-sensei’s dogs had introduced themselves to Tsu-chan so he could stop being scared. Ebi-kun had been the first one, during the apology. Then there was Pakkun who was in charge when Kakashi-sensei was busy. Then the other members of the pack had stepped up; Buru, Urushi, Shiba, Bisuke, Akino, Uhei, and Garuko. Kakashi-sensei had a lot of dogs!

Kakashi-sensei’s music was really pretty, and Tsu-chan had actually managed to play ‘Kagome Kagome’ on the piano all the way through today. Tsu-chan actually learned things when Kakashi-sensei was the one teaching him. (Sometimes Tsu-chan wished Kakashi-sensei could be the one to teach him everything, but Mama had said Tsu-chan needed to spend time with kids his own age if he wanted to make friends. Tsu-chan did want to make friends, but the kids in his class were mean. Tsu-chan wanted to be friends with nice people, like Mama and Kakashi-sensei and Obito-san.)

So when Tsu-chan noticed that Kakashi-sensei never ate anything at snack time even though he was really thin, Tsu-chan worried. It was like when the man named Papa had come to visit Mama before Tsu-chan started school and Tsu-chan had caught The Cold. The Cold made it hard to think and Tsu-chan fell down all the time and now Tsu-chan always felt cold-tired-lonely in a painful ache that went right down to his guts through his heart. (Tsu-chan was cold all the time now, except when Tsu-chan was with Kakashi-sensei. Tsu-chan could almost pretend that things were all right when he was tucked up against Kakashi-sensei’s side as the silver haired man explained the lesson, the dogs curled up around them in lumps of furry warmth.) Tsu-chan worried, and did his very best to be a good student, because Kakashi-sensei deserved better than to have a dame taking up his time.

Tsu-chan had started staying later and later at Kakashi-sensei’s house over the course of the semester. Tsu-chan started bringing his homework with him too, when Kakashi-sensei had offered to help Tsu-chan with school. With some relief, Tsu-chan found math and spelling and reading started to make sense. Kakashi-sensei was a much better teacher than the adults at school. Kakashi-sensei made Tsu-chan run around with the dogs too, because moving the blood around his body made his brain work better. (Tsu-chan was still confused by the explanation of why, exactly, he needed to exercise, but
Eventually though, things came to a head, and Tsu-chan was confronted full on with the fears he had done his best to push aside. Mama had gone out on a vacation with her friends, and Tsu-chan was spending the last week of summer break with Kakashi-sensei. Tsu-chan quietly bent over his workbooks, watching out of the corner of his eye as Obito-san wrapped his arms around Kakashi-sensei.

“Did you manage to eat anything?” Obito-san was always taking care of Kakashi-sensei. (Worry-worry-guilt-worry clawed at the back of Tsu-chan’s mind like an itch he could never reach, an irritant bordering on pain.)

“… Mmn. Nothing solid wants to stay down. I decided not to risk it.” Kakashi-sensei smiled a little and patted Obito-san’s hands. “Your potions are easier to swallow anyway.”

“Damn it, Kakashi!” Obito-san hissed, and shook Kakashi-sensei a tiny bit. “You need to eat real food!”

“I’ve tried, Obito! Remember how it was when this started? I ate and ate and ate until you could see my skin stretch, and it did nothing for me.” Kakashi-sensei reached up and held Obito-san’s face in his hands. “At least food pills and chakra smoothies give me something to use. It takes too much energy out of my system to process real food. Be thankful that the food pills work at all instead of complaining. It could be worse.”

“Don’t say that, Kakashi.” Obito-san looked like he was going to cry, and Tsu-chan stopped pretending to do his homework as agony-grief-guilt knifed through his heart. “I can’t lose you. So stop. Just stop talking like you’re going to give up! I refuse to let you die!”

“Obito…” Tsu-chan dropped his pencil and stared at his teacher. Kakashi-sensei looked sad. Sad, and tired, and thin. Kakashi-sensei murmured something to Obito-san too softly for Tsu-chan to hear over the rushing in his ears. Tsu-chan was horrified to realize how weak his teacher looked, and with a shock Tsu-chan understood finally why Obito-san fussed over Kakashi-sensei so much. Kakashi-sensei was like those kids on the TV commercials asking for money, the kids who were starving to death.

“NO!” Tsu-chan stopped listening as his pulse roared in his ears, and his vision went fuzzy and light halowed the edges. It hurt to breathe. His eyes were burning. Tsu-chan’s heart twisted in his chest until he felt like throwing up. Kakashi-sensei was not allowed to die. Kakashi-sensei was not allowed to leave Tsu-chan alone. Tsu-chan needed Kakashi-sensei. If Kakashi-sensei died, Tsu-chan would die too. The bigger kids and adults at school would kill Tsu-chan, and he could still remember was it was like before Kakashi-sensei came. Mama was no help, she could not protect Tsu-chan the way Kakashi-sensei did.

“NO!” The thought of losing Kakashi-sensei, the thought of losing the sense of safety and security and understanding that the man provided, of losing the one source of warmth in the middle of The Cold that had taken over Tsu-chan’s life, it was worse than the thought of death. It was like the world shattered, like the floor disappeared, it was like being thrown off the edge of a cliff.

“NO!” Tsu-chan would not let Kakashi-sensei leave. Not even The Cold was going to stop him. Tsu-chan would save Kakashi-sensei with his Dying Will!

//...//

Ebi fell over backwards with a squeak of surprise as Tsunayoshi screamed denials and rocketed off
his cushion and barreled headlong into the Boss and Boss’ Mate.

“Hey!” Pakkun shoved Ebi aside and barked a reprimand at the kid’s back, because you were not allowed to interrupt Boss-Mate cuddle time. The pug almost bit off in his tongue in shock as the room exploded in a flood of multi coloured flame. “Holy shit!”

/…/

Obito hated this, hated seeing Kakashi so weak and sickly and fragile. Kakashi had always been lean, but ever since they had hit puberty this second time around the silver haired man had gradually faded away until he was one step away from being a living skeleton. Obito knew Kakashi’s body well, both this new body his partner had been reborn into and the body Kakashi had worn as Konoha Jounin Hatake Kakashi the Copy-Nin, Master of a Thousand Jutsu.

Their scars from their past lives had carried over as birthmarks into their new incarnations. Kakashi still had Obito’s Sharingan. Obito still had Mokuton. (Obito also had some weird-ass demon-brand Rinnegan knock-off courtesy of Kakashi sweet talking Shinigami-sama on Obito’s behalf. Obito swore that fucking creeper of a death god had a gigantic man-crush on Kakashi, and the bastard knew it too! Kakashi had known and had not warned Obito!) Even Kakashi’s ninjend were the same as they had once been, only younger. The reincarnated shinobi had Bloodline Talents without having been born to the Bloodlines in question. The Ninja Clans did not even exist here! Had, in fact, never existed here in this new world. Given the massive impossibilities exhibited by their constitutions, the genetics of their re-birth families should not have mattered.

Except those new families did matter. Kakashi’s hyperactive metabolic system had to be the result of being born a Gokudera. Obito had found out about one of Kakashi’s cousins with a similar wasting illness. Unfortunately the woman in question had lived out her entire life in Italy, and the Clan seemed wary of any mention of her, and she had died in a car crash two years before Obito even had a chance to think about tracking her down. Obito was trying to locate her doctor now, but the man was proving to be frustratingly illusive and Obito would probably have to hunt him down in person if he wanted to get anywhere with that lead on Kakashi’s condition. (Obito would have gone after the man already, but there was the whole Kakashi wanting to adopt-via-abduction Namimori’s entire current crop of potential proto-nin to deal with. What was up with that, anyway? Obito was sure that Kakashi had hated children even way back when he was a child himself in truth. Maybe it was the way pre-pubescent children resembled puppies? Kakashi had always been weak to puppies, even when the other shinobi had been at the height of his cold-hearted bastard assassin phase.)

The body Obito had been reborn into had all the same powers as his old one. Only he healed better now, without the damaged nerves and wrecked blood vessels and scar tissue getting in the way. Obito was faster and stronger and more focused without the pain of the prosthetics interfering with every movement he made. Kakashi should have been the same. Kakashi should have reaped the same benefits. Old damage had been wiped away. Artificial power had been wired in properly, becoming a natural part of their bodies. The Sharingan Obito had given Kakashi no longer drained away the silver haired man’s chakra like water in a cracked bucket. Kakashi should have been fine. Kakashi should have been better than he was in their last lives. Kakashi had been given a chance to rest and grow without the trauma of being a ninja prodigy. Above all else, Kakashi should have been healthy.

Only Kakashi’s body burned through calories like a bonfire ate up flash paper. Kakashi’s body healed too slowly, and iroyojutsu only made it worse. It was like Kakashi was a screwed up version of that American comic book character in the flag costume. Kakashi had to have four times more calories than average just to survive, and his body healed four times slower than it should. Add that to Kakashi’s stubborn refusal (inability) to eat solid food, on top of Kakashi’s insistence that he keep
up his training, and Obito was ready to tear his hair out in frustration.

Kakashi was not fooling anyone by pretending he was fine. Even Tsunayoshi had taken to scolding Kakashi for using energy the man simply could not spare. If the dumb-ass kid was worried, then Kakashi was too tired to front properly, and that scared Obito worse than any of the inconclusive test results or the sight of Kakashi’s ribs through his skin.

“Obito…” Kakashi sighed and let Obito take most of his weight. Kakashi was all brittle bone and paper-thin skin in Obito’s arms. Silver hair was longer than Obito had ever seen it, the only thing about Kakashi that was even half-way healthy, and Kakashi was too lazy to get it cut when he could just tie it back without leaving his lounge chair. Too paranoid about having a stranger wielding blades behind his back while he was too weak to fight them off, as well. Kakashi had lost none of his skills, but his strength was badly faded. (Obito had always wanted to be Kakashi’s hero. To make something of himself that Rin could be proud of. Not at this price though. Not at the cost of Kakashi’s well being. Kakashi’s overdeveloped guilt complex aside, Kakashi had done nothing to deserve this sort of lingering torture. Obito was going to fix this and not even death was going to stop him.)

“NO! NO! NO!” Tsunayoshi was screaming, and crying, and as the boy charged headfirst into their legs and clung, Tsunayoshi was engulfed in orange flames that dyed the air in all the colours of a sunset brought down to earth. The flames did not burn but were instead heavy with intent. “Save Kakashi-sensei with my Dying Will!”

The kid was on fire. The kid was on fire and so was a very surprised looking Kakashi. Kakashi and the kid were on fire and now Obito was too. An orange and violet and indigo conflagration that blazed and raged and burst like a shockwave. Like Gokakyu and Amarasu had hit and twisted together without blending, each colour distinct against the other and edged in sharp Chidori white.

It bloomed in his mind like a torch to oil-soaked wood, like the sun rising after the longest night of midwinter. The determination and focus passed between them like a feedback loop, like a chakra exchange. Kakashi would survive.

It felt almost like casting a genjutsu, only more real as the indigo flames took the image-wish of healthy-strong Kakashi and made it solid, made it reality. Violet flames took what had happened and enhanced the effects, orange flames smoothing out the rough spots, binding Will and intent together into one concrete manifestation, and then the blaze subsided.

Obito hit the ground on his ass, feeling like he had been laid out with a one-two combo of a gut-punch followed by chakra exhaustion. Kakashi looked dazed, and Tsunayoshi was all but unconscious. Whatever the kid had done had knocked him for a loop and left the brat draped over their tangled legs like a wrung-dry rag.

Kakashi was staring at Tsunayoshi in mild consternation, but Obito only had eyes for his partner.

“Kakashi… holy shit.” Obito felt shameless tears prick at the corners of his eyes, his Sharingan open and spinning but the sight before him remained the same. “Fuck me, just look at you, you magnificent bastard.”

“Ha?” Kakashi looked the way he was supposed to, lean and strong and deadly in his beauty in the way of all apex predators. Kakashi looked at Obito, eyeing the shakujou now balanced against Obito’s shoulder, and then glanced around the room at his dogs. One and all the ninken appeared to have been turned into hellhounds, flames in all colours of the rainbow sparking from ruffs and paws and fangs. (The room was tinted heavily towards purple by the violet flames running as a common thread through the whole pack to Kakashi and back.) Kakashi reached up, touching tentative fingers
to the hitai-ate tilted over his left eye, fingers barely missing the crown of violet flames rising from his hairline, and gave Obito the *blandest* look in his extensive repertoire of non-expressions. “I think it’s past time we moved investigating Sawada Iemitsu and these Flames up the priority queue. Ne, Obito-kun?”

“Maybe.” Obito was frowning, and thinking… Kakashi was the genius with a hard-on for knowledge and theory, (Kakashi of the Sharingan had been known as the Master of a Thousand Jutsu for a *damn good reason*) but Obito had always done better with applied learning and following his instincts. Right now instinct was saying that it was Obito’s Will that was at work on Kakashi. The solid-form of the not-quite-a-genjutsu would fade if Obito left, and Kakashi would be right back when he had been before. Unless…

Obito’s eyes narrowed. Unless you were an Uchiha with a fully mastered Sharingan and could manipulate genjutsu liked *you breathed*, even strange alien-magic genjutsu that did not use chakra. Casting his senses over the room, Obito heeded the nudging of his instinct.

“Pakkun, Uhei. Come here.” Obito tapped Tsunayoshi on the forehead, smirking when the kid’s eyes crossed. “Okay, brat. Will you help me keep your Kakashi-sensei strong?”

Kakashi’s gaze sharpened in warning. “*Obito*.”

“Yes!” Tsunayoshi either had missed the cutting edge in Kakashi’s voice or had chosen to ignore it much like Obito.

“*Excellent.*” The indigo flame Uhei had burning alongside the purple worked better than the orange flames Pakkun and Tsunayoshi had. So Obito anchored the illusion using the greyhound as the main base, turning the pug and the child into secondary supports. “Okay, that’s done. Shut up, bastard, I don’t want to hear it. Uhei, Kakashi never leaves your sight unless I’m with him, understand? *No*, Kakashi, if you argue with me I will thump you. If you want me to leave town to get you your goddamned information then *you will not argue with me* about letting Uhei take care of keeping you strong enough to fight without me here to back you up.”

“… Kakashi-sensei is better now?” Tsunayoshi was so *relieved* by that it was almost *painful* to witness, except Obito knew *exactly* how the brat felt. If the Moon Eye plan had *actually* been possible this was probably what completing it would have felt like. “Tsu-chan was scared that Kakashi-sensei had caught The Cold too. Tsu-chan doesn’t want Kakashi-sensei to be Cold like Tsu-chan is. Kakashi-sensei makes Tsu-chan feel warm, so Tsu-chan wants Kakashi-sensei to *be* warm!”

“Maa, ‘The Cold’, is it?” Kakashi pet Tsunayoshi’s fluffy hair like the kid was one of the dogs. You could *hear* the capital letters in the kid’s speech, and Kakashi had mimicked the inflection perfectly. Silver-green eyes flipped up and caught spinning black-on-red. “Don’t worry, Tsu-chan. Obito-san is going to go find out all about The Cold and how to fix it.”

“Mm!” Tsunayoshi beamed and nuzzled into Kakashi’s palm. “Obito-san is a good doctor! He takes good care of Kakashi-sensei! So he’ll take good care of Tsu-chan too!”

“Oh my *gods*. I get it already!” Obito scowled at the emotionally manipulative, blackmailing *bastard* Kakashi that was his partner in life and death and caved like the love-whipped wuss that Obito had never even tried to deny being. “I’ll leave on a ‘research trip’ in the morning, okay?”

“Thank you, Obito.” Kakashi purred in the bedroom voice that always, *always* melted Obito’s spine, and fuck yes, Obito was *so* getting laid tonight.

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The rain fell, soft and soothing, white noise that eased some of the pain screaming from the hole in Xanxus’ Flames that Enrico’s death had left behind.

Red eyes were wide, too startled to be suspicious of the stranger who had interrupted his lonely consumption of a bottle of wine.

The thirteen-year-old swordsman who had taken down Tyr, who had won a place in the Vongola leadership with blade and blood stared back in something very close to reverence as the Resonance between their Flames built higher.

“You…” Bottle set aside, Xanxus stood from where he had been sprawled over an antique settee. “You’re mine.”

The new Sword Emperor hit his knees, looking half out of his head with Sky Attraction, fumbling to offer up his weapon to Xanxus as the Sky approached. “Yeah, Boss, I… yeah. Fuck, you’re my Sky.”

“And you’re my Rain.” Savage possession in his voice as the grieving fifteen year old reached out. Not a replacement (nothing could ever replace a brother) but enough of a balm that the pain in his soul eased a little. “My Guardian.”

His first Guardian. God, Enrico would have been so happy to hear about this, if only…

“Squalo.” The swordsman swallowed hard, voice rough with emotion as calloused fingers dragged through silver hair. “My name’s Squalo Superbi.”

“Xanxus Vongola.” The way Squalo froze and squeaked was the funniest fucking thing Xanxus had seen that week.

“… Vongola?” Squalo looked a bit like a fish, with his face like that. One of the goggle-eyed goldfish bought for little kids. Quickly rising rage banished the last of the daze caused by Resonance as Squalo shot to his feet with an affronted howl. “Voi! What the fuck is a Vongola doing alone where any goddamned asshole can get at you?! Where the fuck is your security detail?! The Heir was killed less than a month ago you haven’t even got a goddamned panic button.”

Dropping back into his seat, trying to ignore the sting caused by the mention of Enrico’s death (finding it easier now than it had been even an hour ago,) Xanxus watched in wordless amusement as Squalo spun on his heel, the Rain still spitting obscenities as he secured the sitting room like a very paranoid and unusually focused whirlwind.

… If nothing else having a Guardian was worth it for the entertainment value alone.

“Hm.” Xanxus tilted his head back against the arm of his chosen seat, grabbing the wine bottle back up off the floor and draining the last of the contents in a single pull. “… I think my brothers will like you.”

Squalo went white as the blood drained from his face and the younger boy promptly tripped over the edge of the rug, vanishing instantly from sight. Xanxus snorted at the noise of his new Rain hitting the floor, and grinned up at the ceiling as he listened to the quiet, imaginative curses drifted up from behind the couch.
Chapter End Notes

*jazz hands* Things are moving along! Also, Kakashi and Obito are finally in Namimori! And the Flames of Dying Will make their appearance in the story!

Show of hands, who thought Flames were the root cause of Kakashi's 'illness' and were surprised by the Mist Flame placebo system? *grins in excitement*
Plotting ninja are not to be underestimated.

Chapter Summary

In which we see Obito go on a research trip, are given further hints that Kakashi is a ridiculously over-powered troll, find out what's up with Nana, have one or two mental breaks triggered by past life traumas, and get to see what happens when shinobi who have already experienced the Repeating Pattern of Fate merry-go-round decide to get sneaky.

Chapter Notes

I'm kinda skimming the Cradle Affair Year because it hurts my heart and also most of the Real Fun starts up in the next chapter.

Although I did have fun summarizing Obito's Flame Research. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(January, -8 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Tracking down Sawada Iemitsu was like trying to follow a trail of breadcrumbs through a forest. In other words, it was all but impossible because annoying little rodents kept eating the path markers. It took Obito the better part of a year to find out where the deadbeat in question even worked, and learning that much came about only because the Vongola were having a rough couple of years.

Ah yes, the Vongola. The Vongola had risen in the space of a single generation from nothing to becoming one of the, if not the, most powerful Mafia Families in Italy, and had held that top position for the last several hundred years. A powerful Mafia Family that was currently in something of a panic because the eldest of the Ninth Head’s four sons had been killed. Something was keeping the old man from naming one of his younger sons as his heir, even with the ridiculously blatant favoritism the man showed the now-middle child. Apparently Iemitsu’s position in the organization’s structure disqualified the idiot despite Iemitsu also having the right to inherit through his bloodline. Obito noted sourly the nothing was said about Tsunayoshi being disqualified. (Given Iemitsu’s actions so far, Obito would not put it past the deadbeat to ignore the whole issue until his Boss called him out on it.)

Mafia succession practice was a weird hegemony of the methods Obito was familiar with. Like being Daimyo you needed the previous leader’s approval and the right bloodline. Like being chosen as Hokage you needed the approval of the upper echelon and the strength to hold the position. Finally, like in the Bloodline Clans, you needed to provably have the power and talents of the bloodline. At least, you needed all of that if you wanted a chance in hell of taking over the Vongola.

Xanxus definitely wanted to take over the Vongola from all outward appearances. Obito recognized the signs of a coup in the making. The poor kid was probably trying to work through his grief through violence, or to make some kind of point, since Obito had the feeling that a large part of Xanxus’ hurry was to prevent any more deaths in his personal family. Idly, Obito wondered if the
sixteen-year-old assassin knew that he was adopted from a branch line. Timoteo Vongola had buried the information deep, but with enough digging a motivated ninja could find anything. (With Kakashi having all but adopted the kid who was looking more and more likely to be a viable Vongola heir Obito was very motivated. Even with Tsuna being the only Vongola Sky not currently being dangled out for assassins like shark bait.)

Once Obito had found Iemitsu, the information seemed to just fall into his lap. (Nothing the Mafia used to secure their data was meant to stop an SSS ranked shinobi, to say nothing of Obito’s use of Kamui to assist in his breaking and entering endeavors. They could never have kept Obito out of their file rooms even if the Mafia had known enough about chakra to ward against ninja.)

‘The Cold’ that Tsunayoshi had complained about for as long as Obito had known the kid had been the result of Tsunayoshi having his Flames sealed off. Obito then moved to quietly, secretly, ransack the Mafia underworld for every tidbit of information on Flames it had. Be that information from ancient lore or modern research Obito did not discriminate, he just gathered it up and passed it on to Kakashi. They needed to know what Tsunayoshi had done to them, and what the Vongola had done to Tsunayoshi, and what the possible side effects were for all of them.

By the time Obito had exhausted all of the readily available information sources on Flames, the born-again shinobi was battling a strong urge to edit the reports he was regularly sending back to Kakashi. Tsunayoshi was lucky Kakashi was a meddling busybody, because otherwise the kid would have been caught in a toxic situation. According to the research, up to ninety percent of passive Skies who had their Flames sealed away ended up on suicide watches. Worse, there was no information on what happened to an Active Sky under a seal. No one had ever been stupid enough to try it. (Except for Timoteo and Iemitsu, the blithering morons.)

Worse was that both men should have known it was a bad idea, what with both of them being Skies themselves. Even if they had never been told, their own abilities should have led them to understand exactly what sort of horror they were perpetuating on an innocent. What the hell was the famed Vongola Intuition good for, if not put to use avoiding deadly mistakes?

(This is what happened when you let fucking civilians play with power unsupervised.)

The Seven Flame Aspects correlated with the Seven Chakra Gates, although there were some minor differences in the theology between the religious views of chakra versus Active Flame use.

Kakashi’s violet Flames indicated a Cloud expression. The Aspect of Freedom and Multiplication, this mostly fit in with the theology recorded for Sahasrara. Clouds had a reputation for being free agents, and were the second most rare Aspect to be found in Active Flame Users. From his own observations Obito thought that it was less that Clouds hated authority and more that Clouds needed a pack they could trust. (Again, they were talking about humans here, and most of the Clouds in the Mafia were mixed Flame Types who said that they were Clouds because that accorded them a certain amount of automatic notoriety. So there was a lot of leeway in all of these generalizations to account for the Human Condition of being fucked up in the head by life, the universe, and everything.)

Kakashi was pretty much a pure, traditional Cloud who needed respect and to have his interest engaged before you got any of his attention. Kakashi’s ninken all had Cloud Flames, which fit in with the territoriality dogs were known for. Pack structure actually leant itself well to maintaining Clouds in a group. Of course, only Shiba, Akio, and Bisuke were pure Cloud. Pakkun actually had a dual expression with Sky Flames, which Obito had come to understand meant Pakkun was primarily a Sky with a very strong concentration of the Cloud Aspect. Buru had Rain, Urushi had Storm, Ebi had Sun, Guruko had Lightning, and Uhei had Mist. It was that Mist-Cloud duality that had been
why Obito could use the greyhound to anchor the Solid Illusion keeping Kakashi some semblance of healthy.

Kakashi had giggled madly and told Pakkun he was a good boy upon discovering this information. The pug had been Kakashi’s first bonded nin-dog, and had been the driving force behind every selection of a pack member from that point onward. It explained a lot about how Kakashi had managed to gather an example for all seven Flame types even back when none of them had been aware Flames even existed. Thanks to the dogs Kakashi had been able to experiment with how each different Flame Aspect manifested, both on its own and in combination with Flames of other types.

Obito had been amused to learn that the Indigo Flames he produced meant Mist. The Anja Chakra was all about the third eye and the making-plus-breaking of illusions that one either had created personally or had inflicted on them from without. It seemed to be eminently suitable for an Uchiha with a mastered Makengyou Sharingan. His imagination had always been one of Obito’s strengths. Now it was just a much more obvious strength. No one had ever said Obito was lacking in willpower after all. Knowing how Kakashi should be had allowed Obito to layer what he was calling a ‘Solid Illusion’ over Kakashi’s body and organs. Basically, Obito had imagined Kakashi being healthy and then made it real. Mist Flames essentially meant Obito could pull off a limited range, scaled down version of the Moon Eye plan whenever he felt like it.

Unfortunately, while the Flames worked perfectly on Kakashi’s physical body, Kakashi’s chakra network could tell the difference between reality and illusion. One real fight would put him down with Chakra exhaustion. (Only for the last little while Obito had been hearing scary things about the Hatake White Chakra, and using Cloud Flames to Multiply the Tenketsu output. Also apparently Kakashi had secondary Flames? The reports from the nin-ken were conflicted, and Tsuna was unreliable at best. There had been something about Kakashi making rainbows on his hands? Oh kami, Kakashi was going to drive Obito to drink and an early second death via stress-induced ulcers.)

Tsunayoshi’s orange Flames were the visible proof he was a Sky. Too bad for the kid, but the Sky Flame was the most rarely seen and most coveted expression of Dying Will, and said Skies were usually shoehorned into leadership positions whether they were psychologically suited to the post or not. (See for example Iemitsu. If not for the Sky Flames and his relation to the First Boss of the Vongola, the man would have been quietly taken out back and shot for being a giant liability long before he reached a position of power.)

As a Sky, Tsunayoshi would be looked upon as something like a living avatar of Harmony, and that expression of a power aspect no doubt explained why the kid had such a hard time of it after being sealed. Without access to the Gate of Svadhishthana any relationship Tsunayoshi attempted to make was doomed from the start. Obito had seen Nana’s detachment from her son slowly widen as the metaphysical bond between the mother and child was strangled by the sealing. It was almost like a late onset of post-partum trauma, and the confusion on both sides of the equation only made things worse.

Tsunayoshi’s ‘Cold’ was a seal of deliberately Discordant Flames layered over his Sky Flames. It was a poison that disrupted Tsunayoshi’s whole nervous system, suppressing the boy’s Sky Flames, and interfering with the kid’s chakra channels. Pakkun was working on eroding the seal from the outside, struggling to draw out the kid’s suppressed Sky Flames. Tsunayoshi’s burst of ‘Hyper Dying Will Mode’ (apparently something of a Bloodline Talent the stronger members of the Vongola main family had a knack for) when he thought Kakashi would die had punched through the seal once, and had made the first hole.

Obito was reluctantly glad the seal had retarded Tsunayoshi’s ability to rationalize his emotions.
Otherwise Tsunayoshi would have realized that Kakashi was not going to die immediately. It was the feeling of utter desperation and urgency that had pushed Tsunayoshi to fight against the seal, and without that push Obito never would have tried the Mist Flame placebo currently acting as Kakashi’s life support system. Now they were working on wedging that tiny pinprick wider. Once Tsunayoshi’s Flame had some breathing room it would burn itself the rest of the way free.

Such was the nature of flame.

‘The Will of Fire.’ Obito savored the irony and perfection of a Konoha shinobi with the Flames of Dying Will. ‘If only Minato-sensei could see us now. He would have had such a lecture ready for idiots who thought it was a good idea to place limits on the Sky.’

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(January, -8 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Enrico’s loss still ached, still left his Flames screaming when Xanxus prodded the void his eldest brother had left behind, but finding Squalo had helped. Had given Xanxus a real direction for his resulting rage. Xanxus would never be forced to stand helplessly by again.

Xanxus had taken over the Varia with Squalo at his right hand, two half-grown teenage boys in charge of the Vongola’s best assassins and they owned it. The first few months had been savage, but they had stayed on top, because with the Varia under his command Xanxus would strike first, could kill their enemies before they thought about targeting Xanxus’ Family.

Xanxus refused to lose another one of his people without a fight. (Not again. Not a third time. Xanxus was no longer that sniveling brat who had cried for his Mamma.)

(A wide, white smile. Welcoming laughter and a warmth that meant home. “Good job, baby brother! I knew you could do it!”)

(A light gone out, guttered and dark and cold.)

The Varia suited Xanxus right down to the ground. The Varia had brought Xanxus his Sun and his Lightning. Even though Lussaria and Leviathan were ridiculous and irritating Xanxus still hoarded their attentions and affections like a particularly grumpy dragon (and they were happy to let him do so.) Despite the side eyeing from the main body of the Famiglia, Xanxus’ Elements returned his regard with equal, if not greater, fervor. They were all of them broken in their own ways, but the uneven edges of their pieces fit together into a complex, glittering whole, and that was what Harmony was supposed to be.

(Enrico’s Guardians had been chosen by politics for the most part, rather than for their strength or their compatibility, and look at how that had turned out. No, Xanxus would wait for a strong Resonance to catch his attention and only accept Guardians who suited him properly.)

It was up to debate if his attitude was being rewarded or punished by the Fates, because during the first proper job Xanxus went on after cleaning house in the Varia netted him his Storm.

His eight-year-old Storm.

Face studiously blank, Xanxus held the tiny, giggling blond up off the floor by the scruff. Blood dripped to the floor, and the tiara holding down thick blond bangs sparkled almost as much as the self-satisfied grin the little Storm directed at Xanxus.

“The Prince likes you!” Another cackle as Xanxus tossed the kid over his shoulder without changing
expression. “Oof. The Prince did not expect to find a King here!”

Ah, lovely. Another crazy one for Xanxus’ collection.

… At least there was no reason for Xanxus to worry about the kid fitting in among the rest of the Varia agents. That thing with the knives had been damned impressive, even if the brat probably had not meant for it to be an audition of any sort. (Or for Xanxus to have survived so easily.)

Luss was going to love the little gremlin.

(‘Four down.’ Murmured in the blood-soaked shadows that lurked between his Wrath and his soul. ‘Only two to go.’)

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(February, -8 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis)

Half a year of jumping across continents every other week trying to track down Sawada Iemitsu and collecting every scrap of lore about the oddly contagious Bloodline Talent the sources Obito had managed to unearth called the Flames of Dying Will. Six months of having Active Mist Flames and learning what he could do with them. Twenty-four weeks of practicing with his new skills and abilities… and it was only now that Obito had bothered to take a good look at Sawada Nana.

Iemitsu had been party to the rape of his only son’s soul. What else had he allowed to be done to his family?

Before the Mist Flames, Obito had thought Nana flighty, and a bit dim. Gullible enough to marry and stay loyal to a man she saw in person only once or twice a year. Easily fooled and absent minded enough to accept excuses at face value. Loving enough but… not quite all there. Not actively malicious, but easily led, and honestly neglectful of her son due to inborn mental deficiencies.

After the Mist Flames, however…

“(…) I think I’m going to be sick.” Obito went chalk white within a minute of Nana’s arrival, a twisted attempt at a polite smile frozen on his face throughout the entirety of the housewife’s short visit. Nana had not noticed anything amiss even as Kakashi and Tsuna shot the unusually silent man concerned looks. Obito swallowed back nausea as the door shut behind Nana. “Oh kami-sama that poor woman.”

“Obito?” Kakashi moved closer, a thin hand closing on Obito’s wrist in concerned support. “What is it?”

Tsuna looked between his two favourite adults with worried eyes, lip caught in his teeth. “Obito-sensei? Is Mama sick?”

“She. It’s. I…” Obito exhaled sharply, looking down at Tsuna with a pained grimace. “I’m… not sure how to say it.”

Grinding a knuckle into his temple, Obito took a moment to just breathe and think over how to explain the things he had uncovered to a five-and-a-half year old. “Okay. Okay, so. Tsuna. You know how some people can be… hurt inside of their heads sometimes?”

“Like… like Kino-san after her stroke?” Tsuna looked rightfully spooked by the direction the conversation was heading in. “She forgot, um, she forgot how to read kanji. And her arm didn’t work right anymore. Like that?”
“It’s… yeah. A little bit like that. Your mother, she… her brain doesn’t work right anymore.” Obito glanced at Kakashi, unable to take the kid’s huge, sad eyes head on any longer. His partner’s calm, nonjudgmental gaze steadied Obito, helping him reclaim the composure he had lost after using Mist Flames to examine Nana’s mind. “Tsuna, have you noticed that your mother forgets stuff a lot? Or that she never notices when people lie to her? Even when it’s really, really obviously a lie?”

“Um… yeah? Sometimes.” Tsuna’s eyes went even wider. “Is Mama dying?”

“No. Your mother is… physically healthy. Her health is fine. But, Tsuna, you’re going to have to take special care of Nana from now on.” Obito looked sad and serious as he placed a hand on Tsuna’s shoulder. “She can’t think certain things the way you can. So she’s going to believe everything people tell her. You need to watch out for Nana, because she doesn’t understand what a lie is. She can’t understand, because her brain is messed up. So it’s up to you, Tsuna. Can you do that? Can you tell Nana when she’s being lied to?”

