(and maybe) we are;

by esquitor

Summary

Sawada Tsunayoshi finds himself pulled into the Underworld as a part of someone else’s Inheritance Plots and Plans, and decides he’s… well. Sorta okay with it. He’s okay with a lot of things. Aaaaabsolutely dandy about it.

Doesn’t mean he’s going to make it easy for them, though.

(MAIN FIC FOR THE SERIES.

features ensemble cast, an island-ful of ocs, multiculturalism, a lot of history-mucking, and a lot of nook-and-cranneying. and most importantly of all, flame lore galore!! very much au. dark humor, and an adventure in worldbuilding and character studies.)

CURRENT ARC: [OYSTER FORTUNES DAILY] aka Reborn's Adventures In Tutoring, or Hang In There, Reborn, This Weirdness Too Shall Pass (It Won't)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
reborn arrives in a most unsettling way. he is unsettled. he is so very unsettled. but if there's anything reborn is good at, it's settling in. and he does just that. maybe a little.. too much.

WARNINGs: absolutely nothing?? nothing. yet. nothing yet. implicit nudity but not explicit.

as usual, custom work skin is providing footnotes and other formatting things. update schedule will probably be sporadic, as i am known to be. for those rereading, a few changes: i'm on a mission to change standard italian words to sicilian forms when being used by most of the vongola people because they're now sicilian and Because I Can.

standard italian vs sicilian
famiglia -> famigghia
nono -> nonu
primo -> primu
fratello / fratellino -> frati / fratuzzu

EDIT nov. 11 2016: added in miscellaneous narrative, fixed a part that for some reason implied enrico was still alive? (he's not.) further notes at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

you are not, however, always permitted to receive answers

Sawada Iemitsu hasn't gone back to his infuriating Island in 3 years.

Which, usually, is par for the course for a man trying to keep his family out of the Cosa Nostra. And it wouldn't be the first time Iemitsu has gone so long without seeing his dear, darling wife and absolutely most adorable son in the whole wide world.

(Whether he wants to keep them out in order to keep them safe, or to make his job that much easier, anyone can only guess. Reborn could ask, but he also doesn't care.)

Timoteo had said the island was very... interesting, after his visit. Very strange, but interesting. He couldn't for the life of him recount how he'd made it onto the island, or off of it. Was it by boat? By plane? Hadn't they taken a jet there from Palermo? To Tokyo?

Didn't Iemitsu say there was an airport on the island? That doesn't seem like something Timoteo
would just.. forget. Although, his oath-brother is definitely getting on in years. He's certainly at the point where memory starts being a problem. Christ knows Fon talks about it enough, and he's older than Timoteo.

Reborn finds himself asking, for the hundredth time in his life and to no one in particular, why is Kakishima so damned weird?

Tsunayoshi, apparently, had been no such disappointment. Much to Iemitsu's disappointment.

"He's beautiful," Timoteo had said when he returned. A little older, a little younger. Reborn worried a little. "He's a lovely boy."

A lovely boy with no flames now. A beautiful child who apparently trips on nothing and can't even pass his elementary classes. A wonderful son who can accomplish nothing, and should therefore never catch the eyes of the fools who thought it was a good idea to go after Timoteo's own sons.

*My family is fine*, says Sawada Iemitsu, when the *agnelli di Dio* give word (*spread rumors*) that a boy bearing his son's resemblance was killed by them in their efforts to retrieve a package from the island. *My family is fine.*

Xanxus has been out of the ice for a year and a half now. He's adapting. Catching up. Reborn made sure of it. *That* family is doing fine now.

...Mostly.

Timoteo hasn't made much progress in the Adoptive Dads department in regards to Xanxus, much to both his and Reborn's frustration. It had taken incredible willpower in the past not to force an Inheritance ceremony on Enrico and just drop Timoteo and Xanxus off on some nice island for a bit of "bonding time". Preferably not one named Australia, which is Death Incarnate. Or Kakishima, since it's so weird and they still haven't been able to find it.

Actually, Australia may just do them a whole world of wonder. Near death experiences will bring any two people closer together... or it'll kill them, but Reborn's betting those two are better than that.

Timoteo *did* come by during Xanxus' physical therapy sessions, in the months following his release from that not-quite-icy hell. Reborn caught him wincing slightly at the sight of Xanxus covered in scars. He hadn't offered an apology, and Xanxus likely wouldn't have accepted it.

He might have appreciated one, though.

Timoteo did ask about the progress Xanxus was making. He spoke with the coach more than with Xanxus himself, while Reborn stood by and monitored and made sure Xanxus didn't over-exert himself in ill-hidden anger.

It makes so much more sense now, to think about it as teenage rebellion, done in efforts to get some attention. Not from the world, but from a parent. Attention not desired or deserved because of his status as Timoteo's (adopted) son, but *because he is a son*. Attention from a parent that isn't Reborn.

Not that Reborn was ever anything like a parent to Xanxus, except in the formal sense of having custody and being the go-to emergency contact.

...Okay, so maybe he's a bit of a parent to Xanxus. But probably more like the uncle who's actually there, as opposed to the father that isn't.
A father like.. Timoteo. Like Iemitsu.

Reborn wonders if it's genetic. If Giotto had ever been there for his own kids, or they for theirs. If he'd left any whelps in Italy to be reared by unfamiliar hands while he went off to Japan to hide from the mafia.

Maybe Ricardo's line was just cursed to be unfair to adopted kids. Did Giotto ever adopt any? Iemitsu's parents?

So many questions. Things Reborn has never thought about before, because they never mattered before. Nothing ever really mattered before. It was just him, Timoteo, and Vongola. Everything in the present.

Luce never brought up *trovami* after that one time. And now it's too late to think to ask her if there was ever anything else she wanted to say about it. Anything else she ever saw in her little delusions of the future. *Anything.*

Anything to calm Reborn down as he rides a flight from Palermo to a set of coordinates somewhere in the Sea of Japan.

*

"I can't come with you," Iemitsu says with a strained laugh. Reborn wonders if Giotto looked like that when he aged, dumb tufty mustache and all. "I've had my visiting rights revoked for a while. Well, actually, my citizen status has been withdrawn and put on hold."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, um. I'm on the island's blacklist? You know, like if Vongola didn't want someone in Sicily or visiting any of the towns. Barred from entry, something like that."

"We'd call that a shoot-on-sight order." Reborn raises an eyebrow. "But that's the most severe case and there's no way we can monitor every single person coming and going from Sicily. There's a dozen ports and twice as many landing points. Not to mention they're still trying to build a damn 17 kilometer bridge across the Strait of Messina." [1]

"Haven't they been trying that for a decade now?"

Reborn scoffs. "They've been trying since the 70s. The 1870s."

"Wow." Iemitsu actually looks a little impressed, though Reborn has no idea why. Damn persistent Italian government. The Messinese might have something to do with it too. Damn them. "Well.. Kakishima only has one port? And one airport. There's fishing docks but you can't use them for anything. It's really easy to monitor incoming and outgoing traffic. I mean, you can't even find the island unless.."

"Unless what?"

"Unless- oh right, unless I give you the coordinates for the landing site." Iemitsu starts digging for a sheet of paper and a pen. Reborn doesn't want to think about what might happen if he gone off without those coordinates. "Are you going by plane or boat? If it's boat you can grab a boat from Kanazawa. Guardian said you're permitted to arrive by plane if you want."

"What do you mean permitted."

"Plane ride it is."
Plane ride it is.

And Reborn can see, now, what Iemitsu means by *you're permitted*.

It's early dawn when they pass over the Sea of Japan. The waters are still dark and foggy, clouds billowing past, sunlight bleeding through. He'd stopped by the cockpit to ask where the coordinates were supposed to be and he's been keeping an eye on that part of the horizon for a while now after returning to his seat.

The mist rolls in, and quickly. No, the *Mist*, because the plane is starting to lurch as his pilot tells him they'd gone a little off course a while back.

Reborn marches back into the cockpit to tell the pilot to remain on course, only to find her fixed on a point in the horizon while the plane's instrument readings spin and fluctuate wildly.

"What's going on, Airò? Where are we going?" Reborn hops onto the dashboard, being careful of the buttons and controls (he'll curse himself later but thank Christ for his small size right now), and snaps his little fingers in front of her face.

No change.

Her eyes are suspiciously hazy and seemingly Misted over, but she's been cleared for the mission and Reborn doesn't recall her coming into contact with anyone strange between boarding the private jet and now. Something's going on. Something strange and dangerous.

"Airò!"

"Off course. We're off course. Returning path-" And she says something unintelligible, a string of letters and numbers, something about a new altitude and clearance height? A flight path. "-Destination, Tokyo."

"Airò, we're going to the island. The coordinates." He frowns, as much as his baby face can frown. Iemitsu had given them a rundown on what might happen on the approach but forcibly removed from the flight path was not one of them.

But when he looks out the cockpit window he can sort of understand why she's turning the plane away. It hadn't been very noticeable from the passenger window where he was sitting, but the Mist is so prevalent, so widespread. It's just a patch on the water right now but it must stretch for miles. It will, if they can get closer.

Reborn has heard of the Devil's Triangle[2]. The Nuevo Family in New York knows something of it, but won't say much more. Or can't say much more. It must not be an Underworld-related phenomenon, then, as this one is. Or isn't. He has no proof that there are or aren't members of the Underworld on the island.

No one else would have knowledge of Dying Will Flames, after all. No one else *should* have knowledge of it. The Underworld does its best to keep it unknown to as much of the public as possible.

(Xanxus' mother comes flitting into his mind. Delusional, they say. As Luce was. Seeing things that weren't there. Delusions of grandeur, thinking, believing that her son was also the son of the leader of Italy's greatest *Cosa Nostra* family.)
It's a shame, but it's necessary. Christ knows the Nuevo already have issues enough with the CIA trying to go after them for being, as they call it, *mafia* and a *liability to the country's security*. They don't need this to become any more of an international issue than it already is.)

And yet.

*And yet.*

Here is an island, so far completely unaffiliated, researching Dying Will Flames. *Experimenting* with flames. *Using flames on their own people, on their entire island*, because Reborn has no other explanation for the pile of indigo-colored dust and haze sitting on the surface of the water that must be what's making the jet's readings go haywire.

Nothing comes back from the Devil's Triangle, though. Or so the legend goes.

"Coordinates, Airò," he says, because that's on the list of things Iemitsu said to do if they received no response over the intercom. Repeat. Repeat until they get a response.

"Coordinates." The pilot stops. Stiffens, just like Iemitsu said she would, and is enveloped in a thin veil of sweet-smelling Mist, just like he said she should be. Should, if they were heading in the right direction. They are. The voice that comes out is not her own. It's Italian, but not Sicilian, just like what Iemitsu uses, though he uses it a little less now. "Coordinates. Please state your destination."

"Latitude, 37 degrees, 12 minutes, 12.3 seconds. Longitude, 135 degrees, 13 minutes, 50.6 seconds. Off the coast of the Ishikawa Prefecture." [3]

"Coordinates received." A pause. Reborn imagines a computer processing information. "Destination, invalid."

"What do you mean *invalid*, that's the coordinates that idiot gave us."

"Altering course. Destination, Tokyo."

Airò's eyes are still hazy. Still turning the plane, steering it pointedly *away* from where they should be going.

Reborn repeats the coordinates. "Latitude, 37 degrees, 12 minutes, 12.3 seconds. Longitude, 135 degrees, 13 minutes, 50.6 seconds. Off the coast of the Ishikawa Prefecture, Airò."

"Destination, invalid. The season today is: summer. Landing is not advised."

"Why isn't it advised? Airò, snap out of it!"

Airò looks straight at him. Her eyes are clear, but she is most certainly *not*. And when she speaks again, she says it in perfect, if horribly accented, Japanese.

"Today's weather is: summer."

At least, that's what Reborn *thinks* she's trying to say, because what he really hears is 'kyou no kiisetsue wa: naatsu-tte'. He can only really catch half of the words she says and that's only because she's been saying the same thing over and over.

And, first of all, how does Airò even know Japanese? She's pure Sicilian. She's been living around the main port in Catania for ages, he's *pretty sure* she's pure Sicilian. And what sort of horrendous
accent is she trying to imitate, anyway?

No, wait-

Reborn has heard that accent before. It's not an accent. It's from Iemitsu.

It's Kakishima dialect. [4]

"My name is Reborn," he growls, though he shouldn't have to, and repeats what Iemitsu had told him to say if they reached this point. Well, more like strongly suggested, and Reborn is starting to see why now. "I am here on behalf of Sawada Iemitsu. I am here for Sawada Tsunayoshi."

He forgets to say it in Japanese. It doesn't seem to matter, because whoever Airò is right now, whomever's Mist is pervading her body, she turns back to the window and, surprisingly enough, swings the plane around again.

And he quite literally means swing. The sudden jerking motion leaves Reborn stumbling off the dashboard and neatly into the co-pilot chair.

"Permission to land, granted. Destination, Kaki Kuukou [5]. Time to destination: 1 hour, 27 minutes. Please fasten your seat belts and expect turbulence. The season today is: summer."

He'd buckle down, but the buckles are too big. He settles for an improvised Leon-seat belt instead.

"Who are you?" he asks the person who is definitely not Airò.

Because Nicola Airò has lived in Catania for her entire 28 years of life, does not speak a lick of Japanese, and also absolutely hates summer.

Airò lets go of the wheel. The plane steers itself back on course, nose pointing straight at the cloud of Mist hanging over the water. Reborn can see a bit of the coast of Japan beyond it.

"My name is Jeong-Seo Kaede," Airò says. There's Mist leaking into the room, leaking out of Airò's body. How did it get in here? When did it get in here? "I am Kokuyo Leader."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what that particularly means."

Airò's eyes flutter shut and she slumps over to the side, held up only by her seat buckle. Reborn starts forward, only to remember he buckled himself down not minutes ago.

The Mist gathers and piles up, swirling like a miniature twister. Within moments, a figure in military dress garb that is very much not Japanese is looking back at him. The person doesn't look Japanese, either.

"It means we will issue a formal apology if you remember this when you wake up in a few hours."

"And if I don't?" He doesn't like the implication of waking up, being that he will have to fall asleep in the first place. Or be knocked out. Reborn doesn't like that. Hitmen generally don't. "What happened to my pilot?"

"If she remembers as well, we will also issue her a formal apology."

Then Jeong-Seo Kaede leans back against the dashboard, reclining on one elbow as though it were a counter at a pub instead of the dashboard of a jet currently several thousand meters above nothing but the dark depths of the open sea. He hates this so much.
She, because Reborn is quite sure now that Jeong-Seo is a she, has a grin like a shark's, like that squalino [6]. It's not terrifying. Reborn thinks it's kind of cute- on Squalo, anyway.

On Jeong-Seo, it looks infuriating.

"Have a good nap, signor Reborn."

"Wait-"

Too late. He's already starting to feel sleepy. Mist clogs his throat like sleeping syrup, thick and heavy.

There's an underground drug being peddled in from Djerba, in Tunisia lately. They're calling it Lotus-eater [7]. It smells sweet, like a lotus field, like a fruit tree. Tastes like citrus and honey.

It makes him want to gag.

"-the plane."

He hears, distantly, while fighting a drowsiness capable of knocking out an elephant, something like reassurance. Something his mamma would have said, something his papa told him when he was a boy. A very very small boy. It's okay.

It's okay.

"Worry not. All systems are under my control."

Nicola wakes with a start. She knows this feeling.

They had it in combat training in the Vongola, working with flames. No one is entrusted with any jobs of security rank C or higher without being made resistant to Mist flame manipulations. She's pretty confident she can withstand anything up to rank B.

That probably explains why she can vaguely remember Reborn being just fine while her head was being screwed with. On auto-pilot and unable to stop the words coming out of her mouth, the information being fed into her mind. He's the World's Greatest Hitman. He's Vongola Nonu's most trusted hitman, Nonu's closest friend, Nonu's frati. Of course he can withstand a paltry Mist manipulation like that.

So what does it mean when she wakes up in a hospital-like room and there is no hitman next to her? She doesn't hear his voice anywhere. Nothing is decimated. No bullet holes in the walls that could indicate his impatience in waiting for someone to wake up. It's stark.

This is the feeling of Mist being purged from her system. Adrenaline. Stimulants. Drugs to simulate lucidity, to drag the mind back from a chemically altered high.

At least, that's what Vongola's trainers say. All Nicola knows is this is a good thing, probably. It means someone wants her alert and awake, rather than that the effects are wearing off due to neglect or negligence. It's a lot of money to force someone out of a Mist-induced suggestion with medication and drugs, even more than it is to wake someone up from Rain overdose.
Nicola calculates a small fortune in her head while something beeps alongside her pulse. Nice and steady. She wonders how long she's been out.

On the next bed over, someone else groans pathetically and stirs. And she says pathetically because it's not even a groan, it's more like an aborted grunt, like they're not even trying. She'd like to tell them to do it with more *gusto*, more *oomph*, but Nicola does not know a lick of Japanese, which is probably where she is right now. It's where they were headed, anyway.

"Awake, princess?"

Except, lo and behold. A fellow Italian.

"I feel like a drugged mule," Nicola slurs, remarkably able to stay within the confines of Standard Italian instead of the apparently unintelligible dialect of Sicilian she picked up in Catania. "A drugged mule full of... drugs."

The other person laughs. It's muffled. *Pathetic*. She feels pathetic too.

"So," Nicola licks her dry lips and tries again. "What are you in here for?"

"Flame exhaustion." She feels her breath catches in her throat. Oh, bad. Meanwhile, the other person just lets out a muffled laugh. "Can you believe it? I let my crew run things for a while just fine, and the first big thing I have to step up for drains me dry. This is what a prune feels like."

Nicola lets out a small, tittering laugh. Funny.

"I've been your bedmate for a few days now, but I didn't snore. You had plenty of beauty rest."

"I'm, uh. Pretty sure I wouldn't have heard you even if you did. Snore." Wow, Airò. Good job sounding natural there. This is why she went into piloting and navigation and not something like, say, infiltration and deception. "Flame exhaustion huh? That's gotta suck."

"Doesn't it?" A chuckle. Little less pathetic-sounding there. Nicola exhales shakily. "They had a hell of a time refilling your Storm flames though. We don't have too many Storms on the island."

Wait, what?

"..What do you mean *refilling my flames*?"

"Flame transfusions. I assume you don't have that in Italy yet."

Flame transfusions sounds both amazing and also like something way beyond Nicola's technical understanding. *How*? What? Where is she again?

Ah, right. *Japan*.

"N..o. No we don't. We, eh... we still do it the old fashioned way." What. "Plenty of fluids and bed rest. Haha."

*Haha*. That's for a damn cold, Airò.

"Is that so? Ours is more of a.. banana milkshake and generous servings of tapioca pudding."

Nicola *gags*. Oh. Gross. That doesn't even *sound* nutritious, but then, she isn't a doctor.

"Oh, there's *okayu* too, if you prefer that."
"What's.. that?"


"Oh, yeah, I know it. Sounds way better than banana milkshakes."

"I'm partial to the tapioca pudding myself.

Nicola makes an extravagant sound and face of disgust. "Euugghhh."