“Un!” Tsuna’s fists clenched in determination. “I’ll protect Mama from the liars!”

“Good.” Obito ruffled Tsuna’s dandelion-fluff hair and hid his anger down deep inside. “That’s very good, Tsuna.”

When Obito got his hands on the bastard, Sawada Iemitsu was a dead man.

/…/

“So.” Kakashi sank into Obito’s lap without protest when his partner tugged him down. “You found something wrong with Nana.”

“I found something very wrong with Nana.” Obito muttered against the skin of Kakashi’s throat, shuddering in reflexive horror as he recalled what he had found in Sawada Nana’s mind. Kakashi’s hands came up to cradle his head and Obito slumped, arms curling tighter around Kakashi’s narrow waist. “…He tied it to their marriage vows. How twisted do you have to be to think doing something like that to your wife is acceptable? Fuck! At least I had a brainwashing heart-seal and a Prisoner’s Complex as an excuse for what I did to my Clan! Sawada just, he just, fuck.”

“Obito…” Kakashi pressed his cheek against the top of Obito’s bowed head. “What did Sawada actually do?”

“Kami… you know, I finally get why you hated the Moon-Eye Plan now? Seeing that… seeing what’s happened to Nana… it’s sick. It’s so sick, Kakashi.” Obito’s shoulders shook, the salt scent of tears thick in the air. ‘It’s… it’s like a logic loop. Nana’s Will isn’t much to speak of even before taking the twisting into account, but what she wants, more than anything, is to be happy and in love and wake up each day going ‘it’s great to be alive!’ They used that. Nana’s in love, so she must be happy. Nana’s happy, so nothing could be wrong. All Sawada has to do is call every so often and say ‘I love you, darling’ and Nana’s own Will does the rest. She doesn’t want to know the truth, because learning bad things means she’ll get hurt so she rejects acknowledging anything that could upset her life. She’s broken. She’s so fucking broken, Kakashi, and she did most of it to herself. To make her life easier to handle. And the worst part is that she was actually in love with that soul-sucking bastard! He raped her Will and she just said thank you may I have another!”

“Shh… Shh, Obito. There’s nothing we can do to save people from themselves. We spent our entire last lives learning that lesson together.” Kakashi wrapped around Obito’s shaking form and pressed kisses to spiky hair. “Civilians are civilians that way, because they hide away instead of fighting. We can’t do anything about that.”
“But… but Tsuna.” Obito swallowed down the thickness in his throat. “His mom’s gone, Kakashi, even if her body’s still moving around and talking. He’ll never have a real relationship with her. Nana’s too damaged, and… Tsuna’ll notice someday.”

“Then he’ll have us, and he’ll remember that we told him as much of the truth as he could understand.” Kakashi promised softly, too thin and brittle in Obito’s arms but still the strongest person Obito had ever known. “Tsuna will always have us.”

“Yeah.” A vow. An oath. An unalterable truth. Obito choked down the shock and horror that had hit him just that much too close to home and sank into the comfort Kakashi was offering him freely. They would be there for the children this world tried to break. It was the least Obito could do, to try and make up for what he had almost done to the children of another world.

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(May, -8 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“… Now Xanxus is frozen.” Obito sighed and pulled Kakashi closer, enjoying the fact that he was in his own bed with his partner and that the time-intensive part of intelligence gathering (also known as the process of setting up a permanent, low-maintenance information network) was over with. “I kinda feel bad for the kid. His eldest brother died and the other two all but abandoned him while they grieved and tried to cover their own asses, his father was lying to him, and now none of the allied Families will consider him a viable heir. Even if he was legitimate, Iemitsu’s people don’t fuck around when it comes to smear campaigns.”

“So Tsu-chan is most likely going to be named an heir at some point in the next few years, considering the pattern of Vongola’s consistent screw ups. As Enrico proved, the killers only need to get lucky once. It’s increasingly likely that Tsuna will be the last one left alive with a legitimate claim. Even if only because none of the assassins know they need to target him.” Kakashi hummed thoughtfully and propped his chin on Obito’s chest. “Maa… that means my cute little student could be the future Vongola Jyuudaime.”

“… That’s a very scary smile, bastard.” Obito could not keep the amusement from creeping into his voice. “It concerns me when you’re wearing your mindfuck face while thinking about the most powerful crime family in the First World, Kakashi.”

“Did you pay any attention at all to the file on Vongola’s origins and history that you put together?” Kakashi got up, ignoring Obito’s grumbling when his hand was dislodged from its prime spot on Kakashi’s backside, and swiped the file in question off the table where he had been working earlier that night. “Here, look. The Vongola Shodaime is the ancestor that validates Tsu-chan. Look at Giotto’s face, pretend he’s Japanese, and now imagine what Tsu-chan will look like at twenty.”

“… Fuck me, that’s terrifying.” Obito stared at Giotto’s image and grimaced, lifting his arm to let Kakashi reclaim his place in the bed. “How the hell do you manage that sort of resemblance without a Clan Breeding Program?”

“I would say ‘sheer dumb chance’, except…” Kakashi flipped open the file to a group image of the first generation of the Vongola Famiglia. The other file he had brought back to the bed with him was placed next to it, this one containing colour-coded data that Kakashi had been collecting on Namimori’s connection to the Vongola. “The first generation Rain Guardian, Asari Ugetsu… and Yamamoto Takeshi, who goes to school with Tsu-chan.”

“The Take-sushi chef’s kid?” Obito blinked, recalling the retired swordsman-for-hire who had moved to Namimori about a decade ago to open a restaurant, and blinked again as another set of
pictures were spun under his nose.


“Huh… This is weird.” Obito fanned out the pictures of the Vongola First Generation and compared the portraits to the school photos of Tsunayoshi and his schoolmates. “This is really weird.”

“I haven’t been able to locate doubles for Storm, Mist, or Lightning. Yet.” Kakashi murmured, and touched G’s image with a single finger. “However… the Storm Guardian followed his Sky here to Japan, and just as Vongola became Sawada… G became Gokudera.”

Obito twitched, and looked over at Kakashi with wide eyes. Kakashi tilted a rueful smile up at Obito. “Only one of my baby cousins is unaccounted for right now. Lavina’s boy. She was half Italian, and given the pattern we’re seeing here I wouldn’t put it past her to have run into another of G’s descendants in Italy, the pink hair would be a pretty obvious sign… and you wanted to talk to her doctor anyway, ne?”

“You magnificent bastard.” Obito growled as he rolled them over, pinning Kakashi to the bed on his back, papers sliding across the blankets. “Why the hell am I the one doing all the work? I pay for your dogs. I pay for your porn addiction. Now you want me to do all your legwork too?”

“Maa, well…” Kakashi fluttered his gilt-gunmetal eyelashes coyly as his mask was tugged down, biting his lip to hide a smile. “I suppose going to Italy would be fun for Uhei and I, if you need to take a break. You’d need to take over Tsu-chan’s training for me, but…”

Obito groaned and hid his face against Kakashi’s neck. “No, shut up. You’re staying here where it’s safe and I can take care of you. No taunting the Mafia until after I find a cure for your sickness.”

“Of course, Obito.” Silent laughter lit Kakashi’s eyes, and his smile was warm and sly and wicked in all the ways Obito loved best. “Whatever you say.”

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(May, -8 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

With the experience gained from being an ANBU Captain, the Sixth Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, and the Jounin Sensei of Konoha’s single most terrifying Genin team, Kakashi could recognize the patterns set by destiny. For once, Kakashi was in a position to do something to alter the players, if not the game, before events gained momentum. This time instead of being caught in the current, Kakashi was standing on the bank. On the outside looking in, with the knowledge and the experience that let him see what was happening before it got started. So Kakashi took the information Obito gathered and started outlining the family trees, drawing the connections between the past and the present and gleaning hints of the future from nearly forgotten history.

“Why are you so obsessed with this?” Obito perched on the desk as Kakashi neatly tacked Iemitsu’s picture up above Tsunayoshi’s. “I mean it’s not that I don’t like the kid, but is this really any of our business, or are you just that bored in your retirement?”

“… Do you remember Kaguya? Do you remember Indra and Asura and the cycle of reincarnation? Do you remember Team Seven, generation after generation of Konoha’s strongest team broken and broken apart again and again and again?” Kakashi turned to look at Obito, silver-green eyes hazy with old, old memories. “I didn’t understand how the pattern governed our fates, back then… and it
cost me you, and Rin, and Sensei, and my adorable little genin… There was so much pain, for so long. All those generations of suffering, just because no one could see the patterns. I can see it happening again, here. The first generation’s Will is manifesting in their descendants. I want to help these kids before forces too big for them to fight shatter them when they try to go against Fate. I want to give these kids the chance we never had.”

“Is it really our place?” Obito shifted, the rings on his shakujou chiming. “I know you think you’ve gotta take responsibility for Ebi’s part in Tsuna’s sealing, and I do appreciate the kid pulling our Flames out, but…”

“What if there had been someone to step in before Rin sacrificed herself?” Kakashi wrapped his arms around his chest, voice cracked with old grief. “What if there had been someone to take us in hand before I lost you?”

“Hey, no. I’m right here, Kakashi. I’m here. I won’t ever leave you again.” Obito was down off the desk and had his arms wrapped around the silver-haired man in an instant. Kakashi could hide it behind lazy smiles and leering eyes most of the time, but every once in a while Kakashi would remember Obito as crushed-gone-taken. As his enemy and his target. As a corpse-puppet turning to scattering ash. As the ghost that haunted him behind closed eyes for years and years and decades until death. Obito tried not to be rabidly overprotective, but seeing Kakashi break down in panic, control crumbling away from his frantic grasp, combined with the already frail health the silver-haired man had been cursed with in this life basically shut down the portion of Obito’s brain that dealt with moderation and appropriate levels of reaction. Such was the result of being an Uchiha with little-to-no emotional self-control. “I’m here, Kakashi, and we’ll win this game, okay? You can have as many little minions as you want and screw with the Mafia’s collective minds upside down and sideways. It’ll be fun, ne? You always liked the idea of pulling a long con back when we were Chunin.”

“… Ne, Obito, do you see it too?” Kakashi twisted in Obito’s arms to look up at his partner, hands creeping up to fist in the collar of his robe. “Do you think this is why we’re here? Why we can remember? No one else was reborn, but if the Sage decided to interfere…”

“I think… I remember… the Shinigami acted like it was all a joke.” Obito narrowed his eyes as he fought to recall the hazy, eternal moments from their time between death and rebirth. Despite the power of Uchiha recollection, repeated traumas, frequent brainwashing, and multiple different deaths capped off by his spending several decades as a ghost haunting Kakashi’s eyes had fragmented Obito’s memories. “If there was someone else like Kaguya… The Shinigami and the Sage of Six Paths might interfere with our reincarnation cycles. Especially if some other Power decided they needed a game changer.”

“I thought so… we’re part of the story now.” Kakashi leaned into Obito’s embrace and worried his lip between his teeth, a bad habit he only indulged in when he was alone with Obito. (He had no desire to bite his own lip off should a surprise attack get through his guard, thank you but no.) “I think… we need to focus on breaking the seal on Tsu-chan’s Flame. Half of his Guardians are here in Namimori. The other three are probably in Italy. Lavina’s boy, the Bovino Famiglia… they’re valid leads on Storm and Lightning. The Shodaime Mist was famous for staying in Italy even after all the others left, so there might be another lead somewhere in that…”

“All that means nothing if Tsuna can’t Harmonize with any of them. Don’t get ahead of yourself, crazy bastard.” Obito used a thumb to pull Kakashi’s lip free and smirked. “Iemitsu pulled something to keep his kid off the radar while they deal with the backlash of the Cradle Affair. They need to find the leak that got Kyuudaime’s first son killed off so easily too. Tsuna’s only six right now. Mafia tradition says the kid needs to be at least ten before he can be officially named the heir, and the old
man still has two possibilities left. We’ve got a minimum of four years to work with, even if the Vongola continues with their new habit of spectacular fuck-ups. More, if Iemitsu keeps stalling things on his end.”

“Four years, hm?” Kakashi looped his arms around Obito’s neck with a soft, wicked smile. “I can get a lot of things done in four years.”

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Chapter End Notes

While I do have a fondness for Smarter Than She Acts!Nana, I also promised that there would be some darker themes presented here due to the shinobi worldview filtering the narrative. Thus, we get to see a bit of how Nana could be so unrealistically oblivious to the extreme and life-threatening violence that had suddenly overtaken her son’s life.

Like I said, given what Iemitsu allowed to happen to his son in canon, similar situations are not outside the realms of possibility. Nothing is scarier than hearing that it was For Their Own Good. People like that cannot be reasoned with, only fought against.
Tsuna is getting a head start on his Jounin Quirk.

Chapter Summary

In which Tsuna is a very empathic child with more Intuition than is good for him considering the state of his Flames, Kakashi continues to plot, Obito is the most Extra when it comes to planning jailbreaks, Xanxus is a Good Sky, and the Varia are adorably bloodthirsty.

Chapter Notes

So Tsuna is going off the reservation rather sooner than I planned, considering that he hasn’t even gotten rid of Nono’s Seal on his Flames yet. Kakashi, I blame you and so does Obito. Ironic, considering Obito’s own penchant for dramatics.

Seriously, why are all of my shinobi so Extra?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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(In which Kakashi and Tsuna are being creepy in entirely new and unique ways and Obito wants to know how the hell he ended up as The Only Sane Man in this family.)

(April, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Xanxus-itoko has been stuck in ice for how long?” Tsuna’s eyes were huge in his face, tiny hints of amber sparkling through the brown. “That Man and the Old Man made him Cold too? Without any way to find a warm place? That’s horrible. And mean! Why do they keep doing this to people?”

“It’s worse than it sounds.” Obito’s grim frown was sympathetic, much to Kakashi’s surprise. The other shinobi had admitted to researching the technique for curiosities sake, but Obito had not done much more than grumble about Bloodline Talent secrets in the time since first mentioning the Zero Point Breakthrough. “So I looked into it, and it turns out that Xanxus is aware inside that glacier of the Ninths. It would be one thing if the guy was in true stasis, but he’s not. Xanxus is stuck, and he’s awake, and he can feel the ice keeping him trapped. It’s cruel, and probably horrifically painful, and it’s going to drive him insane before long if it hasn’t done so already… Kakashi, it’s like… it’s like what Madara did to me, only worse because Xanxus doesn’t even have the hope of ever seeing the sky again. Not unless the Ninth sets him loose.”

“… The anniversary of the Coup is coming up, isn’t it?” Kakashi tilted his head to one side as he started shuffling files, the skin around his eyes tight at the reminder of Obito’s torture and mental breakdown from their past life. Tsuna watched avidly as the information was laid out in front of him without any sort of explanation. With a cruel smile curving his eyes, Kakashi tapped the picture of the Varia Officers. “Hm. Superbi has been granted permission to make a report on Varia activities in the Cradle. Vongola security will be on a hair trigger for the day. Do you remember what I told you about the knockback effects of hyper vigilance, Tsu-kun?”
“When they relax they’ll… relax too much?” Tsuna pursed his lips and glanced up at Kakashi for reassurance, continuing when he saw his teacher’s encouraging nod. “So if we wait for Superbi-san to leave we can save Xanxus-itoko *then* because the Vongola-gumi people won’t be expecting it!”

“A year and a day is a traditional timeframe.” Kakashi smiled wickedly and ruffled Tsuna’s fluffy hair. “It has a certain symmetry and it will merge well with the scenarios we’re crafting for later on.”

“Xanxus-itoko is important.” Tsuna’s eyes gleamed all-over amber as small fingers traced the outlines of dangling feathers. “He’s angry, and he’s Cold, but the Sky is supposed to be *accepting*. Strong enough to handle the truth, even when it hurts. His Elements love him even when he’s mean to them sometimes, so… Would you get him out of there, Obito-sensei? The Old Man hasn’t told anyone that he locked Xanxus-itoko up, you said. Only the people who were there know where he really is. So, um…”

“You’re on the right track, kiddo.” Obito nodded and poked Tsuna’s forehead with a smirk. “The longer the Vongola spend chasing their tails, the longer we have to get things ready on our end of things, just in case they do decide to come after you. *If we* free Xanxus from the cold box, then he’ll owe us one, and we can use that favour to keep the Varia out of our business.”

“So you’ll save him, Obito-sensei?” Tsuna beamed and clapped his hands. “Good! *That Man* and the Old Man are being dumb. I want to have lots of friends when I’m Jyuudaime instead. Kakashi-sensei said having a big team is the best way to make sure everyone else plays fair.”

“Such a clever, devoted little student I have.” Kakashi giggled in that odd tone he had developed sometime after seeing Obito crushed by the rock fall. It never failed to creep Obito out because there was something just *off* about the sound. Tsuna never seemed to notice, and instead just giggled along. This only served to increase the creepy factor in Obito’s opinion. How the hell had Obito ended up the sane one in this partnership?

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(In which Obito proves that just because he’s left behind the Uchiha name does not mean that he’s left behind the Clan’s inborn ability to be Extra about even the most mundane things, or: Obito, there are less dramatic ways to house shop.)

(May, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Obito stared at the tall trees that covered the vast majority of his new property. The cost of the land had been remarkably low, considering the parcels undeveloped state and the fact that the lot shared a significant portion of its property line with the Hibari Estate. The Hibari Clan scared potential neighbors away, so the four hundred acres of mostly woodland was untouched. All the better for them, in the end. The old growth forest, barefaced stone cliff, and a deep running stream had been what attracted Obito to this place. Keeping an eye on Hibari Kyouya was just a bonus, really.

Obito had still puppeteered more than a few genjutsu-addled drug-dealers and flesh-traffickers into draining their bank accounts in order to afford the property. The dividends from Kakashi’s investments would easily pay for the upkeep and property taxes once everything was finished, but Obito had needed the new place *now*. Namimori was peaceful enough for the moment, but once Kakashi’s scheming started having an effect things would get hectic quickly. Obito wanted something a bit more defensible than the small civilian house they had been using for the last two years.

Reaching for the power of Mokuton that rested in his blood, Obito coaxed the trees to grow bigger, taller, wider, twisting them together under his will. Remembering sheltering walls and carved proud
faces and giant trees so tall they seemed to be all that held up the dome of the sky. Branches wove and fused and grew, roots sinking deep as the trunks widened. Under Obito’s urging grew nightingale floors and sliding walls and a watertight scale-shingled roof, connected to covered walkways and winding staircases hidden under armored bark. Underground storage spaces and panic rooms in hollows scooped out by twisting roots. Entrances camouflaged and disguised. Peter Pan’s tree-fort taken to the highest level, Obito built a home worthy of a Clan Head high above the ground, cradled in the boughs.

Once Obito released the Mokuton the unremarkable lot looked more like what Obito’s wistful memories insisted a forest should. Trees thicker than a man was tall, ferns and moss and creeping vines littering the forest floor, and all of it ready to be trapped and warded against unwanted intruders. Obito spiraled out from the center, building up the first layer of security as he double-checked his work. The entire lot was saturated in Obito’s chakra, allowing him to feel-sense where more work was needed to smooth things out. A high wall surrounded the outer boundary of the property now, with only one gate that faced the road. Obito barred the gate and grew a covered carport. Not quite a garage, given that the reborn shinobi had never quite gotten used to the idea of motor vehicles, but it amused Obito to think of having visitors polite enough keep the driveway clear by parking where they should.

Doubling back along his path to add the next layer of tricky security seals and shinobi traps, Obito headed back towards the giant tree house. They would need cushions for the wooden furniture, appliances, and Obito would need to genjutsu a team or two of contractors to install the plumbing and electricity, but it was a solid bit of work for a single day of effort.

Kakashi would love it. The ironic bastard had always been unaccountably disappointed by Konoha’s lack of tree houses. Now they were literally ‘Hidden In The Leaves’, with their very own tree mansion to live in, and all the privacy a regime toppling conspiracy could need. Lots of rooms for Kakashi to abscond with a whole pack of proto-genin plus all of his dogs. Kakashi would be more than able to keep himself entertained while Obito was stuck traipsing around Mafia occupied Europe.

Before he left for the night, Obito set up a line of wireless motion capture cameras along the top of the wall. He really wanted to see the looks on the Hibari’s faces when they saw the three storey tall ‘fence’ that had grown up overnight. (Kushina-nee would have been so proud of him!)

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(In which Obito gets to be traditionally Sneaky and Ninja-like while reliving his glory days. Also: Konoha Shinobi are all about the High-Key Dramatics. Also-also: Xanxus is a Very Good Sky, you know this to be true.)

(May 5th, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Obito kept his Mist Flames suppressed to the lowest possible level. The Vongola had the largest concentration of Flame Adepts in the Mafia. One of them might just get lucky and notice if Obito used Mist Flames on this mission. Instead, shunshin was what got Obito inside the security perimeter and allowed him to dodge around the multiple tangled layers of Mist Wards that Obito wished to unravel. It was almost too bad that Kamui could only take Obito to places he had already been, but it was worth it to get a closer look at the Vongola’s security setup. Once inside the perimeter defenses it was a cakewalk to ninja his way down to where Xanxus was being kept hidden.

In a fit of nostalgia, Obito was dressed as ‘Akatsuki no Tobi’ once again. Although in concession to his new circumstances and allegiances he had switched out the orange mask for an indigo one, and the clouds on his cloak were violet instead of red.
Giving in to the impish urge that gripped him, Obito paused in full view of Xanxus’ imprisoned form and held his finger up to where his mouth would be in the universal sign for ‘shh, be quiet’. The childish gesture made Obito want to giggle, especially when Xanxus’ previously sluggish energy grew agitated. You could taste the rage hanging in the air, silent curses making the heavy, oppressive atmosphere of the Cradle vibrate.

With a theatric twirl, Obito located the brightest source of light in the cavernous basement room and scurried up the wall to hide behind it. The decorative baroque frescoes were far too fragile to support the weight of a grown man, especially considering the less-than-expert repairs done to the damages caused by Xanxus’ duel with the Ninth… unless that man was a ninja and using chakra to stick to the wall, of course.

Obito set a Chameleon Cloak genjutsu around him and settled back on his heels to wait. He still had time to kill until Showtime, which he was going to spend examining the cage.

Unnaturally cold ice, strung with chains. By the thousand little gods, were they really this scared of Xanxus? Wrath Flames or no, the Varia Boss was still only sixteen.

Until the Vongola’s plans for the Cradle Affair Anniversary were over and done with, Obito would have to sit still, listen closely, and hide under the chakra illusion that made him look like another part of the wall, his cloak muddling his outline into something other than what was recognizably human. Obito and Kakashi had come up with a plan, and it was going to be glorious, if only a small taste of what the Vongola really deserved for what they had done to Kakashi’s cute little student.

Squalo Superbi’s loud entrance roused Obito from his meditation on the differences in global politics when waging a war in which the advantage hinged on technological advancements, and how that mindset made people damn fucking stupid when they encountered greater powers that could not be stolen. Well aware of how developed the young assassin’s danger sense was, Obito sank back into a half-meditation and kept his attention focused on finding the sanded to nearly invisible seams that marked where repairs had been made after Xanxus blew holes in everything during his fight with his foster father. It would not do to have his cover blown just because Superbi noticed Obito’s attention. Not that any of this prevented Obito from eavesdropping shamelessly.

Obito had a soft spot for the Varia. They were a group of highly unstable assassins that moved only for love of money held together by their loyalty to one man. They reminded Obito of Konoha’s Jounin forces. Ibiki and Anko would have fit right in, and Gai would have loved Lussaria. Xanxus even had Tsunade-hime’s bad habits! Even without the future political gains and Tsuna’s epic sad face, Obito would probably have saved Xanxus just to preserve that fleeting glimpse of home.

Superbi talked for a long, long time, going into far more detail than some of those reports probably warranted, but Obito did not blame him for stretching things out. That was his Sky in there, trapped and hurting and Superbi could probably feel the rage in Xanxus’ spirit echoing in his Flames through their bond. The Sky was in pain and the Rain could not reach him to soothe that agony… it was probably driving Superbi insane.

The Ninth Generation Guardians assigned to the bloodthirsty Rain Officer looked supremely irritated the longer Superbi prattled on. That irritation kept them from paying proper attention to Superbi’s Flame, but Obito could see the way it spat and raged. The swordsman’s aura was so far from tranquil it was actually a bit impressive that the boy was not verging on Discord.

Obito wholeheartedly approved of Superbi’s tactics. The longer the kid talked, the longer he had to examine the security of the Cradle and the composition of the ice block. Plus, the Vongola was so focused on the Varia that they had completely failed to take other forces into account when designing their security. Forces like Obito, who had reasons to want Xanxus freed outside of familial sentiment
or personal loyalty to the man in question.

The sun was well on its way towards rising by the time Superbi had talked himself hoarse and run out of excuses to keep reporting details. Obito felt sorry for the kid as the Sword Emperor glanced desperately at the file in his hand and then back up at Xanxus’ frozen face. “…I’ll be back later, Boss. Don’t worry about the rest of the trash, we’re Varia Quality.”

‘Varia Quality, hm?’ Obito smiled behind his swirled indigo mask while Superbi stomped off, the muscles of the kid’s back locked tight against letting his shoulders curl in. ‘Oh, rookie, the things I could do with that.’

The last few hours of Obito’s wait ticked by slowly. The Vongola security reset after the Varia Rain Officer’s visit, the Ninth came by and spent about an hour moping and running a monologue of justifications for his decisions to a silent and literally captive audience. Finally, Obito’s watch buzzed silently against his wrist.

It was time.

Obito dropped to the floor in front of Xanxus and reached out, hoping that the solid state of the Flames would not interfere with what he was about to do. Kamui let his hands slide through the iced over Flames. The ice slowed him despite the defensive use of Kamui, stung him, a sharp burn like plunging frost-nipped fingers into hot water. Slowed, but not stopped.

Just like Chakra techniques could be used to bypass Flames, so too could Flames bypass Chakra fuelled tricks. Neither was fully effective against the other, so despite the unexpected pain making it difficult to concentrate Kamui still worked as a method for getting through the Solid State Sky Flames, and thank the merciful kami for that, because Plan B was to abscond with the entire glacier Xanxus’ was stuck in. Which… might have proved difficult if the Zero Point Ice had proved capable of resisting Kamui entirely.

Xanxus’ eyes seemed to go wide under the distortion of the ice as Obito grabbed his shoulders and pushed.

Mafioso and shinobi disappeared soundlessly into Kamui’s shadows.

/.../

“My son! What have you done to my son?” The wailing specter was inhumanly beautiful, dressed in nothing but ice-pale silks. Her delicate bare feet were white as marble, and diamond dust glittered in the air around her. “I gave him to you! I trusted you with my son! What have you done?”

Bulletproof window glass shattered with the frost heave that accompanied her tortured scream. One security guard, already stressed nearly to breaking by the earlier visit by the Varia, lost his nerve and shot the pale woman in a burst of panic. Grouped shots, center mass, just as the head of security had taught them.

Snow exploded around the bullets and the screams fell silent as ice shattered across the floor. The Vongola staff stared as the ice began to melt in a screen of misty wisps.

(Already hidden deep in Kamui with a slowly warming Xanxus, Obito smirked. Nobody did distractions quite like a ninja did distractions. It was nice of Kakashi to teach him that ice clone technique from Yuki. The semi-solid bushin added that extra touch of class to the whole act.)

Later, the few Vongola staff trusted in the Cradle would find the cage of eternal ice standing empty
but undamaged. The gossip from that situation painted an even more terrifying picture of Xanxus’ ancestry that most were entirely comfortable with.

Despite the insulting nature of the oldest gossip, no one had actually thought Xanxus was a demon before that day.

/…/

Xanxus, Boss of the Varia, son and brother of the Vongola Famiglia Head Family, took his first free breath in a year (and a day. A year and a day. Why did that time frame seem so important?)

The man who had removed him from Vongola custody and the cage of ice created by the Ninth’s Zero-Point Breakthrough was hovering just outside of easy reach. Smart of him to look up Xanxus’ barehanded range with his Flames. (Was he aware that Xanxus’ had been frozen with his guns, or did he just not care? Maybe he was counting on the ice to have done damage to the weapons.)

Xanxus eyed his rescuer warily. The subtle caution was at odds with the overtly strange outfit. Sege hat and shakujou and a high collared black robe pattered with violet clouds. An indigo mask faced Xanxus, smooth and featureless except for the lines spiraling out from the single eyehole. (The Vongola group had a long tradition of recruiting Japanese members nearly as frequently as they recruited Italians, and the members of the Varia were even less picky than that. If you were Quality you were in. Combined, those factors meant Xanxus easily recognized the nationality of the period clothing the stranger was wearing as Japanese, but why the man wanted to dress up as a wandering monk from the Warring States Era to break into the Vongola Main House was a mystery Xanxus would let lie for now.)

A second breath, and Xanxus could feel the damage from his imprisonment pull and split. Frostbite, or something like it, had torn open the skin in places where Xanxus’ own Flames had fought back against the ice.

“Signore Xanxus is hurt.” The rings on the staff chimed as the man shifted, twitching like he wanted to jump forward. “Can… can Tobi help?”

Ignoring the question for the moment, Xanxus looked around at the strange landscape that stubbornly resisted every attempt Xanxus made to disrupt it. His Flame was weakened from the ice, but nowhere near exhausted. Mammon had taught Xanxus all the tricks for checking his surroundings for and-or dispelling Mist illusions. The brain-hurting colorless void and square marble-white pillars remained unchanged. Either this joker was stronger than Mammon, or this was a real place rather than a Solid Illusion. “You’re a Mist.”

“Oh, Signore Xanxus can tell? Yes, Tobi is a Mist. Sometimes Tobi is a doctor though.” A scroll was removed from one wide sleeve. (Rice paper, not papyrus. Tobi was definitely from East Asia.) It unrolled with a flourish, and a burst of white smoke cleared to reveal a portable surgery. It was much more extensive than even a Mafia first aid kit. That was at least one point in support of Tobi’s claim. With a shrug, Tobi laughed at himself in the face of Xanxus’ scowl. “Not usually this kind of doctor, but still a medical doctor! Tobi didn’t know how hurt Signore Xanxus would be after being sealed away, so Tobi brought along everything.”

Tobi was most definitely a Mist. A decently strong one too, with a Flame Purity that drowned out any secondary Flames not in use before they could register on Xanxus’ senses. Tobi’s manner of dress and the gear he had packed said East Asia by way of Japan, but his language and accent were pure Veneto rather than the Standard Italian used by tourists. Then again, most Mists had tricks that allowed them to absorb languages and cultures to the point of them seeming to have been born into
it. Xanxus snorted and shook his head. If Tobi had gone through all the trouble of breaking Xanxus out, then Tobi wanted Xanxus alive for reasons of his own. It should be safe enough to let the Mist patch him up, at least until Tobi made his pitch. “Fine. Go ahead.”

“Really? Yay!” Tobi perked up like a dog promised biscuits, grabbing a package of swabs and disinfectant before bouncing over to Xanxus. “Shirt off please, Signore! And, and, oh… so that’s what piccolo meant by important.”

Tobi had frozen in place, inches from touching Xanxus, and the Mafioso could feel why. It was the resonance of a compatible Flame, ringing in his soul like the cathedral bells on Christmas Eve. The draw to Harmonize was like a rip tide, invisible and deadly. It would be the simplest thing in the world to reach out and touch the sliver of bare skin visible between sleeve and glove. With skin to skin contact, all Xanxus would have to do was tug…

‘No.’ Xanxus grabbed that particular Sky impulse and strangled it. No, Xanxus would not. Would not.

Tobi had made no offer, so Xanxus had no right to take. Yes, it might have eased some of the possible overt threat, but Xanxus knew nothing about this strange Mist. Compatible Dying Wills or not, Xanxus had no idea if Tobi was even Varia Quality, no matter how smooth the one-man operation to break Xanxus out had gone. Tobi might have a Sky already, even if he felt Unaligned. Hell, Xanxus had not even seen the man’s face, there was no way there was enough trust here between them to Harmonize properly.

A Sky who met any or all of their Elements before puberty set in might be able to get away with fully Harmonizing at the moment of meeting without damage done to the minds of either party, but Xanxus and Tobi were not inexperienced children. They could do irreparable harm to one another just by accident if something in their histories triggered Discord in the bond. Harmony at first sight was a fairy tale concept that did more harm than good in the end. Even with Squalo it had taken months of courting before Xanxus had fully Harmonized with his Rain, and neither of them had been fully grown.

Very deliberately, Xanxus sat back and braced himself on his hands. “Don’t worry, I can control myself. Just make sure to keep the gloves on.”

Slowly, the Mist nodded and went to work with a grumble. “… Piccolo decimo could’ve warned Tobi. Oh, Tobi is so embarrassed…”

Xanxus stiffened, red eyes narrowed in a suspicious glare. Tobi said nothing further, so Xanxus kept equally quiet. The masked Mist was quick and skilled, oddly gentle and careful not to cause any undue pain or trigger the assassin’s defensive reflexes. Which was better than even Lussaria could manage, sometimes, and that was decidedly impressive.

Soon Xanxus was professionally wrapped in bandages, the trenches of frozen skin cleaned out and treated to prevent infection and lessen scarring. Tobi handed over an energy bar and a bottle of water. Tellingly, both items were still sealed and without any sign that they had been tampered with. As Xanxus took the offerings with a grunt, Tobi skittered back out of touching range.

Alarm bells went off in Xanxus’ head as his Intuition roared. That sort of flinch, in a Mist as powerful as Tobi apparently was…

The fact that the masked man was able to circumvent Vongola security, to say nothing of whatever Tobi had done to trick Xanxus free of the Zero Point created ice, meant Tobi was probably on par with Mammon. Maybe even a pre-curse Mammon. The way Tobi was acting though… that cringe
in his Flames spoke of a severe trauma from the past still carried forward unhealed.