Her roommate laughs. Cackles, maybe. She doesn't know what this person's laugh is normally like, maybe it's always this sharp and meaningful and delighted and just this side of a touch crazed.

It's a cackle.

And, Christ, this woman has the most wonderful sounding laugh Nicola has ever heard. It's giving her shivers.

Weird.

"So, what's Italy doing in these parts of the world?"

"I'm Siciliano." Ah. Oops. ".We're sightseeing. My friend and I."

"Your friend who happens to be an infant?"

"What? No he's not."

"Isn't he?"

What kind of question is that?

Nicola is still wondering when the door opens. It's not a doctor who comes in though, or a nurse, but someone else in uniform. Military-like. Reminds her of the time when she saw the carabinieri march through town.

"Kokuyo Leader. His condition has stabilized."

The woman in the other bed answers and it makes Nicola jump to hear the authority in her tone, the easy way command seems to come out, even if she understands nothing that's being said. "Is he awake?"

"Not yet. He hasn't woken since we brought them in."

"Dr. Koji still can't figure out what's wrong with him?"

"Ah.." The other woman fidgets in the doorway. "...well... it, um. It's a little complicated. It turns out this.. isn't really Dr. Ueda's area of expertise."

"He covers pediatric medicine and he's a Fiamma Specialist. How is this not his area of expertise?"

Hey, she knows that word!

"I- I think you should.. have a look, Kokuyo Leader. I don't really know how to explain it."
She looks nervous. Nicola sympathizes, sort of. She's a hardline Vongola supporter but she knows what it's like to be facing down one of the upper echelons of Vongola's hierarchy. Eyes like hawks, they have. Killer's eyes.

Her roommate shifts on the bed and moves out from behind the curtain that had been obscuring her from Nicola's view. She catches a glimpse of burn scars, crisscrossing and stretching the length of a bare arm up to the shoulder and neck, just before the tell-tale sweet-sick scent of Mist obscures it from sight. Smooth skin.

Maybe all those models that Nicola sees on magazine covers are actually Mist flame users.

The other woman is shrugging on a similar military-like uniform over the black tank-top, probably (also?) military issue. Maybe they're on a military base. But Nicola hasn't heard any thing like titles or ranks being used. She's sure she would recognize them even in another language.

Not that Nicola knows anything about the military, but some of Vongola's people were old enough to have been conscripted before. They still tell stories of it now, and Nicola loves hearing them.

They're old and dreary. They're sad, mournful, hateful. They're proud, they're angry, they're happy. They're all sorts of things, these stories.

Reborn never had any stories like that to tell, in the few years she had known about him. No one has any stories that he told them to tell her either. Some even wonder if he'd killed everyone who came by to conscript him into the army.

"Can you move yet, Nicola Airò?" She definitely does not remember telling this person her name. "We need to send you back soon. Before they start to worry."

"Send me back?" But, yes, she can move. A little. Her toes, if she rreeeeaaally wants to. She doesn't. It's so cozy. "Send me back where?"

"Back to Sicily."

"..I'm not going without my, uh. My friend."

Not to mention she might kind of get in trouble for leaving him here? Even though her job was only to fly him here and back, when it's time to leave. Doesn't that mean she has to stay until it's time to leave? She could always come back to pick him up...

"That's too bad, since he won't be going with you."

"Excuse me? You can't keep him here."

Mmm yeah. No good at infiltration and deception. Good at guard dog. Guard dog Airò, that's her. Guard dog Airò who could probably crash a jet into any house you wanted crashed into with pinpoint accuracy. She'll have to remember what this building looks like from the outside once she's in the air.

"We won't be keeping him here.. or should I say, we won't be the ones keeping him here." Nicola probably looks still confused and bristling and guard-dog-like, because the other woman sighs, just ever so slightly. She looks very... proper. In her uniform. "Come. We'll show you."

Very strict. And regal. Yeah.

It takes about 10 minutes for Nicola to manage to get to her feet. She tries to hurry it up- they're
being patient enough as it is without making it awkward -but whatever they'd given her a shot of is making her muscles weak. Storm flames can only do so much, and apparently she'd exhausted her own natural supply for the time being? Vongola's doctors have said that she has a large reservoir of them, but actively using and generating them really isn't her thing.

Tenacity, however, is.

With a pair of crutches that are sitting conveniently next to the bed, Nicola hobbles her way across the room. She can feel her hospital gown sticking to her skin, already sweating from something as simple as getting up. It's ridiculous.

"Okay," she finally says, grunting and sucking down a few lungfuls of air. She's got this. "Okay. Let's go."

The other woman gives her a once-over from head to toe. The one who reported in has already left, shuffled off with a murmur 2 minutes into Nicola's struggle to remain upright.

She receives a nod and they set off down the hall. Nicola's tap-tapping of the crutches is staccato at first, then falls into a more rhythmic beat as she accustoms herself to using them. It's not long before she's moving at a normal walking speed.

No longer preoccupied with making sure she doesn't tip herself over, Nicola watches the way the hospital orderlies react around this person. Is she the leader of the island? Wasn't there supposed to be a mayor? Were they overthrown? Is this the mayor?

There's no great amount of fear, but no great amount of respect either, that she sees in the eyes of those who look at the woman in front of her. They give a nod. Some of them smile. Others simply give them a wide berth and continue with their work. There are few who wear a similar uniform, but most are in hospital garb. It feels a little.. surreal.

Not abnormal though. It's crazy to think about, but she doesn't feel out of place, even though she technically is. No one looks twice at her. Some even smile! At Nicola! Nicola, who gets laughs and fingers pointed at for having a boy's name! Nicola, who can't do subtlety worth a damn, who looks terrible in anything that stops above her knees!

Nicola, who still gets people playing Marco Polo with her name to the tune of a Ricola commercial. In Vongola. (Arguably) The Strongest and Greatest crime syndicate in Italy.

This? This is nice.

It's quite obvious she's an outsider, but no one seems to want her gone? At least, not that she can tell. She is awful at subtlety, after all. That includes the reading of it.

"They don't seem to be all that concerned with me being here," she confides in the woman before her, in Italian. From the reactions of those around them, no one else seems to speak it. But they're not surprised to hear another language, either.

"You're with me. They have no reason to be concerned."

"Oh." Okay? ".Why is that?"

"Ah, I haven't introduced myself yet." They stop in front of a door with the initials R. S. written on the placard, along with some Japanese squiggles she can't make heads or tails of. Nicola looks up. "I am Kokuyo Leader. I was the one who brought down your plane."
She's taller. Which is weird, because Nicola has heard that Asians are supposedly pretty short, except for men who always seem to adhere to some rule of extreme sexual dimorphism. It's a little odd. Nicola hasn't had to look up at a woman since.. since she was still a girl.

It's kind of neat.

Wait-

"You- you took down my plane? Is it okay? Oh my God, that plane belongs to-" To Vongola oh shit "Please tell me it's okay."

"We landed it safely." Kokuyo Leader chuckles. She's wearing a small grin and the tiny flash of teeth reminds Nicola of something. Something else. Something a little dangerous. "Look through the window."

First Nicola spends a minute to stop panicking about the potential state of one of Vongola's private jets. It's probably worth more than her life and she's not sure how she'd be able to make it up to the Don if it was destroyed.

Then she takes the chance and hesitantly leans over and peers through the slot on the door, squinting. She can't see much, even though everything is brightly lit. Maybe a little too brightly.

"..I can't- I'm not sure what I'm.. looking at."

Kokuyo Leader lets out a hum. She turns the door handle and nudges it open, beckoning. Nicola pushes it further open and steps in-

and is immediately hit with a wave of Flames, Sun, definitely, glimmering and washing over her like a confetti gun full of pixie dust. She almost expects to fly. The air is so thick with flames it's like she's breathing it in. It feels great. She feels great.

There's a dozen more odd machines in here than there were in her own hospital room. Nicola recognizes a normal contraption, a (probably) regular old heart monitor, and something that's probably that flame transfusion thing. And another thing with a glass canister full of something so bright and yellow and glowing that it casts shadows over the opposite walls.

On the bed is a small form. There's a hat on the tableside. One that she very, very much recognizes.

"..That's.."

"Your friend."

Ah. Reborn. Definitely his curly sideburns there. Wasn't there supposed to be something like a pacifier, too? He's always wearing it.

"...He's very small? He shouldn't be that small."

"He has always been this small, Nicola Airò. I imagine he has been actively projecting his larger form onto others by activating parts of his brain and others' with Sun flames, altering perceptions of himself. But now that he is unconscious, the effect has mostly abated."

"But if he's really that- that small, that... I've never even noticed!" Nicola stumbles back just a little bit. "I mean.. I've seen him leaning on a window sill a few times- or I thought I did, but if he's really that size, then he'd had to have been. Standing on the sill itself? And no one ever thought that was strange?"
"Love does strange things to the mind," Kokuyo Leader says smoothly. What? What does love have to do with this? "It makes you see what you want to see. Hear what you want to hear. It is an oversaturation of hormones and chemicals that makes everything seem normal. Like your friend here, and his size."

Reborn is covered mostly by blankets and his face obscured with an oxygen mask and his eyes are closed and he just- he looks like a gangly kid. Someone you'd pick up off the streets, if not for the suit carefully folded on the table next to him. With the hat. And-

"What about- he had a, um, a pet. A chameleon I think."

"Oh, yes." Kokuyo Leader crosses over to the wall opposite the bed and Nicola realizes there's a glass tank there, with its top open to the air. Inside, one shape-changing chameleon named Leon is snoozing away. "We weren't sure what it would eat at first, but it seems to understand human speech and changed its form whenever it was hungry. Took days to get it to stop sleeping next to the patient."

Of course, Nicola wants to say. They're partners.

Instead she's a little bemused by the careful.. care being given to a chameleon.

"How, um. How is he? Not that I have any idea what's going on here, but-"

"Flame exhaustion," is the answer she gets before she even finishes asking her question. "The usual ordeal. We're quite accustomed to it- rooms like this are specially equipped to deal with flame transfusions. The patient, Reborn, is exhibiting symptoms of far more severe exhaustion and depletion to the point where it's affecting his body. Dr. Ueda thinks it's reason why his form is so small, but we can't be sure. It was smaller, actually, when we brought him in. He's stabilized now, but he won't be fit to go anywhere for a few days. Which is why you'll be leaving alone."

"Smaller? He already looks like a- a kid. What was he like before?"

"Like your average 2 year old."

"Oh my God," Nicola whispers, unable to take her eyes off the bed, from the slight rise and fall of a chest too small for the World's Greatest Hitman. "I've been flying a plane with a 2 year old in the back seat and no infant-safe seatbelts."

"His chameleon changes shape, you know."

"Yeah I know, what's that have to do with- oh, right. Oh thank God. I'm not going to lose my piloting license."

"You worry about the strangest things, Nicola Airò."

"And another thing!" She rounds on the other woman, this Kokuyo Leader. "How do you even know my name? What's with the initials on the door? Are those Reborn's initials, his real name? How do you know that? Everyone in- in Sicily has been trying to find out for years."

God, she'd almost said in Vongola again. She's so not fit for undercover duty. At all.

Kokuyo Leader raises an eyebrow.

"Nothing in Vongola is a secret from our Guardian."
Well _never mind_ then. She's just been trying to keep it a secret for no reason.

_Trovami_, said the words carved into the inside of an oyster shell by Luce herself. Luce, their leader, who is known as a Shaman with a penchant for vague precognition.

Of the group, only Reborn seemed to care about the _Madreperla_. Part of it might have to do with the fact that he hadn't told anyone else what Luce had said, about the words she wrote into the nacre lining, that this is the _answer_. An answer. Not a cure, perhaps, but something to go off of. Somewhere to start.

Reborn flexes his hand, palm too large and fingers too long. Far more elegant than he remembers them being. But then again, he's a narcissist. Waking up naked under a hospital gown with lingering growing pains does wonders for his self-confidence, in the very best of ways.

Having to wear standard, if slightly fashionable, street clothing instead of his _suit_ though, does not. It's awful. He misses the bullet and flame proof fabric. Tear resistant, heat resistant, capable of hardening under stress to protect his then softer-but-harder-than-normal infant body. Still soft now. But muscle hardened. _Muscles_. Christ, but he's forgotten how wonderful it feels to have a good set of abs.

(Reborn is most definitely a narcissist. He _loves_ it.)

This is the answer. This is _an_ answer, a cause, a correlation. Flames. Life.

He feels alive. He feels _so alive_ that it's almost stifling.

(And his fedora still fits! Even better.)

"You're cleared for release, _signor_ Reborn," The woman known as Kokuyo Leader tells him from a few feet away, looking up occasionally from the medical clipboard while Reborn gets dressed. Not a lick of shame from either of them, just the way Reborn likes it. He does miss terrorizing anyone nearby with his confidence and arrogance, though. "Sawada Tsunayoshi will receive you outside."

Oh, will he now?

The doctor (can you believe it? A _doctor_. Not a scientist but a _doctor_!) explained what had happened to him in the past few days. He can't say he understands it all- Reborn may be the World's Greatest Hitman and carry several degrees in mathematics and is legally certified to teach at any grade level, but flame research is not his area, even when it's related to the so-called Arcobaleno curse. He still can't believe there's a doctor who specializes in it.

"In children, anyway." Dr. Ueda Koji had said, with the warm smile of a doctor, or an uncle. Someone familiar. "Which, it seems, you most decidedly are not. Anymore. Or ever have been? A strange thing, this curse of yours. I should like to study it some more, but I suppose that is not possible. And I am not a scientist."

Maybe someone else can explain it better and in layman's terms.

Something beyond _atmospheric flame disturbance_ and _flame osmosis, flame displacement_. How
the hell does this island know so much about flames?

It's the kind of questions Reborn has always wanted to ask Iemitsu about but never got the chance to, or if he did ask, he never received a decent answer out of the boy. Man.

(20 years later, and he's still a 19-year-old brat.)

Jeong-Seo Kaede doesn't give him so much as a second glance once he's dressed. She leaves the clipboard there, probably for him to look over if he wants, or for an orderly to collect. He does look over it. It's all words and numbers and terms in Japanese that he can read without quite comprehending, but he memorizes them.

"Hello."

Reborn looks up and reaches for a gun too small for his hand. It's more like a Swiss mini than a Beretta, tiny in his newly large grip.

"My name is... Nagi. I am a Kokuyo Agent-in-training assigned as your interim guide."

The girl is tall, but she can't be more than 15. 16, if he's being generous. She has a young lady's eyes, large and wide and innocent, untouched by age, and a Japanese shade of black. Her voice is light, airy, almost shy. She might almost seem timid, if not for the shock of violet streaks in her hair. Her uniform is similar to that of Jeong-Seo Kaede and the associates who answer to her directly.

Her shoes, though. Those heels could probably kill someone. Reborn does not want to be that someone, but he would like to be there to watch.

"..My interim guide."

"Until you are accustomed to your host family."

So, like a transfer student. "I'm sure that won't take long."

She nods, slowly. "..And until they are accustomed to you."

Ah. Maybe that will take a little longer. If Reborn was still able to use his flames as usual, it wouldn't be problem. But it's all wrong now, his balance is off, has been off for something like 30 years. Flame control is less a reflex and more like a muscle. You can ride a bike years later, but you have to get used to longer limbs, heavier limbs. A higher perspective. A taller bike.

It helps that he doesn't have to power that damned pacifier anymore, though. And it's great. It's like he's spitting in Iron Hat's face. That's Kokuyo's problem now.

(Until he leaves, anyway. Apparently they're only willing to hold onto it for as long as he's on the island, for some reason. Reborn does not relish the idea of having to put that thing on again and reverting to his... smaller form.)

Leon climbs up his hand and onto his shoulder. The mini suit he collects, making sure the sealed missive from Vongola Nonu is still inside. It is. There's also a briefcase with his nametag on it, though Reborn doesn't remember packing one.

"Alright then, signorina Nagi-"

"Just Nagi is fine." There's little shift in her posture. Her Japanese is standard, textbook even, but a
little stiff. Like she's trying hard to sound that way. "Don't worry too much about honorifics. I would advise especially not to use Italian ones, though. The only ones who speak it regularly are the Sawadas and Kokuyo Leader."

"..And that's a problem because..?"

"No one else is supposed to know Italian."

..That's *bizarre*. He'll have to find out why at some point.

"In that case, *Nagi-kun*... what now?"

She smiles at him, and lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "Do you have any questions? Normally my job would be to keep you confined to the eastern half of the island, but you've been authorized Level B security clearance."

"And that means what, exactly?"

"It means that you are permitted travel to and from both sides of the island, with certain restrictions. It also means that I am permitted to answer your questions, short of personal questions regarding any residents or anything regarding sensitive or classified political matters."

"Okay." They're heading down the hall now, towards the front lobby. Jeong-Seo said it was the Main Mansion of the Miura Household. A mansion with a massive hospital wing. A hospital wing that probably has its own address. "First question. Where is Sawada Tsunayoshi?"

"He'll be here to meet you outside in a few minutes."

He notes that she doesn't even hesitate to answer.

"How do you know that?"

"Classified, Level A."

Reborn blinks. He'd been an answer along the lines of 'he called ahead'. Instead he gets Nagi flashing another smile, nice and sweet. Oh, boy.

"..How did your Kokuyo Leader commandeer my jet and how did she manage to land it remotely?"

"Classified, Level A."

"How do you people know my real name?"

"I'm going to say Classified, Level S, but I'm also going to say that our island's Guardian is very intimate with the Vongola."

"*Vongola* doesn't even know my name."

"That's why it's *Classified*~" She says the word like a song. Like it's so infuriatingly *fun* to deny him these answers. "Next question?"

Reborn is trying not to let *too* much irritation show. It was easier as a baby. Not quite developed facial muscles. He probably looks a little scary right now.

Nagi, for her part, does not so much as shiver.
"Why is this island so damned weird?"

It's a crackshoot. He's asking himself more than anything. Actually, he must be really unsettled by all if he's talking to himself out loud. At least, Reborn is pretty sure he's just talking to himself and not trying to get some answer, any answer.

He sighs. And looks up to see his guide giving him a head-to-toe sort of glance. Her eyes land on the mini suit he has tucked between his side and his elbow.

"Your infant-sized clothing seems to be constructed of fiberglass interwoven with threads of ceramic, titanium, para-aramid synthetics, about a dozen other materials as well as an unknown organic compound that seems to originate from your pet chameleon."

"You can't have Leon," is the first thing that comes out of Reborn's mouth, and he's so fucked. God. Fuck this island. This island is so weird. "How do you know what my suit is made of?"

"Classified, Level A." She peers up at him, flashes another smile. Honestly, he thinks he'll fit right in. "We don't want your partner, but we'd like a sample of that suit."

"It's my only suit." Who knows if he's going to stay this size forever? Also he's going to want to have Leon recycle it to make him an adult sized one. Waste not want not. Leon's gifts are not for research. "I'm not handing it over."

"Then, next question."

She's not even bothering to mention that fact that it doesn't fit him right now.