Xanxus swallowed back the inappropriate surge of Wrath that wanted to flare up. Tobi was not Xanxus’ to avenge, and might not ever be.

First things first, it was time for Xanxus to get some answers.

“Who Scorched you?” That was… not what he had intended to ask first, fucking Sky instincts. Xanxus crushed the empty wrapper in lieu of having anything better to destroy. Cellophane burned green and yellow within the wrathful amber as it dropped to the white stone ground. “Was it the one who sent you after me? The other Decimo candidate?”

If the Ninth was really considering someone who would leave an Element this badly damaged as the Heir to the Family over his remaining sons then Xanxus was going to have to start actually killing people for stupidity much sooner than he had expected.

“What? No!” Tobi threw his hands up in a ‘halt’ motion with a distressed yelp. “Piccolo doesn’t even have access to his full Flame yet, anyway!”

“So who was it?” Xanxus watched Tobi fiddle with his staff, feeling uncharacteristically patient. Sure, this line of questioning was essentially useless if Xanxus’ wanted to know whom Tobi was working for and what they wanted in return for Xanxus’ freedom, but maybe his Intuition was on to something. Going at information sideways might just be the right choice.

Already Xanxus had confirmation that there was an actual alternate Decimo candidate, and that he had been the one to send Tobi after Xanxus. From the sound of things, the Decimo candidate was younger than Xanxus. Maybe even too young to be confirmed as heir, which might explain why the Ninth was dithering over whom he planned to name as his Heir now that Enrico was gone. There were also the rather interesting implications stemming from the fact that the kid had apparently already guessed that Xanxus and Tobi were compatible.

All of that was just what Xanxus had been able to glean from Tobi’s comments so far, inferring the truth from word choice and phrasing with careful attention paid to his Intuition. The personal questions were working out well, even if the line of questioning had been started by Xanxus’ Intuition running away from him. Even as Xanxus watched and thought on his next angle, Tobi sighed, slumping a little to lean on his staff.

“When Tobi was thirteen, Tobi was caught in a landslide. Tobi’s great-uncle was a super-skilled surgeon and managed to keep Tobi alive after, but…” Tobi’s left hand rubbed at his right shoulder. (Xanxus noted with interest that Tobi’s eye was on the right as well, rather than the presumably undamaged left.) Tobi laughed, and it was a rough, bitter sound that lacked any form of humor. “Tobi’s uncle Madara gave Tobi’s heart away to a mean lady who wanted… wanted bad things. Evil things.”

Tobi’s hand clawed at his chest for a moment, and Xanxus winced internally. A corrupt Sky was one thing. Having your own blood hand you over to that sort of evil while you were too weak to defend yourself was another thing entirely. “How the fuck did you get loose?”

Corrupt Skies were dangerous. When a Sky fell Discordant they would often inflict unwanted, nonconsensual bonds on the Elements they claimed, and they often took those Elements down with them when they self destructed.

At least, that was what could happen according to the stories the Vongola Alliance used to teach Flame Lore History. Skies were so rare already that information on what happened when a Sky got
twisted was vanishingly thin on the ground. Most Famiglia tended to coddle their Skies rather than risk damaging them.

For Tobi to not only have gotten free, but to have done so without falling Discordant himself or rejecting his Flame entirely was impressive as hell and said a lot about exactly how strong Tobi’s Dying Will was.

“Ah…” Tobi ducked his head like he was blushing, a giggle escaping from behind the mask. Xanxus stared as the Mist wiggled and cooed. “Tobi’s beautiful wife learned that Tobi was still alive and came after Tobi. Then Tobi’s lovely, courageous wife beat Tobi and the bad lady up until the chains around Tobi’s heart shattered and Tobi was free again!”

“Your wife beat you so hard it shook you loose from a Forced Bond?” The sheer amount of violence and damage that would have taken was enough to give even Xanxus pause. The Mist had his hands clasped under his chin like a twittering civilian schoolgirl discussing her hypothetical Prince Charming. Tobi’s voice had gone soft and bubbly like Lussaria conversing about fashion trends. There were even visible hearts and sparkles floating in the air around the man, the Mist’s feet hovering several inches above the ground. Xanxus took a second, more thoughtful look at Tobi’s robe. Chances were… “Your wife would be a Cloud, then?”

“Yes! Wow, how did Signore Xanxus know? Yes, Kashi is a Cloud! Kashi is a very gorgeous, deadly Cloud who loves Tobi very much and will rip out Tobi’s spine rather than let Tobi leave. Again.” Tobi paused, not at all fazed by the dry look on Xanxus’ face. “Kashi is the very best hunter-tracker. It is very hard to escape Kashi if Kashi wants to find you.”

“This Kashi would be your… Piccolo Decimo Cloud Guardian, then?” Xanxus was trying not to put the cart before the horse, but this could… this could work out. Maybe. If the Vongola Cloud and the Varia Mist were married… closer connections between the two branches of the Famiglia would not necessarily be a bad thing. If the Decimo kid were worthy, if Massimo and Federico kept being fucking useless twats about standing up to Nono, if…

“Nope! Kashi is a free Cloud, just like Tobi is a free Mist!” Tobi flashed a double thumbs-up, his stance wavering, and his head turned in a way that let Xanxus know he was being watched. Xanxus’ heart skipped a beat. A Cloud that matched Tobi, that had to match Tobi, because Clouds were picky little shits who never settled for less than the best if they were Clouds worth their Flame, a possibly Varia Quality Cloud, one without a Sky to lay claim to them… How long had it been since the Varia had a decent Cloud Officer? Ottabio had been trash even before he had turned traitor. Would Tobi’s wife resonate with Xanxus as strongly as Tobi himself did? How long had it been since Xanxus had given real consideration to completing his Pride?

A rustle of paper and fabric, and Tobi pulled a thin folder from the depths of his sleeve. “… Maybe Tobi will find a Sky that will make Kashi happy, one day. Kashi has been sad ever since Teacher Minato died. Tobi did it, but Kashi says it was really Kaguya. So Tobi doesn’t… know. Maybe Kashi will pick a new Sky someday, one that Tobi won’t be able to hurt again.”

Put together with what Xanxus’ had already extrapolated and intuited, Tobi’s time in a Forced Bond had been more traumatizing than anything Xanxus had heard tell of before. It was amazing that Tobi could stand to be inside the range of Xanxus’ Flames without lashing out. Mists were already prone to disassociating from reality given the nature of their Flames. For Tobi to have been betrayed by his own blood, enslaved by force to a Discordant Sky, have a hand in killing the man who sounded likely to have been Tobi’s chosen Sky, and only get free because his lover beat him into traction? Yeah, it was no wonder Tobi spoke in the third person. The Mist probably needed the reminder of his own agency, especially if all of the crap he had gone through had started at thirteen. Or younger.
Goddamn.

The names, assuming they were true and not aliases were another clue regarding Tobi’s origins. Xanxus was all but certain the Mist was Japanese at this point, despite the Mist’s unwavering and flawless use of regional dialect Italian. Tobi certainly was not doing much to obscure anything about himself except for his face.

Perhaps achieving a full Harmony was possible after all. Vongola lore had long since established Cloud and Mist as being the most difficult Elements to pull in. Considering the way Xanxus’ own difficult personality made unaligned Elements scatter at the mere mention of his name, Xanxus had stopped actively looking for compatible Elements a long time ago. Yet, here was Tobi, and possibly his wife…

“So how did two unaligned Elements end up close enough to the other Decimo candidate to be doing him favors?” Xanxus ignored the folder in Tobi’s hands for now. There was information that Tobi clearly wanted Xanxus to have, but it was best not to show any desire for it. Tobi was a Mist, and the easiest way to get a Mist to share the interesting secrets was to pretend boredom with all of it. Eventually the Mist would share everything he knew in an attempt to produce an interesting reaction. In addition, a Sky talking to a Scorched Element had to be careful, and patient, much like trying to pet a feral cat. You had to wait and ignore them until they came to you, otherwise someone could end up dead.

“Tobi wanted to make things up to Kashi. So Tobi bought a house where Kashi could rest and heal. Except… Kashi is a genius, you know. Kashi saw what was happening when the Ninth came. Kashi saw the pattern even when the Vongola missed it and tried to break it.” Tobi sighed and hugged himself, seated tailor style as he floated in the air. “When Madara gave Tobi’s heart to Kaguya it was horrible, but at least Tobi was still a Mist. Tobi didn’t like himself much, but Tobi still knew who Tobi was supposed to be. Tobi just had to wait for Kashi to come and take Tobi’s heart back from Kaguya. Signore Xanxus was lied to and frozen and locked away in the dark and… they took the Sky away from Piccolo. They tried to damp down the Flames of the Sky, and poor Piccolo was drowning until Kashi found Piccolo.”

“What…” Xanxus almost thought that he was trapped in the ice again. What Tobi was hinting at with allegory and comparisons to Xanxus’ own trials was…

No.

There was no way even the CEDEF trash would have allowed that sort of thing to happen to a Sky. To have your Flame sealed away was a spiritual castration on the level of a lobotomy. To never know the warm assuredness of this is who I am. To be locked away from the core of ones very self. To do that to a Sky (a Sky too young to fight back or even understand what was going on) to strip all Harmony from their life… better to be killed quickly than suffer that fate! Not even the Vindice took their punishment of Mafia criminals that far. “How is the brat not dead?”

“Kashi is a genius.” Tobi nodded firmly, not bothering to elaborate much on what he appeared to take as given. “Kashi saw the pattern even back then.”

“Back then, you… how long have you been spying on the Vongola?” Resonance this strong did not just crop up out of nowhere. Tobi must have been watching Xanxus long enough for their Flames to interact on some level, even if it was just picking up on traces and residue from Tobi’s stalking. This had to have been building up for a while by now. Long enough for Tobi to decide he liked what he saw in Xanxus even if the Mist was too badly Scorched to recognize the building Resonance until Tobi was practically sitting in the Varia Sky’s lap.
“Tobi started looking for the Vongola three years ago, and it took Tobi about a year to find the good stuff, so… two years? Maybe a little more?” Tobi hummed, counting off on his fingers like a child before he nodded once again. “Yep. A few months more than two years.”

“You started watching before Enrico died.” Xanxus forced his voice to remain level. The traitors had been found, and dealt with, and hopefully Xanxus had managed to get through to the Ninth well enough for steps to finally be taken to avoid a repeat of the utter bullshit failure that had gotten Xanxus’ big brother killed. Yet, for Tobi to have been watching them for so long and never show up on the radar before today… “Did you have anything to do with the assassination?”

“No! Tobi doesn’t care about the Vongola! The Mafia is dumb and boring and stupid.” Tobi slumped to the side with a disgusted whine. “Tobi just wanted to live peacefully with Kashi, but then Kashi’s student got sealed by the Vongola, and then the Heir died, and Signore Xanxus did a dumb thing and got put on ice, and the Ninth is a scared old man who can’t make up his damned mind. Now Kashi’s student may have to be Decimo. Because Signore Xanxus was denounced and the other Heirs are easy targets! There won’t be anyone else left at this rate!”

Xanxus stayed quiet as the Mist grumbled about horrible brat children stealing away his wife’s attention. It was true that Tobi seemed much more concerned with making his wife happy rather than plotting the downfall of the Vongola or getting up to any of the usual headache inducing Mist tricks. However… “What about your wife?”

Tobi went still and silent, the overt silliness falling away to leave behind a cold-blooded killer. This was a man Xanxus could believe had tracked the Vongola for three years without being detected by post-Heir assassination paranoia. This was a Mist strong and canny enough to break into the Vongola Mansion and free Xanxus without tripping any of the alarms. A thrill rushed through the young Sky. This was an Element that might belong with him. “Kashi had plans for Piccolo. Plans the Vongola could wreck by being thoughtless fools. But Kashi is a genius, and saw the pattern soon enough to fix it. Here, look at this.”

At last, the folder Tobi had been fiddling with was handed over. Xanxus was careful to keep his face blank as he took the file and flipped it open. Vongola Primo’s face greeted him, and Xanxus paused. It was a composite photo with half taken from Primo’s official portrait and the other half belonging to a child. Age the kid up, change the colour of his hair and eyes, and the brat could be Primo’s clone. The kid was a good decade younger than Xanxus himself, but with looks like that there was no doubt about the kid’s ancestry. Xanxus flipped through the file, hovering somewhere between curiosity and apprehension. G’s photo was incomplete, as was Lampo’s, and Daemon’s too. However Alaude, Asari, and Knuckle all had the face of a child melded together with the faces from their official portraits. Aside from differences in coloration, it was eerie how closely the children resembled the Primo Generation.

At the very back was an image of Secondo… and Xanxus. Ricardo Vongola’s face merged seamlessly with that of the Varia Boss, and even given the fallacy of hand painted portraits nothing could distract Xanxus from that fact. On the back of the image was clipped a family tree, tracing Xanxus’ bloodline back through his mother (and fucking hell, Xanxus had not seen the woman who birthed him in nearly ten years. How had Tobi gotten bloodline information on Xanxus’ mother?)

From Xanxus to his mother, back through the maternal lines all the way up to Primo’s full-blood sister. At that, something inside Xanxus relaxed. He may not be Timoteo’s son, and he may still need to verify this information through his own sources, but if he was still Vongola blood… then that was enough. It was enough. Xanxus was still a son of the Vongola. The foundations for his sense of self
were secure.

It certainly cleared up how he could have the Vongola Intuition and the Secondo’s Wrath Flames despite being adopted. Both of which should have made Xanxus think twice about Nono’s claim that there was no Vongola blood in Xanxus’ veins. In his rage and grief Xanxus had stopped asking the questions that he should have if he wanted to be smart about things.

“Explain this to me.” Xanxus looked up at Tobi and tried to remain calm even as his mind raced through probabilities. “This looks like…”

“Fate likes nice round numbers. A century. A decade. A year and a day.” Tobi’s mask tilted, and Xanxus could feel the Mist studying him, watching for his reactions. “It’s been ten generations of bloodshed, soaking the legacy of a man who only wished to protect what was precious to him. All the efforts of mortal man cannot turn back time, but sometimes… sometimes a Will of Fire can burn even after death.”

“If I’m cast as Secondo in this game our so-called Fates are playing…” Xanxus snarled and closed the file before he did something stupid. Like burning it. Which would be a stupid thing to do. Information was more precious than gold. Right now Xanxus was busy recalling his lessons in the Vongola Family History. A cousin with Wrath Flames, and a probably civilian raised prospect for the next Head of the Family. The parallels were obvious. “Someone expects me to force the little brat of Primo’s out of power, if it comes to that.”

“To bring a second reign of blood upon the Underworld.” Tobi nodded his head and laid his staff across his knees. “Yes. In Signore Xanxus’ blood is an echo of Signore Xanxus’ predecessors. Patterns like to be followed. Patterns take effort to break. Signore Xanxus’ blood, and Signore Xanxus’ Flame, and Signore Xanxus’ Wrath… any one of those things might pull Signore Xanxus onto a path trod once before. Step carefully, Capo della Varia, those who came before Signore Xanxus’ may well have left traps behind to snare the unwary.”

“I want the Vongola to be strong. To be the strongest.” Xanxus tucked the file under his arm, a red glare daring the Mist to try and take the information packet away. “Expecting every single piece of Trash they take in to be Varia fucking Quality is just stupid though.”

“Tobi understands. Tobi is glad.” The Mist stood, black coat swirling around his ankles as his feet dropped to the ground, and he extended a gloved hand in Xanxus’ direction. “Would Signore Xanxus like to go home now?”

“Fuck, yes. I need booze.” Xanxus let Tobi take a hold of his arm and started plotting even as the air warped around them. If the Primo-clone expected Xanxus to help fight against whichever power was arranging things to mimic the First and Second Generations, then the brat had better be prepared to pay up. Xanxus was not in the habit of doing things for free. Eventually, Xanxus would need a Mist Officer to replace Mammon. Arcobaleno came with a built in time limit after all, and that was the only reason Xanxus did not regret the lack of bond between the shrunken Mist and himself. Plus, God only knew how much Xanxus needed a competent Cloud Officer. When the dust finally settled, the Primo-clone trash had better stay out of Xanxus’ way.

True Harmony was far too rare a gift for Xanxus to let it pass by without making the effort to catch it.

=/=

(In which the Varia are depressed and maudlin, and Xanxus is still a Very Good Sky.)
(May 5th, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

The Varia as a whole remained unusually subdued when Squalo got back from the Vongola Main House. The Rain Officer had headed straight for the lounge with the largest liquor cabinet. Such an act was a type of after-action report all on its own, and not one that left the other Varia Officers with any sort of positive feelings. Belphagor and Mammon did not drink, but they stayed even as the three older (even if only in body) Officers drank in a sort of grim determination to stop thinking.

Not the healthiest of coping methods, but it would happen only this one time a year. They would kill people another day, and the Boss would never know. (Which only made it worse.) They drank to remember, and they drank to forget. Remember their oaths, and forget how badly they were failing to uphold those oaths (failing HIM. Failing their Sky. Forgive us, forgive us, PLEASE. Just give their Sky BACK.)

Most of the way through a very nice bottle of brandy, Squalo slumped sideways into Lussaria. “… Nonon refused to let Boss loose, and I’m forbidden from asking again until next year.”

Lussaria winced and pet Squalo’s hair, the silver length uncut since the coup and a visible sign of the passing time. Belphagor hugged Mammon to his chest and they both scowled, eyes hidden even deeper in shadow than usual. Leviathan gently put down his empty glass, picked up the scotch, and started drinking straight from the bottle.

The bloody light of sunset shaded the room in red and gold. The Varia Officers drank the room dry and passed out hours before the first hint of pink started creeping through the curtains.

“What the fuck is this bullshit you shitty fucking trash?” Xanxus scowled as his Officers fell off the furniture and scrambled upright and tried to focus through the bleary mess of some truly spectacular hangovers. “You shits are supposed to be Varia fucking Quality and instead of tracking down the goddamned fucking trash traitors who killed my brother you’re fucking around like that fucking useless idiot trash Sawada. Get your dumb-fuck trash asses up and get the fuck back to work!”

“… Boss?” The Varia Officers stared, reasonably certain that something had been slipped into the booze. “Boss!”

Leviathan was the first, but he certainly was not the only one to plow into Xanxus and cling and make certain that his return was real. Badass assassins feared the world over, yes, but not completely devoid of human emotion. Group hugs were just one of the things you got used to after living with Lussaria for any length of time. Besides, the Varia Officer lounge was on a closed loop monitor system. No one would ever know.

(“Aww.” Tobi clasped his hands under his chin and cooed while he watched from the other side of Kamui. “That’s adorable.”)

The Varia really were just like Konoha’s Jounin, what with the combination of excessive drinking, sharp pointy edges, sparkles, and the rampant hugging that went on behind closed doors. Tobi sighed with wistful fondness. “Rookies are so cute.”)

/==

Chapter End Notes
Xanxus is a Good Sky and anyone who disagrees with me can _FIGHT ME RIGHT NOW._

Also I didn't hint so much as trumpet my intentions for the future from the rooftops. The relationship between Tsuna and Xanxus is going to be _very different_ from canon. Because Ninshu Shinobi _need_ Clans the same way Flame Actives need Harmonies. It's a _Thing._

And Xanxus? Xanxus is a member of Tsuna's Clan. He just doesn't understand what that means yet.
Outsider views of Kakashi and Obito, then Hayato arrives!

Chapter Summary

The manipulation of what Outsiders see is one of the first things a shinobi child learns. Kakashi and Obito have long since mastered their basics.

Now it's time to teach the next generation those same lessons.

(Well, once they've made sure that their territory is secure. Then they can start teaching.)

Chapter Notes

This is where things start to pick up for our ninja husbands. Seriously, so much starts happening now I thought my fingers were going to fall off. I've got at least the next three chapters written and ready for editing. WTF is this unusually productive nonsense?

Also much of this chapter was written because Aniseandspearmint submitted an ask over on tumble for an outside PoV of Kakashi's forcible adoption of Tsuna. So we've got a CEDEF agent or two, Shamal, and the Hibari. Because go big or go home, am I right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

=/= (May, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Kino Ayame had not always been Kino Ayame. Once, she had been known as Rosemary, a CEDEF field agent with middling-high Flame reserves. Rosemary had risen through the ranks of first the Vongola, and then the CEDEF. Earning recognition and eventually even a promotion recommendation from Lal Mirch herself.

That was when Rosemary met the Young Lion. A direct descendant of Vongola Primo and a Sky without a Sun Guardian. (A Sky without any Guardians.)

Rosemary had always been possessed of more ambition than sense. It was fine when it drove her to succeed where others may have chosen to give up. When it blinded her to the reality of the situation though…

Well, it left her on the wrong side of the Varia, and potentially crippled, and stuck on indefinite medical leave. Rosemary had been given the cover of ‘Kino Ayame’ and sent to Namimori, Japan with orders to observe and report back on the actions of Sawada Iemitsu’s wife and son without alerting them to their watcher. (The Scorch Marks on her Will pulled and ached, dulled the light of her Sun. She should have listened when she was warned away from Sawada. That he had never Courted a Guardian, and everybody who had ever moved to Court Sawada on their own initiative tended to… leave.)
She had been young and beautiful and powerful. She had thought they were just jealous. What could an Assassin grunt know about a high ranking Intelligence agent? She had ignored the warning signs. She had ignored the evidence.

... *Dios,* it hurt so much. How did Lal Mirch manage to stay sane? Rosemary had been cracked, and could barely function some days. Lal Mirch had been *shattered,* her Flame split into two Aspects she had never been meant to wield... (No wonder the woman was always cranky. Chronic pain would do that to a person.)

At first Rosemary had not questioned her assignment. She had just wanted to be as far from Sawada Iemitsu and the reminder of her failure as possible. It was not until she saw Dill, who had vanished a few months after she joined the CEDEF field teams, that she realized what happened to the Elements turned away by Sawada Iemitsu.

The Lightning was more damaged than she was, still blaming himself for not being *good enough* for the Young Lion. It made her sick. She had come *far too close* to that being her. Dill failed to realize that Sawada had given them the most important task he could think of, setting them to protecting his wife and child.

It certainly explained why so few Flame Actives joined or stayed with the CEDEF. The Young Lion sent them to his home town to watch over his family. Which was *stupid,* at the very least they needed more Mists out in the field to keep up with the other Famiglia.

Rosemary had stewed in resentment and pain, some small part of her thinking that if she just worked a little harder, did her job *perfectly,* then the Sky would change his mind and accept her into his Harmony. (Scorching did more than just damage an Element’s Flames, but there were so few Skies who survived long enough to Activate. So few Elements ever left twisted inside out. How could anyone say for certain what Scorching actually did?)

If you became a Guardian it was something to be celebrated. (The failures were quietly shuffled out of sight, never to be spoken of again.) Rosemary still had a chance. If she was being tasked to guard (spy on) the Young Lion’s wife and child then she had *not* been forgotten. Had not been cast aside. (Rejected.)

So Rosemary leaned on the observation skill that had brought her to Lal Mirch’s attention and watched the small Sawada family. Sawada Nana was the perfect Mafia Wife. Domestic, loyal, and a practiced liar. If Rosemary had not *already known* who the Young Lion was then Sawada Nana’s studied cluelessness would have thrown her off the trail entirely.

It was a pity Sawada Nana had to stay hidden away. She would have made an exquisite honey trap.

Rosemary only had to spend a few days at her post to understand why the Young Lion kept his family hidden away. Even Sawada Nana’s clueless mask was not enough of a shield when her son was *Primo’s Japanese clone.*

Looks aside though, the boy had no Flame to speak of and could not walk across flat ground without tripping. It was embarrassing to see Primo’s blood so... wasted. The only thing the boy had going for him was his looks. Looks that were dangerous without the strength to protect himself. It was *inconceivable* that one of Primo’s descendants could be so useless. If Rosemary had not seen the results of the boy’s DNA test for herself...

Well. It certainly explained a lot about why such a highly trained infiltrator had chosen to retire to a civilian town. (Of course Nana was trained. Of *course.* Even temporary Mistresses were told that their Man was a member of the Families. It was *Traditional Custom.* The women had to know that
they and any children they might have were targets so that they could protect themselves. If, sometimes, that protection was a mask of complete ignorance… well, sometimes simple really was best.)

Sawada Nana’s act was flawless. Still, there was only so much a Flame Null could accomplish, even with all the training in the world. Keeping Sawada Tsunayoshi out of enemy hands, so that no one could use him as a bargaining chip or the figurehead for a coup or even just turning him into a target for kidnapping or assassination to demoralize the Young Lion… well. That was what Rosemary was here for. Wounded list or not, she knew what to watch for.

So. First things first, Tsunayoshi’s life was normal in every aspect but one. That tutor of his showed an unusual amount of interest in the boy. Too much interest for it to be entirely casual or easily dismissed. It was not common practice among the Japanese for an instructor to become overly invested in the life of their student. Especially not one as pathetically lackluster as Sawada Tsunayoshi.

Now, it could simply be a side effect of Gokudera Kakashi’s poor health leaving him with few entertainments in his life to help alleviate the boredom caused by his lifestyle restrictions. Or Gokudera might be a setting a trap. There was no indication that Gokudera had any connection to the Mafia, so there was only a slim chance that Tsunayoshi was being targeted because of the Young Lion.

Given the silver-haired man’s other lifestyle factors, however…

Rosemary was suspicious. Useless as he was, Sawada Tsunayoshi was still a child. Perhaps with time the boy could grow into the potential of his bloodline. That would never happen if Rosemary allowed him to be groomed by a predator.

Damningly, Tsunayoshi had gradually increased the amount of time he spent at his tutor’s home until he all but lived there. Sleeping over at least three nights out of every week and storing some of his belongings in the ‘guest’ room. Sawada Nana had not made a move to pull her son back, so Rosemary refrained from taking action herself, but the entire situation left Rosemary with a bad taste in her mouth.

Perhaps she just needed to be closer to the situation…

/…/

Dill turned around the last corner before the street for his apartment and froze. Caught, a fly stuck to paper, limbs bound in metal wires and mind overtaken by endlessly spinning red and black and rippling indigo.

“Hello.” The medical researcher who lived with Sawada Tsunayoshi’s tutor smiled, mild and polite and friendly. Hands tucked into the pockets of his suit pants, eyes glowing with Mist Flame strong enough to give a demon nightmares. The man kept smiling pleasantly even as Dill froze in fear. Overwhelmed by an aura of bloodlust and shadow-borne death that even Lal Mirch in a Raging temper had never matched. “I have a few quick questions to ask you about your employer.”

/…/

“Maa… oops.” Stepping back to avoid the violently convulsing limbs of the newest of Sawada Iemitsu’s plants to arrive in the neighborhood, Kakashi smiled sheepishly as Obito sighed. “Those Mist triggers are awfully sensitive, aren’t they?”
“Damn it, Kakashi! I told you to wait until I finished with the other guy. If she’s anything like the other ones we’ve caught then she’s probably lost everything useful.” Growling, Obito lifted Kakashi out of the way by the hips, dropping his partner to sit on the counter before crouching down by the felled spy. Peeling back the agent’s eyelid, Obito made a frustrated noise. “Ah, why’m I always right about the worst things. You know better than to try genjutsu on deep cover plants, Kakashi! The failsafe wiped everything. Now I’m going to have to rewire another one of these Mafia weirdoes.”

“At least we already know who she’s been reporting to.” Kakashi idly swung his feet as he watched Obito work on repairing and rewriting the spy’s memories so that her handlers would have no reason to get suspicious and take a closer look at the happenings in Namimori. “And this way she won’t be bringing any nasty suspicious rumours down on Tsu-kun.”

“Mm. I should’ve known you’d overreact to her accusing you like that. My own fault for leaving you alone with her, I guess.” Frowning in concentration, Obito carefully pieced back together the remaining shards of the woman’s mind. Gods, Kakashi got mean when people accused him of mistreating his students. “Alright, what sort of reports do you want this one sending to Italy?”

“Maa…” Kakashi tilted his head with a coy smile. “How about this…”

/.../

Kino Ayame handed over her journal to her (handler) physical therapist, just as she did every week so they could monitor the progress of her healing and her mental state. Her right arm trembled and she sighed sadly, wondering if she was every going to fully recover from her accident and the seizure that had followed.

Ayame was a bit embarrassed by her physical weakness, so she probably spent too much ink rambling about her neighbours, but sometimes she just wanted to be the one better off. Chatting with Nana-san tended to be the highlight of her week, and the poor woman left raising her son alone was always ready to talk. Recounting Tsunayoshi’s most recent failure tended to fill up the pages of her journal, and she had not had to think about the way her knee had buckled on her way home from the market.

Luckily Gokudera-san had been outside with his dogs and had managed to catch her before she fell. It was funny how Namimori was home to so many people with health concerns. Ayame was a bit jealous of Gokudera-san’s ability to manage his chronic illness without losing his composure, but at least she did not need to deal with Tsunayoshi every day!

Really, Ayame just did not know how Gokudera-san put up with trying to teach the stupid child anything. The boy was just so useless!

/.../

(June, -7 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis)

Uchiha Obito had spent nearly twenty years either training to take over or actually in charge of a multi-national S-Ranked criminal terrorist organization. He knew how to manage and establish an informant network. Between brainwashing the Fourth Mizukage, steering Pein, and haunting Kakashi, Obito knew how to gather and distribute resources, strengthen fortification, and command forces on a Village sized scale.

Despite all that, a five minute conversation with Kakashi would leave Obito feeling like a green Academy student on his first day of classes.
Kakashi’s eyes had gone gratifyingly wide when Obito dropped them down at the Leaf-emblazoned gate of their new property.

“No… this is fantastic.” Kakashi ran his hands over the trunk of the nearest tree, and Obito shivered, feeling the touch directly to his core, carried through the remnants of his chakra still saturating the lot. Kakashi’s eyes were distant and wistful. “I’ve missed having real trees around me.”

“There’s more.” Grinning, Obito took Kakashi’s hand and led him to the centre of the lot, to one of the trees he had carefully shaped for this purpose. The hidden door made Kakashi laugh in soft amusement, and Obito could not resist the urge to scoop his partner up in a bridal carry before bounding up the spiral staircase. “Look what I made us!”

“… It’s lovely, Obito.” Arms hooked around Obito’s neck, Kakashi tugged down his mask and kissed his excited lover with a smile. “Now, was there a reason for this, or did you just want another threshold to carry me over?”

“I wanted us to have a real place to live.” Obito admitted easily. “Living as civilians was fine until you decided to adopt that mob brat. Don’t get me wrong, Tsu-kun’s a great kid, but you can’t expect to steal another Clan’s Heir without some sort of retaliation. Not even if he’s just one of the spares.”

“Maa, and the civilian housing was too open to be safe.” A chuckle, and Kakashi patted Obito on the cheek. “You do remember that I outlived you by nearly forty years the last time we did this, yes?”

“And how many times did you almost die and only survive because of a bullshit last minute rescue?” Scowling, Obito bounced Kakashi in his arms. “Stop laughing! And don’t try to lie, you bastard! I was watching you, remember? I know.”

“Maa, maa.” Still smiling, Kakashi kissed Obito again, calming the angry grumbling. One soothed, the pain of their combined pasts tucked away once again, Obito cheerfully resumed the tour. Somewhere around the middle of said tour, Kakashi’s expression had shifted from amusement, to disbelief, to exasperation. Pale fingers pressed to his lips stilled Obito’s chatter, and he looked at Kakashi in confusion.

“What?” Mumbled through the gaps in narrow fingers, and Kakashi raised an eyebrow.

“Obito…” How to put this? It had been a topic of much debate back in Konoha-that-was, and any Uchiha the subject was raised with looked torn between pride and irritation. Well, Kakashi never had been able to back down from a challenge. It was the entire basis of his friendship with Gai. “Obito. Why did you model the floor plan after the inside of an eyeball?”

“Um… because circles are the most stable shape? And tree trunks are round-ish?” Obito’s innocent smile turned wincing under Kakashi’s flat stare. The pout that followed was defensive. “Hashirama did it first! It worked for Konoha! It was the first thing I thought of!”

“Maa, maa. Calm down, Obito. I was just curious.” Chuckling, Kakashi tucked his head into the cradle of Obito’s shoulder. “I like it. It’s familiar.”

“Oh. Well, good!” Flushing, still shy at odd moments even after all these peaceful years together, Obito tightened his arms around Kakashi’s trustingly slack form and continued the tour. “… So! Anyway, I figured you’d like a place to put your dogs so I made one of those indoor lawn things. It’s part of my greenhouse, which is why the roof is glass…”
Hibari Meiran was concerned. Not only had their new neighbor raised a massive forest overnight, but he had done so without leaving a single trace of Flame behind. Even her Elder Brother’s peers could not have accomplished such a feat without leaving signs. There should have been some kind of alarm raised during the process. It was inconceivable that such a large Flame output could be hidden from all forms of detection. The sheer volume of Flames needed to produce an entire, living forest from scrub and saplings…

The enormity of the concept was staggering. Meiran was sorely tempter to call her brother, because she could think of no one else who could even attempt to match this display.

A seed of caution held her back, or perhaps her Cloudy Husband’s territoriality was rubbing off on her. Nevertheless, Meiran took a moment to step back and think.

It was entirely possible that this was meant to draw in her brother. Meiran refused to panic like some untrained housewife.

Logic said that this forest as it appeared on the surface was impossible. Therefore someone was attempting to fool her. Such an overwhelming display of skill and power was meant to cow them, to paralyze them or set them to running without thought. Meiran needed to look deeper than the surface.

Logic said that this forest was impossible for one person to accomplish alone. Therefore there had to be a larger group responsible. A Mist to mask their actions. A Storm to erase their traces. At least one, possibly several, sets of Sun and Cloud and Lightning to grow the wall and the forest contained within.

The name on the deed was Dokuro Obito, a medical researcher of some moderate fame. The doctor was also entirely civilian and latent to the point that his Flame Type was undetectable.

So. Someone had framed Dokuro Obito, and in doing so had tried to make him a target of suspicion.

Someone had tried to set both the Hibari Clan and the Storm Arcobaleno on a civilian.

Someone was going to pay for this.

/…/

Kakuzu had been the one to teach Obito how to collect money, but Konan had been the best at moving it, hiding it, squirreling funds away for a rainy day. The electronic component to everything in their new life had tripped Obito up for a bit, but forging was forging was falsifying records. As good individually and collectively as the Akatsuki had been, however, Kakashi made them all look like unranked amateurs.

Konan might have been able to shuffle a paper trail, Kakuzu might have been able to stream their money, but Kakashi…

Kakashi made it dance. Made the money divide and combine and double back and disappear. Kakashi was the one to arrange Obito’s cover and alibi. Was the one to give the Hibari only bare hints of a trail that left them frothing in frustration when their leads all went cold. Was the one to see rumours and plant suggestions among the Hibari servants sent to spy on them. (For all the Copy-Cat’s abilities in combat had been feared, Obito had come to realize that Kakashi’s real genius lay in the core shinobi tenets of misdirection and subterfuge.)

It rankled, knowingly allowing enemy agents within their walls, but it was needed. Obito needed to be seen as eccentric, and love struck, and carelessly trivial with his money. The evidence pointing back to Obito had to be so obvious that the Hibari would dismiss it out of hand as a set up. (It was a
soon enough, kakashi’s scheming bore fruit. the transaction to purchase the land had been cloned, assigned to a false receiving account, and the transaction numbers altered just enough to pass inspection. the ‘money’ used to pay the ‘construction company’ to ‘build’ their house effectively vanished. untraceable, since the money had never existed in the first place. the real money had gone to the real estate company. (obito was still shaking his head over the number of people he had needed to genjutsu to push that purchase through. the gokudera name had helped, what with the number of freeholds the clan of entertainers already had in their possession. adding another property to the clan registry was easy enough. getting full, unrestricted ownership of land in namimori was a bit more difficult. especially given the size of the parcel obito had needed available to be able to grow a proper training ground.)

it was obvious when the hibari took the bait, because the matriarch of the house had stormed around in a blazing temper for weeks afterwards. (obito took a certain sadistic pleasure in having his shadow clone cheerfully go about his day, pretending obliviousness to the hibari-set watchers while the real obito was busy working on kakashi’s evil plan.)

with the hibari’s suspicions thus placated and kakashi installed in a properly secured home, obito was much more comfortable with poking the mafia a bit more overtly.

gokudera lavina had disappeared into the italian underworld with rumours of scandal following after her. too bad for them, but obito needed that woman’s medical files, and he would be getting them.

no matter whose throat he had to slit to do so.

/.../

they were running out of time.

xanxus could not say why, or how, but his intuition was wailing like a five-alarm fire. they were rapidly running out of time.

there was nothing else to be done, though. even if lussaria could be convinced to free xanxus from varia medial early, there was nothing xanxus could do until he had his full range of motion back. it would be suicide to announce his return while still weakened from the ice. that was just asking to be put right back in the freezer. xanxus refused to give nono the chance. there would be no more free shots.

all that self consideration was moot, though, because lussaria had taken one look at xanxus’ frostbite damage and promptly locked the varia sky in his rooms to recover. the rest of xanxus’ guardians were no help. even leviathan, usually accommodating to his boss’ demands, was refusing to let xanxus out.

when he was not raging over being locked up like a princess in a tower, xanxus was willing to admit that staying put and healing was the smart thing to do. heart and instinct were in rebellion against his better sense, so xanxus continued to stew in his frustrations and a growing sense of urgency.

he was running out of time.

/.../
While Xanxus was occupied with recovering from his imprisonment, Squalo was tasked with carrying out his Sky’s will. With Lussaria hovering to deal with any health issues and Leviathan focused on fetching Xanxus reports so that their Boss could get caught up on current operations, their Sky was as safe as he was going to get for now. So despite his nearly overpowering reluctance to let Xanxus leave his sight, Squalo bit back his personal desires like a good Right Hand and did what his Sky needed him to do.

Pulling his motorcycle up to the manse Massimo di Vongola had moved into after taking over the Vongola’s shipping interests. Only just outside Syracuse, the well-fortified property was about as far from the Iron Fort as you could get and still be in Sicily. Squalo wondered if part of Nono’s rejection of Xanxus had stemmed from resentment over the way introducing Xanxus had broken Nono’s hold over his elder sons.

Seeing Xanxus move out of the Iron Fort and into Varia Headquarters had motivated the elder two Vongola to find their own places within the Famiglia’s territory. The power of the Vongola was huge, and their areas of operation were equally huge. Only Enrico, as the Heir, had remained in Palermo where his father was also based. (Enrico had died before he had the chance to see his baby brother find his place, find his Guardians. It was an ache in Xanxus’ Flames that Squalo caught echoes of, from time to time.)

Massimo had moved the furthest, understandably tired of being nothing but insurance, the Spare, expected to succeed but not excel, and certainly never outperform Enrico. That estrangement had only been made more obvious by Massimo’s refusal to move closer to the Iron Fort following Xanxus’ rebellion. The now eldest-Vongola son had been clear. Until he was named Heir in truth (unless he was given the power and authority to have his baby brother released) there was no need for Nono to have Massimo close at hand.

Federico, the pampered favourite, the baby of the family even after Xanxus’ arrival despite being the elder of them, had only compounded the problem Nono faced from his sons by making his own set of demands. Until Xanxus walked free Federico refused to step foot in the Iron Fort.

The resistance to Nono’s unstated orders made it obvious where the Vongola brothers had spent their loyalty. It was especially telling given that Xanxus’ attack had looked exactly like the coup Nono and Sawada were claiming it was.

Rumours and hearsay spread discreetly by the CEDEF to discredit Xanxus in the eyes of the Alliance leadership. A better job than Squalo was used to seeing from the CEDEF this last year, since they had fallen under the command of Sawada. Falsifying information was an entirely different process from ferreting out secrets though, and there was dammingly little talk about finding the culprits behind Enrico di Vongola’s death. Nono remained condemingly silent. Not speaking against Xanxus, but not speaking for him either. Massimo and Federico, in contrast, were staunch defenders of Xanxus’ remaining reputation.

That defense was the only reason Squalo was willing to do this. There was an itch building between his shoulder blades at the thought of exposing his Sky (his injured Sky, the Sky he had lost, had failed) to potential enemies.

Squalo knew he was being paranoid. Xanxus would be the first to scoff at the idea that either of his brothers would intend him harm. It was nothing rational. It was anger and fear and rabid desperation to never see his Sky brought so low again.

As loyal as the Vongola brothers were to one another Squalo knew his paranoia was entirely justified. Enrico was dead, and that was a fact. Enrico’s death had weakened his younger brothers, and that was also a fact. Squalo had never known his Sky’s Flame before Enrico’s death, but the
Sword Emperor had seen, had felt, the cracks in the foundations of his Sky’s world. Something had fractured with Enrico’s death, and it was only the momentum of History that had kept outsiders from noticing.

The traitor who had betrayed Enrico di Vongola to his death was still out there. A traitor highly placed enough, trusted enough, that they had remained undiscovered through all of the following investigations. They could be anyone, placed anywhere in the Famiglia.

Squalo worried that he was not being paranoid enough right now despite all his efforts to confuse and obscure his movements. Nono had to know that Xanxus was back with the Varia by now. The Iron Fort was suspiciously silent, especially given the amount of panicked activity that had taken place the day after Squalo’s Anniversary visit to the Cradle. They had to know that Xanxus had escaped the Ice, but so far no announcement of any kind had been made.

They had time, but no way of knowing how much time. They had to get Xanxus’ name back out there now, but his Sky was vulnerable, was still healing, and somewhere close was a traitor who had killed a Vongola Sky. (No such thing as ‘paranoia’ when they really were out to get you.)

Xanxus could go underground, should have gone to ground, so that he could heal before he started hunting. Except, for all that Nono had been silent on the subject of Xanxus so far, it was a worrying silence. Eventually the Ninth would start sending messages out again, and Squalo dreaded Nono taking direct action and the repercussions caused by the old man’s lies in equal measure.

If Xanxus were out of his reach, Nono would go after Xanxus’ support structure. The Varia were, ironically enough, Xanxus’ greatest weakness in this situation. Nono would not do anything to harm his remaining legitimate heirs, but through action and inaction both Nono had proven just how little he cared for Xanxus. It was well known among the wider Vongola that Nono resented the Varia. Ottavia had been the one to found the Varia as they were today, had set the standards, and had not left it until it became obvious that none of her brothers had the Reserves to go Active.

The story went (minus the more entertaining embellishments) that a much younger Nono had expected the Varia to respect him as they did his mother. Simply by virtue of being born Daniela di Vongola’s only son. The Varia of the time, hardened as they were by the World War and the Ottavia’s legendary temper, had laughed the young Don out of the Compound, given him a few new scars to remember them by, and then told him to only come back when he was Quality. Even now, decades past the time when Timoteo di Vongola was learning the extent and limitations of his title, decades past the time Nono had assumed he had an inherent right to the respect his mother had hard won with spilled blood and raging Flame and a loaded crossbow, decades past the first lesson in earning the right to rule rather than expecting command to be handed to him on the sole virtue of his name, the Ninth held a grudge. An unthinking, illogical, unspoken grudge.

The Varia had given Timoteo di Vongola a very important lesson, even if that lesson had involved the Ninth being loudly and very publically called out on some embarrassing misconceptions about how the Varia and the Vongola functioned. The ridicule of the Varia, a sharp shock of reality after weeks of being pandered to after inheriting the title of Don Vongola, had never faded from Nono’s memory. (There is nothing more fragile than a young man’s pride.) Even after so many decades as the Head of the Alliance, even after four Flame Active sons, all of them Skies, even so… Timoteo di Vongola still felt the sting of his first rejection.

Since then, the Ninth Vongola Head had held a petty grudge against the Elite Assassination Squad, and that grudge had only grown more obvious as time passed. Squalo had been very careful to never voice the thought out loud, but the Second Sword Emperor suspected that Xanxus taking control of the Varia was the end of any potential affection the Ninth may have felt for his foundling. After
Xanxus had dared to not only have stronger Flames than any of the Vongola’s legitimate heirs, but to also be better loved by Nono’s sons, and then for Xanxus to so easily succeed where the Ninth himself had failed so badly the incident was still snickered about in the Varia break rooms to this day?

(Ignoring the fact that Squalo had won his position from Tyr by right of conquest. That Xanxus had walked into the Varia Mansion intending to bleed for his right to lead them. Xanxus had met every challenger with a grin and a gun and blazing Wrath, ready to do what it took to secure his authority but never, never, overstepping into carelessness. Xanxus had fought. Xanxus had won. So the Varia had bowed to him. Squalo had known, from the first moment he knelt in that out of the way sitting room, that Xanxus was the Sky of the Varia. Squalo had known where his Sky belonged, had been proven right… and even if sometimes Squalo wished he had coaxed Xanxus back into Superbi territory instead, he would never think to take the Varia from Xanxus now.)

No, with Enrico dead and the Ninth enacting his petty vengeances the Varia were in a precarious position, and Xanxus was right there on the edge with them. The Varia belonged to Xanxus, heart and Flame, traitorous weasels like Ottabio aside, and Xanxus was a Sky who understood rightful rule. Xanxus would die before he abandoned his own (and Nono knew that. Nono was probably counting on that, and the thought that any Sky could seek to destroy another Sky’s Harmony, especially when still claiming said other Sky as family… It was fucked up and Squalo wanted to Rage on his Sky’s behalf at the unfairness of it.)

Thus, the root of Squalo’s fear and paranoia. If Xanxus managed to escape Lussaria’s clutches early. If the Ninth targeted the Varia beyond planting turncoats like Ottabio. If Nono or that idiot Sawada became active threats to Xanxus’ people. If, if, if.

There were too many threats looming over them. Too many ways for Squalo to lose his Sky again. Too many traps for Squalo to simply wash them all away in a fall of blood. Too many enemies lurking unseen to be sure he could kill them all before they could strike down his Sky.

Squalo was irritated, frustrated, want to kill several someone’s but would not get to, and now he had to go make nice with Boss’ big brothers.

… Fuck everything why was this his life?

I…/

“Fratellito!” Gleefully certain of his welcome, Federico hauled Xanxus into a bone crushing hug. “Papa finally let you out!”

“Gah, Fede!” Xanxus flailed and shoved at his brother, but it was obvious from the beginning that he was already resigned to the show of affection. “Let the fuck go.”

“Yes, Fede, let go. It’s my turn.” Massimo stated firmly, and detached his younger brothers from one another only to engulf Xanxus in his massive arms. “Xan, little brother, I’ve missed you.”

“… Fuck it.” With a sigh, Xanxus returned the hug. “Missed you too, Mas.”

“Me too! You missed me too! Right, Xan?” Throwing an arm around each of his brother’s necks, Federico leaned his weight forward enough that the other two Skies were forced to acknowledge him or fall over. “Such a cruel little brother, playing favourites after so long parted from us!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Xanxus pinched Federico’s side, grinning as the other Sky yelped and jumped back. “At least Mas doesn’t try to suffocate me!”
“Rude!” Federico pointed a finger at Xanxus’ nose, blithely confident in his ability to get away with actions that would result in anyone else being set ablaze. Or shot. “How dare you spurn my heartfelt fraternal affections!”

As Xanxus bristled in earnest, fully prepared to continue the squabble to the highest level of ridiculousness, Massimo watched his younger brothers with an air of tolerant amusement. The Federico and Xanxus show was the height of entertainment at it’s finest, as long as they refrained from pulling him into it.

Leaning up against the wall with Massimo’s Cloud and Federico’s Lightning, Squalo was once again forcibly reminded that the Vongola brothers were each larger than life as individuals, and utterly beyond description when combined. The Sky Flames filled the room they were in, layered and distinctly flavoured, but also somehow entirely singular. There was an overwhelming pressure, and anyone not bonded to the brother’s Skies would feel rather like they had run full speed into a brick wall if they tried something. No wonder they had waited until Enrico di Vongola was alone to take him out. Even having just one of his brother’s nearby must have made Enrico feel unassailable. Squalo could only imagine how overwhelming the Harmony between them had been while Enrico still lived. (He had asked Romeo once, back when his bond to Xanxus was still new, and the boisterous Lightning had been unable to find the words.)

Granted, being part of a nearly mythical four Sky Harmony had not saved Enrico from his assassin, and it did nothing to alter the reminders that the Skies were human in the end.

An example being how Federico di Vongola thought he was funny, and was the kind of man who had named all his Guardian positions after the male leads in Shakespeare’s plays. Yes, even the women. Romeo was the lucky one, he had been Federico’s first Guardian and had come with his name. Granted, the Ninth had titled his Guardians after sweets of all the possible things, so it was not like the brother’s had been given much to speak of when it came to examples to follow. Massimo’s Guardians were by comparison less flamboyantly themed, but giving your closest companions names based on ancient Greek city-states was still a little off. Although once again the first bonded Guardian lucked out, and Sparta had not been asked to change her name. Granted, the Cloud had not been named ‘Sparta’ by her parents, but that was the name she had chosen to go by long before meeting Massimo at the Academy.

Sure, Boss had Guardians named after demons and monsters, but they had all come with those names. Watching Xanxus with his brothers, Squalo was quietly but extremely glad that his Sky had decided against the Vongola tradition of renaming any bonded Guardians. It would have gotten so confusing trying to tell who was being spoken to or spoken about, because the odds were in favour of Xanxus simply calling them all ‘Trash’ and letting that be the end of it.

“Fede, that’s enough.” Massimo used his elbows to separate his younger brothers before their banter turn violent. One broad hand clasped on Xanxus’ shoulder, the now-elder of the Vongola’s Tenth Generation wore a quelling look. “Xan, are you going to give us an explanation now? Papa refused to let us see you. Refused to even so much as deliver letters. It’s been a year, Xan. We’ve been worried.”

“… Fuck.” With a grimace, Xanxus looked away from his brother’s faces. Curious but also concerned, and not in a way that meant they were finding fault in him. “I… Nono had me imprisoned.”

“Imprisoned? For what?” A disgusted snort, and Federico’s hands were moving. Sharp angry gestures to illustrate his mood. “Sawada’s been even more of an idiot than usual, and the rumours being passed around! Did you know that some of them are saying that you tried to kill Papa?”
Stupidity and nonsense!”

Romeo winced, and Squalo eyed Federico’s Lightning curiously. Sparta seemed determined not to look directly at anyone, although Squalo wondered how much of that was Massimo’s Cloud trying to ignore the extra Flames currently occupying her Territory. Not usually a sympathetic person by nature, Squalo often felt pity for the Guardians bonded to Xanxus’ older brothers. They all had above average to high reserves, Active Flames, and had come from well established Alliance Families… but Squalo would bet one of his better swords on less than half of them having full bonds to their Sky.

It certainly explained why Romeo and Sparta were the only ones to remain when Xanxus came to visit. Those two were at least bound strongly enough to their respective Vongola that Squalo could pick up on it without trying! (Squalo could only remember one instance of someone other than Romeo being at Federico’s side during a meet up with Xanxus, and Lear had been rather… wilted by the end of that meeting. Squalo had long suspected that the whole thing had been set up as a punishment for the Mist, given the satisfaction Romeo had all but radiated when they left.)

It had nothing to do with Massimo and Federico’s reserves, either. Even though neither Vongola came close to Xanxus’ level of strength, they both had enough Flame to go Active without artificial assistance, and to support a full set of bonds afterwards. So despite rumours to the contrary, the Tenth Generation of Vongola were in no way weak. They just had the unfortunate circumstances of being Heirs, and thus restricted to meeting only the people approved by their minders, and so their Elements had been assigned to them by politics rather than by a fortuitous chance meeting between a Sky and an Element that matched them.

From what Squalo had picked up from Xanxus’ ranting, Nono had all but forced his selected matches on his sons, and it had crippled them in the process. Squalo knew enough about Xanxus’ brothers, even if it was mostly secondhand information, to know that they would have done their best to Harmonize with the Guardians presented to them. Nono, who had gone through three Lightning Guardians over his reign as Don, seemed to have forgotten that trying does not always work.

So now Massimo and Federico di Vongola were stuck with Guardians who never really fit them and lessened chances of finding Elements that actually suited them because it was assumed by the entire Alliance that the chance to come Courting a Vongola Sky had passed. It was a straight up shitty situation, but none of Squalo’s business beyond ensuring that his Sky remained unharmed. If Squalo’s advice were asked, he would recommend visiting the smaller Famiglia and branch houses, then working down to street level if that failed to turn up a full complement of Guardians. Boss was an excellent example to prove that power and potential was not just found in the upper levels of their society.

Xanxus had remained silent for too long, and Massimo’s frown was heavy with concern. “Fratrellito. Why do you call out Papa ‘Nono’?”

“Because…” A nearly invisible tremble, and Xanxus clenched his hands into fists. “Because I’m not his son. I’m not your brother. Nono lied. I’m not his and he never bothered to adopt me properly!”

Squalo grit his teeth, fighting to keep his eyes open as his Sky’s anguish flooded their bond.

“Fratrellito.” Implacable and sure as sunrise, Massimo did not hesitate to pull Xanxus into his arms. “Xanxus, listen to me now. You are my little brother. Any lies you may have uncovered on Father’s part do not change that. All the proof you need is in our Flames.”

“Is that why you broke the Iron Fort? Then Papa deserved it!” Almost comically offended, Federico flailed for a moment before joining in on the hug. “It doesn’t change anything, Xan! You’re still
But what in god’s good name was Papa thinking? What if the bastardo who got Enrico had hit all of us? Putting on the Rings would’ve killed you!”

“… Maybe not.” Reluctantly, Xanxus drew away from his brother’s and snapped his fingers at Squalo. Once the Rain handed over the file and stepped back into his place against the wall, Xanxus handed Massimo the information. “According to this, I’m just as much a Vongola of the blood as you are. Just… a different branch.”

“Hm, as much or more, according to some of these names. That’s one of the Third’s better known bastards there, and that’s Nonna’s brother, the one that died in the War.” Utterly delighted by what he was reading, Federico pried the papers out of Massimo’s hands for a closer look. “I’m tempted to abdicate in your favour, little brother, just for the looks on their faces!”

With a snort, Xanxus collapsed onto the nearest couch. “Nono wouldn’t allow it.”

“Papa would have little choice, unless he wanted to explain to the entire Alliance why he lied about matters of Succession.” Humming thoughtfully, Massimo prepared them all drinks as Federico examined the data.

“… Old man won’t do it.” Accepting the espresso his older brother handed him, Xanxus pulled his feet up far enough to give Massimo room to sit.

“I know.” Trading Federico a full coffee cup for the papers, Massimo sat down on the empty cushion. “Papa won’t admit to any fault, or apologize, or even second guess himself. Nonna complained about Papa’s failings as a Don often enough for me to still remember.”

Startled, Xanxus blinked and stared at his brothers. “Is that why Enrico was always so…”

“So not like Papa? Yeah. Nonna was in charge of raising him. Said that she had seen what happened when the Heir was raised by Nannies and Mafia Wives and wasn’t going to see her grandson ruined that way.” Federico kicked his feet up onto the coffee table and sipped his drink with a happy murmur. “Mm. Nonna was the best. I kinda wish that she’d stayed Donna longer, instead of stepping down as soon as Papa was old enough. Maybe then Papa wouldn’t be so…”

“Hidebound is what he is.” Massimo huffed, setting the information packet aside to reach for his own cup. “Stubborn and deaf to criticism and certain that his way is the right way is the only way. We’d never be able to convince him to name Xanxus Decimo. Dios, we can’t even get him to name me his Heir.”

“Is that why you’re all the way out here?” Xanxus nudged Massimo’s thigh with his heel. “Because Nono’s passing you over?”

“I am out here.” Massimo stated with assured dignity. “Because my father had hidden away my baby brother. And then refused me access. I told him that until I was allowed to speak to you, and was able to hear out your side of events, I would not return. And so I left. I have not been back since. And now you are here, in my home, and my father has said… nothing.”

Xanxus slid down in his seat, hiding his face in his drink. “… oh.”

“I did pretty much the same thing!” Federico interjected cheerfully. Then he paused, expression shading towards rueful. “I was a lot louder about it though. Which might be why I keep getting ‘hints’ and ‘reports’ that say you were staging a coup.”

Rolling his eyes at the air quotes, Xanxus raised a brow. “Sawada?”
“Sawada.” Federico affirmed with a tired sigh. “He’s not even trying to be subtle anymore. It’s like he thinks we want to think the worst of you. I know he’s our cousin, but I don’t get why Papa trusts him so much. He’s family, yes, but Sawada’s an idiot.”

“Which is why Papa trusts him.” Massimo looked thoughtful, idly turning pages of the file as the conversation flowed around him. “Sawada is Primo’s bloodline, so having Sawada serving him gives Papa more credibility than he already had. And you know how much Papa likes having his authority confirmed. Plus, even though he’s stupidly strong, Sawada’s a fool. Even if Sawada did try to dispose Papa he wouldn’t be able to hold on to power.”

“Not like Xan!” Federico blinked, mouth still moving even as his eyes went wide with realization. “Xan’d be a fantastic Don. That’s why Enrico never let you go near the CEDEF!”

Intuition roared.

“That’s it.” Massimo breathed, eyes as wide as both of his brother’s. “That’s what Papa had planned. Make Xan the head of the CEDEF, remove him from the succession without ever having to admit that he lied, and then marry any children Xan had back into the Main Family.”

“Everyone knew Enrico was your favourite.” Federico mused. “Your kid or grandkid marrying into Enrico’s line? It could’ve worked.”

“Possible, but not plausible.” Massimo rebutted. “Xan might’ve well as been bred on Nonna’s order to run the Varia. In the CEDEF? He and Lal Mirch would’ve tried to kill each other inside of an hour and burned the whole of Sicily down between them in the process.”

“Well, yes.” Federico admitted easily. “But since when has collateral or taking personalities into account ever stopped Papa when he’s decided on how things are going to go?”

“Not a fucking sneak.” Xanxus growled, one hand slashing out in Squalo’s direction. “Look at my Guardians!”

“Four of six, all in the Varia. Even if for your little Storm it was a few days delayed.” Massimo nodded agreeably. “Which has neatly interfered with any potential attempts to remove you from your place in the Succession and as the Head of the Varia.”

“Which only goes to show how dumb fear makes people.” Federico gestured to Xanxus with his empty cup before standing up for a refill.

Xanxus frowned, brow furrowed. “What?”

“Ah, fratellito, you may as well be Nonna reborn. You don’t want to be Don, you want the freedom to be terrifying and hunt down our enemies.” Coffee refreshed, Federico returned to his seat. “That’s why Mas and I aren’t serious about abdicating. You’d do a fabulous job and you’d hate it the whole time.”

“Exactly. And that’s how we know the ‘coup’ rumour is so much bullshit.” Giving Federico a chiding look for his lack of manners, Massimo lifted the carafe towards Xanxus, refilling his baby brother’s cup before pouring his own. Once done treating his drink, Massimo leaned back and smiled at his confused little brother. “I can believe that you’d attack Papa to make a point or win an argument or even clear the way for me. But take over for yourself? No. You’d kill half the Dons in the Alliance for stupidly within a week.”

The laugh surprised Xanxus, and the relief was so sharp it hurt. His brothers still believed in him. It was all Xanxus needed to soothe the sting of Nono’s betrayal. “I wanted him to do something about
Enrico’s assassination. Wanted him to prove that anybody who struck against the Vongola would pay. He wouldn’t listen.”

“So you decided to make him listen?” Federico shook his head. “That was not one of your better plans, fratellito.”

“Hmph.” Xanxus shrugged one shoulder and looked away.

“… How badly did he hurt you?” The quiet question made Xanxus look at Massimo. Large fingers were delicate on still-healing scars. “A year before you managed to break loose, and you’re still healing… how bad was it, Xan?”

Silence fell. Xanxus knew his brothers would wait however long it took for him to answer. He did not want to answer. Did not want them to know what the Ninth was willing to do to those who challenged him, but… they were his brothers. If they were going to defy the Ninth then they needed to know what they risked.

“… Zero Point.” Both of his elder brothers went still, eyes hard and dismayed and angry as Xanxus haltingly explained. “Trapped me in the Ice. Left me that way. Locked up. Frozen. Shark says nobody who wasn’t there was allowed to know.”

“Dios, Xan. How are you alive?” Federico abandoned his coffee cup to wedge himself between Xanxus’ back and the couch’s armrest in order to enfold his little brother in a possessive hold. “How could he? After claiming you as his son! How?”

“I wish I could say I’m surprised. But…” Massimo sighed, patting Xanxus’ knee. Federico’s invasion of the couch had shoved Xanxus further down the cushions and now the youngest had his legs slung over Massimo’s lap. “We all know how Papa handled the collection of our Guardians.”

“Ugh.” Federico groaned into Xanxus’ feathers. “Romeo’s the only good thing to come out of that mess.”

Said Lightning looked incredibly flattered and beamed at his Sky.

Sparta looked jealous for all of a second before Massimo looked over at her with a soft smile. “Mm. At least I have Sparta. I don’t like to think about what it would be like if I hadn’t Bonded her before Papa took over the matchmaking.”

“You both need to find better Guardians.” Xanxus scowled, his body relaxed between his brothers but his temper boiling. “We still haven’t plugged the leak. You need more proper Bonds.”

“… As you say, little brother.” Massimo looked exhausted by the very thought. Dealing with the politically motivated choices foisted on him by the Famiglia had burned him out. The idea of dealing with Courting and all the drama it entailed was daunting to say the least.

Sparta simply remained silent and looked murderous. Every inch of her a territorial Cloud, and that explained some of Massimo’s reluctance. Having a Cloud as your first (only) Guardian made finding the rest… complicated.

“We’ll keep we’ll keep looking, Xan. Promise. But enough about that!” Federico returned his older brother’s thankful look for the subject change with a grin and a wink. “Tell us how you got out! Did Papa let you loose, or…”

“Hn. There… was a Mist. Strong one. Teleported me out.” Xanxus squirmed inside, thinking of Tobi and the Resonance between their Flames and wanted. “Patched me up. Gave me new intel.
Silence hung over them as Massimo and Federico exchanged a thoughtful look over Xanxus’ head. A Mist? There was some speculation that Mammon was Xanxus’ Mist Guardian, but they both knew better. Mammon of the Varia was Viper of the Arcobaleno, and the ‘Strongest Seven’ were cursed. The Arcobaleno could not form Bonds. Sad as this was for Mammon, it did mean that Xanxus’ Harmony still lacked a Mist.

Now Xanxus was telling them that a Mist strong enough to invade and escape the Iron Fort undetected had taken an active interest in their baby brother. An active enough interest to induce said Mist to break Xanxus out of his prison and provide him with unasked for information on Xanxus’ personal situation.

There was a grin on Massimo’s face, growing larger by the second.

“So that’s why you’re talking about Bonds again!” Federico cooed, crushing Xanxus’ to his chest. “You’ve got a Mist interested in you!”

“Interested enough to make the first move even.” Massimo’s eyebrows lifted as he chuckled, dimples on full display. “Of course, the real question here is if this Mist even had a chance. We know how picky you are, baby brother.”

“Your ears are going red! Are you blushing? Let me see!” Squealing shamelessly in glee, Federico dragged a flailing Xanxus backwards so he could examine his little brother’s face. “You are blushing! Mas! Mas, look! Xan’s blushing. I think he actually likes this one!”

“That’s adorable.” Laughing almost too hard to speak, Massimo pinned Xanxus’ ankles down against his thighs to avoid being kicked in the face during his baby brother’s struggles. “I don’t think you’ve ever been Courted before, have you, Xan? If I remember right you’d half-bonded all of your current Guardians within a few minutes of meeting them.”

“I remember when he met Squalo.” Federico sighed wistfully and nuzzled Xanxus’ hair, ignoring the violent squirming. “They were so cute. I swear there were stars in their eyes!”

“**Dios,** fratello! What do I have to kill to shut you up?” With a groan of resignation, Xanxus slumped back, digging his elbow into Federico’s ribs.

“Hah! I cannot be silenced!” Federico crowed triumphantly. “Now tell us everything, little brother. It’s not every day a Mist chases after their Sky! You usually have to put some effort into baiting them first.”

“Well, Xan’s always been special.” Massimo opined mildly, the grin still lingering on his face. “I’m not surprised he’s gotten a Mist’s interest without trying.”

“… You’re both horrible people.” Xanxus growled, refusing to admit how warm their easy care and affection made him feel. They already knew how he felt, so there was no need to get sappy. (No need to speak the obvious out loud for just anyone to hear.)

“If this Mist of yours works out for the long run, all you’ll have left to find is your Cloud.” Massimo pointed out helpfully, his tone mild as milk despite the mischief in his eyes.

“Don’t be grumpy, fratrellito! We’re happy for you!” Federico squeezed Xanxus to his chest again. “It’s too bad you didn’t manage to snag a Cloud while you were at it though.”

“… **hn.**” Against his best effort to hide any tells, being in his brother’s company had relaxed Xanxus
off his usual hyper-vigilance. Red eyes slid away, and something just under Xanxus’ ribs squirmed happily.

Eyes locked on their little brother, a matching pair of wickedly gleeful grins grew on Massimo and Federico’s faces. Their big brother instincts (and the Vongola Intuition) were tingling.

“Really?” Federico squealed again, too excited by the news to calm down.

“Is there something you forgot to mention about your escape, fratellito?” Massimo was gently teasing, with equally gentle understanding leavening his amusement. Although slightly envious of the way Xanxus’ Elements seemed to find him with little actual effort (as any Sky would be) Massimo would never begrudge either of his younger brothers finding their Guardians.

“… No?” Looking slightly hunted, Xanxus shifted his sprawl. Any escape attempt was forestalled by his brothers reaffirming their holds on his shoulders and knees. “So how soon after I was iced did Nono put Sawada in charge of the CEDEF?”

Massimo frowned. “It was a month or two after we noticed you were missing. I wasn’t paying much attention to be honest. I was more concerned with finding where Papa had hidden you.”

“Same here.” Federico admitted with a shrug. “Plus, I thought Papa was just securing the Succession by taking Sawada out of the running.”

“This is important?” Concerned, Massimo tracked the changes in Xanxus’ new scars as they lengthened with his emotions, growing more livid as Xanxus’ Wrath swelled.

“… Nono never meant to free me.” Seeing his brothers frown, Xanxus clarified his thoughts. “I’m a bigger threat. Acknowledged as Nono’s son. Removing Sawada first means I wasn’t a threat anymore.”

Stricken, Massimo sat back, swallowing back a reflexive protest as he ran through the logic for himself. “Ah.”

“Shit.” Federico growled, equally anguished and belatedly wary of the meaning behind Sawada’s promotion. “Xan’s right.”

Tangled together on the couch, the Vongola brothers mourned the loss of the father they had thought they knew.

Forgotten on the side tables, their coffee grew cold long before they moved again.

/…/

(February, -6 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Hibari Kyouya had been hunting for nearly a year. The day his hunt had begun was still clear in his memory, and the mystery that still lingered made Kyouya unlikely to ever forget it. Waking to look out his bedroom window to find the familiar line of the horizon… changed.

No longer a mostly-tame line of scrub, the horizon had instead been overtaken by towering, monstrous trees that changed the view into something unrecognizable.