Reborn stops in the lobby. It's mostly empty, since tourist season is over, and they're alone except for the receptionist. Somehow it feels like if he doesn't get one more clear answer to something before he meets with the Sawadas, he won't be getting many straightforward answers ever.

He'll have to choose them more carefully.

"What happened with the agnelli di Dio?"

Nagi blinks. Straightens. Smooths down the front of her uniform with trembling fingers.

"Case designation AGNUSDEI is classified under Personal Information. Clearance must be obtained from Sawada Tsunayoshi, Honorary Member of the Namimori Precinct Disciplinary Committee, and Yamamoto Takeshi, Sworn Member of the Namimori Precinct Disciplinary Committee."

Hm.

"..I had heard they were dead," he chances. Iemitsu had already more or less admitted as much that Tsunayoshi was alive.

Her shoulder twitches, and she smiles again. Mist drifts around her, sweet like lotuses. "They are not."

And isn't that just peachy.

"What are the limits to your answering my questions like this?"

"I will accompany you throughout your stay upon the island, for as long as required. You may ask questions at any time. I am only able to answer those of security Level B or lower."
He nods. Alright. He can deal with that. Probably should have asked that first, though he can't see what difference it would have made unless he actually knew what was considered A or S or answerable.

Reborn pushes the door open and steps outside-

-only to be run into by the smallest, fluffiest, brownest blur he has ever seen before.

(He says smallest, but given that he has just cleared 190 centimeters[8] again, everything seems tiny.)

Then this tiny blur, this little child- and, wow, Reborn barely felt that. Thank God for his chest and abs. He doesn't know how muscle mass translates over with the curse but somehow it does and it's what keeps him from yelping and stumbling back like the boy is doing right now.

He is reminded of Timoteo's dream, all those years ago. It is a boy, with hair not flaxen but bronzed in the sun. Hair that seems to glow in the light of the dying day. Eyes too dark, too wide, too young. Too wise.

He looks just like his father. But smaller. Way, way smaller, and somehow also more irritating?

*No Good Tsuna,* was what Iemitsu had said about him, fondly and distantly. The way one would speak of a family heirloom, or a beloved stuffed animal. *His darling No Good son.*

"Tsuna."

"Ah- Nagi! Hi." *Tsunayoshi* beams at the girl peering around Reborn's side. He waves a little, then peers up at Reborn. "Are you with him? That means this is our guest, right?"

"He is, yes." Somehow Nagi manages to slip through the space between Reborn's elbow and the door frame. "Reborn-san, this is Sawada Tsunayoshi and his mother, Sawada Nana. They will be your host family."

"Thank you for hosting my stay, Sawada-san. Sawada-kun."

"Just Tsuna is fine," Tsunayoshi quips with a smile. "My mother loves having more people around the place. You're coming too, right Nagi? They've already dropped your things off."

"Of course."

"Oh, it will be so nice to have some more company around the house," Sawada Nana coos as she comes up behind him, hands latching onto her son's shoulders. He doesn't seem to mind it. "It's been so quiet since you started junior high, Tsu-kun. You never bring that lovely boy around anymore."

Tsunayoshi splutters. Very Iemitsu-like, but with more red on his face.

"M-maman!" Well that's definitely French. "Takeshi has baseball practice, he- he joined the club, remember? He has summer practice! I can't pull him away from baseball practice. He loves baseball."

"I thought he loved you."

Tsunayoshi makes an aborted whining sound and tries to avoid all eye contact.

"Is Tsuna having boy problems?" Nagi drifts over, brightening. "I can give him the Talk."
"I already had that in school," Tsunayoshi says in a rush. His ears are pink now. His mother looks absolutely giddy.

"Then I can give you Advice."

"I have Kyouko-chan for that!" That's practically a squeak. He must be part mouse.

"She's barely 16. I'm almost 18, I have far more experience."

"You have long distance relationships with someone in Namimori and another one halfway across the world!"

"Friendships. Yes. So." Nagi brandishes an arm to the side, gesturing to a nearby bench.

"Why don't we leave that for when we get home, hm?" Nana says, her fingers tippling along Tsunayoshi's shoulders like fluttering wings. It doesn't seem to comfort him any. "I'm sure Reborn-san is tired from his flight and ordeal, and it's a bit of a drive back to the house."

"That's a great idea, maman!" Tsunayoshi squeaks again, looking relieved. 'I'll-

"I'll go tell Hibari-san to pull the car up. You three get to know each other, okay?"

Tsunayoshi looks crestfallen and accepts his fate. Nagi slings an arm over his shoulder (Tsunayoshi is so small that she clears him by nearly a full head) and pulls him up in front of Reborn.

"Reborn-san, you're here to report back to Tsuna's father about him, right?" For all that she has the air of a shy gentle princess, Nagi seems... vicious. "Let him know his kid has a boyfriend and he should come by to give this boyfriend the shovel talk, okay?"

"Takeshi is not my boyfriend," Tsunayoshi whispers, face still red and in vain, because Reborn is already agreeing to do just that.

He doesn't know what it is that Timoteo wants him to do here, but he figures it's gotta be fun if it has something to do with Sawada Tsunayoshi.

* * *

Reborn opens the letter from Timoteo once he's set up in one of several spare guest rooms in the Sawada house. The Vongola Sky Flame flickers at the head of it, harmlessly offering light with which to read by.

His guide, Nagi, has pulled Tsunayoshi aside after a quiet dinner affair, murmuring in that odd lilting island dialect of theirs that Reborn is trying to pick up as quickly as possible. He had graciously helped with the dishes and now Nana is curled up on the living room couch watching a Korean soap with a box of tissues next to her.

What a strange household he's found himself in.

To Reborn, my dearest brother,

I am sorry to spring this request upon you so suddenly. From what Iemitsu has told me, by the time you read this letter you will have likely been questioned as to the nature of your visit on the island.
Oh, yeah. Right after he regained consciousness properly and could do more than slur his way around words.

We have decided it would be best that you arrive on the island under the pretense of checking up on Tsunayoshi's state on Iemitsu's behalf. Once there, you would read this letter and be assigned your actual mission and contract. As you already know, there is no way to refuse. Iemitsu tells me it will not be a simple matter for you to depart the island once you have met Tsunayoshi. There is only the path forward.

But you are quite good at that, aren't you, frati?

Forgive me if this letter becomes long-winded. I prepared it in the event that you truly would not be able to leave the island any time soon, so it may say more than I would otherwise write.

I'm getting old, frati.

Reborn sucks in a breath slowly. The paper crinkles in his hands, too large and long now, but it is resistant to tears and water and flame alike.

I am getting old, frati. My time will come soon, I can feel it in my bones. It speaks to me when I walk the streets of Catania, when I visit my Daniel[9] and hold her hand. She waits for me, frati. I wish I could say that my Blood Oath to you comes first, but I cannot. I cannot.

You are my greatest friend. Not my first, but perhaps my longest. You have told me many secrets and kept from me many more, as I have done to you. Perhaps after this we can do away with all our formalities and be honest with each other. Man to man, eh?

"Man to man." Reborn feels a small smile curling on his lips. He's suddenly glad now that they've all got separate rooms.

The letter is pretty long. Timoteo probably fished out the longest single sheet of paper he had lying around from the Stone Age and filled it to the brim. Reborn skims the few following paragraphs, chuckles a little, and skips down as far as he can until he finds any mention of an assignment. Maybe he'll read the rest when he isn't as jetlagged.

...I will continue on to your assignment now, Reborn. Normally I would fear you had fallen asleep by now, but if I know you, I know you of all people would not tire from reading anything I write. Also, I know you would have skipped down here after the first few passages. I do hope you will go back and read the rest, perhaps even write back. Your progress reports are always so brief and dull.

Oh, fine then, Timoteo. Maybe Reborn will write the longest damn report ever. He'll make it a dozen pages long and fill it with his observational studies of the island's insect species.

Iemitsu and I have decided to leave the matter of Inheritance to Sawada Tsunayoshi. Now, I do not necessarily mean that I wish to make him my heir, frati, but such a thing will suffice if it is what he makes of it....
people have actually been trying to link sicily to italy since rome was still an empire. it's just too far away.

devil's triangle: also known as the, uh, bermuda triangle. haha.

these are real coordinates and you are free to look them up 8') it's still destination invalid.

ekakishima dialect is actually going to be niigata dialect with a few twists (or as close as I can manage since I've only found a few sources for the dialect so far). there's a few other cultures and languages mixed in on the island that will have some effect on the dialect in weird fictitious ways (I am not a linguist). why niigata? why anything? /twiddles thumbs, whistles innocently

kaki kuukou: literally means 'oyster airport', because everything is oysters. a private airport and the only one on the island. has no commercial airlines and is operated completely by kakishima residents for private flights only, inbound and outbound. must be 'pre-approved' for landing and take off, as reborn found out.

squalino: (italian) dimunitive (or so) form of squalo, shark. meaning, baby shark. baaaaby shark.

legend has it that djerba was the island of the lotus-eaters where odysseus was stranded on his voyage through the mediterranean.

190cm: about 74 inches, 6'2"

dania: short for daniela, timoteo's wife (which i just remembered is the name of his mum too, that's gotta be a little creepy. but. no. not the same person.)

Chapter End Notes

it's always so hard to choose what to footnote and what to say 'haha not telling yet you'll find out later'. it's also difficult to tell myself to be patient stick to the outline and not find reasons to shove xanxus or other arcobaleno onto the island early.

as usual feel free to ask questions and if I can clarify without revealing stuff then I will!! my tumbles is vongolastic I am open to all pms and asks. i'll get character profiles up there soon hmmmm.

Extra Notes From The Edit (nov. 2016): reborn and timoteo aren't actually 'brothers' in the blood sense; they've made a blood oath together and simply refer to each other as brothers. this is explored/explained a little in 'the way we fall (apart);'
[oyster fortunes daily] you are permitted receive answers.

Chapter Summary

in which reborn wonders about the questions we all want to know the answers to: why is everyone talking so weird, and also how do taxes work on kakishima? is there a military presence? is anyone a civilian? how is no one dead yet? what the hell is yamamoto takeshi wearing.

Chapter Notes

taking a lot of liberties with dialect and accent mangling and trying to 'create' my own idea of a language dialect. i am not japanese. i only have the internet, google translate, and a crude understanding of the japanese language at my disposal.

WARNINGS: food? in the latter half. some odd foods.

as before, sicilian vocab is different from italian, so that may throw you for a loop a bit, but the words are.. almost mostly the same. see: famigghia instead of famiglia.

EDIT nov. 2016: gone through and edited typos, some wording, added misc narrative, nothing Vital. basically added A Lot more off-hand details that reborn thinks about constantly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

there is no guarantee that they'll be the right answers, or even useful answers, but hey, at least you got answers.

He wakes.

That's... it, really. Reborn lays there for a minute, confused.

The curtains are still drawn and it's just barely light out behind them. Probably dawn. Not even dawn. Birds chirping. Crickets. Is it the season for crickets?

(Summer, isn't it?)

What had woken him up?

Sitting up, he surveys the guest room with a quiet, steady eye. It looks much the same as it did when he fell asleep. Nothing has been moved and even Leon is flicking a tongue at him from the pillow, as though asking what he's doing awake at this ungodly hour.

Because, and Reborn is sure of it because he's peering at the alarm clock he was provided, 3AM is far too early on a regular day, even for him. Especially on a- what is it, Sunday? Christ. It's 3AM
A soft clatter from beyond the door of his room, probably downstairs, answers his question.

Reborn scoops the chameleon up onto his shoulder and grabs his hat. Mismatched attire be damned, he's not leaving his hat behind. Or Leon.

And so it is that the World's Greatest Hitman is padding silently downstairs barefoot, wearing a slightly overlarge pair of Iemitsu's old (barely worn) pajamas, covered in something like carrots and cake prints, with a sleepy chameleon pooled in the bottom of his fedora. He wishes he had a pistol that fit his new size. He'd even settle for a revolver if need be. But he has Leon, if worst comes to worst.

And if worst really comes to worst, he's never needed a gun to kill before.

There's a light on in the kitchen and low, quiet murmuring. Something clatters onto the table and someone hisses.

Reborn snaps around the corner of the doorway and sees... Tsunayoshi. And Nagi. Both looking completely disheveled and half-asleep. Nagi's even laying on the table itself, face tucked into her elbow, her other arm outstretched and draped onto Tsunayoshi's. Nana is nowhere in sight.

And it's just all the better that it's only them, because Leon is apparently too tired to transform properly, so Reborn is holding out a limp and sleepy reptile at the two of them instead of a gun.

Tsunayoshi doesn't even balk. The boy looks up, blinks blearily, and slides a clean potholder over the table at Reborn.

Reborn gives him a nod and sets Leon down on it. The chameleon curls up, and if reptiles could purr, he supposes Leon would be doing just that. It is a very comfortable looking potholder.

"Sorry if we-" Tsunayoshi yawns, involuntarily baring one of his canines, ",-sorry if we woke you."

"I'm a light sleeper." Reborn pulls a chair out and eyes the coffee-maker on the counter as he sits down. It looks like it should be capable of making a decent cup of coffee, but.. Nothing beats a Moka pot on the stove when it comes to espresso. "What are you two doing up at this hour?"

"M up at this time every Sunday," Tsunayoshi mumbles. He has something in one hand and a screwdriver in the other. Reborn doesn't recall Iemitsu ever mentioning his son being a tinkerer.

"Specially during Summer."

"Summer?"

"Mmm." The boy doesn't elaborate. He's squinting at whatever he has in his hands. "I'm waiting for the Daily Fortunes."

"The... okay." Okay. Horoscopes, maybe? It's honestly too early to start questioning anything, especially things he's not sure his mind is interpreting properly. The kids don't look like they're capable of answering anyway. At least, not in any way that's also informative. Case in point, waiting for the horoscopes at 3AM. "Any reason why the two of you look half-dead? Or is that just because it's 3 in the morning?"

"It's 3AM on a Sunday," Nagi answers from the crook of her arm. It's more of a croak and he can barely hear her.
"My nightlight broke," says Tsunayoshi.

So that's probably what he's fixing. Reborn has never heard of a nightlight with screws that small, though. Or any screws at all. There's an extension cord pulled up to the table, most likely to test the nightlight, and what looks like a small radio as well.

Reborn looks between Tsunayoshi, Nagi, and the coffee maker.

"It's not too early to start that thing up, is it?"

Tsunayoshi raises his head and follows Reborn's gaze. ".Go ahead. Papa's the only one who ever uses it, but we keep it clean. I'd be a good host and make some for you but I'm a little...

He wiggles his captive arm. Nagi gives him sympathetic pats on the shoulder and an appreciative hum. She seems to be enjoying her nap.

"I'm sure I can manage without burning the house down." With a grunt, Reborn gets to his feet and slips his fedora on to free his hands instead of, y'know, just setting it down. He's only been here a single night (if one didn't count being in a Fiamma Exhaustion-induced coma for a week) and already he seems to be pulled into the natural flow of the island. The nonchalance, the idleness. This sedate pace of life, so similar to life in Sicily, but without the murder. Casual murder.

He still wishes they had a Moka pot though.

The hair on the back of his neck prickles. Reborn looks over his shoulder and catches Tsunayoshi staring at him unflinchingly, hands poised. His eyes flicker up.

Odd.

"Coffee's up there."

The cabinet is at the perfect height for peering into. And there are indeed sachets of coffee inside. Most of them seem are Japanese brands, but Reborn spots a few he recognizes from Sicily mixed in there too.

It may not be an espresso machine- it's far too liquid, what drips into the cup -but he supposes he can live on just the scent alone. Every breath makes him feel more awake and alive. Reborn doesn't remember ever being so sluggish and tired in the morning.. It could be a standard of living on the Madreperla. It could explain why Iemitsu looked like shit whenever Reborn happened to catch him before a morning mug, if this is the effect that coffee has on the islanders.

It didn't explain why he was like that off the island, though. Or why it's affecting Reborn, too.

"How are you even functioning," Nagi says in a grouse without even lifting her head, in a tone like she's cursing his very existence.

"Very carefully," he responds, leaning over to inhale the scent of brewing coffee.

"You could be too if you let go of my arm, Nagi."

"But then you wouldn't be functioning, Tsuna."

"Hmm," Tsunayoshi hums so easily. He looks more awake than Reborn feels, but not as awake as Reborn looks, because Reborn has mastered the art of Seeming Alert And Awake (to the point where he sleeps with his eyes open and claims it's not because of lagopthalmos [6] or whatever
Vongola's physicians call it, Reborn is not a damn rabbit). "They probably gave him a *Fiamma* Regulator implant."

Ookay, now he's *definitely* awake.

"A what?"

"An-" Tsunayoshi presses two fingers against the side of his neck, palpatating backwards towards his spine. "An implant. It should be around here. Well, actually, it's put at the base of the skull, near the cerebellum."

He's too busy being concerned about the idea of *Flames* and *inhibitor* existing in the same sentence in relation to each other to be concerned about the fact that Sawada Tsunayoshi, Iemitsu's No Good son who should only be in junior high, apparently knows some basic anatomy.

"Medulla oblongata," Nagi throws in, still nestled into her elbow.

"..It's not the cerebellum?" Tsunayoshi blinks.

"The cerebellum is inside the skull, Tsuna."

"So? You can just.." The boy makes an upward jabbing motion with the end of the screwdriver, at an angle steep enough that Reborn can almost imagine him stabbing it into the base of someone's skull.

Reborn is still trying to parse a response to that (to all of this, actually) when Nagi finally lifts her head. She looks tired and absolutely dead to the world. For a moment, he thinks she's going to tell him he's an idiot and what does he mean so? It's inside the skull. You can't reach it, obviously. Except by doing that really steep-angled stab that Tsunayoshi just did.

Instead, Nagi just says, "The medulla oblongata is responsible for involuntary functions. *Fiamma* Release is one of them. That's why the Regulator is implanted near it."

"Ooh.. Right. No wonder I almost failed Science."

"Tsuna, that's 7th grade. That's *basic anatomy*."

*Junior high students don't take Anatomy courses*, Reborn wants to yell, because he had to know that kind of stuff when he was earning his Master's in mathematics.

(..Okay, so maybe he *didn't* actually *have* to know it, but he realized pretty early on he was going to have a lot of free time between all his mathematics classes and decided to take a few other courses too.)

He doesn't yell. Instead, he takes out the pot from the machine, pours himself a mug of cheap coffee water, and gulps it straight down. It's not scalding his mouth or throat, so his Flames are obviously still working to shield the lining of his esophagus and keep it from becoming a boiled prune.

Also, this coffee isn't bad. Iemitsu has good taste.

"Anyway," the girl sighs and reaches up to sweep a strand of hair from her face. Nagi has pulled back both of her hands now and seems to be in a better state than she was a moment ago. Reborn watches in fascination as, within those same few seconds, Tsunayoshi goes from chipper and alert to curled in on himself, jittery, and probably more than a little terrified. "The *Fiamma* Regulator
doesn't prevent Flames from being produced, Reborn-san. It just stops them from manifesting outside the body at certain hours, or at all. Except through anything you're touching directly."

"Mmm." Reborn starts prodding at the back of his neck again, if only to stop his other hand from twitching and reaching for Leon.