Kyouya had bolted outside in his sleep robe, barely slowing long enough to scoop up his tonfa.

A small gathering of the grounds keeping and security staff had grouped up a few paces from the
back property line when Kyouya arrived. Ignoring the herbivores who crowed under his parents dominions, Kyouya stalked up to the massive wall that arced away in both directions, subtly curved. Presumably the wall enclosed the entirety of the neighboring property.

There was no possible way for such an edifice to have been erected in the less-than-twelve-hours between nightfall and Kyouya waking for the day.

Scowling, Kyouya kept up his determined march until he was close enough to draw back one arm and "slam" a tonfa into the wall. The bleating of the herbivores fell silent at the crash. Kyouya grit his teeth and refused to shake out his now-stinging arm.

Against all odds and rationality, the wall was actually as solid as it looked.

So. Not an illusion such as the false-carnivore had warned them of. Not a flimsy theater construct that was as easy to tear down as it was to put up.

Head tipped back, Kyouya glared up at the top of the barrier. Someone was disturbing the peace of Namimori. Someone was issuing a challenge.

Someone was going to be bitten to death.

/…/

Kyouya’s irritation had only grown worse in the time since that first jarring morning. The adults had placed the information they had discovered on lockdown, and even combined with Tetsu’s assistance all of Kyouya’s efforts had only provided him with a name.

Just a name.

Dokuro Obito was a well known name if you knew where to look. A genius. A prodigy.

A ghost.

For all that the herbivore had supposedly lived in Namimori with his wife for several years, Kyouya had never laid eyes on Dokuro Obito. The last time Kyouya had been this enraged by his prey had been during the false-carnivores last visit.

/…/

A novelty home.

Months of panic and paranoia. Nearly a year of stalking a civilian in an attempt to catch sight of the enemy menacing them.

All gone to waste because a love-crazed genius with too much money had decided to build his shut-in, delicate greenhouse flower of an artist lover a novelty treehouse home.

Hibari Meiran had stopped biting the people who irritated her by the time she started Middle School, but she was sorely tempted to pick the habit back up again solely for the educational benefit of the sorry fools who thought that it would be funny to tweak the Hibari Clan’s noses.

Tracking Dokuro Obito’s finances had revealed a paper trail leading to a dummy account held by the so-called ‘specialty construction company’ hired to develop the property. A truly ridiculous amount of money had moved through the dummy account only to vanish. At least the young doctor had gotten his money’s worth. Hibari servants planted among the electrical and plumbing teams had
reported back about the massive treehouse, which was really more of a mansion, which Dokuro had commissioned built and then had connected to the grid.

A. Treehouse.

There was no plot. No danger. Just a group of Flame Active mercenaries with enough imagination to avoid the trap of the bloody Underworld, enough skill to avoid detection, and enough guts to obliquely prank the hereditary protectors of one of the world’s oldest neutral zones.

Meiran would be charmed if she were not so aggravated.

Unfortunately, the trail had gone cold. Every clue looped back to Dokuro, or cut off completely. It was almost cheeky, the way Dokuro was so obviously set up when he was so painfully civilian. Whoever these Flame Mercenaries were, they had a very skilled Mist on their team, to keep them all so well hidden. It was close to certain that their Storm was equally as skilled, and that they had very fine control, to be able to burn away all traces of their work so completely.

Frustrated, and unable to do anything about it, Meiran assigned a few of her better troubleshooters to keep an eye out for groups of Flame Actives that fit her tentative profile. Then she strove to put the issue out of her mind entirely.

… Which was easier said than done with the looming shadows that had overtaken her Southern property line.

Still, Meiran was a Hibari, and reality would bend to her will even if she had to bite it to death first.

/…/

The wall on the Southern border of his parent’s territory defied him. Every attempt Kyouya had made to scale the monstrous fence line had been thwarted. First by his mother, or by one of Hibari Meiran’s numerous aides. Then, once the uncharacteristic tension had left his mother’s jaw, by the very wall itself. For all the fence appeared to have been grown entirely from tree trunks, their look was deceptive.

The surface looked like bark, like it should be rough and grooved. Instead the surface was smooth, sanded down to a grain so fine the outer wall felt like machine pressed paper. It was impossible to locate anything like a gripping point.

Prowling the border revealed only a single gate, directly facing the main road, and that gate was rarely opened for more than a few minutes at a time. The brief glimpse Kyouya had gotten of the forest within the walls was so, so tempting. An entirely different world existed within those walls. The forest was wild and free and it called to him. Kyouya wanted it. Wanted the thrill promised by the whisper of shifting shadows and rustling leaves.

It was a place meant to host carnivores.

Kyouya wanted in.

/…/

Face down on the bed of the empty vacation home he was using as a temporary base, Obito screamed himself hoarse into the overstuffed pillow.

Lavina had a son. This Obito and Kakashi had known. Lavina had a son with a Mafia Don. Lavina had given her son up to said Mafia Don. Lavina’s son had not known that he was illegitimate until
years after Lavina’s death! A death under extremely suspicious circumstances! When Lavina’s son had discovered the truth, Lavina’s son had run away to become a freelance Hitman.

Rolling over onto his back, Obito sucked in air, glaring balefully at the swirls of plaster decorating the ceiling.

Of course Kakashi’s little cousin had to go and make things complicated. Hatake or Gokudera, the names had little impact on the fact that Kakashi always made things more difficult for Obito.

Whining in self pity, Obito pressed the ball of his fists into his eyes and drummed his heels against the mattress like a petulant toddler denying naptime.

The worst thing, the absolute worst thing, was that Obito was already attached to the idea of the brat. A little bitty Kakashi, cold and alone and unprotected. Probably suffering from long-term poison damage and abused. Convinced that his suffering was his own fault. A tiny Kakashi, an angry little silver-topped genius prodigy who had lost a parent, lost their hero, to violent death.

Fuck everything!

Obito could not deal with this! This was a Gokudera Clan problem. Obito washed his hands of it!

… Sayako-obasan was scarier than he was anyway. She made a much better choice to take responsibility for coaxing Lavina’s son in from the cold.

/…/

(March, -6 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Eight years old (six months free from his father’s lies) and Gokudera Hayato was making a name for himself: The Smoking Bomb. It felt good to have an epithet. A moniker to be known by that had nothing to do with his blood, and with nothing in it to link him back to the useless, pathetic, ignorant weakling he used to be. It was hard going, and the work was unforgiving, but Hayato knew that all the blood staining his hands was worth it. One day everyone would forget he had ever been a pretty, petty, piano playing civilian bastard brat. One day he would be strong, and feared, and people would forget that Hayato had even been anyone but the Smoking Bomb.

The familiar, although unexpected, figure of Trident Shamal leaning against the side of a building directly in his path made Hayato pause for a moment before he resumed walking. The argument from before Hayato had accepted this mission was still fresh on his mind. Shamal had not wanted Hayato working alone, as if the Mosquito had ever bothered to spare Hayato the harsh realities and filth of their profession. Bastard was probably just pissed not to be getting a cut of Hayato’s payment. “I thought you were done with me.”

“Hm, I was… except I have a message for you.” Shamal stuck his hands into his coat pockets and looked up at the sky. “Your mother’s family in Japan found out that I was Lavina’s doctor and tracked me down for copies of her file. Somehow, and I’m still not sure how, they also found out about you, and that you had taken on your mother’s family name. It seems they approve of that, and now they want to meet with you.”

“I… Madre’s family?” Hayato actually looked up at Shamal’s face, feeling lost and confused but doing his damnedest not to show any of that. “I thought that they had disowned her?”

“Apparently not.” Shamal lifted an eyebrow. If this worked out he could stop babysitting the brat, and maybe Hayato would even manage to make it through puberty alive. “Well? Are you going?”
Hayato was silent, thinking hard about his options. Thinking hard about his parents, and about missed opportunities. Eventually, much to Shamal’s well-hidden relief, Hayato nodded in agreement. “Sure. I can at least hear what they want.”

/…/

A week after being contacted by the Gokudera, Shamal and Hayato were escorted by a woman in a traditional servant kimono to a small sitting room within the Gokudera Clan’s main estate.

It seemed that Lavina had come by her extraordinary looks honestly. Being a family of entertainers, the members of the Gokudera Clan had taken visual attractiveness as well as artistic talent into account when choosing their spouses for several untold generations. Gokudera Sayako had been a true beauty on par with Lavina in her younger years, and the elderly lady retained much of that grace and elegance even at her now advanced age.

“I’m glad you accepted our invitation to come home, child. I never agreed with leaving Lavina-chan in gaijin lands.” A bird-boned hand was lifted to point at Hayato with imperious resolve. “Look at what it led her to. Forsaking you, forsaking her Clan, besmirching her honour! Fostering weakness in will and isolation in spirit when every thinking mind with an ounce of common sense can see that strength lies in unity of purpose!”

“Maa, Obasan. I think you’re scaring the babies.” Wild silver hair a shade closer to white than Hayato’s platinum tones fell well past the shoulders of the man sitting to Sayako’s right, the thick mane half-heartedly pulled back in a loose tail. A brown and white hound rested by his side, and silver-green eyes were curved in amusement above a thin black cloth mask.

“Bah!” Sayako rapped her enameled folding fan against the traditional low table. “Boys need a good scare every now and then. Keeps them honest. Keeps them from playing silly games. Don’t you try to fool me, Gokudera Kakashi, I’ve seen how you terrorize that husband of yours!”

“Maa, Obasan, so cruel.” Kakashi pressed one palm to his heart and winked. “Besides, Obito likes it when I surprise him.”

Shamal tried to make himself very small and unobtrusive without actually resorting outright to an invisibility illusion. The old woman was terrifying, as unlike Lavina in personality as she was alike in looks, and her laconic nephew was setting off every danger sense Shamal had despite having contributed less than twenty words in total to the conversation since they arrived. Something told Shamal that Lavina would have been very surprised by her father’s relatives if she had ever stopped deliberately avoiding contact with them ‘for their own good’.

Hayato looked fascinated with the byplay between his so-called great-aunt and cousin, and God as his witness Shamal recognized more similarities in personality between Hayato and Sayako than there had ever been between the boy and his mother. Kakashi held Hayato’s gaze for a moment and then smiled disarmingly, hand dropping to rest on the hound’s head. “So, Hayato-kun. I hear you have an interest in fireworks?”

“Ah, yes?” Hayato blinked, obviously derailed from some consuming train of thought. The boy remembered Shamal’s warnings about maintaining Omerta, but he was far too enraptured by his relatives to really pay said warnings much mind, or even wonder how his cousin had learned about his explosives training. “I also… I play the piano. Madre taught me. Though it’s been… it’s been hard to find the time or… or even want to play much, after Madre… I mean, now that I know the truth, it… it’s hard.”

“Humph, well it’s understandable!” Sayako huffed and jabbed her closed fan through the air at
Hayato. “Look at you! You could hardly be more obviously Gokudera if we branded the family crest on your forehead! Children need to know their parents, their roots. Hiding the truth just damages their self image!”

“Maa, well, Hayato-kun is here now, Obasan. I’m sure he’ll recover in due time.” Kakashi tilted his head to one side and beamed. “I’m no slouch at fireworks myself, you know, Hayato-kun. If the piano still upsets you right now, we can wait to work on that until you feel better about it. We could always try seeing how you take to percussive instruments in the meantime, ne?”

Hayato’s eyes gleamed with the avarice of a genius previously denied the chance to learn, a genius now offered a new, untapped information resource. Shamal knew the boy was sold, and it was odd to feel trepidation instead of relief. This whole trip was about pawning the boy off on his mother’s relatives and getting him out of the hitman business before Hayato got himself killed.

Except there was something off about all this, even if there was nothing substantial to point at, the way Shamal’s skin crawled with unease was the least of it. It was just that for a family of civilian musicians, the Gokudera made Shamal’s nerves twitch. Maybe Shamal should have agreed to mentor the brat for real instead of just giving him the bare basics and letting him tag along on the easy jobs. Maybe that would have kept Hayato from jumping on what seemed to be a coded offer of combat training from an all but complete stranger. Albeit one who was connected to Hayato by blood and name.

Blood relative of Hayato’s or not, the weirdo was wearing a mask for gods sake! A ridiculous thing made of thin cloth that covered everything from chin to cheekbones but did very little to actually disguise his identity. (Also, Kakashi had apparently married a man? Was that even legal in Japan?)

Shamal said nothing, however, because Sayako’s green eyes were hard as jade over the oddly sharp looking edge of her now open fan, and Kakashi’s hidden smile flirted with the threat of violence. Ice slid down Shamal’s spine, and it was almost as bad as the one time Shamal had witnessed Reborn get angry. (Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the Gokudera were just the old traditional Japanese family they appeared to be and it was the cultural differences that made Shamal’s skin prick.)

Good luck to the brat, but Hayato was on his own now.

/…/

Obito watched the Mafia doctor, Lavina’s doctor, arrive at the Gokudera main estate with Lavina’s son. Gokudera Hayato was a tiny, too-skinny specter of the past. A scowling, silver-haired genius angry at the unthinking cruelty of the world. Hayato looked like a Gokudera, looked like Kakashi and Sayako-obasan, right down to the way his bottom lip stuck out when he was mad. More than that, Obito realized with sinking despair, aside from the pale colouring Hayato looked just like G.
Right down to the raging, incredibly potent Storm Flames.

(Fuckdammit, Kakashi was going to be so smug. The bastard needed to be wrong at least once! Having a partner who was right all the time may have been Obito’s justified karma, but kami-sama enough was enough!)

Resigned to the inevitable invasion of his life by Kakashi’s ever expanding collection of stray dogs and small children, Obito set out to find a place to ambush Trident Shamal once Sayako-obasan got tired of playing with him.

He had never tested his Flame Suppression Seals so close to an Active Mist before. This would be an excellent chance to see how well they held up during a direct confrontation.
Shamal staggered away from the front gates of the Gokudera estate to catch a taxi back to the airport. Gokudera Kakashi’s so-called husband Dokuro Obito was the doctor who had initially tracked Shamal down, and the Japanese man had grilled the Mafia doctor on every single tiny detail of Lavina’s diagnosis and treatments before allowing Shamal to escape.

Reborn could have picked up a few tips on interrogation from the civilian doctor. Shamal was exhausted and had the feeling that Dokuro had learned far more than he should have during the extensive questioning on medical history about Lavina, Hayato, and Shamal’s interactions with and connections to the Mafia.

It left Shamal feeling distinctly on edge despite being certain that he had never even come close to violating Omerta. From the looks of things, Gokudera Kakashi would be taking custody of Hayato, which explained why the man had been there for the meeting. Shamal’s short burst of laughter held a slight edge of hysteria.

If Sayako and Kakashi were the standard example of the Gokudera, then Hayato was either going to grow up either terrified of his own shadow, or utterly terrifying beyond mortal comprehension. (Shamal blamed his exposure to Reborn for the tiny masochistic part of him that could not wait to see what the kid became.)

Man, Obito felt kind of bad. The other Mist had never noticed Obito’s Active Flames, so that was a success. Poor Shamal probably had not deserved to be hit with that much Killing Intent, but the lazy pervert had all but admitted to knowing that Hayato was being abused, being poisoned! By his own sister! Shamal had done nothing, not even after Hayato had run away. Aside from taking Hayato on a few jobs to get the kid’s name out to the right people Shamal had just left Kakashi’s little cousin on the streets. Fair game for any Mafia asshole to take advantage of!

(Madara and Zetsu and Danzo and even motherfucking Sarutobi, twisting the abandoned and the orphaned around until their hearts were too wounded to know themselves anymore.)

… Obito took back his earlier thought. Shamal deserved everything Obito had subjected him to. Even better, Obito had gotten all the information he was looking for. Both Lavina and Hayato’s medical files were in Obito’s possession now. (That Hayato’s file made note of the poison damage, and yet made no mention of the steps needed to repair said damage made Obito hiss. Shamal would be seeing red dawns for the rest of his natural life.) The genjutsu implanted suggestion that Shamal forget the pertinent details of their little chat, and just who had taken Hayato in, was really just insurance.

Really. (It would be interesting to monitor how an Active Mist dealt with the more subtle aspects of Uchiha genjutsu.)

After watching the taxi carrying Shamal pull away, Hayato swallowed in an abrupt onslaught of nervousness. Sure, Shamal had said repeatedly that he wanted to get rid of Hayato, and that the only reason the Mosquito even bothered looking out for him was because he owed it to Hayato’s mother and sister, and the Gokudera Family actually seemed to want Hayato despite everything, but at least with Shamal he had known what to expect. The Gokudera… it seemed like too much of a good thing, having estranged relatives take him in out of the goodness of their hearts. How long would it be until the catch became apparent?
“Hayato-kun.” Kakashi folded his hands in the sleeves of his yukata and smiled, ignoring the way Hayato jolted in surprise. “Thank you for accepting our offer.”

“I’m a bastard, you know.” Hayato’s mouth moved without any input from his brain, exposing his shame in a torrent of bitter words. Better to get it over with now instead of waiting until after hope had been given a chance to weaken his defenses. Hayato could read and speak Japanese fluently, so he would be able to survive just fine once the Gokudera dumped him back out on the streets. “I took my mother’s name because it’s what I should’ve been called all along.”

“We have that in common then.” Kakashi tilted his head in an invitation for Hayato to follow and headed back into the house. “My mother was… something of a wastrel, using the family name and reputation to attain invitations to parties she did not have the musical skill to attend on her own merit. She died in childbirth with my father still unnamed. Lavina-itoko on the other hand, was famous in her own right even in Italia where the Gokudera name is all but unknown.”

“Oh.” Hayato mulled over that as he followed his new guardian down the traditionally decorated hallways. “So my birth isn’t… isn’t a problem?”

“No more than I was. The Gokudera Clan judges the individual on their own merit, rather than their parents accomplishments… or mistakes, as the case may be.” Kakashi smiled down at Hayato and chuckled. “Only you can decide who you are, and who you will one day become, Hayato-kun. Choose your path, and let the Will of Fire burn freely.”

Hayato nodded slowly and looked up at Kakashi. He was really too old now to give into the impulse that gripped him, but… Hayato decided to follow through with it anyway.

Kakashi blinked down as Hayato’s much smaller fingers touched the older man’s palm, but the larger hand turned over, long fingers wrapped around Hayato’s outstretched hand in a firm grip. They had the same hands, for all the difference in size and age. Pale skin and long, fine bones. Pianist’s hands, his mother had called them. Ducking his head, Hayato leaned against Kakashi’s side for only a brief moment. “…Thank you.”

/…/

It had taken awhile, taken years, before Obito calmed down enough after Kakashi’s initial diagnosis to realize that Kakashi was in no danger of dropping dead anytime soon.

Sure, Kakashi was entirely dependant on food and soldier pills to stay healthy and combat ready, but that was nothing new to Kakashi. It was like being in ANBU again, like adjusting to the constant drain of Obito’s implanted Sharingan. Missions coming fast and hard and the ever-present masks forbidding normal rations.

As smothering and overprotective as Obito could be, after the third time his fragile, sickly boyfriend had thrown him headfirst through a tree Obito was at least willing to admit that Kakashi was capable of defending himself (and later on, the kids as well) from anything short of a rampaging bijuu.

This realization had meant getting Obito to attend classes, followed by his residency, further followed by his work shifts, got progressively easier as time passed. By the time Hayato moved in, Obito hardly ever skipped out on his research to covertly spy on Kakashi’s daily activities anymore.

Kakashi was very proud of Obito’s progress.

Of course, moving Hayato into the new Konoha Compound was a valid reason for Obito to send a Shadow Clone off to work in his place. Since, of course Obito used a Shadow Clone rather than call
in sick. Technically all of Obito’s work was even completed by Obito so it was not really fraud. Plus, it meant that Obito still got paid for full hours, and not needing to explain his absences meant not needing to file the associated paperwork with the Human Resources Department. Less paperwork was always a bonus.

Another benefit lay in the way it confused any watchers. Obito loved being able to be in two places at once, and because he was using chakra instead of Mist Flames no one in the Mafia could see through the deception. It never would have been a viable plan in his last life, but as a ‘civilian’ medical researcher Obito’s Shadow Clone was at considerably less risk of being dispelled by a sudden onset of violence. Mist Doppelgangers were much better suited for combat, comparatively, and Obito had been working on them, but he still tended to reach for his shinobi techniques first.

“I’m so glad I got to see this.” Obito was grinning, wide and gleeful, his Sharingan all but glowing as he recorded Tsuna and Hayato’s first meeting. “Sweet little gods, were you this feral when you first went to the Academy? It would explain so much.”

A slow blink and Kakashi huffed, a soft chuckle of amusement escaping as his tiny student and equally tiny cousin eyed one another distrustfully from opposite sides of the room. “Maa… I was better socialized than an Inuzuka. Or a Yamato.”

“All that tells me is that you knew better than to be the one who bit first during introductions.” Absurdly fond, Obito thought back across the length of two lifetimes and grinned in remembrance. “You were such a little shit. The first thing you did when you got bumped up to the grad class was tell us how much we all sucked.”

“Maa, well…” Kakashi was able to think about those times and smile now, and Obito was grateful that he had been given the chance to see those smiles. Small and hidden and warm and fond and not to be shared with outsiders. Kakashi’s real smiles were just for him, just for Obito (and the kids and the dogs.) The silver-haired genius snorted, waving one hand in dismissal. “I may have been socialized, but it was by ninken and high level Jounin. By that standard you all seemed rather… lackluster.”

“… You told me to my face that I was pathetic less than two minutes after we spoke for the first time, Bakakashi.” Obito elbowed his partner playfully. “You were a shit! Admit it!”

“Maa, sure.” With a shrug, Kakashi tucked his hands into his sleeves and beamed at Obito’s suspicious face. “I’m the shit.”

It took a few seconds for Obito to process what Kakashi had just said, but once he had the indignant sputtering was enough to catch the attention of both boys. “That wasn’t what I said and you know it!”

“Maa.” Swaying casually out of the way of a badly-aimed swat, Kakashi sauntered over to the children with a cheerful smile. “Now that we’ve got Hayato-kun all moved in, why don’t you show him around the property, Tsu-kun?”

“Mmhmm, I can do that, Ka-sensei.” There was a strange look on Tsuna’s face. Covetousness and longing and a startlement that was nothing like fear. (Minato-sensei had worn that look a few times in Kakashi’s memory. When he had been assigned as Minato-sensei’s apprentice. Meeting Kushina-nee at the ramen stand. The first day Obito and Rin had introduced themselves as the newest members of Minato-sensei’s Team Seven.) It was a subtle look, but intense and singular, and Kakashi had to wonder…

There was a funny twist in Tsuna’s still-developing chakra, echoed in the tiny licks of Flame they
had managed to pry loose of the Suppression Seal. So much time and careful effort to wedge open those small cracks, every bit of growth in Tsuna’s chakra hard-fought for and prying at the Seal that cut away his Spirit from the Second Gate. At least they had been able to do that much for Tsuna, and at some point they would be able to free him completely. (Unlike Anko, who had never been able to access her full chakra until Orochimaru’s ‘death’ destroyed her Curse Seal. Unlike Sai, and so many others, who had never entirely recovered from ROOT and Danzo’s many abuses. Unlike Obito, who had needed Kakashi to kill him again in order to be freed from Kaguya…)

“… If you say so, Kakashi-sama.” The look Hayato was giving Tsuna was equal parts resentful and curious. That funny twist in Tsuna’s chakra was being tentatively echoed in Hayato’s, starting in the First Gate, seconded by the Seventh, and cascading through the rest of his little cousin’s system. Each time Tsuna’s chakra dulled and cut off because of the Seal’s interference Hayato’s chakra would spike. Furious and hurt and all but audibly hissing like an upset cat.

The Raging Storm.

A very strong little Storm, already Active and with a Cloud Secondary edging closer to usefulness with every enraged flare of his Flames. Simultaneous echoes, a feedback loop in little flickers across the Rainbow. The same curious little ember-glow that Kakashi had found in his explorations of his own Flames. An ember-glow that all but erupted in thwarted fury when in sensing range of Tsuna’s Seal.

Oh, this was an even better outcome than Kakashi had thought to plan for. Tsuna had the bare-bones of skill in Ninshu, the bits of the philosophy that Kakashi had tracked down and cobbled together after his retirement. Ninshu, and the cracks in the Seal, and the way Hayato resembled Kakashi so strongly in so many little ways…

Yes, Kakashi had the feeling the next day or so were going to be interesting.

(In the dark parts of his soul where Kakashi would never stop being a weapon and a born killer and an elite shinobi, fangs were bared. A gleaming, curved knife of a smile, anticipatory and pleased.)

It was always nice when a plan came together. It would be interesting to see how the two boys got on.

(The trap was set, and baited. Their prey would come to them, in due time.)

/…/

Tsuna was certain that he was going to embarrass himself, if he had not managed to do so already.

It was not his fault! Hayato-kun was Kakashi-sensei’s cousin and Hayato-kun’s face was naked. It was a shock! Tsuna had not been prepared!

Hayato-kun was even prettier than Kyoko-chan and even if that thought felt a little bit disloyal it was still true! Even Hana-san would agree with him!

Using the Ninshu Kakashi-sensei had taught him was hard. Especially with the Cold that never really went away and made Tsuna a useless weakling, but Tsuna would die if Hayato-kun decided not to be his friend. It would be the worst thing if Hayato-kun hated him. Tsuna would never be able to bare it.

So, with his chakra clawing and ripping at the Cold with increasing savagery, Tsuna reached for Hayato’s Spirit with everything he was. Hoping against hope that the freezing ache of loneliness in his gut, the void that yawned under his ribs, might finally be eased.
Kakashi-sensei could not be the one to do it. Was not his. Was not meant for Tsuna, and it hurt, even though Tsuna understood. Maybe Hayato-kun though... maybe Hayato-kun was. Maybe, maybe, maybe... maybe Hayato-kun could do it. Could help Tsuna be warm again...

/.../

The Gokudera Clan Estate had been impressive in the way that few Mafia Fortresses could manage. Old, traditional, and effortlessly elegant. Completely lacking the ostentatious displays of wealth and power every Famiglia, bar none, indulged in. Despite, or maybe because of the values he had been raised with, Hayato had far preferred the aesthetics of his Madre’s Clan.

Then Kakashi-sama had taken Hayato to his personal residence.

On one hand, the property was so grandiosely over the top it was absurd. The thirty foot tall fortress wall encircling the property line was just the start.

... On the other hand there was a full sized Japanese mansion, complete with gardens, dojo, fully functional modern appliances, and working plumbing built twenty feet off the ground. In a tree!

Well, in several trees, but still.

It was a level of gleefully shameless self-indulgence that Hayato had never thought about participating in, let alone agreeing to live in, but it certainly made him feel less self-conscious about developing his own code system and language based on G-script. (Maybe Kakashi-sama would agree to take Hayato ghost hunting. The older Gokudera seemed like the kind of person who enjoyed indulging odd impulses. Hayato approved mightily of his Madre’s relatives so far.)

Then there was the catch. The fly in the ointment.

“Hayato-kun, this is my student, Sawada Tsunayoshi.” Kakashi-sama patted the other boy on his fluffy head and those eyes that looked so much like Hayato’s own curved under the influence of a cheery smile. “Tsu-kun, this is my cute little cousin, Gokudera Hayato. Hayato-kun will be living with Obito and I from now on. So let’s all do our best to get along!”

“Um.” Honey-brown eyes went wide and startled when they met Hayato’s narrow glare, and Hayato’s gut lurched. It was too much a reminder of how seeing Bianchi’s face had felt those last few weeks before Hayato had finally broke and run away. “Welcome to Namimori, Gokudera-kun.”

Hayato decided he hated him.

“Don’t you have your own home, idiota?” Hayato snarled, an itch under his skin demanding he rage. Insisting that he fight, there was something about this civilian creampuff that made Hayato want to rip it all apart. “Kakashi-sama! Why is he here?”

“... Maa.” Kakashi-sama looked delighted, and combed his fingers through Hayato’s hair. Which, yes, was an odd reaction, but Kakashi-sama seemed to find everything Hayato did to be somehow adorable. Calmed, Hayato contented himself with glaring around Kakashi-sama’s hip at the interloper. “Tsu-kun has been my student for several years now, Hayato-kun.”

Not appeased, Hayato scoffed, and pressed closer to Kakashi-sama’s side. No stupid, squishy civilian patsy was going to ruin the first good thing Hayato had found since his piano lessons ended. “Learning what?”

“Oh, some of this, and some of that.” Humming, Kakashi-sama patted them both on the head again before wandering over to where Obito-sensei was pouring over the pile of paperwork Shamal had
forked over when the Japanese doctor had demanded Hayato’s medical history, along with his Madre’s, and the basic information on the selfish asshole who had ruined her life. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy learning new things together.”

“… As you say, Kakashi-sama.” Glowering at the civilian, Hayato twitched as his gut clenched again. Were those… were those his Flames? Were his Flames reacting to this fluffball? Really? The same Flames that had woken to full Rage after one too many poisonings by his father. The same Flames that had driven him to run, and left over half of that selfish asshole’s mansion lit on fire in his wake. Those Flames. Were those Flames seriously getting excited by a civilian?

… Well, Kakashi-sama must have seen something worthwhile in this creampuff to agree to teach him. So Hayato may as well give him the benefit of the doubt…

Just for now! To give him a chance to prove himself! This did not mean Hayato actually liked him!

(Tsuna looked at Hayato through his lashes and offered a tentative smile. Hayato’s cheeks went bright pink, and Tsuna had to clutch his hands together to keep said hands to himself. No wonder Kakashi-sensei wore a mask! Tsuna just wanted to grab Hayato and hide him away! Hayato was so pretty! Too pretty! Tsuna was doomed! He needed more time to be ready for this!)

Kakashi-sama sent them off to learn the property in an unsubtle attempt to push them together. The usual technique employed by adults to encourage friendships in children.

Hayato did not need help making friends! Hayato did not need friends! Even if Tsuna was actually really nice and kind of sweet but Hayato was fine on his own! Why would Hayato ever choose some weakling civilian as his first friend anyway?

Still, this was Kakashi-sama’s student, even if he was unworthy, so Hayato would behave. He did not want to cause trouble for Kakashi-sama. Hayato was already imposing on his cousin enough by moving in, so it would be best to avoid causing any further disruptions. (Kakashi-sama might change his mind if Hayato proved to be too much trouble, and Hayato was so tired. The thought of going back to the streets was terrifying. Not as bad as the thought of being trapped by his father again, but Hayato could not help but hope that he had found a real home. A family. A place to finally belong.)

(A place that was safe.)

“Come on, Gokudera-kun!” Tugging on his sleeve, Tsuna pulled Hayato along the maze-like hallways until they reached one of the large trees that contained the staircases that lead down to the forest floor. “I want to show you the training grounds before it gets dark!”

“… Training grounds?” Intrigued, Hayato managed to ignore the strange flux of heat caused by Tsuna’s touch. What had Kakashi-sama said he was teaching Tsuna again? Driven by his curiosity, Hayato followed the other boy down into the forest.

(/.../)

(April, -6 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“No! Shut up! It isn’t fair!” Hayato glared at the stupid civilian brat who was always in his way. Why did Kakashi-sama like this idiota so much anyway? Tsuna was useless and weak and too dumb to live. Hayato was a much better student, and Kakashi-sama’s cousin on top of that. Kakashi-sama did not need Tsuna leeching off him anymore now that Kakashi-sama had Hayato. “I don’t want to hear your excuses! Triple Bomb!”

“Oh no!” Tsuna ignored the dynamite thrown his way. They were in the training ground after all,
and Obito-sensei had done worse things to the landscape before. It was the fumbled stick that fell hissing to the ground at Hayato’s feet that held Tsuna’s attention. The fuse burned Hayato’s ankle and the other boy dropped more of his arsenal in a shower of falling sparks. The silver-haired genius looked down in dawning horror. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The clinging layer of Cold Tsuna had lived with for three years despite Pakkun’s best efforts to help shattered like brittle ice hit with lava. “Save Hayato with my Dying Will!”

The clearing exploded. Dust and broken rock were flung high into the air, ricocheting through the branches of the closest trees, chipping off bark and shaking loose leaves.

Green eyes wide and filmed over with crimson light, Hayato stared at Tsuna. The little Sky (a Sky! How had Hayato missed that? A Sky) stared back with eyes of molten amber. Red Storm Flames and orange Sky Flames twined together like affectionate cats, gathering in dense clusters on their limbs where their bare skin met. Ruby Flames danced over Hayato’s skin in a volume he had never managed on his own before, more energetic than ever where those Flames reached out for Tsuna’s amber Flames. Hayato felt strong and assured and oddly centered. Joy bubbled up at the new certainty that this was where Hayato was meant to be, facing death and danger and life with all it’s many challenges at the side of this boy. “You saved me… even after I tried to hurt you?”

“Hayato-kun was just scared. You, um. You need Kakashi-sensei. I understand.” Tsuna sat up but refused to loosen his grip on Hayato or drop his gaze. “Besides… Hayato-kun is my Storm. That means I need to keep Hayato-kun with me for always.”

“… Okay.” Hayato grinned, and laughed, and threw his arms around the other boy’s neck with enough vigor to topple them back over. Harmony demolished any possibility for awkwardness between them, leaving behind only glee and a need to be as close as possible as their Flames learned each other and reached equilibrium. “Okay, Tsuna-sama! I’ll be your Storm, and you’ll be my Sky, and we can share Kakashi-sama.”

/…/

“That did it.” Seated atop the cliff that bordered the training field, Kakashi smiled in smug satisfaction. “Finally. I had a feeling that the pull towards Harmony would work better than mortal peril.”

“… Sure, Boss.” Pakkun rolled his eyes to stare pointedly at the massive, still smoking crater that had replaced the middle of the training field. “Kami forbid the pups be in mortal peril. Whatever you say.”

/…/

Obito was grinning stupidly up at the ceiling of their new home. A laugh, low and amused and a little rough. Kakashi shifted up Obito’s body to fold his arms over the happily dazed Mist’s chest as a chin rest. “Good?”

“Fantastic.” Still riding the endorphin rush of orgasm, Obito was shameless about pulling Kakashi into a sloppy kiss, one hand sliding over the copycat’s backside. Weapon calloused fingers slid between pale cheeks, sinking into the slick, open warmth. A shudder ran down Kakashi’s back, and Obito swallowed Kakashi’s pleased whine, groaning in response when pale thighs spread wider around his waist. “You like the house then?”

“Hm, yes. But.” More kisses. Sweet, drugging kisses as Kakashi flexed around him. The Cloud laughed again, and it left Obito’s chest filled with warm pride. There had been so little joy shared between them in their last lifetime that every one of Kakashi’s smiles felt like a victory to Obito. “It’s
more than just the house. It’s what it means, Obito. So… thank you. I know you don’t understand why I’ve taken in Tsuna and Hayato, but you made it possible anyway.”

Obito scrunched up his nose, a massive sigh making his chest heave. Call Obito a prude, but mentioning the kids tended to break the mood for him.

“Look, Kakashi. I like the brats. I do! I even get why you like teaching them. And you needed something better to do with your time than just reading your perverted books. But…” Hesitant, Obito looked away from too-knowing, too-accepting silver eyes. So much, too much, had been left unsaid in their last lifetime, and it had torn them apart again and again. Obito refused to loose Kakashi to hubris a second time. “I…”

Kakashi shifted, touched gentle fingers to Obito’s scars. “Maa, Obito… you don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do.” Obito cut in, voice low and intent and a look in his eyes that bordered on fanaticism. “I would lay this world at your feet were that your desire. I would rain destruction and ruin across the globe until no other power remained but those sworn to you. I would rip your enemies’ flesh from bone until the rivers flowed red to water the trees. I would do anything for you. For you, Kakashi. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to please you.”

“Maa, Obito.” Blood and shadows and blades hidden away under idle mischief and a lazy drawl. Underneath the underneath and hooded silver eyes that noticed everything even as other gazes dismissed and passed over without noticing the deadly killer lounging openly in the sunlight. “You’re so dramatic, anata.”

“But I would. You know I would. I would to anything for you. Anything you wanted.” Obito cupped Kakashi’s face, the silver-haired genius still relaxed and at ease and faintly amused by Obito’s fervor. No one else could suit Obito like this. No one else could be so accepting of Obito’s jagged edges. No one else would fit against him without trying to repair something broken beyond any fixing. No one else could simply take Obito’s maniac devotion in stride. No one but Kakashi.

Thumb brushing the arch of a sharp cheekbone, gazing covetously into Kakashi’s left eye. Obito’s claim on Kakashi, on the genius shinobi’s body and affections. A claim that had transcended lifetimes, had survived even the turn of Fate’s wheel and stayed with Kakashi even in this still-alien world they had been reborn into. Obito softened, cooed rapturously. “But that’s not what you want. You want comfort and home and safety. You want laughter and contentment and a pack of cute little genin running around. You want cubs to nurture and train and raise to their full potential before you let them loose to wreak havoc on the world. You want the dream Konohagakure was founded on and never saw realized.”

“Aa. You do know my desires well, anata. But you give me too much credit.” Kakashi sighed, eyes half-lidded and gleaming as he melted against Obito, pressing close and warm. “All I want is to build a Clan with you.”

“You’ll have that, koishii.” All but purring, Obito rolled them over, pressing Kakashi down into the pillows. “I’m going to give you that. And more. And more.”

“A-ah!” Back arched, Kakashi clawed at Obito’s shoulders, scoring the skin. Long fingers caught on the scars over Obito’s right shoulder, the ever-present, highly visible reminder that Kakashi had claimed Obito first in every lifetime. Obito snarled, shifted his hips, thrust savage and claiming into the tight clench of Kakashi’s body. Savoring his partner’s surprise, the way every muscle in Kakashi’s lean frame twitched and flexed, accepting Obito into Kakashi’s embrace. Lush mouth dropping open, still slick and swollen from their earlier play, Kakashi gasped for air. “Ah, haa, yes. Obito! More.”

... So yeah. That happened.

Obito and Kakashi are creepy levels of codependent and also apparently the brothers di Vongola are stupidly adorable.

Now I'm going to go work on something else. I hope you were entertained by my answer to your ask, Aniseandspearmint! ^_^
The Namimori Genin Corp is recruiting. Kakashi-style.

Chapter Summary

The Raging Storm brings change and upheaval to all who stand outside the eye of the Hurricane. The first Chakra is the root of the soul, where ambition and motivation drive one forward through life.

Tsuna has found Hayato, and bonded his Storm and First Guardian. Namimori’s forecast calls for a new manifestation of destiny. Fate is fickle, but not unforgiving.

Chapter Notes

Another big chapter, to make up for being AWOL for a month! (My wifi was down so it's not like it was my fault but I'll take any excuse to listen to you all start screaming. It's fun~♥)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(April, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Hayato stared in awe at the two extensive family trees pinned to the wall. One detailed the generations of descent between the Vongola Primo and Sawada Tsunayoshi, showing clearly the familial, if somewhat distant, relationship between Vongola Secondo, Vongola Nono, the Young Lion of the Vongola, and the Capo della Varia. The other was Hayato’s own family tree, and the young genius reverently traced his bloodline back through the generations to where G’s tattooed face began it all.

“I’m, I mean we, are we actually G’s descendants? There were rumours about the Falco, but…” Hayato thought absently about the coded cipher he had been obsessively determined to crack since the moment he had first uncovered it and discovered it’s importance in the Mafia world. Hayato glanced at the other tree and then back to his own. “No wonder I keep trying to read the G Script… and Tsuna-sama is Giotto Vongola’s descendant. Is that why we…”

“Why the two of you Harmonized so easily, so quickly, and to such an impressive degree? I really couldn’t say.” Kakashi leaned against the opposite wall and watched Hayato go through the reports Kakashi had handed over once the drama in the training field had concluded. It was nowhere near all the information Kakashi had by a long shot, but genius or not Hayato was still a child, and still adjusting to having found his true Sky. There was no need to overwhelm him. Even if the kid really was a genius. It was a little startling, how similar they were. Hayato even had the same sardonic sense of humour and prickly temper Kakashi had eventually outgrown about six months into his stint in ANBU. “Something is going to happen with the tenth generation of the Vongola however. We’ve managed to identify everyone except for Lightning and Mist, although I know which Family to watch to find us Tsuna’s Lightning.”

“You aren’t going to tell us who they are until after we find them, right? Just like how you let Tsuna-sama and I Harmonize on our own before you told me about G and the Vongola Decimo situation.”
Hayato gave Kakashi a dirty look as the older man giggled unrepentantly. “You’re a bastard, Kakashi-sama.”

“So my husband often tells me.” Kakashi grinned behind his mask and patted Hayato on the head as the kid grumbled. Little baby cousins were the best things. Kakashi was so glad he had the opportunity to have one this time around.

=/=

(April, -5 Years to the Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Naoe Nagi was going to die. She knew it for a fact. Her mother had refused to save Nagi, and so she would die. Her organs were failing and without a compatible donor… there was no hope. Nagi tried to spend as much time asleep as she possibly could. At least in her dream world Nagi had Mukuro-sama, and her body stopped hurting for a little while.

There was shouting in the hallway outside of Nagi’s private hospital room, getting louder with every passing second as the voices approached. The door opened wide, swinging fast and hard through the air to bang against the doorstop. A tall man with dark plum eyes and strange red marks all over the right side of his face sauntered in. He was wearing a doctor’s white coat and nametag and he looked… he looked… he…

“Fuck off you useless trash!” He shouted at the crowd of hospital staff that had followed him down the hall and closed the door firmly.

There was something familiar about this man. Something familiar about how being near him felt. Something familiar in the way he moved, the timbre of his voice, the flicker of his eyes. Nagi did not know what it was but something told her she was safe now. “… Who are you?”

“My name is Dokuro Obito, Nagi-chan, and I’m your birth father’s cousin.” Her good eye gone wide with surprise, the girl watched as her previously unknown relative flipped through the chart the nurses had left clipped to the foot of her bed. Obito’s face twisted into a scowl as he snorted in disgust. Obito looked up at her, tossing the chart aside and Nagi realized that they had the same eyes. Obito took a seat next to Nagi so that they could see each other’s faces better. “I’m going to be blunt with you, Nagi-chan. My cousin was a dumbass of epic proportions, and Rokudo made some really stupid choices over the course of his life. One of them was hooking up with your mother during her hen party. Not that any of it was your fault, but there you go. There’s a reason your parent’s marriage sucks. Not that they have any excuses to be taking it out on you, but… ah, never mind that anyway. I’m a doctor. Did you know that? Yeah, and I’ve developed some artificial organs that can help you. I’ve taken custody of you away from your mother. I doubt she paid any attention to what I was working on. I think she stopped listening once I said I’d be paying for all your medical expenses. Whatever. I wanted to know if you were willing to be one of the test subjects?”

“I… I could live? You can help me?” Ignoring the more confusing parts of Obito’s rant, Nagi felt her eye fill up with tears as she gazed at her saviour. “I don’t, I don’t want to got back to mother’s house ever again. If I help you do the test, can I live with you instead?”

“Of course, Nagi-chan.” Obito’s teeth flashed under the hospital lights as he smiled. “My wife likes kids, and a sweet girl like you will make a wonderful addition to the Family.”

“Thank you, Obito-sama.” Nagi closed her eye with a smile. “Thank you so much.”

/…/
A few weeks after Harmonizing with Hayato, Tsuna was showing a marked improvement in all areas of his life.

Privately, Kakashi was glad that, beyond simply being his baby cousin, Hayato was also primarily a very strong Storm Flame. The last of the Ninth’s seal had been Deconstructed at an exponentially faster rate than Kakashi had initially predicted, and the lingering after-effects wore off even faster.

Tsuna’s abilities in book learning, his overall comprehension skills, deductive reasoning, coordination, and physical training were no longer fraught with insurmountable obstacles but rather had become things Tsuna was finally starting to enjoy exercising and expanding upon. The worst of the bullying had tapered off, and even those few who persisted seemed to be doing so more out of the engrained habit of years or personal failings rather than targeted malice. The teachers stopped singling Tsuna out for ‘object lessons’, and a few of those who had previously mocked or ignored Tsuna’s plight now looked confused whenever they ran into the small Sky.

Three years of systematic abuse during his formative scholastic years had left a mark on Tsuna’s mind, however, and the boy was wary of any attention paid to him. It did not matter if the attention was neutral, or even if the attention was positive. Tsuna was skittish around his peers and teachers. Whenever Tsuna was in a situation involving direct interaction with another human being from outside their small Clan he did his best to escape as soon as possible. Although Tsuna’s caution never bridged the gap into hostility or aggression, the child had long since lost his ability to trust in the better nature of his fellow man (not without some form of no-harm guarantee or proof of their intentions toward him, at least.)

For his part, Hayato had taken to being Tsuna’s Storm with gusto. Hayato was determined to drag his ‘Jyuudaime’ up to academic excellence by any means necessary. Tsuna could kick and scream all he wanted, Hayato refused to leave his new Boss ignorant, and now that Tsuna’s mind was no longer handicapped by the seal the little Sky’s knowledge base was catching up to that of his peer group. Hayato rewarded Tsuna’s efforts with more tutoring sessions on Mafia History and Law. The poor little Sky looked ready to cry when Hayato informed him that homework was a decent way to practice for the paperwork Tsuna would have to deal with in the Future if the Vongola Really Were That Dumb.

“Listen to your Right Hand Man, Tsu-kun.” Kakashi’s amusement over Tsuna’s suffering was plain for all to see. The Copy-nin had never quite gotten over being forced into the Hokage hat, back in his last life, and tended to take it out on anyone he caught trying to shirk putting the effort in. “Hayato-kun knows what he’s talking about.”

Tsuna crumbled into a pile of eight-year-old despair, and Hayato had preened at his cousin’s complement. The boys were being raised using a strange combination of Shinobi Clan methods and very liberal interpretations of Mafia traditions. Secretly, of course. Both Nindo and Omerta stressed secrecy. (The first rule of the Fight Club is that you do not talk about the Fight Club.) To all but the four of them, Obito was a young genius doctor, Kakashi was his fragile artist boyfriend, and the children were an entirely normal, if increasingly precocious, pair of childhood friends. Only members of their little Clan knew what lay underneath the underneath.

Obito just shook his head at all of them, told Tsuna to suck it up, and occasionally spent a weekend in Italy benevolently stalking Xanxus.

The guy looked like a Yuhi, drank like a Senju, felt like Minato-sensei, and acted like a pre-Village Uchiha. It was glorious chaos wherever he went. Sometimes Xanxus would turn and stare at Obito’s hiding spot, which meant it was time for Obito to scarper, and sweet kami that was as thrilling as it
was terrifying. The frostbite scars were looking better now, growing less obvious, and Obito was glad that the marks of betrayal had avoided digging too deep beyond the Varia Sky’s skin. Xanxus deserved better than to be reminded of the lies he had been told by the people he had trusted every time he looked at himself in the mirror.

|...|

They had a good reason to be thankful that Tsuna had broken through the seal enough to Harmonize shortly after the boys started third grade. No one was quite certain about what had happened to Yamamoto Takeshi’s mother, but the lack never seemed to dim the boy’s smile. Tsuyoshi ran his sushi shop, and his son left each day wearing a bright smile. No one looked beyond the boy’s apparent cheer. No one, that is, except for Tsuna and Hayato, who had been taught to look underneath the underneath in every situation.

Tsunamichi Takeshi was drowning, and he was too far under to ask for help even if he had realized it was on offer.

Obito’s influence on the two boys rapidly became apparent (even if Kakashi’s sense of humour mitigated the overt stalker-tendencies a little) when Tsuna and Hayato took to following Takeshi everywhere.

At least Takeshi knew they were following him around, instead of spending over a decade being invisible in the background. That was all Kakashi had to say about it as he blandly eyed a rather shamed looking Obito.

Something had to give way eventually, and Tsuna needed to be there when it did.

/==

(April -5 Years to the Vongola Succession Crisis.)

His son, Yamamoto Tsuyoshi noticed, was looking mighty confused. (Also a bit harassed, because the thousand little gods knew children were anything but subtle or knowledgeable about delicate emotions, but mostly just confused.)

Takeshi was ignoring the chattering of the usual group of boys he hung out with after school in favour of staring in outright perplexity at two boys sitting on the other side of the restaurant. To be fair, so were most of the customers present. Though the adults seemed significantly more amused by the scene than Tsuyoshi’s son.

The fluffy haired brunette and his silver haired companion had set up a full-scale tea ceremony in child-sized miniature in their booth. Tsuyoshi was still trying to figure out where all the dishes had come from, because he certainly did not stock such things. They were even wearing formal kimono. It would be adorable, if a bit surreal, except they had done nearly the same thing every day Takeshi had hung out at the restaurant since shortly after the new school term had begun.

They seemed to switch up the theme they had going every week or so. Tsuyoshi had never been so entertained by customers before. The displays even had the added benefit of bringing in other customers who were curious about the costume of the day. Tsuyoshi’s favourite so far had been the red-crowned crane outfits. Kami forgive him, but Tsuyoshi was beyond tempted to ask if they had
Cleaning up after closing that night, Tsuyoshi finally gave in to his curiosity. “So, those two boys who come in to have tea every day, are they friends of yours?”

“No… really? Sawada and Gokudera are in my class, but they don’t really talk to anyone but each other.” Takeshi looked up at his father, and the volume of his voice dropped like someone could be listening from around a corner in the empty restaurant. “Tousan, I think they’re stalking me!”

“What…” Tsuyoshi cleared his throat, Takeshi’s utterly serious expression doing very little to help keep the laughter at bay. “What makes you say that, Takeshi?”

“I see them everywhere. At lunch. At practice. At the restaurant. At the park. They’re everywhere.” Takeshi’s spooked expression was just precious. It was like the boy had no idea how to handle people waiting for him to make the first real move. “And every time they look at me? They smile. Tousan, I think they want to eat me!”

“Well, Takeshi…” Tsuyoshi was not going to laugh. He was once a professional swordsman-for-hire, so he could damn well keep a straight face even in the face of his son’s ridiculousness. “Maybe you should just ask them what they want?”

“No, Tousan, you don’t understand! Gokudera’s step-dad is a doctor!” Takeshi had well and truly freaked himself out now. “If I get too close they’ll steal my kidneys! I don’t want to get chopped up! I like my liver where it is!”

“Takeshi, that’s not what Dokuro-sensei does!” Tsuyoshi had tried not to lose it, really he had, but of course the neighbourhood kids had overheard someone talking about Doctor Dokuro Obito’s work with artificial replacement organs and made up a story to scare each other with. The funniest part was that Tsuyoshi could not even tell his son that Dokuro-sensei was not that kind of doctor, because ironically enough the man was ‘that kind’ of doctor. “I’m sure if you asked Gokudera-kun he’ll tell you he just wants to be friends!”

Takeshi gave his father an utterly betrayed look. “You haven’t seen Gokudera’s teeth from up close.”

(=/=)

(April 24th, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Takeshi grit his teeth to keep his scream hidden behind a smile. It was his birthday, Takeshi was nine now, and he was supposed to be happy today (he was supposed to be happy every day, but today especially.) Except… except…

Except it felt like everyone only liked him because of what he could do (do for them.) It was like Takeshi was not allowed to exist outside of sports. Forget homework, and forget making friends with someone who was not on a sports team. Takeshi liked baseball, really he did, but sometimes (every time) when he thought about it Takeshi thought he could start to hate how being good at sports made
people treat him. (Even the teachers had started to ignore him in class because Takeshi was the 
baseball star.)

Every day, his dad asked Takeshi if he had talked to Sawada and Gokudera yet. Every day, Takeshi 
pushed his shame down under his smile and said he had not been able to catch them. (**Liar. Takeshi’s** 
guilt grew stronger, a sour taste at the back of his mouth. **Liar,** your ‘friends’ laugh every time you 
mention them, and you, **Yamamoto Takeshi,** are too much of a **coward** to tell them to stop. Too 
much of a coward to talk to the **weird kids,** because what if people stopped **liking** you, after? **Selfish** 
coward.)

Takeshi remembered how people used to treat Sawada, how badly they picked on him before 
Gokudera showed up. Half the class still called him ‘dame-Tsuna’, even if Takeshi was having a 
hard time remembering what made Tsuna ‘no-good’. Gokudera was the first and **only** friend Takeshi 
had ever seen Sawada make. Why would Sawada even **want** to talk to Takeshi? Gokudera was 
smart, and willing to defend Sawada, and loud enough to make himself heard, and brave enough to 
speak up, and…

Takeshi had seen how unfair it was, but he had never even tried to stick up for Sawada. A good 
person would have stepped in, the way Gokudera had. (**Takeshi knew he was a bad person. A liar** 
and a coward.)

It got harder and harder to smile properly as the day dragged on. Takeshi was so glad when class let 
out, but the day was not over yet. His friends piled into Take-Sushi and greeted his dad, and then it 
happened. **“Of course we came! Can’t ignore our future baseball star!”**

It was like being cracked open, like being **broken.** Takeshi bolted from the restaurant, ignoring his 
dad trying to call him back. (**He had to get away before he hurt someone.**) He ran and he ran and he 
**ran** until he collapsed against the railing of a bridge. It was hard to breathe around the weight in his 
chest and Takeshi wished he could just **stop caring** about what those **useless glory-seeking leeches** 
said about him.

**“Yamamoto-kun, are you okay?”** Sawada was there (**because of course he was**) Gokudera hovering 
just behind the shorter boy’s shoulder. **“You’re crying.”**

**“Aha?”** Takeshi touched his face, a true enough there were tears streaking down his face. Takeshi 
had not even noticed the sobs that strangled his breath. **“Would you look at that, haha. I didn’t even** 
notice.”

**“Tch. Idiota,** how can you not notice when something’s hurting you?” Gokudera rolled his eyes and 
thrust a napkin into Takeshi’s hand. **“Here, wipe your face. Those gnats you let hover around you** 
aren’t worth the water.”

**“Aa.”** Takeshi cleared his eyes and blew his nose while the other boys watched him with concerned 
eyes. **“Um. Thanks.”**

**“You’re welcome, Yamamoto-kun.”** Sawada smiled gently. **“I’m glad we were here to help.”**

**“Ah… what are you two doing here?”** Takeshi twisted the tissue into shreds, still feeling unbalanced. 
Sawada and Gokudera exchanged a sideways look. Gokudera shrugged and Sawada smiled again. 
**“Waiting.”**

Takeshi opened his mouth to ask what they were waiting for but… stopped. Looked at his 
classmates full on for the first time, instead of stealing glances out of the corner of his eye. Looked at
their strange, matching outfits. Looked at how they were dressed in black workout gi and old-fashioned leather armour. Looked at how they dressed for training, for exercise but were instead…

‘They were waiting… for me?’

It was an odd realization to have. Sawada and Gokudera had not asked for anything. Everybody asked Takeshi for something. They wanted a smile, or a winning game, or a chance to feel popular. Everybody wanted something except for these two boys who… everybody else made fun of.

“How do you stand it?” Takeshi had to know. “How do you put up with everyone talking about you? They call you both names, and make fun of you all the time. Why don’t you care? Doesn’t it bother you?”

Another look was exchanged, and Sawada giggled. This time Gokudera was the one who smiled, sharp white teeth on display in that disturbing way he had. It made people think that Gokudera ate smaller children, or at least that he would have no objections to tearing chunks out of his enemies if they strayed too close. “Why should we care? Their opinions are worthless to us.”

“Every day… every day… it feels like they want something from me.” Takeshi did not know where the words were coming from. He had put so much effort into ignoring the things he was now talking about to these two boys. Takeshi was sure there was no way he could ever have put his feelings into words if he had been asked. Except these two… sure, Takeshi knew of them, everyone in Namimori had heard of these two ‘strange little boys’. Yet prior to today, before this very moment, they and Takeshi had never spoken actual words to each other before. So why did Takeshi trust them? Why was Takeshi spilling secrets and feelings he had never even admitted to his dad? “If I don’t smile they fuss because they think my batting average will slump. It’s never about me. They only care because I’ll win games for Namimori one day. It’s heavy. It feels like chains pulling me under water, and I don’t… I don’t like it, but I don’t know how to stop.”

“Yamamoto-kun… I think that Yamamoto-kun shouldn’t force himself.” Sawada looked sad, but determined to say his piece. “I can understand what Yamamoto-kun is saying. Not being liked, not having friends or people around… it’s scary. I used to smile just so my mother wouldn’t worry about me, even though the people at school were mean, and liked to hurt me. It’s cold and lonely to be that way, but…”

“But the people who really care about you want to know when you’re sad, idiota.” Gokudera poked Takeshi in the forehead with a smirk, one arm slung around Sawada’s neck. “We want to know when you’re hurt and angry and everything else. If you smile all the time like a brain dead baseball-obsessed moron how are we supposed to know when you need our help?”

“We think Yamamoto-kun is just great as he is right now.” Pulled sideways by Gokudera’s hold, Sawada still managed to nod his head, one hand clasped around Gokudera’s wrist. “We don’t want Yamamoto-kun to try to be anyone but Yamamoto-kun. We want Yamamoto-kun’s smiles to all be real smiles from now on.”

“You both…” Takeshi wiped away fresh tears as they both nodded, perfectly serious and utterly unashamed. It felt… it felt like after the rain fell and all the dust had been washed away. Fresh and clean and full of promise. Takeshi knew that there and then, with them… he would never have to fake a smile again. Takeshi’s lips twitched, and the grin that bloomed on his face lit his eyes and put all his past smiles to shame. “Hi, my name’s Yamamoto Takeshi! Do you want to be friends?”

“Hello, Yamamoto-kun. My name is Sawada Tsunayoshi.” Sawada held out his hand. “Please call me Tsuna, all my friends do.”
“Haha, okay, Tsuna!” Takeshi reached for Tsuna’s hand. “You can both call me Takeshi then!”

Palm clasped palm, and the bridge exploded in amber and turquoise Flames. There was an outraged shriek and a large splash as the three boys fell through the melted safety rail into the river below. “Damn it, Takeshi-baka! Learn to control yourself!”

Soaked and shocked and clinging to his new friends with both arms, Takeshi grinned at the sky as they dragged themselves towards the bank. “Hahaha! Man, Hayato, your voice went really high!”

(=)

(May, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Kyoko-chan?” Sasagawa Kyoko turned in surprise, and so did the group of upperclassmen gathered around her older brother. Kyoko’s face was ruddy with tears, and Ryohei’s face was bloody. Sawada Tsunayoshi looked over the tableau in concern, flanked on the right and left by Gokudera Hayato and Yamamoto Takeshi. Sawada’s face, usually open and smiling, assumed a scowl just as fierce as Gokudera’s at the sight of the bruising grip one of the middle school boy’s had on Kyoko’s arm. “… You’re all worse than trash.”

With a squeak, Kyoko stumbled away from the fight as her captor went crashing to the ground after a baseball bat to the head. Ryohei shouted with glee as Kyoko’s three classmates piled into the gang of older kids. Watching Sawada jump up and kick the bully who had cut her big brother’s face in the face, Kyoko felt ashamed. This was all her fault, because she was not strong enough to protect herself her big brother had gotten hurt. Ryohei was bleeding and it was because Kyoko was weak.

Face set with newfound determination, Kyoko called up every boxing lecture her brother had ever given her, made sure her thumb was on the outside of her fist, and slammed a right cross into one of their dumb stupid faces. “Leave my Oniichan alone, you big bully!”

“Extreme, Kyoko-chan!” Ryohei laughed in delighted surprise. “That’s my imouto-chan!”

The last of the gang fell with Gokudera’s combat boot in his gut. Looking around at his friends and the Sasagawa siblings, Sawada hurried over to Ryohei. “Sasagawa-sempai, are you okay? I saw them kick you in the head before we stopped them.”

“I’m extremely fine, kohai!” Ryohei grinned and punched a fist into the air, blithely ignoring the blood spread across his face. “I heal extremely fast, you see!”

Kyoko’s classmates were looking at Ryohei with strangely intent expressions, and Kyoko’s brother seemed to… shimmer. Like sun heated pavement. Kyoko had always thought that her big brother shone like the sun, but now it looked a little too real. There was gold light on Ryohei’s skin, and Kyoko could see her classmates exchange unreadable looks. Yamamoto grinned, and Gokudera sighed while waving his hands in a shooshing motion at Sawada. With a chuckle, Sawada smiled back at Ryohei, hands clasped behind him. “I’m glad, sempai. Kyoko-chan would be very sad if you were hurt.”

“You!” Ryohei jabbed a pointed finger at Sawada, who blinked.

The silence lingered for a bit, then Sawada’s eyebrows went up in realization. “Oh! I’m Sawada Tsunayoshi, Sasagawa-sempai. These are my friends Gokudera Hayato-kun and Yamamoto Takeshi-kun. We’re in Kyoko-chan’s year.”

“Thank you for helping me protect my little sister to the extreme!” Ryohei bowed low. “You should all extremely call me big brother! We’re extreme comrades now!”
“… If you insist, Oniisan.” Sawada looked amused by Ryohei’s enthusiasm, which was much better than the usual reaction of trying to escape. “You can call me Tsuna then. Everyone does.”

“We’ll be good friends to the extreme, Tsuna!” Ryohei slung an arm around Sawada’s neck, and an explosion of amber-gold fire blew the upperclassman creeping up behind Ryohei with a raised pipe backwards to land with a violent crunch. Kyoko paused in the middle of digging the bandages out of her bag. Brother and sister stared at the yellow flame dancing over Ryohei’s skinned knuckles, the scrapes fading away in sparkles of sunlight. Sawada’s resigned expression deepened as Kyoko poked the fire and little wisps of indigo, the dark blue shot through with gold sparks, crawled over the back of her hand. Ryohei blinked as all their bruises faded away. “Huh. Extreme.”

/=/= (-6 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Obito hummed a little nonsense tune under his breath as he coaxed artificial Mokuton cells to mix with Nagi’s biopsy cultures. A few more weeks and the replacement organs would be ready for implantation.

The network of medical seals that covered Obito’s lab space glowed, green light pulsing steadily like a heartbeat. There was no God Tree or Gedo Mezo statue for Obito to leech off of for chakra here in this world, so he had needed to start recreating the cloning process from scratch. Which had resulted in Obito spending rather more time in his lab than Kakashi was entirely happy with. Even if the other ninja had never complained out loud, Obito had dragged himself home after the third all-nighter in a row with the fuzzy idea that Kakashi was plotting something.

Kakashi was always plotting something.

It was a good thing that the medical community of this world had already started experimenting with cloning. Not only did the already developed science save him time, Obito was also given a good idea of where to start working on the Mokuton cells. Not to the extent of Obito’s power, but enough to give little Nagi a trump card, and to ensure that her body would be strong enough to fight if it ever came down to that. It also helped that Nagi was a Mist as well, and that her struggle to live after the accident had Activated her Flames. Nagi could keep herself alive long enough for Obito to get the new process perfected, and after that the Mist Flame’s Creation Aspect worked almost seamlessly with the Mokuton Wood Release.

Poor Nagi had suffered enough, there was no need to put her through more pain simply because Obito had rushed the development of her new organs. Obito could remember very little of his first year in the Mountain’s Graveyard. Mostly just pain, and feeling like his body was trying to eat him. So Obito was taking his time, he was getting this right. This was the first big project he had ever attempted, and while it might not be a cure for Kakashi’s condition, Obito knew that this would help. Even if it was just one little girl, one little cousin, Obito was still saving a life. It would never fix what he had done before, but maybe it was a good start for making some kind of amends with the ghosts of his first Clan.

Before he left the lab for home Obito checked the most delicate organ he was crafting. The inactivated Sharingan was the fuzzy red of a newborn Uchiha. As good a sign as any that it would function properly.

Obito really hoped that Nagi-chan liked her adoption present.

/…/
Kyoko was hiding something from her. Hana scowled, watching her best friend arrive with her older brother. Both Kyoko and Ryohei were covered in bruises, smiles bright but the bags under their eyes dark and heavy. Ryohei ran off to join a group of boys with a shout, Kyoko waving after her brother before trotting over to where Hana was waiting by the doors. “Good morning, Hana-chan!”

“… Good morning, Kyoko. Did you bring your cake money?” It had been a week since Kyoko and Hana had spent time together after school. If Kyoko brushed her off one more time…

“Ah! I’m sorry, Hana-chan! Oniichan and I have to go somewhere after school.” Hana’s eyes narrowed. Kyoko was hiding something from her. Hana was going to find out what it was.

… The Sawada monkey had started talking the Kyoko and Ryohei this week. That seemed like a good place to start asking questions.

No one left bruises on her Kyoko without answering to Kurokawa Hana!

/…/

At first the movements in the herbivore crowds had been dismissed, as always, as beneath Kyouya’s attention. His Tetsu would alert Kyouya of anything worthy of a carnivore’s attention. After some time, the loud bleating from the herbivores stopped.

Abruptly.

The ensuring panicked whispers had been hushed. Fearful. Interesting.

What was that the little herbivore had said about ‘teeth’?

(Kusakabe Tetsuya was not sure if Kyou-san’s sudden interest in the local rumour mill was a good thing or not. On one hand, it had distracted Kyou-san from the matter of his new neighbours, and had sidetracked the youngest Hibari’s attempts to break into the fenced property. On the other hand, Kyou-san taking an active interest in anything was terrifying to contemplate even just in theory. Tetsuya had no desire whatsoever to experience the reality.

… Tetsuya really should have known better. There was tempting Fate, and then there was kicking Fate in the fork and calling them a pansy.)

Changes had occurred in Kyouya’s territory while he had been distracted.

Confusing changes.

One of the small animals that the troublesome herbivores stalked had grown fangs. Still a small animal, but one that hunted, even if it was in a pack.

Amused despite himself, Kyouya settled in to watch the situation develop. So many small animals unsheathing claws and fangs. Even if they were just learning how to use their milk teeth to chew on weakened prey. How had Kyouya missed seeing so many baby carnivores in his territory?

It was the loud (not-a) herbivore who provided the answer.

Camouflage.

They were only baby carnivores. Clumsy, and unskilled at hunting. Confused by their prey drive after so long pretending to be part of the herd. Unlike Kyouya and Tetsu, the small animals were alone. There were no adult carnivores watching over them to teach them the best ways to bite their
prey to death.

The little alpha’s dam was the worst, the kind of herbivore so broken to harness she would drown if placed in a tub of water. The rest lived with painfully average herbivores. Even the bloodthirsty one who liked blades was without proper guidance. The little sword cub’s sire might still eat like a proper carnivore, but his teeth had dulled with the loss of his mate. A threat to his cub might rouse him, but the desire to hunt his prey down for himself was gone.

**Kyouya** would never let that happen to him. **Kyouya**’s future mate would be a proper carnivore, capable of hunting with him just like Kyouya’s parents hunted together. (Pair-bonding between large predators was often intense, and lifelong. There was a chill behind Kyouya’s breastbone at the thought of one of his parents being without the other. The thought of that loss ever happening to *him*… no. Kyouya would pick the **strongest** mate. A mate as wild and savage and **furious** as his mother when she Raged. Kyouya would **never** be left to hunt alone.)

That still left Kyouya with a growing pack of baby carnivores in his territory. Baby carnivores who had disguised themselves as small animals. The crowds of herbivores camouflaged them, and Kyouya had very nearly overlooked them.