"There should be a bit of a bump at the injection site if they did give you one."

There isn't.

"..I don't think there is."

"Then I'll really have to say it again," Nagi says, and throws herself back onto the table, "how are you even functioning."

Reborn's so called interim guide does not have the right face for being as sassy as she is. Cheeks too round, eyes too wide, too slim and petite. It's adorable. And also disturbing to think of her as adorable, even if she did say she was almost 18. He's just... going to keep his thoughts to himself. He's not Shamal, after all. Christ forbid.

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't be as dandy as I am?"

"He's like another Takeshi." Tsunayoshi laments pathetically in his seat. The boy seems to have given up on the nightlight and is just holding his head in his hands. "Or Hibari-san. Another Hibari-san. God, no, I think another Takeshi is... I don't know which one is worse."

"Reborn-san is more like a combination of the two, isn't he?"

"That's even more terrifying." Tsunayoshi says in a whine that's quickly becoming characteristic of him in Reborn's mind.

Isn't Takeshi the boyfriend?

"I don't know who this Takeshi or Hibari is, but if it's terrifying, I'll accept it without taking offense."

"Takeshi is the boyfriend," Nagi whispers with the straightest face Reborn has ever seen. Unlike Tsunayoshi's.

"T-Takeshi is not my boyfriend!" Haha, he stuttered. "A-and Hibari-san is the current Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee. O-or at least, um, of our precinct's Disciplinary Committee. He's our-well, he's my senpai."

Reborn glances between them. ".How old is he, exactly?"

"U-hm.... I think he just turned 17. Right after school started."

"That sounds a bit young for someone running a committee about discipline."

"Really?" Tsunayoshi scratches at his cheek, looking not at all perturbed. "He was made Chairman when he was... 7."

Whuh.

"And you don't find that strange at all?"
"Well, the previous Chairman picked him, so.. No? Not really? I think it's weirder that people are still thinking of challenging him."

"That's because he's a Mainlander, Tsuna."

Iemitsu's kid scrunches his nose. "That's a stupid reason. Was it like that for you too, Nagi?"

"Not.. not really, no." She twists a bit of hair around her finger. "..Shouichi said most people were avoiding me because I looked like an serial killer for a few weeks. He was worried.. after he stopped being terrified, anyway."

Tsunayoshi's mouth opens and closes a few times. Reborn's is far more functional.

"I can hardly imagine you looking like a serial killer, Nagi-kun."

Then she turns to him with the deadest, emptiest, most world weary expression he has probably ever seen before, ever. Even worse than Xanxus when he first came out of the ice. It's the face of someone who has given up on the world, who resents it, who feels abandoned by it. Someone who wants and rejects it all at once. Wrathful, in a different sense.

* * *

Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, he thinks, and a shiver crawls slowly up his spine. Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.

Reborn fears for the man who scorned this one.

Tsunayoshi touches her shoulder gently. They tense and relax all at once, and the resentment fades from her too-wide eyes. "..Is Ginan okay?" [1]

She.. nods. After a moment. There's an implicit sort of worry in Tsunayoshi's body language, the way his hand seems to want to reach for hers. He recalls that Nagi only stopped looking so drained and tired when she let go of him.

"He's.. been better," she says softly. "He's gotten better, I think."

Reborn does not think about the fondness she speaks with. He doesn't think about the idea that this person named Gina is responsible for the look of utter desolation and vengeance Nagi had worn. He doesn't consider the problem of Tsunayoshi being concerned for the person responsible. Or that Nagi is the one that Vongola has been looking for, the Mist who is resonating with another Mist somewhere in Italy. That she is right here, and she has named him Gina. Ginan.

He considers instead the fact that Gina could be a girl's name. He's not sure what Ginan could be, though. Or it could be a simple reversal of Nagi's name. Maybe a sister. Or, brother. Or both. A brother who prefers to be Gina(n). A sister who would rather be a brother.

Or it could mean something else. Something about vengeance. [2]

"..His name is Gina?" Reborn asks in a spectacular display of tactlessness.

They seem to appreciate it, in any case.

"Ginan," Nagi says. "Short for ginantaidoubutsu. He likes 'Gina' too."

Reborn's face twitches and he tries really hard not to laugh. He can't even tell whether or not that's a joke. [3]

* * *
2 hours later, after 5 mugs of coffee and a trip back to his room to reread Timoteo's letters and the files in the briefcase (and two trips to the lavatory), Nagi is snoozing away in her chair, one hand draped over Tsunayoshi's elbow again. The boy is done fiddling with his odd-looking nightlight and is instead joining Nagi in dozing off where he is. He'd pulled out an old spare nightlight when he caught Reborn staring a little too hard at the one he was working on.

There's no bulb or LED fixture that Reborn can recognize, just what looks to be a metal rod sticking out where the light source should be, encased in some sort of glass. There's a removable backing and some kind of computer chip installed inside, a small wire-frame cube, but no other circuitry. Tsunayoshi's has a pair of dials on the sides and one on the front. The plug prongs don't look like they'd fit any standard electrical outlet either.

All in all, it's a very odd-looking nightlight. He kind of wants to plug it in to see what happens, but Tsunayoshi says the outlets have been upgraded and the spare is an older model that will probably short circuit if they try. The prongs definitely don't match the holes on the extension cord, but Reborn could probably make it fit.

He resists the urge to ask for a manual. Just so he doesn't have to ask more questions about it.

Iemitsu doesn't seem to have anything in his closet except dirty jeans and spare 'construction worker' outfits, and also a whole ton of shorts and tank tops, so Reborn decides to stay in his carrot cake-printed pajamas, for lounging purposes. He doesn't want to think about how he's going to get other clothing, though, because as comfortable as these pajamas are, he wouldn't be caught dead shopping in them.

Nagi's a Mist though, if he's not mistaken. Maybe he can cajole her into putting him in an Illusioned suit.

Then the radio turns on at exactly 5:30AM, jerking the two kids awake.

"It's Sunday, dear Oysters! This is Oonami-shi, and I'm reporting live from the Fiamma Research Facility! Good morning and welcome to a wonderful new week. The weather today is summer, and will be summer for the rest of this month. We should be expecting a change to winter soon!"

Reborn settles into one of the chairs, intrigued, because maybe this will finally explain what the whole summer thing on the plane was about.

"And now, for your regularly scheduled Daily Fiamma Fortunes!"

What follows is definitely not something Reborn expects to hear from a quiet town like this. First of all—there's a research facility? For Flames? And it's public knowledge?

"Summer at the Research Facility is kicking up. As such, the island fiamma output will be lowered 3.654% for the remainder of this week. Night duration has been extended 2.123%, and nightly intake will be increased by 5.241%. Please adjust your schedules accordingly to avoid sudden onset of fiamma exhaustion during your day! All fiamma nightlights using standard, preprogrammed settings will receive networked updates by 9PM.

I will now read the adjustments for manual and prescription settings."

Normally Reborn would be drinking all of this in and storing it away for later behind the mantra of
what the hell is up with this island going on in his head. If nothing else, he can relay this to Vongola's own scientists and researchers and see if they can get anything out of it.

But he’s too busy watching Iemitsu's kid scribbling down a mathematical formula (involving Fiamma Voltage!) and squinting sideways at it. Interesting. It looks like an off-shoot of physics and.. university-level variables? Beyond university-level?


Then Nagi lifts her head and taps her finger on a few places. Reborn would be willing to brush it off as random if he didn't have a damn degree in mathematics himself, and also if Tsunayoshi's face didn't brighten up as he set to solving it with gusto. Nagi watches, and Oonami-shi chatters away with instructions on how to go about replacing appropriate values, what an incorrect result will look like (a difference of more than 20% from your current setting, unless your prescription has changed), and as usual, to never test out new fiamma nightlight settings alone.

"For further assistance, please see your primary fiamma physician! That's all the updates we have for you today. The Fiamma Research Facility thanks you for your cooperation.

As always, should you encounter any unrestrained fiamma response of Class A or higher, locate a fiamma physician or your nearest Sawada attendant. If you are unable to find either, head to your local Hibari station or Kokuyo office for assistance.

This concludes the Daily Fiamma Fortunes. Have care, and remember your Resolve!"

The radio fizzes for a moment, crackling out a jaunty little tune that sounds like it was made and recorded a century ago, then turns off. Tsunayoshi fiddles with the dials.

"Aha!"

He grins, and Reborn is reminded of just how much the boy looks like his father. And like Giotto. There were few photos and paintings that survived the years, and those that did were grainy, faded. Reborn finds himself quickly replacing those blurry, warped faces of Giotto with Tsunayoshi's, give or take a decade or two.

The nightlight is plugged into the extension cord and Tsunayoshi turns the forward facing dial halfway around. For a moment there's nothing, except the kitchen lights flickering and the refrigerator humming off and on again.

Then a small flame flickers inside the glass container around the metal prong. Like a candle it wavers, flares, and even from where Reborn is leaning against the wall he feels the pulsing pressure of unsunsunsun that's drawing him closer before he can stop himself.

And then all of a sudden, it cuts off. Or, rather, it's redirected. Like an asteroid nearing a larger planet, the direction of the flame is pulled sharply to one side and Reborn can practically see them veering right towards Tsunayoshi, who seems to be soaking it up like a damp sponge.

Iemitsu never said his kid was a veritable black hole.

Iemitsu never said anything about what Reborn is finding out about Tsunayoshi, actually.

Things that Reborn has found out to be true:
Short, scrawny, barely any muscle mass to speak of. Unable to walk without stumbling and nearly tripping on nothing. Terrible balance, compared to your average teen going through a growth spurt (which Tsunayoshi is not). Unnecessarily frightened by the slightest thing, like someone slamming a door across the street, or the chihuahua barking on the other side of the fence. Unable to focus on a conversation unless the other party is directly in front of him or within immediate line of sight.

Things he has found to be not true:

The utter uselessness and hopelessness of Sawada Tsunayoshi.

Honestly? Reborn had been expecting a kid worse than Dino, and that was saying something. There's always those stories of Skies who performed better when around other members of their Septet, but Dino was...

Is. Dino is. Dino is a mess. Dino still is and probably will always be a mess that needs the balance of his Bonds to keep him from self-destructing. Some combination of performance anxiety, perfectionism, and a beautifully crafted mask (for a teen, anyway) made him a walking disaster with a smile on his face. But, he still turned out okay? In Reborn's opinion, he turned out fine.

So, why would Iemitsu tell them his son is hopeless, can't do anything, is completely No Good, when it's quite clear that he... isn't? Not entirely. Does Iemitsu even know anything about his family? Is he lying to the Vongola?

Considering that Iemitsu gets most of his information about his family from Nana, is his wife lying to him?

(Probably. Since this is the first he's ever heard of the boy having a boyfriend, even rumored, and Iemitsu will talk about everything he knows of Tsuna given half the chance. And given that Kakishima is impossible to find and Tsunayoshi generally would have had a 99% chance of remaining a civilian, all that talking hadn't been a problem.

It is now. It's definitely a problem now.)

Reborn is shaken out of his thoughts by Nagi's humming.

He's disgusted that he even drifted off like that to begin with. What a failure of a hitman. What if someone had come upon them and decided to attack? What if Tsunayoshi decided to attack? Not that he thinks Tsunayoshi would ever have the reason to, and Reborn would ever entertain the idea that he wouldn't be able to fight Tsunayoshi off with just his little finger if need be.

There's a knock at the door, and he watches the pulse of flames more or less shrink until it disappears with a fuuf when Tsunayoshi unplugs it from the cord. Fire hazard, maybe.

Before he can ask where the flames are even coming from, Tsunayoshi is answering the door and a far too cheery voice is greeting him before it's even open. Reborn, being a curious hitman, follows.

"Tsuna!" The new arrival grins. He's a boy with a mop of black hair shaved clean on one side of his head, and pair of rather odd-colored eyes. Odd, for a Japanese.

Maybe Japanese? Of all the people Reborn has seen so far, Nagi is the only one who looks remotely like what a Japanese.. should. Look like.

..There's something wrong with that thought there.

But Reborn disregards it in favor of trying to figure out what the hell the boy is wearing. A dress?
Or is this what they call a tunic in Japan, a yukata? It doesn't seem to fold over like most of the yukata Reborn is familiar with. There's some circular crest on the front, and what looks like embroidery of bamboo stalks and a flowering plum? That's... probably not Japanese.

"Morning, Takeshi." Ah, yes. The Not-Boyfriend. "You're.. here early."

"I wanted to meet your house guest!" The boy keeps grinning. Eerily. "Morning! I'm Yamamoto Takeshi, Tsuna's classmate. Just Yamamoto's fine."

"Good morning.. Yamamoto?" At the other's nod and beaming smile, Reborn tips his head down in greeting. And remembers that he's still wearing carrot cakes. Oh well. "Reborn. Tsunayoshi's house guest, I suppose. Actually, Tsunayoshi, I need to talk to you about that. And to your mother."

Tsunayoshi taps his chin. "Maman's going to be asleep until 8 at least..."

"Then let's get breakfast!"

"..But Maman is-"

"I can cook."

They're adorable. Absolutely. Like, Xanxus and Lussuria levels of adorable. Only slightly less murderous. Yamamoto looks so eager and Tsunayoshi-

Tsunayoshi looks happy, but also like he's trying not to swallow a bug. (Xanxus has less restraint, and also less visible happiness.)

"We're not having sushi for breakfast, Takeshi."

"I can make other things! Like.. kaatsu! I can make chicken or pork. Or, ooh, beef. Beef kaatsu."

The boy makes an indulgent 'mmm' sound. Reborn blinks. So does Tsunayoshi.

"Takeshi, tonight's the full moon."

Yamamoto blinks. Eerily. "So? My parents are Shinto."

"Heathen," Nagi says loudly from the kitchen. [4]

Tsunayoshi gestures in the direction of the call as though agreeing with it. "I can't eat meat, anyway. Remember?"

Yamamoto's expression twitches and stumbles. That's.. the only way Reborn can really explain what happens to it. It stumbles the way a person stumbles, catches itself, and gets back up, as most expressions do when under moderately applied stress.

"Why not?"

"I'm allergic. And so is maman."

"..Since when?"

"Since.. always?"

"..But I've seen you eat meat before. When we graduated Primary! There was a barbecue party!"
"Yeah," Tsunayoshi says with a grimace. "Do you remember me being violently ill after because I forgot they cooked the vegetables and meat on the same grill?"

"Oh." Now Yamamoto's face falls, like someone finally succumbing to death or illness. Resigned. "Right, that did happen.. I thought you'd just eaten something undercooked. But what about mulgogi?"

"Just because it shares the same characters doesn't make it the same thing, Takeshi. I can eat fish just fine. I had your sushi before, didn't I?" Tsunayoshi pauses for a moment. ".Does your dad know that you know Korean?"

"Yeah. My old man's been making me practice kanji since we started junior high because of it, so I don't 'forget my roots'. " Yamamoto punctuates the last few words with air quotes and a laugh.

Tsunayoshi leans closer. "Are you sure he isn't secretly a nationalist?"

Rather than being alarmed or offended, Yamamoto laughs. Again. "I think he's just trying really hard to make sure we fit in. Like, an Islandist, or something like that. It's fine! It's fine. Plus, my marks in Japanese are going up because of it."

"Ugh, lucky." Tsunayoshi sighs. "Uhm, anyway- there's some fish in the fridge that we can grill for breakfast, then. Why are you here so early anyway?"

"I said I wanted to meet your houseguest. But also I just want to say good morning to you, Tsuna!"

"I-I meant-" Tsunayoshi squeaks and stutters backwards, either in embarrassment or awkwardness. "You have baseball practice, don't you? It's Sunday."

"Yeah. And? Today's the Day of No Ice." Reborn does a mild double take behind Tsunayoshi that thankfully goes unnoticed by them both. "So, here I am! Not resting."

Oh. That makes more sense. This damn island and its dialect.

"You patrolled instead of going to baseball practice?"

"Well, you did suggest I shouldn't be practicing every day. And I get to see you, too! I haven't visited in, like, forever."

Tsunayoshi's face goes red and he starts shoving Yamamoto through the doorway while making vague protesting sounds.

"He's shy," Yamamoto stage-whispers to Reborn, grinning, as he goes by.

"I see," Reborn says with a solemn, understanding, viciously delighted nod.

Tsunayoshi hisses, "Am not!"

He seems to be trying to bury his face in the other boy's clothing, but given that it's quite.. fitted, there isn't really much to grab onto. There's an emblem on the back, too. A rising sun, white against a violet backdrop. Kind of like the Japanese flag, but in reversed colors. It doesn't look like any prefecture's flag that Reborn has ever read about.

Actually, what he's more surprised about is that Yamamoto has apparently gone patrolling and yet there's not a single speck of dirt on his white.. whatever he's wearing. The tunic. Reborn is just going to call it a tunic. It's clean. Does he have a new one for each day? Or maybe it was laundered
recently.

"You look like you have a lot of questions, Reborn-san."

"You're very observant, Nagi-kun." Nagi has a mug of coffee now and sits a little straighter than when Reborn had gone out to Meet The Boyfriend Who Isn't Really A Boyfriend. Looks like everyone runs on coffee here, because Tsunayoshi is the same. Yamamoto probably had a cup before coming up, if he's been.. patrolling. "I do have a few questions, if you're awake enough to answer them."

"I am always awake enough to answer questions," she said with a prolonged, sage-like sip, as though she were drinking tea instead of bitter coffee dregs (Reborn's favorite, to be honest). "Though I can't guarantee coherency before 6AM."

Reborn checks the clock on the wall. It's close enough to 6. He'll chance it, and sits back down at the table, setting his hat upside-down for Leon to crawl into and nest in.

"I'll start by assuming that all of you are speaking some sort of.. regional dialect."

Nagi blinks. "..You're not familiar with it?"

"I'm not, no."

"Oh. We.. had assumed you were, since you're associated with- with Iemitsu."

It takes him just a moment to get over the fact that she's referring to Iemitsu by his given name so easily and without honorifics, instead of 'Sawada-san', the way she had addressed Nana. Unless they really didn't care about honorifics on the island. But she did call him Reborn--san, so.. this is going to take a bit more looking into.

"He came to us with a rough understanding of Italian and picked up Sicilian pretty quickly. I only ever heard him speaking Japanese to his wife on the phone."

"Then, would you like a primer on the dialect? We have them in paper and electronic format. It should help cut down on any current and future confusion."

Oh, he thinks he's dealing with it quite well, actually, considering it's not his native language. It's a bit like talking to actual Italians for the first time all over again. *That* had been a chore.

"Paper would be preferable. I'm still not used to all this newfangled technology." Not to mention those electronic devices tend to give him headaches. He's a hitman, not a tech-head.

"We'll have a volume sent to the Sawada residence then. It shouldn't take more than a day or two," Nagi smiles, amicable and professional. "Is there anything I can clarify for you in the meantime?"

"Yeah." Reborn tips his head toward the stove, where Yamamoto is heating up a griddle on the stove. "Why does he say kaatsu instead of katsu?"

"Kakishima's dialect tends to have a lot more long, drawn out syllables. Most of it is easy to understand if you know enough Japanese, which it seems you do. If you're familiar with the Niigata Prefecture's dialect, that's even better."

"So kaatsu is for katsu, like cutlet." She nods, and Reborn goes about deciphering every weird word he has heard so far since arrive. "Nokoori is.. nokori? [7] But what about that Daily Fiamma Fortunes thing? Unless I didn't hear that one wrong."
"In standard Japanese that would be something like.. Weekly Sunday Fiamma Report. We use houkoku because it's more of a warning than a report or forecast, though."

So, not as simple as just a different accent. Different words, too. This is definitely like learning standard Italian all over again.

Which means this ought to be fun.

(In hindsight, he should probably find it odd that they have an entire dictionary primer for their own dialect.)

"Did you have any other questions?"

"Can I ask what all that fiamma output and intake is about?"

"You can.." Nagi looks contemplative for a moment. "Tsuna would be better suited to answer those questions though."

Tsunayoshi, as usual, squeaks. Reborn rues the day this boy becomes a boss of anything.

"Why me?!"

"You were there for most of the project, you know it best."

"That- that doesn't mean I understand most of it!"

"Reborn-san isn't a scientist, you know enough to explain it in layman's terms. And Nana-san works there too, so you definitely know more about it than I would!"

What?

"Sawada-san works in the research facility?"

"Um, yes. Maman has been working there since.. she was in university. Just every now and then, when they need her."

Isn't she just a housewife?

"Does Iemitsu know?"

Tsunayoshi just. Shrugs. So does Nagi. And Yamamoto. They all just collectively shrug.

Does Iemitsu even know anything about his family? He has to be worse than Timoteo at this point.

"A-anyway, eh, so-" Tsunayoshi gestures with his hands as though to distract Reborn. His face is probably a little scary right now, since the boy's hand movements seem to get more and more jerky and frantic as he talks. He makes a conscious effort to smooth it out again. "The island, it, um, it absorbs flames- just a bit! It's for- for research. They work on Fiamma technology and weapons in the facility and they need flames for that, of course, s-so it's collected from the people. That's why visitors have to be given something- most of them aren't used to having their flames extracted, even slightly. A-and from what we're told, whatever flames aren't used get circulated back out into the atmosphere and we just kind of reabsorb it so it works out just fine!"

Reborn has a million and one questions and just as many things to say about how that does not work out just fine.
"...I don't think he gets it. See, I'm not good at this, I can't explain about- about the facility, it's-

"No, Tsunayoshi, you explained it just fine. I understood it just fine." He rubs at the bridge of his

nose, though, sighing. "...Barring some things."

Like why the hell they think it's okay to take flames from the populace to be used in what amounts
to military experiments. If there's even a military. There can't not be, there's no other way to

enforce something like this. Not unless they have something like the Cosa Nostra, the mafia, or

something. Unless they all unanimously agree that this is a Good Idea.

..It could be that it's played off like taxation, except with Flames instead of actual currency. This

island doesn't even legally exist, after all. Does it even obey Japan's tax laws?

(Not that Reborn is particularly knowledgeable about that sort of thing. That's for Vongola's legal

accountants to manage. But it's something worth being curious about, since he's here.)

"..You said that everyone is having their flames absorbed."

"Just- small amounts! Honestly."

"Everyone?"

"Um, everyone except infants, anyone in the hospital, some of the elderly... a-anyone who applies

for an implant with a valid medical reason..." Tsunayoshi ticks them off with his fingers, mumbling

to himself in between. "..Visitors. Frequent visitors- one-time visitors generally get a patch or a.. a

shot? I don't know, I've never gotten one myself."

Reborn probes at the back of his neck again. "So why haven't I been given anything?"

"I- I guess it has to do with, um." The boy gestures to his own chest, draws a circle with his index

finger. Ah. "N-Nagi said that your body is kind of.. accustomed to having flames drawn out? Or

anyway, that your fiamma response is pretty high and that might be why you're not as affected by

having some of it absorbed. Like, your Aura is pretty bright."

"You can see that?"

"..Yes?"

Reborn looks at Nagi, who nods. Then at Yamamoto who is looking over his shoulder with a eerily

beaming smile. Everything about that boy is eerie. "Even you two?"

"It's very warm," Nagi says softly. "Very... cozy. Suns are always cozy."

That sounds like the exact opposite of Reborn.

"I'm a hitman, I'm not supposed to be cozy."

Wait. He wasn't supposed to say that.

"That's useful though, isn't it?" Yamamoto chips in. "You get people to cozy up to you before you

off them. I'd love something like that!"

Reborn expects some civilian-type retort or comment, something like don't say weird things like

that, or you're not going to off anyone, Takeshi!

Instead he hears:
"You have Rain, Takeshi. You just put them to sleep and kill them quietly."

"Quiet's boring, though! Sky flames must be nice. You've got that whole soothing harmony thing going on. Sometimes. No one would see you coming! And no one can see you coming at them, Nagi."

"But of course," Nagi preens, like it's natural to be praised for one's potential as an assassin.

*Kids these days.*

"All of you have flames, then?" They all nod. He chances the next question: "..All of you can *use* flames?"

"Everyone can *light* a flame, if that's what you.. mean..." Tsunayoshi trails off and leans back. Probably in response to Reborn's eyebrows drawing together.

Leon's tongue darts out and sticks to Reborn's cheek. Reborn swats at it, but does ease up on his expression a little.

"So you're saying that, essentially..." He trails off with a sweeping of his hand towards the trio, indicating something he's not really sure he wants to hear put into words.

"..Essentially just about every single person on this island is *Fiamma* responsive," Nagi chirps. As though that were the most normal, *natural* response in the world. "80% at least, at any given time. Excepting, of course, most children under 6 years of age, and a majority of the tourist population."

"I see." Reborn closes his eyes and rubs at his chin like an old man without stubble. He's starting to wonder if he'll ever grow any. Shouldn't be growing some by now? He's definitely way old enough now.

"So, when did you three discover your flames?"

"Classified, Level A." Nagi tips her head, but continues talking before Reborn can open his mouth to protest. He figures it has something to do with Gina, though. "Probably around 2006. I was.. 8. Almost 9."

"I was 7! End of first grade." Yamamoto sweeps by, laying down maybe a dozen small dishes before all three of them. Tsunayoshi and Nagi take one look at the contents and exchange glances.

"2008. Probably."

Reborn looks down and, somehow without his noticing, Yamamoto had managed to heat up a pot of soup, grill enough fish for 4, reheat the rice, scramble eggs, scoop out what looks and smells probably like pickled vegetables, and-

"..Is that-"

*Nattou!" Yamamoto beams while setting down the bowls of soup, and then falters. "Uh, no? No nattou? Hey- why are you two swapping food? This is a healthy, balanced meal! You have to eat it as is!"

"Healthy for a giant teenage athlete with a metabolism that moves at the speed of a melting glacier," Tsunayoshi mutters, taking half of Nagi's dish of *nattou* in exchange for half of his portion of pickled vegetables. "I'm going to get another egg, too. Didn't you know eggs and *nattou* make a perfectly nutritious meal?"
"Tsuna that's a superstition," Yamamoto says with a frown. Tsunayoshi and Nagi ignore his remark and chorus out *itadakimasu* at the same time. "You can't survive on eggs and *nattou.*"

"*You* survive on milk and sushi." Tsunayoshi shovels a wad of rice and egg and *nattou* into his mouth as though to prove a point. "Besides, I'm scrawny as hell and probably underweight, I'll take what I can get."

Yamamoto stands there, looking disappointed, worried, and chiding, all at once. "That's why you're still so small, Tsuna."

Tsunayoshi jabs an elbow into his side on the way up to get another egg. Yamamoto laughs it off. Reborn watches, because nothing in the *Madreperla* archives could prepare him for the sight of Tsunayoshi cracking a raw egg into his steaming bowl of rice.

Then he remembers that Palermo likes to roll up stalks of leeks in entrails and grill them streetside, so this isn't as bad. Subjectively speaking.

Reborn looks over at Nagi instead, and she takes a mouthful of pickled cabbage (probably cabbage) while keeping eye contact, as though daring him to comment on it.

He, very wisely, does not.

"*Itadakimasu,*" he says, and sets to his food as Yamamoto sits down. Vaguely he recalls some other rules of 'etiquette' that should be followed, but the children don't seem to be worrying about it. And until he gets that primer, he really won't know for sure unless someone tells him. "What about you, Tsunayoshi?"

"What about me?"

"When did you manifest your flames?"

He asks this, knowing what the answer is and what it should be. The question is whether Tsunayoshi will admit to it, or if he will make up some story so that he doesn't feel.. 'left out', as kids often do.

"Um," Tsunayoshi says, ducking his head. He mutters something. "...6."

Reborn can almost feel time slowing down. Knowing, as he does, that Tsunayoshi should not have awakened his flames. Should never have, if Timoteo had done everything properly and sealed those flames before they could be activated. In their seats, Yamamoto and Nagi have stiffened slightly as well.

"..6 years old?" he asks quietly. Idly. A year after they were sealed, he managed to unseal them himself? That would be quite the feat.

"Yamamoto laughs. It's a very.. very strange sound. Sort of strangled, sort of muffled. Sort of pained. Sort of gleeful. Does he know? Is this sort of thing public knowledge for everyone? Maybe it is. Being Flame-active is a sort of status symbol in the *Cosa Nostra*. Maybe showing off the day you awaken your flames is like a status symbol on the island.

"6 months?" he continues, when Tsunayoshi doesn't respond.

That would be lightly more concerning. The idea that he had already had his flames when Timoteo came along and sealed them away is definitely worrying. Reborn doesn't even know the kid all that much, doesn't really have a reason to care about him.
"6... days."

Reborn.. nods. Just, nods, distantly. As though only barely registering the meaning of those words, lest dread settle into his stomach before he can get some food into it. He neatly shelves that detail and sets it aside for later pondering.

Then he nudges his dish of nattou over to Tsunayoshi's side.

* * *

Sawada Nana wakes up at almost exactly 8 o'clock. Precisely at 8 o'clock, actually. Reborn hears her shuffling around upstairs right when the living room clock sounds off the time.

Yamamoto Takeshi leaves another serving of food warming in the oven before heading off to finish his patrol. Reborn sets another pot of coffee to drip five minutes before 8, as Tsunayoshi recommended. Best to have her fully awake as soon as possible, he says, before they have their talk.

Now they're settling onto the living room couches, each one with more coffee. Reborn is starting to find himself partial to this blend, and he usually hates anything that's less than two-thirds espresso.

It has to be this island. Kakishima. The Madreperla.

This island is a myth. It is an island that cannot be found. Those who are destined for it do not return. It is a place where nearly the whole of Vongola's Primu generation ventured to and summarily disappeared from the history of the Cosa Nostra. Died, even, on this very island. Did Giotto know this, when he came here? Did he know what an enigma it was, how well hidden it could be? Did Ugetsu know, and was that the reason why he brought Giotto here? To hide him, perhaps? To hide his descendants?

(In-fighting has always been so commonplace among the Cosa Nostra. Vongola tried its best to avoid it, but even Vongola isn't perfect.)

"Sawada-san," he begins, setting his mug down on the coffee table, "I'm sure by now you've been made aware that I am here on behalf of your husband, Sawada Iemitsu."

Both of them seem to reflexively twitch at the mention of Iemitsu's name. Nana tightens her fingers around the mug.

"Does, um, does this mean you're not here for that, then?"

"Oh, I am. But I was tasked with another assignment as well." That makes it sound like Iemitsu contracted him for this. Eugh. Never. "Are you aware of what your father does for a living,
Tsunayoshi?"

"He's in the mafia, right?" Reborn *blinks* and snaps his mouth shut. Tsunayoshi gives him an owlish sort of look. "He thinks we don't know."

"..Well, you're not wrong," Reborn says with a cough. That's definitely unexpected. "Iemitsu isn't actually in the Family. He advises it from an external standpoint."

"..So he works for the mafia."

"Cosa Nostra. And, technically, yes. We both work for the Vongola Family. I am, usually, a contracted hitman. He acts as a second-in-command in times of conflict."

"What does he do when it.. isn't?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Tsunayoshi frowns. "..Okay then. Um. Why are you here then? I mean- what's the.. other assignment?"

"My other assignment involves the fact that my *dear friend*, the current Don, is about as old as the Mona Lisa, and the Vongola is facing a dire lack of successors at the moment. His sons are currently all ineligible for succession. Most of them are dead. One is alive, but is, again, ineligible."

Nana stifles a gasp, surprised, but not overly horrified. It *is* the Cosa Nostra after all. Tsunayoshi, on the other hand, stifles a snort of laughter. "Wow, that sucks."

Reborn narrows his eyes just the slightest bit. "The reason I am here is because your ancestor happens to have been involved in the Vongola succession line in the past, thus making you eligible for the Inheritance."

"..Isn't the Cosa Nostra the, um, the one that.. you have to be- what was it, Italian? To join? Or, to succeed."

"Close. Anyone can be associated with us, but to formally *join*, one would need some Sicilian blood. Traditionally speaking, anyway."

"So, why me? And how did papa manage to join? Unless he isn't actually.. joined? How does that even work?"

"Do you know the name Sawada Ieyasu?"

"Oh!" Tsunayoshi beams. "Yeah. We've got a whole photo album with Ieyasu in it. A lot of them, actually."

Damn. Reborn wants to see those. If only so he can rub it in Timoteo's face.

"Ieyasu retired from the Vongola and moved here, to this island. His name was Giotto, but his formal title is more commonly known as Vongola Primu."

Now it's Tsunayoshi's turn to twitch in his seat. "Th-that's..."

"Giotto was Vongola's founding father. You, Tsunayoshi, are his descendant, however diluted in blood."
"Oh." The boy's face falls. "...That sucks."

..Of course he'd say that. Reborn has only known the boy for a day and a half and he can already tell the kid has little to no ambition. Apparently he had tried to ditch class early yesterday in order to come to the mansion with his mother to pick Reborn up. No friends to hang out with, as far as Reborn has noticed, though he's friendly with Nagi and Yamamoto Takeshi. Isn't talkative, doesn't care much about his studies, but can somehow fix a nightlight? That emits flames?

"So, Sawada Tsunayoshi. Vongola's only options for heirs are one who is ineligible but was raised in the Underworld and knows it like the back of his hand, and one who has the slightest claim over heirship but has never touched the criminal world before in his entire life. That's you. I," Reborn gestures to himself with more than a small amount of pride, "am the World's Greatest Hitman in Vongola's employ. Can you guess what my assignment here would be?"

"..To kill me? Right? Maman?"

Nana is, surprisingly, calm. She even seems to give it a bit of thought.

"Tsu-kun is the one with a more legitimate claim on the Inheritance, right? From what you say, he has very diluted Sicilian blood, but is still eligible. So this other possible heir must have something related that invalidates him from succession. Tsu-kun is untrained, so it's possible that you're here to.. train him. Or the opposing party could be trying to get rid of competition. Oh, but history is rife with leaders controlled from the shadows. Is that what you're here to do, Reborn-san? Turn my Tsu-kun into a puppet for your Cosa Nostra?"

She isn't smiling- it would be far more terrifying if she were smiling. Instead she looks disappointed. Sad. Sad in the I let you into my house and you spit in my cooking, how could you? Shame on you. Shame on you, sort of way.

Nana seems to have a hell of a knack for guilt-tripping and Reborn wants to know if she does it consciously and knowingly or otherwise.

"Sawada-san, I did say that I was here on Iemitsu's behalf, not Vongola's," he reassures her. "I'm not here to kill your son, or to turn him into a puppet."

Reborn resists the urge to reach out, to take her hand. She is a mother who raised her son without a husband. Who cares for him with all of her heart. Who hears that he is the World's Greatest Killer, and decides to try to guilt-trip him about what he has or hasn't been sent to do.

Sawada Nana is someone who will likely do anything to protect her son. He's counting on that.

I do not necessarily mean that I wish to make him my heir, frati, but such a thing will suffice if it is what he makes of it.

Reborn has barely an inkling of what Timoteo is planning right now. What he has is a set of instructions and a deposit in his bank account.

Leave the matter of Inheritance to Sawada Tsunayoshi.

"I'm here to protect him."

***

What he also has is the tendency to be a filthy, filthy liar.
Gina / Ginan: pronounced the japanese way with a hard g, like in game. Hey, if mukuro gets to name her kuromu, nagi gets to name him gina

義な: pronounced gina, means righteousness

gi nantai doubutsu: (japanese) means literally 'psuedo soft-bodied animal'. sounds like something hibari would use. but in this case, it means 'pseudo mollusk'. (poor mukuro. maybe once he gets to the island she'll call him 'true mollusk'.)

while the average buddhist practitioner is not required to be vegetarian, most will eat vegetarian on the day of the new moon and full moon. eastern vegetarianism is different from western vegetarianism though, in terms of the types of foods. we eat a lot of marinated and meat-shaped tofu. also pickled vegetables.

mulgogi: (korean) fish. meat is just gogi. mul means water, so fish is basically.. water meat, haha

Lagopthalmos: a condition where one sleeps with eyes open, usually as a result of underdeveloped or paralyzed facial muscles that prevent full closure of the eyes.

Nokori nai no hi 残りないの日: (japanese) meaning 'day of no rest' or 'day without rest' (probably, according to google translate). 'koori' commonly means 'ice'.

Chapter End Notes

tsuna and takeshi aren't actually dating fyi. no one knows if they're actually dating. they don't know if they're actually dating.

Notes From The Edit: clarification stuff.
- the island absorbs flames from the populace, mostly during the night (induces slight exhaustion as well), and releases it back during the day. night shifts and odd-hour workers receive some kind of patch or internal regulator to be exempted from this cycle.
- Fiamma Inhibitor implant was also changed to Fiamma Regulator, because it makes more sense, in hindsight
- 'fiamma responsive' is basically this au's / the island's way of saying 'flame-active', as you might have seen in some Other Fics. the cosa nostra uses flame-active, but kakishima operates under a different philosophy flame-wise so they don't use that term 8U
- the whole 'mysterious non-existent island' kakishima did not actually start until AFTER giotto arrived. the history of it is on the wiki page for those so curious, but i do intend to address it bit by bit throughout the fic too, because i can.
- i also realized that with the calendar i set up, the dates that were chosen and the day of a full moon does not actually make sense please suspend your belief and pretend it works out just fine hahahaha

- regarding the 'daily fiamma fortunes' vs 'weekly sunday fiamma report', my notes on how i conjured up the whole mess, for the curious. my sources are google translate and a web blurb explaining days of the week in japan. reborn is also not a native speaker, so i am also taking liberties with how accurate his translations are.