… It was **good camouflage**.

Too good for baby carnivores to have set in place on their own. Too good to have been an happy accident of circumstances aligning, not with their herbivore parents ignorant of the baby carnivore’s true natures. Kyouya, however, was on the hunt for hidden things, and it was easy to spot an emerging carnivore when you knew where to look.

Best of all, Kyouya had **finally located** Dokuro Obito’s wife.

… Stupid crowding herbivore thinking was apparently infectious. Kyouya had read ‘wife’ on the paperwork and translated that into ‘female herbivore’, when really what he **should** have been doing was searching for his prey’s **mate**.

Gokudera Kakashi was **supposedly** sickly, and perhaps that was enough of a reason from why a strong carnivore would be content to remain dunned for so long, but Kyouya could barely comprehend it. He learned very quickly, very completely, that **sick** in no way meant **weak**.

/…/

They were loud, they were crowding, and baby carnivores or not Kyouya had **standards** for acceptable behaviour from Namimori citizens.

So he attacked.

(Watching from a prudent distance, Tetsuya winced as Kyou-san’s attempt to bite someone to death went terribly, **terribly awry**.)

Kyouya’s back slammed into the pavement, a sandaled foot wedged into his sternum pinning him in place, and confusion filled the young Hibari as he scrambled for the air that the impact with the street had knocked from his lungs.

This man should **not** have been able to beat him, let alone move fast enough that Kyouya had **not seen** the blow that felled him. Gokudera Kakashi was weak. Sickly. His health so fragile he needed to wear a mask at all times to filter his air.

Kyouya tried to snarl a challenge and the adult carnivore just chuffed at him. **Amused** by Kyouya
like a wolf letting cubs play chase-and-pounce with their tail. The little animals were watching, eyes bright and interested. Kyōya would have been angry about being shamed in front of so large a crowd but...

It was a lesson. An older carnivore putting an unruly cub back in its place, and Kyōya wondered…

(Tetsuya had learned to be wary of the future when Kyō-san had that contemplative look on his face.)

Kyōya had a lot to think about.

(Tetsuya was right. This was going to give him so many headaches. … Still. It was nice to see Kyō-san making new friends.)

/…/

Camouflage was not a skill that Kyōya had ever considered learning before. Yet it was camouflage keeping the den of baby carnivores safe. It was camouflage that hid the wolf-dog’s actions from the notice of the Hibari Clan’s watchers. Camouflage that had allowed the eagle-owl to pass as a harmless sparrow, dismissed as not a threat.

Camouflage could be used to get Kyōya what he wanted.

“Here you go, Kyōya-sempai!” The little alpha held out a pile of fabric. Camouflage, Kyōya reminded himself as he took the offered clothes, loath to remove his Namimori uniform. Camouflage, not crowding.

“… Huh.” Tetsuya’s thoughtful noise caught Kyōya’s attention, and he noted the way his second was examining his own set of new camouflage.

Intrigued, Kyōya took a second look and… bullet and blade proof fabric hung in heavy folds. What was within those towering walls that the baby carnivores required such defensive pelts? An anticipatory grin bared Kyōya’s teeth as sharp eyes gleamed with rising blood-thirst.

It was even better than Kyōya had imagined. He had nearly died four times in the first thirty minutes.

“Kyōya-sempai! Look out!” Make that five times.

Violet and orange Flames blasted clear the trap that had nearly impaled Kyōya, and he laughed in savage delight. “Let’s go, little animal.”

“Kyōya-sempai?” The little alpha was confused, but Kyōya knew he would figure it out soon enough. The wolf-dog would see to it.

Why had his parents never explained how much fun a proper hunting pack was? Just think of the kind of prey Kyōya could go after now.

(Tetsuya could only pray that his ‘pack’ could keep Kyō-san’s attention restricted to Namimori for at least a few more years.

When blue and green sparks rippled over and up his hands when Tsuna-kun helped him up, Tetsuya could only blink and oh. Oh, he had nothing to worry about. Tetsuya and Kyō-san were exactly where they should be.)
Gokudera Kakashi was probably one of the most relaxed adults in Namimori. Not out of blissful ignorance (not like Nana and her perpetual dazed obliviousness) but more like life’s chaotic pitfalls and whirlwind dramas occurred simply to amuse him.

When Tsuna and Hayato had Harmonized back in March, Kakashi had sauntered into the destroyed training field shortly after they had calmed themselves and looked down at the two boys with happily curved eyes. “Maa, I knew that you’d be able to resolve your differences.”

Then, since the training field needed repairs before it could be used again, Kakashi had made the boys run laps all the way around the property wall. How lucky that there was a track laid down along the inside for just that purpose! Hayato had sworn to never fumble his explosives again. Kakashi was a demon when it came to training time.

“You can’t choose your blood.” Kakashi had told them once their laps were done, ignoring the way they had collapsed in exhausted puddles. “Sometimes blood means nothing. Family is something you choose. Family is something you make. Your team can be your family more than any blood relative could possibly be. When you call someone comrades, nakama, when you choose the people who will live and fight and love and laugh and cry and die with and for you… that bond will be the most precious thing you will ever have.”

Tsuna had rolled his head over to find Hayato already looking back. The Harmony between them was new but strong and shining bright. Eyes dyed in the colours of their Flames the two boys had moved enough to clasp hands and smile.

When Tsuna and Hayato dragged Takeshi home with them that memorable day in April, Kakashi simply tilted his head to observe the sopping wet trio of boys. “Maa, there are spare yukata in the laundry. Make sure you mop up the puddles.”

They had emerged after changing into dry clothes to find a table set for five with bowls of Takeshi’s favourite noodles. The small gifts Tsuna and Hayato had purchased for Takeshi sat neatly wrapped and tagged on the side table, along with a larger gift from Kakashi and Obito. With a little urging from Hayato, Takeshi had ignored the usual custom of waiting until he was alone and opened his gifts right away. After cake, Takeshi held a blue-hilted tanto close and stared at Kakashi in disbelief as the masked man smiled. “Tsu-kun has responsibilities to meet when he gets older, Takeshi-kun. You’ll need to be strong in order to stay by his side with Hayato-kun. I can help you with some things, but you should ask your father about learning the sword. I won’t take that birthright away from either of you.”

Wearing his new ball cap and wristband, Takeshi had clutched his new blade to his chest and asked a very surprised Tsuyoshi when they could start training in the family style the moment he got home. (This was not the situation Tsuyoshi had expected to result from his son’s sudden onset of hysteria.)

When the boys had sheepishly presented a bruised and bloodied Ryohei and Kyoko to him in May, Kakashi had nodded his head in understanding. “If you two want to join Tsu-kun’s team you’ll have to do the training. Fighting together makes you comrades, and each member of the team needs to be able to hold their own and help their friends in a pinch. Remember, fighting might be against the rules, and those who break the rules may be trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash.”

Kyoko had sparkled, utterly enthralled. Ryohei had glowed, taking the words to heart just as his
sister did. It would take years before the seed Kakashi planted that day flowered, much to the utter terror of the Sasagawa sibling’s opponents, but every legend started with something small and easily overlooked. The siblings may have looked different on the surface, but the way they reacted to Kakashi’s words was eerily identical. Both had clapped their hands in excitement and cheered enthusiastically. “Extreme!”

“… Maa, what youthful little friends you’ve made, Tsu-kun.” Kakashi’s tone had said he was laughing at them, but none of the children were ever told what the joke was.

When Kurokawa Hana had stomped up to the group a few weeks after Ryohei and Kyoko started training with the team, blazing with righteous fury over Kyoko’s tired and sore appearance, Kakashi had just handed over a training uniform. “Maa, Hana-chan will just have to play with us then. Otherwise there’ll be no one to protect poor Kyoko-chan from the monkeys.”

“Kakashi-sensei!” Kyoko had flushed and stomped her foot in ire. “I can protect myself!”

“Kyoko-chan?” Hana had been startled out of her outrage, blinking at the sight of her cheerful, bubbly best friend loudly protesting her usual role of ‘damsel in distress’. Hana had turned thoughtful, and went to put the uniform on. “Fine, if Kyoko-chan’s here, so am I! Even if you’re all stupid monkeys!”

“As you say, Hana-chan.” Kakashi had promptly set them to running. “For warm up today we’ll jog to the training field!”

It should be noted here that Kakashi’s version of a ‘warm up jog’ was more of an ‘oh sweet kami we are all going to get eaten’ sprint wherein the children were chased screaming through the street by a pack of baying hellhounds.

“That man is insane!” Hana had screeched, then scrambled to avoid a line of heavy throwing knives. Tossed just slow and off target enough for an untrained civilian girl to just barely dodge. The next throws would become slightly faster, but then again, so would she.

“Maa, so cruel, Hana-chan. What kind of thing is that to say about your beloved sensei?” Kakashi twirled another kunai by the handle ring with a lazy smile. “Look at how kind and generous I am, helping to motivate you to catch up to the others!”

Hana bolted before Kakashi decided to start throwing sharp pointy things at her again, red-violet sparks trailing from the ends of her hair as Tsuna yanked her around the corner and out of sight.

When Hibari Kyouya attacked them for ‘noise and crowding’ a week after Hana joined up with the others, Kakashi thrashed the bloodthirsty child up one side of the street and down the other without looking away from his book. “Maa, what an adorable baby skylark.”

Kyouya was pinned to the ground, Kakashi’s foot applying just enough pressure to the boy’s sternum to prevent Kyouya from gaining enough air to recover and struggle. Kyouya barely managed to suck up enough air to growl a breath. “… herbivore…”

“That’s rude, Kyouya-kun. Making assumptions like that.” Kakashi smiled and closed his book with a sigh. “My clan totem in a wolf after all. A sheepdog might live among the herd but he is not a part of it. More than that, Kyouya-kun, the lone wolf dies… but the pack survives.”

Kakashi lifted his foot and turned away without saying anything else. Kyouya sat up to watch him leave, a contemplative look on his face as he rubbed feeling back into his chest.

“Maa, why aren’t you running? Sensei never said for you to stop.” The kunai came out once more,
and in the mad scramble to escape no one paid any attention to what happened to Kyouya in the aftermath.

No one, however, was surprised when Kyouya showed up at the next training session. Kakashi-sensei just had that effect on people. Kusakabe Tetsuya looked a bit more dubious until he put on the uniform and took note of the Kevlar, the armoured mesh, and the plated segments covering an reinforced over vital areas. Kyouya’s follower took things a bit more seriously at that point.

Tsuna fell over with a squeak of shock when he tackled Kyouya out of the way of a sprung trap during a survival exercise and violet flames bloomed in a vicious cyclone. Kyouya’s smile was just as scary as Hayato’s when the Storm decided to experiment. Takeshi’s eyebrows had grown back eventually, so what was the big deal?

The green-and-blue that rippled over Tetsuya’s arms a few minutes later just made Kyouya grin more. There was just something about Clouds that made their smiles into something utterly deranged if not outright terrifying.

“Excellent.” Kakashi patted Tsuna on the head and looked very pleased. “Keep up the good work, Tsu-kun. The more you and your team Harmonize together the more Flames you’ll have access to. Now go do your chakra control exercises.”

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(May, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

Despite Obito’s overly high opinion of himself, Kakashi was not pouting. Just because Obito was spending all of his time at the hospital or in the lab working on the artificial organ project for his little baby cousin (who Kakashi could readily admit had a more immediate need for Obito’s assistance and attention than Kakashi did,) thereby leaving Kakashi all alone with naught but ninken and proto-nin for company…

Had Kakashi complained? No he had not. So Obito’s baseless accusation that Kakashi was sulking and jealous of Obito’s attention now that Kakashi was no longer Obito’s only real patient was patently ridiculous. Obito was still spouting nonsense, just like when they were genin.

“You’re pouting again, Boss.” Uhei’s tongue lolled as he laughed. The hound had gotten cheeky since become Kakashi’s de facto health monitor and nurse. “Don’t worry so much. Your mate will be bringing the new pup back to the den soon, ne?”

“I get nothing but sass and backtalk.” Kakashi huffed and turned back to his book, monitoring the children out of the corner of his eye. Chakra control exercises, meditation, and D-ranked jutsu had worked to develop the children’s civilian-pitiful chakra networks into a respectable Academy Graduate average despite the late-by-Village-standards start most of them had gotten. The boys were a bit more advanced than the girls by virtue of previous combat or sports training, but Kyoko and Hana refused to let that slow them down and were catching up quickly.

When it came to shinobi training the Sky Attribute was the best life hack ever. Thanks to Tsuna there was a constant exchange of Harmonized Flames between the children. Drawing out the Flames disturbed the balance between Spirit and Body, affecting the chakra network, making it easier to identify when agitated consciously.

Kakashi had never seen a group of civilian born trainees access their chakra so quickly and easily before. It took the majority of two Academy years back in Konohagakure-that-was for the civilian kids to access enough chakra to even do the leaf trick. That was why children were encouraged to
enroll as early as possible. The more practiced they were at mediation, combined with the Academy’s physical training program, made it easier for them to access their chakra while still young enough for it to matter.

The younger a shinobi was when they first accessed their chakra consciously, the better they were at maintaining jutsu and increasing their reserves. Thanks to the boost from their Flames, Tsuna and his group of little friends were sticking leaves on their foreheads in a matter of days after they first threw sparks.

A less self-assured man might have said it was cheating, but, well, he was a ninja. Plus Kakashi still had all of them beat without the Sky Flame hack. The benefit of being a legitimate genius combined with two lifetimes of training.

They were good kids. They really did remind Kakashi of puppies. All eager energy and voracious appetites for learning and the occasional piece of destroyed furniture that they were really very sorry for Kakashi-sensei, they would be more careful the next time they practiced kawamiri in the house, promise. It was adorable. They absorbed their lessons with bloodthirsty abandon. Thank goodness, Kakashi mused, that ninja were ‘cool’. An interested and enthusiastic child would apply themselves to lessons with enough dedication to make even Gai cry. (With real, not-manly tears even.)

They all had their particular strengths of course. Tsuna pulled off the fastest replacement jutsu, and the little Sky would be an absolute terror once he had the chakra reserves for sustained shunshin. Hayato’s skill with explosive tags was already something to be feared and Kakashi was already gleefully anticipating the chaos his baby cousin would wreak once Hayato advanced past D-rank fuinjutsu. Takeshi had been born for blade work and Tsuyoshi had promised to pass on the family sword style when Takeshi turned ten. Ryohei was a natural taijutsu genius and he picked up iryojutsu with a similar instinctive knowledge of the human body. Kyoko’s henge was immaculate, and she excelled when it came to intelligence gathering and infiltration, showing an intuitive knowledge of motivations and levers. Hana had taken to traps and tripwires with all the glee of a spider spinning her first web. Kyouya displayed an affinity for tracking and hunting that hinted towards the same sort of hyper-senses Kakashi boasted. Tetsuya had a knack for diplomacy and negotiation that meant he could get a hold of anything given enough time, especially once Kakashi had refined the boy’s methods a bit and then set him loose on an unsuspecting black market.

Gleeful shouts drew Kakashi out of his reverie and after taking in the situation, also prompted him to put his book away.

“All right, my adorable little minions!” Kakashi clapped his hands and beamed, casually sending the participants of the brawl-in-progress sprawling with a few well-placed ankle hooks. “Since you’ve got so much energy today, I’m going to teach you all how to climb trees!”

Eight little faces gave him looks on a gradient from bored to confused to irritated. That changed when Kakashi walked up the nearest tree and stood on the bottom of a branch in complete defiance of gravity. The clearing was soon filled with the sounds of small bodies thumping into the ground with the occasional crack of exploding bark. Kakashi settled back on his perch and observed the fresh source of what was simultaneously complete misery for his students and delightful entertainment for him.

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(June, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

While school was in session Kakashi-sensei went easier on them in training so they could keep up with their homework. Tsuna, Kyoko, and Hana started running together every morning. Of course,
their usual route incorporated a lot more parkour and free-running than the average nine-year-old was generally capable of. They did this because the rest of the team had their own types of extracurricular training. Kyouya and Tetsuya had their patrols, Takeshi had baseball and kendo, Ryohei had boxing, and Hayato got demolitions and pyrotechnics training with Kakashi-sensei after dinner when everyone else had gone home.

Tsun and the girls had quietly admitted (only to each other) that they liked the weekends better. On school nights they all had to separate and return to their parent’s houses. On the weekends, however, they got to stay together with the whole team and Kakashi-sensei would help with their homework before giving them a bonus shinobi lesson on subjects like tactics or philosophy. It was so much more interesting than memorising the names of historically important people.

Kakashi-sensei would sometimes make their official homework more fun by teaching them stuff about how to infiltrate a castle, or how to spread rumours in a way that made the enemy make mistakes. Weekends also meant survival exercises, which were much more fun than book lessons. Kakashi-sensei had promised to take them all on a weekend camping trip that summer, and also said they could all stay in the tree house every night until school started back up again. Ah, being patient in the meantime was hard.

/…/

(June, -5 years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

The day had finally arrived. It had been the long, gruelling effort of months to make it this far, but now Nagi was finally allowed to leave the hospital. Nagi smoothed the pretty silks of her new kimono and smiled at her cousin as he muttered dire imprecations over the paperwork he was filling out. Tentative fingers brushed over the matching silk eye-patch, tracing the two-petal lotus stitched there.

“Is your new eye bothering you?” Obito watched carefully as Nagi shook her head, justifiably pleased with the revolutionary work he had done. With the development of the artificial organs, plus the groundbreaking procedure that had replaced Nagi’s lost eye, Obito was spoiled for his choice of funding, and all because his baby cousin had given Obito a side project. This ‘being a doctor’ thing was the best idea Obito had ever had. A much better plan than brainwashing people with the moon.

“Alright, if you’re sure. Do you want to file the adoption papers now, or wait a little bit longer to see if you can stand living with me first?”

“Now please, Obito-sama.” Nagi bit her lip and peered at her cousin through lowered lashes. “May I… I don’t want to be Naoe Nagi anymore. She’s dead.”

“Sure… did you have a name in mind?” Obito pulled Nagi’s wheelchair a bit closer and turned the adoption papers around. “There’s a change of name form here, so it’s no extra trouble to get it done now.”

“Dokuro.” Taking a deep breath she looked up and smiled, remembering Murkuro-sama’s kind smile and Obito-sama’s warm eyes. “I want to be Dokuro Kuromu.”

“Kuromu? Chrome?” Obito looked puzzled as he sounded out the English word. “Where did you learn that one, Kuromu-chan?”

“… It’s the name Mukuro-sama gave me.” Chrome blushed, staring at her hands as he fingers twisted together. “I want to use the same name that Obito-sama and Otousama have, because you’re my new Family, but Mukuro-sama was the one who saved me first. Mukuro-sama helped keep me alive until Obito-sama came, so I want to use his name too.”
“Alright then.” Obito penned the characters with the swift efficiency of a man used to the bureaucratic demands of the medical profession, tapping the edges to align the papers once he was done. “There you are then. Welcome to the Family, Dokuro Kuromu-chan.”

Chrome giggled and wiped away the tears that leaked form her uncovered eye as she smiled. “Please take care of me!”

/…/

On the first day of summer vacation, Obito-sensei brought his cousin’s daughter home to live with him and Kakashi-sensei and Hayato. The children had heard Obito-sensei talk about her, but this was the first time any of them had met the younger girl. The manner they had of staring like a pack of wolves surrounding a campfire, they felt, was therefore forgivable.

Obito gave Kakashi a look, and could only sigh as his ‘wife’ smiled at him with sadistic cheer, the contrary bastard.

Obito was going to be paying for that ‘wife’ crack he made when he got hired for his first career position for the rest of his life, and therefore refused to stop referring to Kakashi as his wife in that way. If he was going to get punished for it anyway, he might as well deserve what he had coming to him.

‘I never should have left them unsupervised together for so long.’ Obito mourned the loss of innocence. ‘I knew the bastard would turn them into a pack of monsters.’ Obito faced the children and forced down the shudder of unease crawling up his spine. ‘Glowing eyes. Why are they all giving me the glowing eyes of doom?’ With a short glare at Kakashi, Obito put his hands on his baby cousin’s shoulders in a tangible gesture of support and reassurance.

“This is my cousin, Dokuro Kuromu.” Obito smiled down at the top of Chrome’s head. “She was in a car accident and she was hurt very badly. The reason none of you were allowed to visit her in the hospital was because she needed a lot of surgeries, and her immune system was compromised from the medications. That means one of you could have passed on germs and gotten her sick enough to die. Kuromu-chan is better now, but she’s not strong enough for most of the training games yet. So, please treat her kindly while she finishes her recovery.”

“Hi!” Tsuna was delighted not to be the smallest and youngest and weakest anymore. Sure, Tsuna was the Sky, but that only made the coddling from the others even worse. Chrome was the new baby of the family, and her health was fragile, and it felt great to automatically be labelled the protector for once. “I’m Tsuna, Kuromu-chan! Welcome to the family!”

“… Please take care of me.” Chrome ducked her chin and smiled shyly as the other children introduced themselves. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

Chrome grew stronger every day, her Mist Flames already some of the strongest in the pack thanks to her struggle to survive after the accident. Her body could only handle short periods of activity however, and that meant Kakashi spent a long time trying to keep the kids engaged without excluding the newcomer.

Chrome caught up to the rest of the pack quickly in terms of chakra control and meditation, but her weak body stunted the development of her chakra reserves. It obviously upset her to sit out of the more physical exercises even though she understood why she needed to take it easy for now. The boys, however, chafed at being assigned extra book lessons and meditation sessions. Something had to give before a revolt was staged.
“Why does Obito-sama call Kakashi-sensei his wife?” A few days after moving in with the rest of the pack Chrome had finally relaxed enough to ask a few quiet questions at lunch. Fortunately for Obito’s nerves, the tension between the boys and girls eased up during break times. “Isn’t Kakashi-sensei a man?”

“Yeah, but Kakashi-sensei is too sensible to be a husband.” Tsuna did not seem to see anything odd with this situation. “Obito-sensei is silly most of the time. That makes him the husband.”

“Oh.” Chrome chewed on a carrot stick thoughtfully. “So being a man or a woman doesn’t matter?”

“I don’t think so.” Kyoko smiled cheerfully from Tsuna’s other side. “Tsuna-kun is going to be my wife when we grow up, after all! We both agreed that I make a better husband. Tsuna-kun is sensible like Hana-chan.”

“You need to match sensible and silly for a good marriage.” Tsuna said this with all the gravitas a nine-year-old social pariah with no real experience with culturally enforced gender roles was capable of. “My Mama and Papa are both silly people. Mama would’ve made a better husband than a wife, and Papa is never home. Marriage means ‘partners for life’. You can’t be good partners if you never spend time together!”

“Oh! I see.” Chrome smiled at Tsuna thankfully. “So Hayato-nii and Tetsuya-nii are wives but Ryohei-nii and Takeshi-nii are husbands!”

Roles thus clarified, the children turned back to their lunches. Ryohei’s brow furrowed, and he brought up the issue both Tsuna and Chrome had tactfully been able to avoid. “… What about Kyouya?”

All sound faded away as the pack of children froze.

“I.” Kyouya stabbed his chopsticks into his rice with savage grace. “Have never. Been silly.”

“Hahaha! That’s true.” Takeshi grinned brightly. “I guess we’ll have to find you a good husband when we’re older! Ne, Kyouya-sempai?”

“Shut up before I bite you to death, herbivore.” The children laughed as Kyouya glared, and everyone carefully refrained from commenting on the inherent silliness of categorizing every individual one met into groupings dependant on their carnivorous or herbivorous tendencies.

Lunchtime noises resumed with the tension broken.

“What. The hell. Was that?” Obito hissed as he turned to look at Kakashi in stupefied horror. “I thought you were teaching them shinobi skills not helping them get a head start on the Jounin crazies.”

“Maa, my dear husband brought it on himself.” Kakashi gave his partner a serene smile. “As a dutiful wife I simply take care of our home and children while you work to support us.”

“Kakashi, no. Kakashi.” Obito’s head sank into his hands. “How do they not understand social gender roles yet? They’re old enough to recognize the difference between men and women!”

“… Hm. I wonder.” With a slight shrug, Kakashi pointedly said nothing about Clan mentality, pack behaviour, or social clustering. The brats having been raised as outnumbered shinobi in a primarily civilian world meant they were a society unto themselves, and thus had established values of normal
the were vastly different from those norms followed by the rest of the children in Namimori.

It was really Obito’s own fault for carrying the ‘Kakashi is my wife’ joke too far. Until their training for bodywork missions started, there was no kind of gender demarcation in training kunoichi and shinobi. Kakashi himself had actually gone out of his way to take all the kunoichi lessons after he made ANBU Captain. You never knew what you would need to know. Better to have knowledge and not need it than need it and not have it.

Kakashi paused as a memory in an orange jumpsuit ran through his mind with a mad cackle. Now then, that was an idea that would put the whole group on an even level again.

“… What the hell did you just think of, you crazy bastard?” Obito’s eye twitched violently at the sight of Kakashi’s wicked grin. “Stop smiling like that. It’s creepy.”

“But you are my loving and devoted wife, husband mine.” Kakashi giggled, knowing very well that the sound disturbed Obito, and the children all looked up with grins as they recognized the verbal signal that meant ‘Kakashi-sensei had thought up a new training game’. “I won’t spoil the ending for you, but I am a genius.”

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(June, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“You are insane.” Obito had never quite appreciated how bad Kakashi’s mental trauma was prior to that moment. “I love you and cherish you above all others, but you are completely cracked.”

“Maa, my husband is so cruel to me.” Obito’s life partner pouted, expertly drawing attention to her, to Kakashi’s ruby painted lips. “Oiroke no jutsu is a perfectly valid training technique. Now the children will be comfortable going undercover as either gender without any of those pesky little tells that puberty causes.”

In female form Kakashi had no problems going without a mask, instead choosing to make liberal use of a painted fan. Make-up was it’s own kind of mask, as well. After all, Hatake Sakumo had been a man, with a man’s face. For all Kakashi knew his female self took after one of his mothers in looks. An ethereal beauty carved of moonstone and alabaster, Kakashi tilted her head to the side and smiled at Obito’s stunned-stupid expression. “Ne, Obito-kun, do you think I’m pretty?”

“You’re always gorgeous. Man or woman doesn’t matter.” Obito spoke honestly, without thinking twice about what he was saying, and Kakashi’s smile grew. Obito sighed and shook his head with a longsuffering look at his partner. “That doesn’t mean you aren’t bugfuck crazy. Seriously, Kakashi. What made you think full gender reassignment was a good idea for training a bunch of kids?”

“Maa, adjusting to a female body will occupy the boys enough to give Kuromu-chan a chance to catch up in taijutsu.” Kakashi shrugged and gestured at the children, now an all-girl group where the former boys were struggling to adjust to a new center of balance and weight distribution as they worked through kata. “Plus this puts them all in the right mindset to absorb the first set of kunoichi-centric lessons. Which will be new material for all of them, meaning Kuromu-chan will start evenly with everyone else. Besides that, this is probably Kyouya-kun’s last summer before puberty starts, and I want at least one Oiroke session where hormones aren’t an issue.”

Obito looked over at the group and noted that his baby cousin did look much better able to keep up with the others now. “… How the hell did you manage to talk Kyouya into this, anyway?”

“Among animals it’s usually the females that are the most dangerous and deadly.” Kakashi smirked
and fluttered her eyelashes as she purred. “They are, in fact, the better predator. Kyouya-kun had no objections to the Oiroke training at all. In fact, it was Hana-chan who fussed the most about it. She calmed down once I told her that any male-only training had to wait until Kuromu-chan was strong enough to participate fully.”

“Crazy bastard.” Obito shook his head and wrapped an arm around Kakashi’s waist, only a little thrown by the deeper-than-expected curve of hip and waist. Obito buried his face in flyaway silver hair and sighed in contentment. “… Thanks. I knew you’d figure something out.”

“You’re welcome.” Kakashi stroked a hand over Obito’s forearm and smiled a secret smile behind a raised fan. Perhaps Obito would like to help Kakashi test the integrity of the Oiroke transformation later that night. In private. Love was a battlefield, after all. “Good job, my sweet little flowers! The one who lasts the longest gets to choose the menu for the rest of the week!”

The irony in that challenge, of course, being that the Oiroke technique was a unique transformation ninjutsu that used no chakra beyond what it took to initiate the change in gender. What Kakashi was really testing them on was how long they could stand living in female bodies. Well, that, and looking for signs of gender dysphasia. If the clash between mind and physical body was too bad then Kakashi needed to know for the future so they could avoid assigning that student missions that would be compromised by the mental conflict.

A week of kunoichi training later, Kakashi had the feeling that they had underestimated the level of stubbornness their students possessed. Kakashi had stayed female too, in shinobi solidarity, but the kids…

Or perhaps that whole ‘boys and girls have nearly identical brain chemistry until puberty’ thing had more of an impact on self-image than Kakashi thought. None of the boys had shifted back yet, and in fact they all seemed to be mostly enjoying themselves. Tetsuya was the only one to take more than a day to adjust to the change in circumstances, but had soon achieved an even keel once sufficiently distracted by Kyouya’s antics. Kyouya was revelling in the fact that her usual prey did not recognize her, and chose to fight back more often than they ran away because she was ‘just a little girl’. Ryohei was extremely pleased to be able to go everywhere with her little sister now. She said as much. Loudly. Often. Kyoko frequently choosing to chime in with an equally energetic affirmation of enjoying how she now got the chance to have a ‘big sister sometimes’.

Ironically, Hana was the only one struggling, since she had to get used to the fact that gender did not affect the overall behaviour of an individual so much as it dictated how other people reacted to the way an individual behaved. The poor child’s worldview was just shattered, but at least she was young enough to adapt easily to the change in her perception of reality. Of course, now Hana was convinced that everyone she ever knew ever was tripping balls crazy, but at least she was no longer a budding mysandrist. So that was at least one extra good thing had come from the training session.

It was a learning experience all around, indeed. Kakashi got a chance to practice all of the more advanced kunoichi tricks they had learned in theory, and Obito stopped fussing quite so much. Kakashi even got Obito to agree that, yes, Kakashi was a genius, and all of their ideas were therefore good ideas. Silly man. Obito should have known that already, after spending the better part of two lifetimes obsessed with and rigorously stalking Kakashi.

By the end of the second week, it became obvious to Kakashi that summer break would be over before their competitive drive let any of the ‘boys’ quit, and put the matter to vote. Much to the eldest now-girl’s smug satisfaction over the results, Kyouya won. Narrowly edging out the others with their barbeque recipe and a better grasp of math that allowed them to balance the more effective budget. The ‘wife skills’ contest left Tsuna determined to brush up on math, and Hayato with a new
tendency to read recipe books in their spare time. Tetsuya just shook their head and consoled themself with the fact that they could cook better than Hayato and balance a budget faster than Tsuna. (Them being nearly two years older than the runners up was immaterial.)

Then, of course, it was time for the promised and long awaited camping trip.

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Chapter End Notes

Look at what I did! *cackles*

Gue~ess who shows up next chapter? Hint: Next chapter is Obito and Chrome's visit to Italy! ♥
Chapter Summary

The Mist clings low to the ground, concealing traps and pitfalls for unwary feet. The Lightning is a spark of potential not yet strong enough to shine.

Obito is really rather pleased with himself right now.

Chapter Notes

I bet you thought I'd forgotten about you. Don't worry darlings, I got what you need~♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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(June, -5 Years to Vongola Succession Crisis.)

“Kuromu-chan, are you sure you don’t want to go camping with everyone else?” Obito crouched down so he could look his shy baby cousin in the eye. “I can delay my trip overseas and go with you, if you want. I know the others would be glad to have you along.”

“No, Obito-sama. I’m… not strong enough right now. They would have to slow down for me, instead of having fun.” Chrome blushed and clasped her hands together to keep from fidgeting under her cousin’s concerned gaze. “I’ll go next year when I’m stronger. Besides, I miss spending time with just Obito-sama. Going to Italia with Obito-sama is just as exciting as going camping.”

“Okay, okay. As long as you’re sure, Kuromu-chan.” Obito chuckled as the girl nodded, holding tight to his hand with a smile as he stood up. “Got your bags all packed and in the storage scroll? Good! Then here we go!”

Chrome gasped as the edges of the world opened up, laughing happily as Obito swept her away into Kamui.

/…/

After checking into a hotel for appearances sake (anyone backtracking them would go nuts trying to figure out how they got in to the country) Obito and Chrome headed off to a meeting with the Bovino Boss. The small Mafia Famiglia had something Obito wanted.

“… I’ve had some interactions with Doctor Trident Shamal. His field of specialty sees many damaged organs as a side effect of infectious diseases.” Obito accepted a glass of wine with a smile, nodding when Chrome looked at him for permission before taking the glass of sparkling juice offered to her. “He’s not much use for the technical side of things though. My little cousin here is proof in action that the new organs work, but the process of growing them is very tedious and very laborious at the same time. I’m looking for a way to streamline said process so that it isn’t necessary to monitor
everything constantly. My wife was a bit… upset by the extra lab hours I had to put in.”

“Ah, wives are like that.” The Bovino Boss looked wistful for a moment, before he shook it off and started the negotiations in earnest.

Chrome sat quietly and observed, speaking only when invited to by name. She had learned what sort of appearance and demeanor appealed the men like the Bovino Boss when she was still pretending to be Naoe Nagi. Kakashi-sensei’s lessons had taught her how to use that, how to make her fragile appearance and soft voice into a weapon. A weapon they would never see even after she had struck them down using it. Obito-sama was smiling as the Bovino Boss gave them everything they had come for. The mafia man happily fooling himself into thinking the Bovino had gotten the better end of the deal. “Well, I can only spare one of my people for this. We do have other projects you understand. Now, Ottavia would be best suited, but…”

“Is something the matter, Signore Bovino?” Obito tilted his head, inviting the Italian man to speak while they waited for the final version of the contract to be brought to them for signing.