Houkoku = report, from 'hou', broadcast, and 'koku', warning
Kōun = fortune
mash them together and get something like 'Houkokuun'
mai nichī 毎日 = every day
nichi yōbi 日曜日 = sun-day (of the week)
nichi = sun, yōbi = day of the week
毎日曜日 = mainichiyōbi, which can be somewhat read as 'every day of the week (daily)', or 'every sunday'. plugging the above into google translate will get 'every sunday', but plugging 'every sunday' in gets 'maishuu nichiyoubini' instead, with 'shuu' standing for 'week', so 'every week sunday', or 'weekly sunday'. which is what nagi gives for the standard japanese wording.
Mainichiyōbi no Fiamma Houkokuun: (probably) literally 'every sunday's fiamma report' or 'fiamma report of every sunday' in kakishima's made-up dialect. it will be referred to as 'Sunday Weekly Fiamma Broadcast' from now on, or just Sunday Broadcast, or Fiamma Broadcast, or something similar. whichever.

aaand this gives you an idea of what goes on behind the scenes of me writing..... putting in Too Much Effort. i belatedly apologize for mauling the language to anyone who actually knows japanese. wordmashing is my favorite thing to do.
[oyster fortunes daily] do not displease the gods.

Chapter Summary

reborn has been on the island for about a week (not including his 1 week coma). he gets a crash-course on disciplinary committee politics, finds out that they're basically school-based gangs (even if no one else thinks so), and discovers just how far the 'island authorities' reach goes. (very far, it turns out.)

oh and he goes shopping, too.

Chapter Notes

the usual language mangling and culture smashing. any corrections are welcomed!!

new locations for oyster island:
azayakatani: bright valley. azayaka, for short, is 'bright'. a city directly south of namimori.
kotsuzui: can mean either 'bone marrow' or 'true spirit'. a city directly south of azayakatani

standard italian vs sicilian
nono -> nonu
primo -> primu
fratello / fratellino -> frati / fratuzzu

WARNINGS: food, eating. mention of (mostly cooked) animal blood as food. nondescript hibari 'retainer of the underworld' kyouya flavoured violence. the usual very weird island that no one really thinks is weird at all, except poor reborn.

edit: i somehow forgot that maman and tsuna are avoiding meat, oops. luckily i haev a whole repertoire of appropriate non meaty foods to replace it with.

EDIT nov. 2016: not.. a lot of things to make note of, but slight alterations to a few lines, some typos fixed, and a bit of narrative added here and there.

they will displease you in turn. or destroy you. neither of which is really all that enjoyable.

There is absolutely no reason for a shopping mall to be this ridiculously huge. Especially not one set in a town as small as Namimori's.

If there's anything Reborn is starting to find stranger than the island, it's the island's cities. Towns. People! Everyone here is local. The jaunt from Tsunayoshi's house to the mall had taken only the better part of half an hour, mostly because Tsunayoshi and Yamamoto kept falling behind, and probably sets them at the outer edge of Namimori, if the slow replacement of houses by businesses
means anything.

Actually, they passed by a sign not too long ago that mentioned something about entering a city that Reborn didn't catch the name of, so they're probably not in Namimori at all anymore. He hasn't seen anything but houses or the occasional restaurant and retail store the entire way, and.. someone's van advertising plumbing services. A bed town, maybe, depending on what it's like in the other parts of Namimori. He'll leave the tour off until he gets some proper clothes in his wardrobe. For now he's relying on some of Iemitsu's old things, since he had come woefully unprepared and Timoteo had, understandably, not thought to pack anything but his infant-sized clothing in the briefcase.

In all, Namimori seems to be very quiet. It is very quiet.

(He wonders if that's why the topic of the agnelli di Dio is so touchy. Disruptions in small inclusive towns always tend to be the either the talk of the town, or something that everyone avoids. Nagi doesn't seem to have been involved at all, yet shows signs of being personally affected by it.)

(She's not even from Namimori, though? Is it just- it must be. Just this island and its strangeness. That's gotta be it.)

"Nana, Tsunayoshi!"

The call comes from the crowd of people that suddenly swept up in front of them, a merging of a bunch of minor roads into a main street running parallel to a fenced off highway. Nana and Tsunayoshi both look up, though Nana is the only one who spots the owner of that voice.

"Nao-san!"

It's Nana who calls back, and Tsunayoshi perks up. Whatever he'd been talking about with Yamamoto trails off, unfinished.

"Nao-san, over here!"

'Nao-san' turns out to be a woman in her late 50s wearing a brightly colored, floral-print michiyuki coat over a black hakama that makes her look half like delinquent schoolgirl and half like an overbearing grandmother who's trying to fit in and means well. And also fits in quite well. [1] It's a stark contrast from how humble Namimori's citizens have been so far, and a definite far cry from the earthly twill and cotton of Sicily- although, he supposes, she might not look so out of place in Agira.

They kiss on the cheek, as Italians do- or the French, in this case. Or both. They exchange greetings in a murmur of both languages, and then all three when Tsunayoshi stumbles in. 'Nao-san' sweeps him up and swings him around as though he were a head shorter than he is and half his current age. It's like all the Sawadas inherited the supposed taller Italian genes while Tsunayoshi got the, ahem, short end of the stick. Shorter than most.

But, well, he's still a kid. He'll grow. Probably. Reborn did, and so did Xanxus.

"Reborn-san, this is Sawada Yoshinao. Nao-san, this is Reborn-san, our house guest."

"Hello, signor Reborn!" Nagi wasn't kidding when she said that only the Sawadas spoke Italian regularly. He can't detect even the slightest hint of an accent. "I'm Nana's aunt."

"Mitsu's aunt."
The woman waves it off, chuckling. "You can just call me Nao. Yoshinao is such a mouthful, and it takes forever to say."

"I couldn't possibly."

She waves it off again. Reborn can feel his understanding of Japan slowly trickling out like a crack in a tub. Everything he might have read about is being overturned to reveal something else. Pebbles on a beach, or stones on a walkway. He only knows so much.

It's like watching ice cream melt. But more unappealing.

"What brings you up this far North, Nao-san?"

"Oh, I heard through the grapevine that your latest house guest was in dire need in the clothing department. Anything I could do to help?"

"You could have just called." Nana shakes her head with a sigh that seems only a touch exasperated. "Nao-san is a seamstress. Tailor, designer, refitter. You name it, she'll manage it. You're a bit on the tall side, Reborn-san, so anything we find for you will probably need some fixing."

"I could tailor a whole set if you'd like."

"I definitely would not ask that of you, Yoshinao-san."

"Maybe not, but I can still do it anyway." Cheeky. He likes this family. "Tsunayoshi, come here, I have something for you!"

'Something' turns out to be an thin hood of red cloth, embroidered and stitched to look like... something. He's seen that kind of animal before. Not in person, maybe in a book. Definitely not on television, or whatever they're calling it these days. YouTube. Ah.

"That's... cute," Reborn mutters before he can stop himself. Adorable. "The hood, I mean."

Tsunayoshi stares at him blankly.

"You're cute, too, Tsuna!"

Tsunayoshi reflexively swats Yamamoto on the arm. Then yanks off the red panda hood and smacks him with it repeatedly, completely red in the face. Yamamoto shirks away, laughing and shielding himself from the harmless assault. It's like watching slapstick comedy.

Honestly, the way Iemitsu spoke of his kid, it sounded like he would've been an eternally nervous and terrified mess, melting at the very hint of compliment or affection. Then again, the last time Iemitsu saw his kid must've been at least 3 years ago now. A lot can happen in 3 years. A lot can happen in 2 years.

(Xanxus learned to stew in his anger and put it towards something more productive. The alternative being lashing out at anyone passing by and getting even angrier when Timoteo did nothing about it. Hasn't made him any less angry, though, so there's no saying how actually healthy it is.)

"Tsu-kun, Takeshi-kun, we're going now!"

Reborn turns and sees Nana and Yoshinao waving from a few feet away. He turns again and
Tsunayoshi and Yamamoto are catching up, looking more or less.. normal again. Tsunayoshi is still pinkish under the hood and Yamamoto is still chuckling.

He'd think it a bit warm to wear a hat, but Reborn's still got his fedora on, so he's not going to be a hypocrite.

"Something wrong, Reborn-san?" Yamamoto tips his head. He looks a little less eerie now, with an eyepatch on, despite the fact that someone has drawn on a sword dripping with blue blood.

Which is weird, now that he thinks about it. Reborn hasn't heard anything about him getting an injury either. (He's learned that Tsunayoshi gets worked up easily by things like that.)

"Nothing. I was just thinking those kids over there were wearing something familiar." Reborn nods his head in the direction of a group of teens walking down the other side of the street. Their tunics are a slightly off-white color, the crest is a little different, and they have sparrows in flight instead of bamboo stalks. "You had that on the day we met, didn't you, Yamamoto?"

"Ooh. Yeah, yeah. That's the Disciplinary Committee uniforms."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, then?"

"I'm off-duty!" He wasn't aware they even had a concept of 'off-duty', considering how many times Yamamoto had come by the house at 4 or 5 in the morning this past week wearing the darn thing. "Hmm. Those are.. probably members of Azayakatani's Disciplinary Committee. Don't stare."

Reborn bristles at being told what to do, but he looks away just as one of the group raises their head to look at him. "Why not?"

"Azayaka's Committee is a bit... unruly." But Yamamoto looks so happy about it. Looks it, anyway. He's only met the boy a few times and he can kind of tell now that the smile is mostly a farce. A farce for what, though, he's not sure yet, but it makes his Hitman Senses tingle pleasantly. "They're a little better now than they were before, but we should still be careful around them."

Reborn nods. They looked harmless enough, but then again, Nana had been the one to try and guilt him out of turning her son into a puppet dictator. Not that he had any intention of doing that to begin with.

"Takeshi? What are you looking at?" Tsunayoshi asks, being maybe half as tall as Yamamoto is.

"Azayaka Committee. They're staring at us." Yamamoto squints, then seems to follow their gaze. Probably. Reborn isn't looking. "...Well, I guess they're staring at Reborn-san's hat."

Goddammit.

"Oh, they're coming over."

Tsunayoshi hisses something under his breath, looking... contrite? That's an odd thing to display. Yamamoto looks, hearing the hiss, but doesn't seem to out-of-place emotion. Unless it isn't out of place at all.

"Please don't get in a fight with them, Takeshi."

"They're starting it!"

"It's Summer vacation. Don't fight." Tsunayoshi gives him another look, this one worthy of his
father's most stubborn, stern moments, and pulls out a round patch from the inside of his shirt, like one of those iron-on things. He gives it to Yamamoto, who sighs and takes out his own. More bamboo stalks.

Being taller, Yamamoto holds them both up above the crowd while Tsunayoshi maneuvers the three of them closer to the store fronts to avoid being bowled over by other pedestrians. Reborn isn't sure what point this is supposed to serve; until he sees the other group pausing for a moment in the middle of crossing the street.

"What are they doing?" Tsunayoshi whispers as loudly as he can. Reborn resists the urge to laugh at his attempts to tiptoe and peer through the crowd.

There's a ridiculous amount of people. Must be a morning rush or something.

"They stopped." Thank Christ for his hat. Reborn pulls the brim a little lower, letting him peer out from just under it while keeping his face mostly hidden.

Or so he hoped. Reborn makes a speculative sound.

"What?"

"They started coming over again."

For all that Tsunayoshi could be anyone's sweet, charming child, he's making a pretty contemptuous face right now.

Then Yamamoto yelps and Tsunayoshi doesn't look quite so hateful, but maybe a little more exasperated. "What now?"

"Ah- um, uh. Weeee should duck in somewhere. Soon!" Shoving the patch back under his shirt and Tsunayoshi's into his hand, Yamamoto urges them into an empty ice cream parlor. "Like, now!"

Tsunayoshi makes a sound of protest at being pushed around, though he doesn't seem to resist being herded away from the street. "What's going on, Yamamoto?"

Reborn thinks he sees the cause, but given that he is a Guest and Not Super Knowledgeable About The Island, he's not sure why it should be a reason for concern. Someone else is holding up a patch, too, and it looks just like the ones Yamamoto and Tsunayoshi have. Except, if he squints, he can make out the rising sun against a violet background behind the bamboo stalks, too. The same symbol that was on the back of Yamamoto's tunic. Whomever it is, they're not that far off.

Reborn catches sight of Nana and Yoshinao waving at them from right around where the patch-holder is. He returns their wave with a gesture that he hopes will translate into we'll be there in a few minutes and ducks in after Yamamoto.

In retrospect, he probably should've indicated the Committee group that's heading their way. Surely Nana would understand that.

"Why are we in here, Takeshi? Are they still following us?"

"Yes," Reborn says, because he is the tallest and therefore still able to see the Azayaka group heading towards them. Just Barely. "Will hiding in here help?"

"No! No. But we'll be fine. As long as, um, no one else finds us!" Yamamoto is talking in a pitch that usually only Tsunayoshi is capable of. Even some of the terror is in there.
"...Who's going to find us, Takeshi?"

Yamamoto whispers back, "Yatagarasu."

Tsunayoshi squeaks, as he does, and goes silent. The cashier gives them an odd look.

Reborn plops down a handful of yen he'd fished out of the bank (after converting a portion of his current savings into an even smaller portion; damn the exchange rate) and picks out a small thing of wasabi ice cream. It's good ice cream weather.

Yamamoto and Tsunayoshi are both busy trying to hide behind retail racks while simultaneously sneaking peeks at the storefront. Reborn does not see the need to, and neither of them are insisting that he does, so he leans against the counter and eats his ice cream.

It's.. surprisingly good.

When both of the boys make a sound, Reborn follows their gazes to- oh, well, he didn't need to. He's going to assume the one they're staring at is the boy in the white tunic, the same one Yamamoto has been wearing. White with purple accents and bamboo stalks. The sun rays on the back also has bamboo stalks over it, much like the patch that was held up.

He doesn't seem interested in them, though, and is instead facing down the approaching Azayakatani crowd. Reborn turns his attentions elsewhere.

"So," he starts, making a crude circle with his hands while trying not to drop his ice cream at the same time, "what are those things for?"

They're like badges," says Yamamoto. He's calmed down a little now that they're behind a Suitable Barrier. "We used to have armbands but, um.. they kept ripping. They're only really used for identification in municipalities other than our own. Mostly we, eh, use it sort of to say.. 'back off, I'm armed', that sort of thing? Other Committees don't usually give us much trouble, except, like, Kokuyo, but they don't even have a Committee, so it doesn't count. It's generally a way to stop fights from happening?"

"It wards off in-fighting," Tsunayoshi explains further. "All the Committees are under the same umbrella even though each city and town Precinct has its own Local Territoriality thing going on. That's why Takeshi isn't wearing his uniform; basically that would imply he's trying to exercise his duty rights in a city that isn't his, or that he wasn't assigned to. That's what badges are for. It's, um., kind of like holding up a white flag, but with guns and cannons loaded?"

"Haha!" Yamamoto laughs. Reborn doesn't know why, but Tsunayoshi is snickering too. [2]

"U-usually though, we don't, um, turn around and backstab them. Anymore. Anyway! It's.. generally considered a statement of, 'I'm a member of another Precinct's Committee, I'm not here to cause trouble, but if you start something, I'll still kick your ass.' They're peace offerings, basically." Honestly that only barely sounds like a peace offering, but Reborn has already accepted that Kakishima doesn't really make much sense to anyone that hasn't lived here for a consecutive number of years. "We were also trying to get them to leave you alone. It's pretty easy to tell you're an Outsider and some people have.. problems. With Outsiders."

"Oh?" His eyebrows rise up under the brim of his hat. "Even you, Tsunayoshi?"

"Of course?" Tsunayoshi looks at Reborn with a confused frown. "You're under my protection. Mine and maman's."
You don't really look like someone who can do much protecting, Reborn muses in his mind. He's a little impressed, though.

"By default, because I'm your house guest, or did you volunteer?"

"It's our duty and obligation as residents of Kakishima," Tsunayoshi says in a tone of something like pride. "We don't accept visitors as house guests unless we're able and willing to take them under our protection too. And I'm under Takeshi's protection, so- ow- Takeshi, what-"

Yamamoto has just started shaking Tsunayoshi by the shoulders and is staring very intently towards the storefront, something like fear and horror quickly escalating on his face. "He's coming over he's coming he's opening the door—!

As though he were a mighty being of some ominous power or deity, the boy in white and purple enters the parlor, striding in with great purpose. The Azayaka group is waiting outside.

The boy looks at Reborn, and for a moment, they stare each other down. Then he reaches for the shine of polished wood at his side, making no efforts to hide his movements or how thickly the desire to fight pours from every inch of him. A pair of tonfas hang down, so far limp in the hands of their owner.

Reborn holds his hands up (or tries, since one has to hold the cup too) in a motion like surrender, letting the little plastic spoon stick out the corner of his mouth like a cigarette. He doesn't fight children. Bullies them sometimes, yes, but he'd never try to pick a fight with one.

Almost immediately the tension dissipates and the boy's weapons are slotted back onto the straps around his waist as smoothly as they were taken out. Reborn is regarded with no more interest than a predator would regard another predator. From afar.

It's not often he finds someone else who likes to sit at the top of the food chain this much.

"Who are you?" The boy asks, with all the authoritativeness of a sibirro [3] and none of the privilege.

It makes his hackles rise, but Reborn only lowers his hands slowly. With his free one, he gestures (politely, with his entire hand and not just his fingers) in the general direction of where the other two boys who are hiding, and removes the spoon from his mouth.

"I'm here with Sawada Tsunayoshi."

The little police-child does not look surprised, even when Tsunayoshi lets a disgruntled, betrayed squawk. Instead, he looks slightly bored. More bored. Maybe even disappointed. "You are the house guest, then."

"Does everybody know that?" Reborn asks no one in particular. "How does everybody know that?"

"Only myself and Yamamoto Takeshi know. You were taken under Sawada Tsunayoshi's protection. He is under ours. We are required to be aware of such things, and we are obligated to perform our duties accordingly."

"Duties?"

"Tell Sawada Tsunayoshi and Yamamoto Takeshi that they have remedial lessons starting the week before Summer vacation ends," the boy says, his coal-black gaze flickering towards where Reborn had gestured to, "on grounds of truancy."
"We started one day early!" Tsunayoshi squawks from his hiding place. "How does that warrant a whole week of remedial lessons?!

Huh. Didn't Tsunayoshi say he only tried to leave school early that Saturday?

The boy's eyes narrow. "2 weeks."

"..I-I'll- um. We'll take the.. 1 week," is the meek reply.

A nod. "Yamamoto Takeshi."

"Uh-" Yamamoto's head pops up. "Yes, Chairman?"

Ah. This must be the fabled Hibari-san, then.

"You will remain here and keep watch of Sawada Tsunayoshi."

Yamamoto's hand rises up in the form of a salute. "With my Dying Breath, Chairman."

That.. doesn't sound ominous or eerie at all.

"Good. Excuse me, Reborn-san." Hibari dips his head in a minute, borderline respectful bow. He'd wonder how Hibari knows his name, but the answer will probably be the same as his previous one. Duties. "I have some thugs to bite to death for threatening those under my protection."

"You are a thug," Tsunayoshi shouts after the rising sun on Hibari's back. "You're not even supposed to patrol here!"

Hibari gives him a flat look. "I am the Chairman of the Namimori Precinct. I will patrol wherever and whenever I want."

Tsunayoshi whines. "That's not how it works!"

Hibari does not deign to reply.

The door opens again. Wind swirls in and flutters the hem of Hibari's tunic, lending to the image of bamboo stalks swaying high above the ground. Reborn swears there was no breeze a few minutes ago, and yet now it's kicking up around the boy and the Azayaka group (gang?) like the beginning of some Western shootout. He finds himself watching with some avid interest, because most of the crowd has stopped and is doing the same, giving them a wide, almost ring-like berth.

This is apparently normal, and standard fare, because no one is calling the police (if there even is something like a police force here), Yamamoto and Tsunayoshi are chattering away behind him, and some of the onlookers even have their phones out to snap pictures or record the whole thing. Or whatever it is that youths do on their mobile phones these days.

"We're not thugs, Tsuna. We're the Committee! Namimori's Committee."

"Thugs. Glorified thugs."

Yamamoto throws an arm around Tsunayoshi's neck and laughs.

Outside, Hibari is holding up the patch again, the same one with the rising sun and stalks of bamboo embroidered on it.

"What's he even doing in Azayakatani?" Tsunayoshi mutters. "I didn't think he ever left Namimori
except to go to the Miura Mansion."

"Maybe he's visiting his dad. I mean, Hibari Leader."

"The HQ is down in Kotsuzui, though... He would've taken the bus or an escort, right? It's pretty far for walking."

"..Well, this is Hibari-san we're talking about. Maybe he likes walking. I mean, he's always patrolling. He patrols more than I do."

"Takeshi, everyone patrols more than you do."

"Exactly!"

The Azayaka group is forming a loose circle around Hibari now, apparently having called off any discussion or negotiation. Hibari seems to have been waiting for it, taking out the pair of wooden tonfa with an extravagant, spinning flourish. They have batons.

Hibari strikes first, a blur of black and white and streaks of violet.

"Sometimes I wonder how you even got accepted into the Committee, Takeshi."

"Shitsure-tte, Tsuna! [4] I told Hibari-san that if I joined the Committee I would make it my responsibility to look after you and I guess he believed me. I believe me too."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Yes it does," Reborn quips from the counter. It's hard to ignore them when their conversation contrasts so much with the fight brewing outside.

It's surprisingly empty in the store. He's not sure where the cashier disappeared to in the midst of all this—Oh, there she is. Behind the counter. Texting. Or Tweeting?

She lifts the phone up to snap a picture of Hibari kicking ass (quite literally kicking one of them aside) and grins while tapping out another message.

The boy is a whirlwind, swinging his tonfa with ease and comfort and using them in probably unconventional ways. He hits with them, sure, and blocks, and parries. And then reverses his grip, uses the short handle to hook under the armpit or around a knee to trip them over. And then turns them around again to use as stilts for his hands, adding inches to the reach of his upwards kick that sends a far-taller opponent reeling back.

_Yatagarasu_ is a bit of a stretch, but _Vaiśravaṇa_ probably isn't. _Bishamonten_. [5]

Hibari stops and turns to the store again, one arm raised in Reborn's direction, the air of battle dancing wildly in his eyes and in the air around him. Very good senses, that one.

If only Tsunayoshi were the same.

"..Is he done? Is it over?"

"Looks like it. C'mon, Tsuna!" Yamamoto comes up, one hand latched around Tsunayoshi's elbow. "Why's he staring at you, Reborn-san?"

Reborn shrugs, and wills himself to stop being impressed. It works. Hibari loses interest in him again and turns back to the scattered bodies around him. "He's your Chairman, Yamamoto."
"He probably just wants to fight," Tsunayoshi sighs.

Reborn tosses his empty ice cream cup into the trash bin and heads for the door, now that it looks like everything is settled and people are moving again. He just barely catches sight of Hibari yawning before the crowd hides him from view. No one even seems bothered by the more or less turf war that had just happened. *Disciplinary Committee?*

More like *thinly veiled gang violence*. Reborn has seen enough of it on the streets of Sicily to recognize it for what it is, no matter how Tsunayoshi or Yamamoto attempt to explain it away.

Nana and Yoshinao come up to them just as they make it out of the store, tittering and breathless, but neither of them too worried. Except Nana, who always seems to be worried over Tsunayoshi.

"Are you okay, Tsu-kun?" Nana fusses over the boys, insisting on checking them over for injuries. "They didn't hurt you, did they? Takeshi-kun?"

"No, *maman*, Hibari-san was here."

"Yeah, we're fine!"

"Oh, I thought I recognized that patch! How lucky! Is Hibari-kun still here? I have to thank him--"

"*Maman* you don't have to do that every time he does something! Honestly it's a little embarrassing for both of us, please don't!"

But Nana is already weaving through the crowd, leaving a mortified and forlorn-looking son behind with Yamamoto's arm draped over his shoulders again. Reborn, being at least a head taller than everyone else, watches Nana approach Hibari and give him a bow with her words of gratitude.

Hibari stiffens, returns the bow with a slight one of his own. They share a few short words, and then he scurries off. The Chairman stops a bit away to make a call on a handheld device (probably a phone?), then disappears completely into the crowd.

"He's such a shy child," Nana says airily when she returns. Tsunayoshi doesn't seem to know what to do about his mother anymore. "Well, let's go! We can grab some lunch after. There's a few really good Vietnamese restaurants even this far North of the colony. Hibari-kun recommended one of them before he left."

The what. Where?

"We can't eat where Hibari-san is eating!" Tsunayoshi near-shrieks. "Or, where he's eaten before. That's- it's- we just can't!"

"It'll be *fiine*, Tsuna. The Chairman has good taste."

"That's not the *problem*!"

"What *is* the problem, then? Clearly it's not a social *faux pas* if Yamamoto and Sawada-san are agreeable to it," Reborn says as an innocent observation. He's interested. Never even knew there were any Vietnamese in Japan. That's probably what that tunic was, too, come to think of it. "I'd also like to try the food at one of these restaurants."

"You're outnumbered, Tsuna." Yamamoto grins, hauling Tsunayoshi along after the boy's mother and great-aunt. "Let's go!"
Tsunayoshi looks like he regrets everything in life. Reborn can't help but be delighted by it.

* * *

They have everything in Azayakatani. There are stores with mainly Western clothing, some with mainly Japanese clothing, some carrying a mix of Korean, Vietnamese, even Chinese-styled fashion. He kind of understands why Nana wanted to bring him here instead of one of the smaller general stores in Namimori.

There isn't much that really fits Reborn's estètica. Most of the suits are cut for Japanese styles and Japanese men, and other Easterners. (And also somehow Nagi, the few times he had seen her wearing a suit. Very sharp.) And while he might look young, he is still in his 60s, and is only really willing to sport one of those brightly colored vests that he'd thought existed nowhere but in the heart of Tokyo.

Considering that the Sawadas were supposedly full of Europeans and Italians, he was hoping for something that might remind him of home. Unfortunately, Japan is slightly warmer than Sicily, and Kakishima even moreso. Everything is made of cloth that's pretty.... thin. Thinner than he's used to.

In the end, Reborn collects a stack of dress shirts in various colors and lots of slacks, patterned and plain and the longest ones he can find. It's been a while since he's had to shop for his own clothes, and he doesn't relish the experience. Especially when there's so many other things to wade through to find something he's familiar with.

Tsunayoshi drops by to see how he's doing. He takes one look at the stack of clothing and disappears. And then reappears a few minutes later holding up an oversized white graphic tee with a black vest and bright yellow tie printed on it, and an expectant smile on his face.

Reborn squints at it for a few seconds, and then adds it to his pile, because why not? He can sleep in it, if nothing else.

There's a loose-fitting Chinese-styled tunic that doesn't hang too badly on him, too. But, as much as he enjoys Fon's company, he puts it back on the rack.

In all, the entire ordeal is.. quite the experience.

Tsunayoshi somehow manages to sneak in a pair of baggy plaid-patterned pants while Reborn wasn't looking. He doesn't notice until the checkout, and by then it's too late. He's more surprised that they actually look like they would fit him. It's almost as though the boy has an eye for things like that, and for clothes that might look good at him? Except Reborn's most fashionable experience with Tsunayoshi is seeing the boy wear a pair of capybara-print pajamas. And polka-dotted socks.

(He did overhear Tsunayoshi helping Nagi mix and match up her suits a few days ago, though, so that probably counts for something. But that's still weird.)

Speaking of polka-dotted socks—

"Tsunayoshi," Reborn muses humorously. He pulls out a pack of them from his shopping bag. Not that he doesn't need or want socks, but- is that shawl, too? It is. A shawl. And yellow suspenders. Why? "How did you manage to sneak any of this in here?"

The boy just grins at him from under his red panda hood. Takeshi is sporting a cap with baseballs for ears, as well as a new black blazer with a now all-too-familiar rising sun pattern spreading out from the right side of it in psychedelic shades of blue and purple. Even though it's pretty warm out.
Seriously, that symbol is on practically everything. He's still been meaning to ask what it is.

"Are we all set, then?" Nana drifts out from the ladies' section with Yoshinao; nothing new in hand, but Yoshinao looks ready to go home and make another hat for Tsunayoshi. "Were you able to find everything alright, Reborn-san? If there's anything else you still need, we can help you pay for it."

"No, no, Sawada-san. That's very generous of you, but I have everything I need just fine." He is a hitman, but as an associate of Vongola he must also be a gentleman. And if there's anything Reborn is good at being, it's being a gentleman. "Now, didn't you mention something about lunch before?"

* * *

Lunch is a bowl of noodles and soup at a Vietnamese eatery. A novel concept for Reborn, where in Sicily they rarely add any kind of pasta to soups. Rarely, but not never. And none that you couldn't eat with just a spoon.

Luckily, he already knows how to use chopsticks. Thanks, Fon. And he figures they recommended this dish (bún riêu, Yamamoto called it) because it had tomatoes, which, okay. He loves tomatoes. And crab. And this is pretty good. He can't even really scrunch his nose at the chunk of coagulated blood, having had the pleasure of biscuits dipped in fresh sanguinaccio, and blood sausages, during the slaughter season. [7]

The others are all far more accustomed to this sort of fare, though Tsunayoshi orders a rice dish with a pair of split and fried shrimp, a fried egg, a square of... egg quiche? And some pickled vegetables that he picks at. He uses a fork and spoon rather than chopsticks, which Reborn finds rather. Odd. All things considered.

"You're left-handed, Tsunayoshi?" He comments, noting that the boy's left hand moves a lot more smoothly than his right one does.

"Not really..." Tsunayoshi holds up his hand, and for some reason Reborn has never noticed the way his fingers never straightened out properly, but remained slightly bent. "It's just a really unlucky hand. I've dropped stuff on it, gotten it stuck in a doorjamb a few times, fallen on it. You name it."

"You're almost worse than I am, Tsuna," Yamamoto laughs. He has no trouble using his hands though. "You have to start small! Microfractures first, that's what senpai says. Big ones don't help at all."

"Tell that to your right ulna, Takeshi."

Yamamoto blinks, then grins sheepishly. Tsunayoshi offers a quick and brief apologetic smile.

"So, Reborn! Signor Reborn." Yoshinao smiles at him over her bowl of what she said was called cháo. It looks like rice porridge with chicken parts and, lo and behold, more blood squares. He's a little surprised that the Japanese were able to incorporate this kind of food into their diet. "You'll be staying with Nana for a while, then?"

Then again, this is Kakishima. An island with everything. An island that doesn't exist.

"I was requested to... look after Tsunayoshi. To protect him, as it were." It's about as much as he's willing to say to an outsider. "Though it seems he's quite well protected as it is."

"Is Italy getting to be that bad?"
Reborn tries very hard and succeeds in not choking on his vermicelli.

"Reborn says there's no heirs left," Tsunayoshi says off-handedly. "Dead or ineligible."

"Tsk." Yoshinao clucks her tongue. "What is Vongola doing, letting all their heirs die in one go?"
*That's not entirely true,* Reborn doesn't say. "I don't suppose he's here to make *you* the next heir, Tsunayoshi."

Tsunayoshi pales and whispers in horror, "god, please, no."

If nothing else, Reborn is glad that she has the decency to speak lowly and not shout the supposed family secret for everyone in the restaurant to hear.

He clears his throat.

"..You know about the Vongola, Yoshinao-san?"

"Oh, please," she scoffs, and starts to explain between mouthfuls. "We've always known, at least in part. My brother, Iesato, was the one who supposed to inherit the Family Vault, but he's.. he's never been all there. Especially not after Iemitsu left. Mother decided that someone else had to inherit, so she left the key to me instead of my brother. I suppose I made the mistake of letting Iemitsu go through the Vault when he was too young to understand.. After he raided the archives, mother and I went through them to find out what he had taken. We decided the rest of the family had to know about it, too. Not *everyone,* of course, and not not everything— Tsunayoshi was far too young at the time. But we did let most of them know that Iemitsu was involved in something big in Italy."

"..And somehow you decided he was mafia, Tsunayoshi?"

Now it's Tsunayoshi's turn to shrug. "Have you seen the numbers he deposits in the bank account? I mean, even assuming he doesn't spend any more than... I don't know, 10% or 20% of his earnings, it's a whole ton of money. Especially if he's earning it in *lira.* And *especially* if he is actually spending a lot of it and just leaving us with whatever's left of his weekly or monthly stipend or whatever. It's big, he's making a ton of money, he's being secretive. Obviously it's something criminal."

That.. is incredibly logical and Reborn should not be so surprised that Tsunayoshi has managed to work it out that way.

"You have a very active imagination." And he also seems to be very, very okay with spending money that very clearly comes from a somewhat criminal source.

"Really?" Nana seems a little surprised to hear that. "I thought as much, too, when Nao-san told me."

"That Tsunayoshi has been watching too many movies and playing too many video games?"

"No, that 'Mitsu was in the mafia." Reborn is finding it hard to scrounge up the energy to be surprised anymore. *This* is why he doesn't like taking on missions with close to nothing in terms of information. "The Sawadas have a lot of Italian roots... and 'Mitsu brought his boss over once, did you know? You remember Timoteo-san, right, Tsu-kun?"

"Mm.. yeah, I guess."

"I remember him!" Yamamoto crows quietly with a mouthful of salad. "He came by my place with
Tsuna for sushi."

Tsunayoshi stiffens, then nods again. "Yeah. We did."

Unpleasant memories, perhaps? Interesting, if he actually remembers that event. Nana's own stillness says volumes about it.

"I think.. he wants to keep us safe," she admits, setting down her utensils against the side of the bowl. "I think he thinks that, by keeping us away and apart, by not letting us know what he's doing, no one will connect the dots. But that isn't true, is it? They still know where we are."

"..Yes. They do." He won't lie about that. It's why he's here, after all. A contingency plan for the dots being connected. "The only thing keeping your son alive right now is the fact that no one can actually find this island."

"But someone did."

Tsunayoshi's quiet words are followed by a tense silence. Someone did. The agnelli di Dio.

"I have been meaning to ask about that," Reborn says with calmness he's been practicing for decades. "Nagi said she could not tell me directly what happened."

"I'll tell you what happened," Yoshinao cuts in with something bordering a sneer. It looks odd on her aging features. Mocking. "They came in. They caused trouble. We kicked them out. End of story."

Reborn wants to demand more. Needs to ask. Needs to know. He can't stand not knowing. Not for the first nor last time does Reborn feel like a rowboat adrift in the wide open sea, wanting nothing but a line to follow, a lifesaver to keep him company. A whisper to tell him where to go. Where he is.

He hasn't started from nothing in a long, long time. Not since Tonino the Rat threw him the table scraps of his contract jobs out of humor and mocking pity. Not since he pulled the trigger on his father's gun and left the Rat for dead.

(Christ but he hated the man. It was definitely worth spending a week's worth of pay to drop a bouquet of orange and yellow lilies [8] on his corpse for Tonino's debtors to find.)

Something nudges at his elbow. Reborn follows the hand up to Tsunayoshi's face, tentative and nervous. Worrying. Like what he had done for Nagi, the day after Reborn arrived. But how does he know? Does it show on his face? But there's no reason for Tsunayoshi to be worried about him being angry, unless-

Oh. Of course. Flames awakening at the age of 6 days. Of course.

Hyper awareness. Hyper intuition.

...And, yeah, maybe it is showing on his face. The others at the table have gone quiet as well.

"You were making a scary face again, Reborn-san," Yamamoto chirps with far too much cheer.

"I was thinking scary things." Reborn looks briefly over to where Nana and Yoshinao are sitting. Nana has her chopsticks loose in her hand, and Yoshinao is still eating, albeit slowly and watching him out of the corner of her eyes. "..My apologies. I take it that's a dreary topic for everyone?"
"A little bit," Tsunayoshi says, giving him a cheeky little smile. Irritating. But somehow more likable than Iemitsu ever was, which is weird, but also understandable. "How's the food?"

"Good." Reborn appreciates the change in conversation. He sure does love making people uncomfortable, just not.. in this way. Not accidentally. There's no point if it isn't done with purpose. "Surprisingly enough."

"What kind of foods do you have in Italy?"

"Sicily only has Sicilian food, and we like it that way." Sicily has always been that way. Even when other cultures decide to set up shop, everything becomes 'Sicilian', eventually. "The Mainland has all sorts of things, I think, but I don't bother much with the Mainland."

Unsurprisingly, his current companions all give him an look of utter understanding.

"Well, that's one thing we can agree on," Yoshinao outright laughs. He could really come to like it here. It's weird as hell, but oddly homey. "Are you up for dessert after, signore? Or do you Italians prefer not to walk on a full belly?"

"I am Sicilianu, signorina," Reborn snorts, taking a drink of his cup of tea and wishing it were espresso instead, "and I will take that as a challenge."

* * *

"You sound sick, frati."

"Urgh," Reborn groans, letting his forehead fall discreetly onto the phonebox in front of him. Don't remind me."

"What happened? Summer cold?"

"Too much to eat." Timoteo laughs on the other end. Reborn scowls, but only lightly. Not that Timoteo can see it. "Shut up, fratuzzu."

"What sort of phone are you using, Reborn?" Timoteo asks once the laughter dies down. "I don't recognize this number."

"Private phone booth. Tsunayoshi says this is the easiest way to make international calls, apparently. I've managed to connect Leon to it, so this line should be scrambled, though I don't know for how long."

"Just as we suspected. The island seems to be locked down quite securely."

"On the contrary, it's surprisingly pleasant here, fratuzzu. Maybe a little too pleasant, but I can't complain."

"..Are you sure you're alright, Reborn?"

"Yes." He frowns, though. Something niggles at the back of his mind. "Why do you ask?"

"It's.. no, never mind. It's probably nothing. Just an old man and his paranoia." Timoteo hums briefly. "You sound like you have a sore throat, is all. You're not using a voice-changer, are you? That's a tad excessive if you are."
Oh, right. He'd forgotten about that already.

"I'm surprised, and a little hurt. Have you forgotten the sound of my voice from all those years ago?"

Ah, but that silence is golden. He lets it go on for another few moments, listening to the sudden exhale of breath on the other end of the line.

"The answer is here, 'Teo." He pauses, for a moment. "You know, I always thought I'd die a dog's death, ever since I became an Arcobaleno. Ever since I accepted what it meant to be an Arcobaleno."

"You said 10 years," Timoteo says in a hush. "10 more years."