“No, nothing wrong. Ottavia simply has recently taken over the care of her nephew.” A spasm of pain and anger and grief crossed the mafia man’s face. “The boy’s mother died in childbirth.”

“If Signora Ottavia chooses to come, we can provide lodging and caretakers for the infant. My wife is very fond of children, despite us being unable to have any of our own.” An ironic smile twisted Obito’s lips, and Chrome giggled quietly as she thought about Kakashi-sensei and the genin pack. “May I ask what the boy is called?”

“… Lambo Bovino.” The mafia don looked like he had made up his mind. “I’m certain Ottavia and her ward will enjoy the opportunity to see what life is like in Giappone.”

Decision made, the contract was soon signed and sealed. Obito and Chrome were sent on their way and told that Ottavia Bovino would take a room in their hotel once she had been informed of the move and packed her things.

/.../

Once delivered back to their hotel by a Bovino car, Obito turned to Chrome with a smile. “I’ve still got a few more things to do today, Kuromu-chan. Did you want to come with me, or did you want to explore a bit and stretch your legs? I know that grown up talk isn’t very interesting, and I want you to have fun on your vacation.”

“… I could go look for gifts?” Chrome ventured after a moment of quiet thought. Obito-sama was right to suggest a break. One more patronizing comment about ‘what a sweet little girl’ she was and Chrome would start dropping Hell Viewing genjutsu like ping-pong balls. “Then you could join me when you’re done? Kakashi-sensei would probably like something too, since you’re bringing home another kid.”

“Eh, maybe. You’re probably right about me needing to find a bribe though. Bastard gets prickly when he’s surprised. Now, you have your panic button?” Obito grinned as Chrome tilted her chin to show off the tiny seal inked behind her ear. “Good girl. Enjoy yourself and remember not to trust anyone who offers you candy!”

“Take care, Obito-sama.” Accepting the hair ruffle that disguised how Obito-sama slipped a stack of local bills into her purse, Chrome turned and walked off in the direction of the nearest palazzo. Chrome had left her eye patch off for the meeting with the Bovino, so she carried a white lace parasol to keep the harsh sun out of her weaker eye. A knee length lavender dress with lace trim, and
a lotus shaped hairclip to pin up her dark locks the way Mukuro-sama had favored when he played
with her hair. Chrome knew she looked like an easy target, being alone and as obviously foreign as
she was, so she cast a subtle Mist-assisted genjutsu that deflected negative attention and made the
shopkeepers feel especially helpful. Layered illusions were the best illusions. Chrome smiled as she
wandered along the canal. “Underneath the underneath, Kakashi-sensei.”

A small bag of fresh fruit soon hung from her wrist, bought as a snack to tide her over until
dinnertime. Obito-sama had strongly encouraged Chrome to eat only healthy, unprocessed foods, at
least until her new organs were fully integrated with each other and the rest of her body. Chrome still
had very little appetite, but did her best to eat a little more each day. Always an observant child, even
before her little accident, Chrome had easily seen how distressed Obito-sama was by Kakashi-
sensei’s mysterious illness, and she refused to add more worry to her cousin’s mind. Another few
months, a year at most, and Chrome would be mostly normal again as long as she followed Obito-
sama’s rules.

Chrome wandered past the line of shops she had explored and into a park, admiring the flowers as
she went. To be truthful, she would rather have Obito-sama with her before she made any final
choices regarding the purchasing of gifts for the others. Even after a month of living together,
Chrome was nervous about getting her new family members something they might hate. The only
person she felt confident choosing something for was Obito-sama, and it seemed a little silly to buy
him a souvenir from a trip he had been the one to take her on.

“Oh.” There was a boy, lying on the park bench. He was blond, and thin, much too painfully thin.
Almost as thin as Chrome had been after the doctors had taken all her organs out, before Obito-sama
had fixed her. Reaching into her bag, Chrome approached the boy. “Here. I hope you feel better
soon.”

The blond boy stared at Chrome wearing an odd expression. Slowly he reached out and took the
apple from her hand. Chrome kept smiling despite the strange way the boy looked at her, feeling the
same sparkle Ryohei-nii had under his skin as their fingertips brushed during the exchange. “…
Thanks.”

The blond boy left the park without saying anything else, and Chrome gave him a ten second head
start before she cast a chameleon cloak and followed after him. He was much, much too thin.
Chrome would make sure of his situation first before asking Obito-sama if she could have him. If his
family loved him, then Obito-sama would say no, and Chrome would feel bad for asking. Better to
make certain things were actually wrong with the boy before she asked to keep him.

“Ken, there you are.” The man the blond boy went up to had dark hair and a pair of red stripes
tattooed on one cheek. “Did you fall asleep in the park again? You know that’s dangerous.”

“You worry too much, Lancia.” The blond boy (Ken. His name was Ken) rolled his eyes before
taking a bite out of his apple. Good. It made Chrome glad to see Ken eat what she had provided him.
“I don’t know how someone who fusses like a woman is the Strongest Man in Northern Italy.”

“I fuss because I care, kiddo.” The man (Lancia, what an interesting name. Lancia) rubbed a hand
over Ken’s hair and chuckled. Chrome pouted. The blond boy was already being properly taken
care of. No fair. The man stepped aside to avoid the irritated swipe Ken took, and in doing so gave
Chrome a clear view of the other two boys lurking in Lancia’s shadow.

“Mukuro-sama?” Her parasol went flying as Chrome dropped her illusions in favour of throwing
herself bodily into the arms of a very surprised boy whose dark hair was styled in a way that vaguely
resembled a pineapple. “Mukuro-sama, I found you!”
Lancia of no known last name may have been the strongest man in Northern Italy, but all of his years acting as a mafia bodyguard had not prepared him for the odd situations that accompanied caring for children. To say nothing of caring for horrifically abused, Flame Active children. Little girls appearing out of thin air and ambushing his ward with a strangling hug while chanting Mukuro’s name over and over in a gleeful voice was just one of many crazy things that had happened lately. “… Are you going to introduce your friend to the rest of us, Mukuro?”

“Ah, I’m sorry!” The little girl stepped back with a blush and bowed, hands folded in front of her. She looked only six, maybe seven if she was small for her age. Dressed like a proper little lady, despite the foreign manners. She only had the barest trace of an accent. An accent that was at it’s most noticeable when she was using someone’s name. She was from outside of Italy, but someone had put a great deal of effort into her education. Dark plum eyes looked up at Lancia. “My name is Kuromu Dokuro. Mukuro-sama is my elder brother.”

With that stunning little tidbit of information out in the open she turned back to Mukuro. The boy looked blindsided, which was a first in Lancia’s (admittedly limited) experiences with the boy. “My dearest Chrome… how are you here?”

“You stopped talking to me. Of course I came looking for you!” Chrome propped her hands on her hips and gave Mukuro a look. It was a look that said, ’you are being deliberately dumb, now stop being silly and do as I say before I make you sorry.’ Chrome had practiced this look in the mirror after seeing Kakashi-sensei use it on Obito-sama to good effect. Mukuro proved to be quite receptive to it, if the way his eyes went wide and he shrank back was any indication. “Mukuro-sama is my brother, and family is the most important thing. I thought you were in trouble. Or hurt! Letting me worry about you so much was rude, Mukuro-sama.”

“Huh.” Ken finished off his apple as Mukuro sputtered. “I guess the resemblance wasn’t just my imagination after all.”

Chikusa blinked, looking between Mukuro and Chrome a few times before he nodded in silent agreement.

In short order, Chrome had browbeaten and sweet-talked all four of them into agreeing to follow Chrome back to her hotel. After a short detour to pick up Chrome’s discarded parasol from where it had landed in the dust by the curb, they followed Chrome straight to the suite Chrome and Obito were sharing. Chrome wasted no time in placing an order with room service. The boys were all much too thin.

Chrome frowned as she recalled the hard jut of Mukuro’s ribs under her arms. “Hasn’t Lancia-san been feeding you?”

The man in question blinked at being obliquely sassed by a little girl. “Hey! I’ve only had them for a few weeks. Give me a little more credit than that, please.”

“Humph.” Chrome lifted her chin and gave the man a sideways look that said ‘judging you’ in no uncertain terms. Hayato-nii had this look down to an art. Chrome never would have dared to treat an adult this way back before. Her new family was the best family. They taught Chrome so many useful things. “Fine. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt for now, Lancia-san.”

The next few hours were nerve-wracking for Chrome. Recalling all of Kakashi-sensei’s kunoichi
lessons with frantic determination, Chrome used a mix-match of her more difficult-to-deal-with family member’s mannerisms to both keep Lancia off guard and bolster her own still-shaky courage. Mukuro knew what she was doing, of course, Chrome could tell, but her brother was far too amused by her actions to spoil her game. So Chrome fed them, and ushered Ken into one of the beds for a nap when the energetic blond started to droop, and made small talk with the other three over lattes. Just as Chrome was ready to really start panicking, the door rattled as it was unlocked, and Obito-sama walked into the hotel room followed by a girl around Mukuro-sama’s age with red hair and violet eyes. Obito paused the stream of chatter he had been directing at his tag-along and eyed the unexpected guests seated with Chrome.

“I found Mukuro-niisama, Obito-sama.” Chrome contributed helpfully, clinging to said boy’s arm and smiling cheerfully.

“Oh, good! That’s one more task out of the way. Excellent job, Kuromu-chan!” Obito smiled back, his right eye flashing red in the overhead light as he turned to motion with one hand at the girl he had brought back with him. “This is M.M., I’ve been calling her Emu-chan. I picked her up from a bad situation as a favour to Sayako-obasan. She’ll be coming home with us when we leave.”

The redhead clutched a woodwind instrument case to her chest and glared at Obito before snarling something nasty sounding. Chrome blinked. Obito had thumped Italian into all of their heads using a Mist technique he had picked up during one of his research trips. Enough of the words were related for Chrome to recognize the language. “She’s French?”

“She ran into a little trouble in Paris, yes, and you know how my wife’s family are about letting musical talent go to waste.” Obito flopped down on the couch across from Chrome and ignored the way Lancia jumped at the sudden invasion of his space. “So! You’re the amazing Mukuro, are you? Sorry Rokudo was such a deadbeat that it took us ten years to find you.”

“… Apology accepted.” Mukuro blinked slowly and tilted his head to one side as he examined Obito. “… Rokudo is my family name.”

“It’s your father’s given name, actually.” Obito fussed around making himself a coffee. “Someone must have messed up the records somewhere along the line. We Japanese tend to give the family name first and the given name last. The order is transposed in Italian. Whoever put your father’s name down probably missed that.”


Lancia suppressed the urge to run away very fast while screaming in panicked hysteria. Mukuro was off-putting on a good day, and now there were three of him. Oh god, some of Mukuro’s issues were down to genetics, not trauma. Lancia was not getting paid enough to deal with that.

Chikusa quietly ignored all the tension and simply showed the French girl where to put her bags. Scowl or not, she was pretty and alone and did not deserve to be ignored just because of Mukuro’s family drama.

“So, Signore Lancia.” Obito smiled over the edge of his coffee cup. “I’m going to want to take my little cousin, and his friends, if they don’t object, home with me. Thoughts?”

Lancia sighed, and massaged the bridge of his nose. He was really not paid enough to deal with this. “… Let me set up a meeting with my Boss.”

/…/
A week after her Boss had informed Ottavia that she was being sent to Japan and Ottavia still had not calmed down.

*Japan*, really? Ottavia knew that the man was broken up over his sister’s death, but sending his nephew and presumptive heir halfway around the world was **stupid**. How was the boy ever supposed to grow loyal to the Famiglia if he was so far removed from it? *Idiots.*

Ottavia did not even *speak* Japanese! At least Signore Dokuro spoke Italian, so she had no concerns about being able to do the job she had been hired for, but living would be hard until Ottavia picked up enough of the native lingo to get by.

The mysterious doctor who had bought her contract from the Bovino had shown up only once before Ottavia was scheduled to move into the hotel, and it was to deal with Ottavia’s belongings and personal equipment.

The transport unit was about the same size as a train boxcar. Dokuro had measured the shipping container by eye, and then had jumped up on top. Standing at one end the man pulled out a scroll about two feet wide, and once unrolled along the length of the boxcar it had stretched from end to end with a few feet to spare. Dokuro had slapped a palm down on the paper, and the side facing the crate had lit up. The boxcar had started glowing in turn, and then the whole shipping container had disappeared in a burst of white smoke.

Dokuro had rolled the scroll back up, tied it with a braided string, and handed the whole thing over to Ottavia with a smile. “There you go! Just break the seal when you’re ready to unpack. Oh, but make sure there’s enough room first.”

“… Thank you for the warning.” Ottavia gingerly took the scroll and tried to be discrete about how carefully she examined the thing. It was just inked rice paper on a wooden spindle. There was nothing technological to it at all that Ottavia could detect. It was like those damned Rings that Talbot forged for Flame Adepts. So inexplicable by any given measure of rationality that you wanted to throw your hands up and cry ‘magic’! Like that was even a thing! Sure, Flames could be used to achieve many seemingly impossible things, but there were limits! Now there was this *thing*. *How?* How was this a *thing*? “An extra-dimensional storage space?”

“Mm. With built in stasis preservation. Your belongings will remain unharmed and unchanged so long as they’re in the scroll.” Dokuro motioned Ottavia towards the car he had been brought to the Bovino estate in and fell into step beside the Italian woman as she started moving. “As you can see, my operation methods are *not* consumer friendly. Which is why I requested your assistance in the development of the technology required for mass production.”

“So I see.” Ottavia snorted, amused despite her small misgivings. Yeah, if Dokuro’s methods anywhere *close* to being as mysterious as Talbot’s then the doctor would need the ‘layman friendly’ technology made from scratch. Similar to Talbot’s ring forging, Dokuro’s production methods likely as not only worked for Dokuro. Unlike Talbot, however, Dokuro seemed willing to share enough of his secrets to help with the advancement of medical technology. Ottavia could appreciate that sort of forward thinking mindset. “I look forward to working with you, Doctor.”

“The pleasure is mine, Signora.” Dokuro grinned at her as Ottavia bundled Lambo into the car. They headed for the hotel, managing a decent conversation about mass-conversion energy costs and hard limit physics during the drive. Ottavia was impressed by the breadth and depth of Dokuro’s knowledge base. Most medical doctors focused exclusively on their field of practice and rarely strayed outside that comfort zone. Dokuro would be able to provide at least some input on the development process of the technology Ottavia would be creating for him.
Ottavia was shown to her room as soon as they arrived, just down the hall from Dokuro’s suite. The doctor hovered politely by the door after dropping Ottavia’s bags just inside, respectful of a lady’s private space. “Dinner will be in an hour. We have a private dining hall reserved, so you can get to know everyone in our party without public pressure.”

Patting Lambo’s back as the boy fussed about being woken up, Ottavia smiled at her new employer. “I look forward to it, Doctor.”

/…/

‘No pressure, he said.’ Ottavia eyed the Strongest Man in Northern Italy, and gave an equally wary amount of attention to the Estraneo spawn Lancia of the Serpente had taken in after the mysterious attack had wiped that unlamented Famiglia out, leaving the three boys as the only survivors. (Suspicious.) Dokuro and the two girls he claimed were his wards were almost as alarming. Dokuro’s little cousin was the half-sister of the oldest Estraneo brat? (So suspicious.) Was this some sort of joke? ‘No pressure my ass.’

/…/

Two years after being rescued from the ice, and Nono was still having heart attacks every time Xanxus so much as sneezed. (Nono, not Papa. Not Papa ever again.) It would be amusing if it were not so goddamned fucking aggravating. Sawada was still being his idiot useless trash self, and Varia Operations was pulling double duty gathering mission information so they could crosscheck and validate the shit provided by CEDEF. The one good point in the whole thing was that Nono could not put Xanxus back on ice without loosing a metric fuckton of credibility.

Xanxus’ year on ice was passed off as him being hidden away to recover from a botched assassination attempt. People had pretty much been expecting someone to make a try for Xanxus once his eldest brother was capped. It was certainly a believable story to spin for the masses after Enrico di Vongola had been wiped out in with such apparent ease.

Xanxus’ ability to capitalize on the fact that he had ‘survived’ where Nono’s legitimate firstborn son had died was stymied by Sawada ‘letting it slip’ that Xanxus was suspected in having something to do with his brother’s death.

Less than a month after Xanxus made his return common knowledge and Massimo was fending off rumours that he was avoiding the Iron Fort and his responsibilities as Nono’s new heir because Xanxus had made threats on his life. Only Federico’s very loud and very public support of his younger brother kept the rumors from becoming a serious threat to the Varia Boss. Some would see the ‘attack’ on Xanxus as proof of his innocence, some would think it was a trick to just look innocent, and some were just too fucking stupid to live.

As if Xanxus had ever even wanted to leave the Varia! Xanxus may have come late to their family, but that had not mattered to his brothers. The four of them had been family, and Famiglia, and Skies. The Resonance between the four brothers had been incredible and terrible and glorious. The plans they had made, the things they could have done together… all of it lost because Iemitsu fucking Sawada had dropped the fucking ball.

Now, unless they managed to catch the assholes who were targeting the Vongola heirs before Massimo and Federico’s security slipped up too, one of the Vongola branch lines would need to provide the Vongola Decimo. Xanxus had the horrible impression that Nono was seriously considering the Sawada trash’s spawn for the post in the event of his last legitimate son’s possible death. If that happened Xanxus would have to challenge the brat, weaker claim or no weaker claim.
The Mafia was old fashioned like that. Sure, after this many generations of separation Xanxus had just as much Vongola blood as Nono did, but Xanxus was descended from a maternal line. It may have been easier to trace and prove, but being the first male born to his line since Primo’s time was seen as less worth than the Sawada line, which had been all sons from Primo on down.

It did amuse Xanxus that his Vongola ancestor was Primo’s full sibling sister, while Nono was Secondo’s descendant, who had only been Primo’s cousin. If you looked at it that way, Xanxus actually had more ‘pure’ Vongola blood than Nono. If Xanxus had wanted to challenge any of his brothers for Decimo, there was a good chance the Rings would accept Xanxus’ claim. Against Primo’s direct descendant, however…

Right now the only thing keeping Xanxus from saying ‘fuck it’ and burning everything to the ground was Tobi and his hints about his ‘Piccolo Decimo’. Yes, trusting an unknown Mist was probably the stupidest thing Xanxus had ever done, Resonance or no Resonance, but when the Varia Boss looked at the composite photos of the blended First Generation and prospective Tenth Generation…

Xanxus’ Intuition curled up and purred like a lion gorged on blood and honey-wine. Just please, god, let Tobi’s wife be as much of a genius as Tobi claimed. Maybe if this fallback Tenth Generation was raised together, was raised in Harmony, maybe then they could avoid the weakness that had festered in the First Generation and splintered the following generations apart. Maybe, even if Xanxus failed again, even if Xanxus lost every last one of his brothers, maybe the Vongola could still stand strong.

The plans crafted by Xanxus and his brothers had counted on having four (three, two, one… please no) Resonating Skies acting in concert. Depending on how strong this distant cousin turned possible Decimo candidate ended up being, maybe some of those plans could be salvaged. It was something to think about (a tribute to Enrico’s memory, a preservation of his legacy) but there was a very high chance that the spare Decimo would be mostly, if not completely, civilian-raised. Especially since there had been no leads on the people who had killed Enrico, not even after two years of Xanxus hunting. Even with the world’s greatest Mafia Tutor the trash brat would need years to really be brought up to par. (Not the Sawada trash spawn. Anyone but the Sawada trash spawn.)

The only alternate Decimo candidate Nono had other than Xanxus himself who was even hinted at having Mafia-Heir style combat training was Tobi’s ‘Piccolo Decimo’. Keeping in mind that Tobi was a skilled enough Mist that Nono still had no idea how Xanxus had gotten free of the Zero Point Breakthrough ice, Xanxus was hoping that whatever lessons Tobi’s wife was imparting on the brat would be enough to overcome any lingering civilian influences on the kid. Even if ‘Piccolo Decimo’ was the Sawada-trash’s spawn, Xanxus doubted would be all that hard to negate Sawada’s minimal influence. Sawada never left Italy for more than a week at a time, so if the brat could even pick his father out of a lineup Xanxus would be very surprised.

Which was why, of course, Xanxus had spent the first few years of his freedom making discrete inquiries about Flame Active Mist doctors when he was not beefing up Massimo and Federico’s security to what were frankly ridiculous levels. (Not enough, never enough. He was going to lose them, he was going to lose his brothers and nothing he did would be enough to stop it.)

Tobi was not Trident Shamal, Xanxus knew the Mosquito’s Flame Signature well enough to rule the womanizer pervert out, but Shamal was a doctor. Doctors talked to one another, they consulted and shared case studies and exchanged files, and Xanxus knew he just had to wait. He had a valid lead, so patience was all he needed to achieve his goal.

After all, there had to be some reason that Tobi was still hanging around. Xanxus could feel the Mist’s Flame brushing against his own from time to time. The damage from Tobi’s Scorching faded
bit by bit as time went on, the prominent scars in Tobi’s Flame Aura healing until Xanxus could only feel them because he knew where to look. All Xanxus had to do was wait until Tobi did something to tip off one of the Varia’s informants and Xanxus would have a trail to follow.

Like hell was Xanxus going to let someone who could be his Element get away. Leaving their ability to meet again up to Chance would be stupid. Not to mention wasteful. But madre di dios it was hard to sit on a cranky Sky’s instinct to pull in a wounded Element, to shelter his own in the expanse of his Sky. Being patient was hard, even if this was the best and healthiest course Xanxus could see to get what he wanted.

Xanxus only felt a little bit foolish when the tip finally came in. Not that he let anyone know. Only the Varia Officers knew that Xanxus had been broken out of the Iron Fort, rather than escaping on his own, and even they did not know much more than Tobi’s alias, occupation, and Flame Alignment.

The Bovino. Of course Tobi was after the Bovino. Xanxus closed his eyes and tamped down on the surge of irritation. Tobi was in Italy for more than just spying on Xanxus. The Mist was searching for matches, because of some plan about turning the Tenth Generation of Vongola into a Xerox copy of the First Generation.

Still… if it worked then it would be amazing. Vongola Primo was a figure of near-religious significance in the Mafia world, especially among the Flame Users. If worse came to worst and all of Xanxus’ brothers died… Visibly connecting the Decimo brat back to the founder of the Vongola Family would sink a lot of the brat’s opposition before they could really start making a fuss.

Lampo Bovino had been the Primo Generation Lightning Guardian, and significantly younger than the rest of Primo’s Inner Circle. The doctor who had approached the Bovino for technology development had left with a contract and Ottavia Bovino. According to Xanxus’ informant, the Bovino woman had taken charge of a newly born nephew she had named Lambo. The brat apparently tested positive for Lightning Flames to the point of being born with green eyes rather than baby blue, and had been rejected by his maternal uncle, the Boss of the Bovino Famiglia.

There was coincidence, and then there was conspiracy. Xanxus had paid attention to the Vongola History, and he knew how the young Bovino lord-to-be had fallen in with Primo’s group of vigilantes. It was eerie how the stories matched up, even if Tobi and his wife were taking steps to move the Tenth Generation’s meetings up to much sooner in the brat’s personal timelines.

The Bovino connection had just about sealed it for Xanxus, then the doctor had disappeared for a day and come back with a Sun Potential girl trained in Parisian Musical Combat with no indication of where and how he had picked the chit up. That much confusion in surveillance usually meant Mist Flame interference. Then Xanxus got word that Lancia of the Serpente would be joining the doctor along with his three Estraneo brats. If this was the kind of talent Tobi was gathering for his ‘Piccolo Decimo’s Inner Circle then the Tenth Generation might not go to complete shit despite Nono and the Sawada trash’s best efforts.

Some enterprising fucker had managed to get a set of stills from the hotel’s security cameras. One of them was of the doctor in swim shorts by the pool. Red and white lines crosshatched the Mist’s entire right side from scalp to sole.

‘A landslide, huh.’ Xanxus imagined the damage that had left those scars behind and winced. ‘That definitely explains how his Flame was brought low enough for a Discordant Sky to get her hooks in him. Especially if he really was already Harmonized.’

A portrait quality close up of one of the Estraneo brats made Xanxus pause. Black-plum hair instead
of blue, one eye throwing back the same strange red glare half the shots of probably-Tobi did, still recovering from whatever attack had wiped out his original Famiglia, and decades younger than any of the portraits depicted, but the brat still bore an uncanny resemblance to Daemon Spade. “Well fuck me... the trash managed to find the whole set.”

The First Generation Cloud Guardian had been French, but Alaude’s double had already been found. Tobi scouring Italy for the Primo bloodlines that had not moved to Japan made sense, but what had sent the man to France? Xanxus made a mental note to look into the Parisian girl, there would be some kind of answers found in that story, he was sure of it.

“Ooo, he’s cute.” Lussaria put the meal tray down and snatched up the photos spread over Xanxus’ desk. “Not your usual type though, Boss.”

“He’s married. Happily married, from the reports. So put your shitty tongue back in your mouth.” Xanxus rolled his eyes and grabbed his plate. “He got fucking engaged at fifteen and married at eighteen and by all accounts hasn’t strayed fucking once. Shitty trash doesn’t usually keep to their vows like that.”

“Hm, I know Eastern countries see a lot of people marry young, but it’s usually a younger girl to an older man.” Lussaria stacked the photos neatly and cleared enough paperwork out of the way for Xanxus to eat without worrying about spills. “How old is his wife? Some of the more traditional families push cross generational marriages if a girl starts to get older…”

“A year younger.” Xanxus ate neatly but quickly, not bothering to put the plate down until he started working on the steak. He had enough to do without listening to Lussaria nag him about his shitty manners. At least the faces Lussaria made when his shitty romantic values ran headfirst into his fucking libido made for amusing entertainment.

/.../

Mukuro was watching his so-called ‘cousin’ closely. The man had not yet claimed any Mafia affiliation, but he had connections to Trident Shamal and the Bovino, so there was surely more Dokuro Obito was hiding. Surely there were darker sins hiding behind the mask of Obito’s wide smile. Mukuro might have simply possessed Lancia and done away with the problem if it were not for his dear Chrome. The girl had been one of the few innocent things Mukuro had in his life, and just being around her in physical truth made the rage and pain manageable.

Barely, barely, his demons held back with spit and string, but held back nonetheless. So Mukuro stayed his hand, ordered Ken and Chikusa to hold back, and watched.

The man was obviously a Mist, and a fairly skilled one too. The morning after her arrival M.M. had woken up with conversational mastery of the Italian language, her Parisian accent all but unnoticeable. With a smile, the man had cheerfully asked if that meant M.M. had decided to stop ignoring him. The display of power had spooked the redhead since she had truthfully only been able to speak French when she arrived the previous night but now was able to speak fluently in both Italian and Japanese. So M.M. had played along with the man’s story, skittering away whenever he drifted too close.

Lancia was suspicious of the man too, but he did not have the experience Mukuro had in noticing when a Mist was playing games. Sure, Mukuro was usually the player, rather than one of the game pieces, but Mukuro was not stupid enough to overlook how an older Mist might be able to get the drop on him despite the extra power and experience granted by his reincarnations.

“You can trust Obito-sama. He saved my life, Mukuro-niisama. Just like you did.” Chrome touched
the scars from her surgeries, still livid red but healing under her clothes. “Obito-sama will protect Mukuro-nee-sama too, because Obito-sama has already decided that Mukuro-nee-sama is his family.”

“Is he Mafia?” Mukuro looked away from Chrome’s disappointed face. ‘Family’ was a worthless concept, not matter what his dear Chrome said. Just look at what the Estraneo had done to the children of their own blood. “I will destroy all Mafia scum who exist, Chrome. I won’t let something as meaningless as blood ties stop me.”

“… The Estraneo didn’t hurt you because they were Mafia, Mukuro-nee-sama.” Chrome spoke over their vocal objections, ruthlessly suppressing her urge to flinch as she did her best to shatter their convictions.

Chrome had spoken at length to Kakashi and Obito about this, and she knew that she was doing what had to be done. It was nothing to be proud of. Chrome had betrayed Mukuro’s confidences to people her brother had not known, but Chrome had needed their guidance. Shinobi lied, but they could not afford to believe lies about themselves. Not if they wanted to survive. Only brutal honesty about one’s own strengths and weaknesses could see a shinobi live to see retirement. Chrome was going to make sure that her new brothers survived for a long, long time. No matter how much she had to hurt them in the meantime.

“No, Mukuro-nee-sama, it had nothing to do with the Estraneo being a Mafia group.” Sometimes you had to rip things down before you could rebuild them, like re-breaking bone that had healed crooked and weak. “They hurt you because they were evil people, and because they could get away with it. Lancia-san is Mafia, but that doesn’t make him evil. Lancia-san helps you because he can, and he protects you because he cares. I don’t want Mukuro-nee-sama to become someone who destroys. Mukuro-nee-sama may think that he’s an avenger, but Mukuro-nee-sama is really better as a protector. Mukuro-nee-sama saved Ken-nii, and Chikusa-nii, and me. Even when it would have been easier for Mukuro-nee-sama to leave us behind. Mukuro-nee-sama is also taking care of Emu-nee and Lambo-chan because he doesn’t trust the adults to do it right. Mukuro-nee-sama may be scary sometimes, but he makes people feel safe too. I don’t want Mukuro-nee-sama to hurt himself by being angry all the time.”

“Chrome…” Mukuro stared and tried to find an argument in favour of his planned revenge that would stand up Chrome’s speech and not come across as childish petulance. Mukuro could tell that Ken and Chikusa agreed with Chrome, and he really did not know what to do with that. For there to be some reluctance to turn on Lancia and the Serpente when the Famiglia had been the ones to shelter the Estraneo survivors while they recovered their strength, that stumbling block Mukuro had expected, but not… whatever this was.

“She’s right, you know. There are rules in the Mafia world, Laws written in blood and shadow, and the Estraneo broke them.” M.M. cuddled a sleeping Lambo and shrugged when the boys looked at her in nearly as much disbelief as they had been looking at Chrome. “Traditionally, targeting the women and underage children of another Famiglia was grounds for demanding restitution. As the victims, you had a Blood Right to take vengeance on the Estraneo as members of the Family, and more rights as kidnapped children from another bloodline. If you try to pull the same thing on another Crime Family without cause, you’ll be the ones considered fair game. As bad as the Estraneo hurt you, it can still get worse. You don’t want the Vindice gunning for you, trust me.”

“What do you mean?” Mukuro frowned, but M.M. shut her mouth as refused to elaborate. It was frustrating, but Mukuro could wait. He was still young, after all, and the Mafia was not going anywhere in the meantime.

/…/
Mukuro had reason to be glad he had held back from attacking his cousin soon after that conversation. The man had taken them all to the airport, led them into an empty corner of the parking garage that was out of view of the security cameras, and then the air around them had twisted. Mukuro had a stunned moment to take in the endless void and square pillars surrounding them before the air twisted again and the group was standing in a primordial forest straight out of a Jurassic Era documentary.

Lancia looked pale, and Mukuro could appreciate why. A strong Mist Flame user could teleport, and the truly skilled could manage to take one or two people with them. This man had moved two extra adults, an infant, five children, and all of their luggage. He had done so without any apparent strain or even touching them. If the man had been honest about their planned destination being Japan, then he had managed all of that on top of moving the group of them across a full quarter rotation of the planet.

Mukuro rapidly adjusted his assessment of his cousin’s strength upwards. Dear god, no wonder the Estraneo had bred Mukuro from this bloodline. No wonder Mukuro had survived the Six Paths of Hell, when all the others had died. Mukuro had been tailor made to be able to survive that experiment. How the hell had Obito managed this without dropping dead of Flame Exhaustion? Where was that strange place they had traveled through? It had seemed… oddly familiar, to Mukuro.

“Alright then, everybody still have all of their limbs attached in the right places? Excellent! Follow me please.” Without even having the decency to so much as be breathing hard after his impossible feat, Obito cheerfully stepped up to the bole of a massive tree, put his hand on the bark, opened a door, and started walking up the now revealed stairs. “Come on, slow pokes!”

“It’s perfectly safe.” Chrome giggled behind her hand, smiling at their hesitation, and gently shoved the nearest body (that of a long-suffering Chikusa) up the hidden stairs winding up the inside of the tree.

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Chapter End Notes

And there's the Mukuro chapter. Mukuro and his extras are still recovering from the deprivations of the Estraneo, so they haven't started their "kill everyone" plan yet. Luckily enough for their rap-sheet with the Vindice, Obito has shown up to whisk them away from Mafia saturated Italy. Obito plans to keep throwing distractions at Mukuro's head until the bloodlust dies down a little. Kid has issues. Perfectly understandable issues, but still something Obito as a responsible ninja adult needs to see channelled in a more productive direction than "indiscriminate slaughter".

Lambo's screentime is pretty much going to get taken over by Ottavia, because he's just a wee little bean right now that does nothing but sleep and scream in random intervals. We'll revisit Lambo as an actual character when he's capable of speaking actual words.

Also a quick Xanxus scene, because the angry boy still wants to complete his Harmony and Obito is very shiny to international criminal syndicates.
The alternate title for this fic is "In which a married Obito and Kakashi raise the Vongola Tenth Generation in the time honoured tradition of insane Konoha powerhouses."

I regret nothing. (Except maybe the fact that this fic spans over thirty years of fic time.)

Works inspired by this one: [History keeps pulling me down by Pomfry](#)

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