"I said it for you, fratuzzu. Now I'm going to say it for myself." Reborn taps out a rhythm against his thigh, counting the minuscule clicks in the background noise. "I need you to contact Verrocchio and get in touch with Verde."

"..Verde. The same Verde who, in your own words, absolutely despises you from the bottom of his pitch black soul? That Verde?"

"Yeah, that one."

Timoteo laughs, again. This time it's a little less humorous and a little more like the young man Reborn remembers from decades ago. "The same Verde who is almost impossible to reach?"

"Talk to Viper- or I guess it's Mammon now. Mammon knows how to find him. Well, Mammon knows how to find Fon, who usually knows where Skull is. And as useless as Skull is, he knows where to find Verde. I've never quite understood that part."

"Are you trying to call all of your friends over to the island, Reborn?"

"I doubt the authorities here would let me, but it wouldn't hurt to make them all aware that I might have found something vital. Of course, if it's too much trouble for an old man like you, fratuzzu, just have Mammon to call my direct line."

"Duly noted, my friend." Honestly, the only difference is who's going to be the one shelling out money for Mammon's cooperation. "Did you have anything to report, yet? I know it hasn't been long since you arrived."

"Only that there's no point in getting Tsunayoshi to train in the conventional way," Reborn murmurs, looking out the one-way mirrored sides of the phone stall he's currently in. The escort car is waiting for him so he can't stay on for too long. "There's nothing he really needs to be protected from. Nothing gets in or out of the island without authorization. You can't even call the mainland without an access code. No one here finds that odd."

"Do you suppose this is what Iemitsu meant?"

"It could be." An odd crackling sound makes him straighten up. "We don't have much longer. Their security works fast."

"Alright." He hears Timoteo taking a deep breath. "Can you still carry out the assignment?"

"Did you forget who single-handedly charmed the Long Lian triads into killing their own leader before they could move into Potenza?" Reborn says in a drawl. "I'll find a way. When are you
making your next move? I need to know how much time I have."

"What makes you think I have a next move?"

"I've known you almost 50 years, Timoteo. I know you have a next move. And I know it involves Sawada Tsunayoshi."

"Too true."

He is quiet. So is Reborn.

Together they listen to the staccato beat trying to tap into their line. He supposes this may be his only chance to talk to Timoteo without someone eavesdropping. It's unfortunate that he can't say everything that he wants to say in just a few words, in just a few minutes.

Verde would've be able to do something like that, with that technology of this. Compressed databurst, he calls it. Far better than sending a letter, but takes a little more know-how to access, which is unfortunate. Reborn prefers the feel and ease of good ol' fashioned paper in his hands, Flame-resistant or otherwise.

(Tsunayoshi says that 'Kokuyo' operates the processing center for outgoing and incoming post, though, so that's going to be tricky to bypass if he wants to send something handwritten.)

"..The Commissione is getting antsy. The media has been having a field day ever since we ousted Provenzano and the Corleonesi, and they've gotten wind of your so-called disappearance, frati. It's making them wonder. Ever since Enrico died.. and after what happened to Massimo and Federico —"

Reborn shushes him with a hiss, following the sound of a larger crackle of static. They are good at this.

"I will try to head them off as long as I can, but I cannot say how much longer. Perhaps until the end of this year. Do your best, frati. We want to give them a good show, after all."

"Is that what we're doing?" Reborn snorts, slowly putting the pieces together. He isn't the World's Greatest for nothing. "Do the others know about this? Does Xanxus?"

"If they did, they would never have agreed. Xanxus doesn't know, but he is getting impatient regardless, now that you've gone and left him in the dust. Varia has been getting a little more bloody lately, as well. If I didn't know any better I would think he was throwing another tantrum."

"Che biddicchi [9]." He doesn't mean it mockingly, though. Goddamn Xanxus. "Go spend some time with him before I come back and kick his ass for being a brat. He's your kid, don't forget."

Timoteo laughs, again. Whether it's at Reborn's less than sarcastic fondness, his threat, or the fact that he's the one acting like the dad, Reborn doesn't know. He doesn't want to know.

"End of the year, frati. No later. Understood?"

Under normal circumstances, 4 months would hardly be enough time to get a civilian ready for what Timoteo is suggesting. Under normal circumstances, Reborn would never consider it. Not because it's impossible (nothing is impossible for him), but because it pushes a person too much, too far. No student of his will go through that without proper safety measures, whether for a farce or otherwise.
Luckily, Tsunayoshi is not under normal circumstances, and Kakishima seems to be the perfect safety measure.

"Sè, sè. End of the year." The crackling gets louder and Leon lets out a pitched buzzing whine, like a cicada. Someone is approaching his phone booth rather quickly. "Time's up, fratuZZu. I don't think the authorities appreciate my circumventing their phone tapping."

"Such a pity. Best of luck to you, Reborn."

"Long Lian, remember?" Reborn chuckles to himself. That had certainly been an assignment he enjoyed. "Chaos."

Timoteo's softly returned ciao clicks against the switchhook. Leon changes back into his chameleon form and Reborn reconnects the original receiver, hanging it up again. He opens the door and steps out before the official outside gets close enough to knock.

"Did I take too long? I was just catching up back home," he says by way of an excuse, reverting to Japanese. It probably won't work, but no one's ever been faulted for trying. Yet.

"You were within the allotted time limit," says the man giving him a look from head to toe. 
"..However, I must inform you that tampering with the phone lines, especially those of the private booths, is prohibited by island law. You are given a single warning. Do not do it again."

He's torn between a sarcastic 'if you say so' and a dismissive denial of any wrongdoing. On the one hand, the first is a response very typical of him. On the other, they have no proof. Unless the booths themselves are bugged and supervised through cameras.

"I didn't want to inflict our... risqué conversation on anyone. He and I haven't seen each other in so long..."

The man coughs and clears his throat, turning a delicate shade of pink. "Th-the phone booths shouldn't be used for anything like that, either!"

"My apologies, then." Reborn cackles inwardly, but remains outwardly a veneer of remorse. "Is there any way I could get a private phone line, then?"

"Not.. not that I am- uh, aware of."

"Then I'll be back." He gives the man a pat on the shoulder and heads back to the escort car.

It doesn't take long to remember that he really doesn't want to walk anymore. Ugh.

Inside, Tsunayoshi and Yamamoto are half-asleep, leaning against each other and dozing in the back seat. Reborn slides in next to them quietly, making sure not to jostle them awake.

Yoshinao had headed off back home to the Southern part of the island when they parted ways after lunch. She'd taken with her the pieces he'd bought that either weren't quite long enough or were a bit too long, and after taking his measurements, vowed to have them wear-ready by the time Tsunayoshi had to go back to class. There's still a sizable pile left.

"How did it go?" Nana asks him quietly from the front.

"Well enough." The escort gets in and starts up the car, pulling out of the temporary parking space for those looking to use the phone booths. Most of them seem to be empty. Reborn raises a hand to scratch Leon's head. "He wants me to stay on assignment, if I can."
Nana frowns, only slightly. "I appreciate the gesture, Reborn-san, and I'm sure Tsu-kun does, too, but.. we really have no need for extra protection. The island is unreachable and no one here would severely hurt Tsu-kun in anyway. I'm sorry, but it just isn't necessary."

"If he doesn't need physical protection, then perhaps I could offer my services in other areas."

"I thought you were a hitman?"

"I've been contracted as a home tutor on separate occasions for two separate individuals, from ages 13 through 20 for the both of them." He watches Nana's expression go from unsure to interested. "I heard Tsunayoshi was having some trouble in school, academically."

"...But you're a..?"

"I am. I also have a Master's degree in mathematics, and am certified and licensed to teach various subjects in Italy."

Her eyebrows go up unsubtly. "Well, that is pretty impressive."

"I wouldn't be much of a man if all I could do was kill another man, would I?"

Nana blinks. Then smiles, softly. Nostalgic, as though remembering a distant memory. Probably something about Iemitsu.

"..Of course not. I'd love to take you up on that offer, Reborn-san, but- you are aware that the school curriculum here also includes fiamma-related material? You'll probably have to be re-certified, too."

Oh. Of course it does. Of course he does.

"That won't be a problem," he says instead, smoothly. "Who do I speak with?"

"Hmm.." She taps her chin, much in the same way that Tsunayoshi does. "Probably the Board of Education in Gendo-cho. We can have Nagi arrange for an appointment to be scheduled for you, once she's back." Her head tips in a considering manner. "I admit, I wouldn't normally believe something like that, Reborn-san, but... Maybe it's because you've worked with 'Mitsu?"

"Perhaps," he shrugs. "But I am the World's Greatest Hitman. My greatness is not in my strength nor skill, though I have those as well. Mine is in my accomplishments. I am, of course, most well versed in the line of taking lives, and I can't say I have any remorse for it. But I've found that preserving life can also be quite enjoyable. None of us will live forever, after all. I've managed to raise my two previous students into model citizens, despite everything working against them."

'Model' being a subjecting term, of course. Xanxus ended up with a mouth filthier than the gutters of Palermo (no thanks, in part, to Leviathan and Squalo), and Dino now controls practically half of all the bingo houses and more or less all the horse racing pools in the Catania Province, of which Vongola has a large share of. But they both turned out alright.

By Cosa Nostra standards, anyway.

Tsunayoshi's mother is quiet, though, and Reborn turns his eyes from the window to the odd contemplation she wears. She's looking at her son.

"...I don't mean to replace Iemitsu, of course," he adds. "My previous students had.. lost at least one parent, by the time I was assigned to be their tutor. My incidental 'raising' of them was a bit literal,
in their case. But for Tsunayoshi, I can remain strictly academic if that's what you prefer, Sawada-san. I am, in the end, a complete stranger, on assignment from your husband and another complete stranger to make sure no harm comes to your son."

"No, no, it's..." Nana trails off, her eyes drifting shut. Her brow furrows, but her tone is no more bitter than than espresso. Or chocolate. "...It's fine. Someone has to. Replace 'Mitsu', I mean. Since he can't be here himself."

Or he won't be here himself.

Then she smiles, giggling, and gives him a mischievous look. Like she wants him to keep a secret. "Maybe if 'Mitsu hears Tsu-kun calling someone else papa, he might get a little jealous and come straight home to make sure it doesn't happen again. That would be terribly dashing of him, don't you think?"

Reborn weighs the thought of shuddering at being called anyone's papa against the thought of Iemitsu flipping his shit when he finds out that someone has stolen his most precious and adorable son away. One is terribly unwanted and makes him sweat nervously; the other elicits a vicious delight in him that he finds hard to resist.

Decisions, decisions. He's so torn between them.

The look on his face is probably what makes Nana burst out into laughter. He's confused for a moment, which only makes her laugh again, and harder. Then he laughs too. Quietly, and stifled, because neither of them want to wake up the kids.

He can't remember the last time he laughed. Like this. Or at all.

* * *

(13 years ago, probably.)

[1] like so
[2] kakishima history joke that will probably be explained later.
[3] polizziottu: (sicilian) policeman
[4] shitsure: (japanese) from shitsurei, usually heard as 'shitsurei shimasu'. means 'excuse me', or 'impolite'. in this case, it's something like 'excuse you' or 'rude!!'
[5] bishamonten: god of war in japanese mythology, and a punisher of evildoers. vaisravana is i believe the sanskrit name. in contrast, yatagarasu (as in the previous piece in this series) is traditionally a three-legged crow whose appearance is 'construed as evidence of the will of Heaven or divine intervention in human affairs'. which probably says a lot about how they see kyouya hahaha.
[6] estètica, estetica: (sicilian, italian) ~*~aesthetics~*~
[7] sanguinaccio: an italian chocolate pudding made with milk, cream, spices, aaaaaand. fresh pig's blood. is/ was traditionally served to celebrate the slaughter season, in that no part of the pig goes to waste.
[8] orange lilies: in floriography, represents pure hatred. yellow lilies offer some gratitude and positive meanings, but mix them together and you have a very sarcastic and salty bouquet.
[9] che biddicchi: (sicilian) 'that's cute', roughly.
"Reborn, we're going to take a nap!"

"Alright," he calls back idly from the kitchen table.

Reborn has several years worth of textbooks and study materials strewn out in front of him and has already gone through a sizable amount of them. The entire Kakishima School Curriculum, from 5th year Primary all the way to 12th year High School. Or so the Curriculum says, even though the contents are years ahead of what kids these age should be studying-

Wait-
"Wait, what? All of you?"

"Yeah?"

Confused, and also maybe a little bit alarmed, Reborn sticks his head into the living room. Yamamoto, Tsunayoshi, and Nagi have pushed the couches and tables up near the doorway to create a barrier and have 2 (3? He hopes it's 3) futons laid out.

He checks the clock in the hall. It's only-

"It's 2 in the evening. You're all taking a nap? Together?"

"For Collective Resting Hour. Remember?"

"..Right." Not really, no. Tsunayoshi tried to explain it, but Reborn figures he won't make much sense of it until he gets the textbook definition. Which, considering that particular book's placement in his pile of stuff, should be soon. He scratches the side of his neck. "..You're going to nap here?"

"Well.. normally I use my room and share with Takeshi, but there's not enough space for Nagi. So.. yeah." Tsunayoshi shrugs. "Sorry if it feels a little weird?"

"No worries," Reborn lies. He's kind of glad Nagi is almost 18 and also looks like she could wrestle the both of them down easy. What does she even do in her free time? "I'll be in the kitchen. Studying. If you.. need anything."

Maman put him on house duty for the day while she was at work. Reborn is the best at house duty. He looked after two boys from prepubescence all the way into near-adulthood. Well, okay, he accompanied them, he didn't actually raise them, but, details.

(Only near-adulthood, because they'll never be adults in his eyes. Even if they're no longer baby lion and baby mustang.)

Granted, none of them ever took their siestas as often as these three seem to take naps. Resting Hours.

"I still can't believe you're actually going through with.. all of that..."

"With what? Studying?"

"Yeah." Tsunayoshi looks.. conflicted. "There's so much. Didn't you already have a teaching license?"

"For teaching in Italy." Reborn lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "And a degree in standard mathematics that doesn't apply here."

"Hmm." Ah, there's that strange look again. The one that looks frustrated and constipated all at once. Tsunayoshi's probably not even aware of the face he's making. "How long did that take?"

Something about it makes Reborn.. squint. Scrutinize. Like he really wants to figure this boy out sooner rather than later. He's like one giant Rubix cube with far too many color combinations that he's willing to be shuffled into, but none of them that seem to be a real answer.

"I was 42 when they handed me the degree."

Yamamoto thumps something on the floor and yelps. Tsunayoshi's eyebrows disappear into the
fringe of his hair, and Nagi is slowly rising up from behind the couch like a Loch Ness Monster.

"It took you 20 years to get a degree?" Tsunayoshi asks. "Or did you go back to school, um.. late?"

Reborn is not a bashful person. On the contrary, he has absolutely no shame. *Morals*, yes, and respect, and common sense. But no shame. There's no point.

He comes from the gutters; worked in the gutters, fed from the gutters, lived and slept and killed in them. And now he's an upstanding guest in a house on an island off the coast of Japan that no one can seem to find because someone thought it would be a great idea to *shroud everything within a 60 kilometer radius in Mist flames* [1].

And yet. Something about Sawada Tsunayoshi just screams at him. He's not even really sure what to make of it, what these warning bells ringing in his head are trying to say. Reborn is pretty sure it's not related to accidentally terrifying the boy every time he creaks a door open behind his back.

He reaches up- and catches only empty air. Scratches through his hair for a moment, looking around. As though catching on, Tsunayoshi and the others start glancing about too. Yamamoto even lifts up a couch cushion.

Then he turns around and sees his hat on the kitchen table, of course, where he had left it, with Leon sleeping smugly on top of it. Or supposedly sleeping, anyway, because Reborn makes a rude gesture at him that he entirely does not mean (and also makes sure the kids don't see) and Leon sticks his tongue out in response.

With a *harrumph*, Reborn turns back to the trio and leans against the doorway, tossing the end of a bright yellow shawl over his shoulder.

"I enrolled in that school just before I turned 39." And he dares anyone to have a problem with that. These three obviously don't.

"You didn't go to college until you were 39?" Why does Tsunayoshi sound so *awed* by that? That's not a normal reaction. Refreshing, but not normal. "Why not? And why so late?"

"I never went to school in general until I was 39. No point in it." He waves a hand dismissively. "Then I was bored and wanted a change of pace, so I went."

"You were *bored*!"

Reborn jerks a thumb towards the 8 years worth of textbooks on the dining room table behind him, spanning every subject from mathematics to history, to university level science and vocational psychology. *Fiamma* editions, of course. It's loads of fun.

"How the hell did you get a degree from nothing in 3 years?" Nagi blurts out. Reborn is not even bothered to correct her language. He's heard worse things from Xanxus.

(Hell, he's heard worse things from *Tsunayoshi*, unassuming fluff-muffin that he is.)

"Perseverance, coffee, and some well-placed Sun flames."

"Oh, that's gotta be cheating," Tsunayoshi groans. "No wonder *maman* is so smart."

Nagi muses, "No wonder Shouichi is so smart."

"Um." Yamamoto finally raises his hand, the other one rubbing the back of his head.
"Yes, Yamamoto?"

"...You're 42 years old?"

"I'm 64," Reborn says, very flatly. "I see where your priorities lie, Yamamoto Takeshi."

"He's so old," the boy whispers, dragging his hands down his face. "He's, like, ancient."

"Hey." Tsunayoshi ribs him in the side. "Nao-san is about the same age."

Yamamoto cups his hands around his mouth at Reborn. "Aannncieenntt."

"That's right," Reborn drawls back, "I'm old as hell. You three better get your beauty sleep or you'll end up just like me, age-lines and all."

"You don't seem so bad, though," Nagi points out. "Even with the age-lines."

Reborn wants to snap at her.

"Yeah," Tsunayoshi chirps, fluffing up a pillow. "If I had to pick what I'd be like when I'm 60, you're not so bad. I mean, at least you don't leave beer cans lying around like papa does whenever he visits."

He wants to snap at Tsunayoshi too. Because he's isn't in any way 'not so bad'. Reborn may have no shame but he also consequently has no delusions about his life. What he is, what he does. Who he is. It's awful to hear that he's only been here 2 weeks and is somehow better than the boy's own father.

...Then again.

He looks down at the sunny yellow shawl and baggy plaid pants that Tsunayoshi had picked out for him, and he figures they have every reason not to think he's anything but 'not so bad'. Reborn has done nothing but look after them (on Nana's behalf), has been completely civil and charming. He hasn't even (successfully) pulled a gun on any of them yet.

And yet, somehow, it feels very disconcerting.

"Keep saying things like that and I'll personally submit a request to your Committee Chairman for an extra week of remedial lessons. Starting, oh, look at that, the Monday after next."

Yamamoto squawks. "No!"

"You're awful," Tsunayoshi hisses, awe replaced with mock fury. "Horrible! Evil! Abominable Stepmother!"

"Your words warm the cold dead cockles of my heart, Tsunayoshi." Reborn puts a hand over his chest, as though touched. That's much better. "Now take your nap and give me some peace and quiet."

"Crotchety old man!"

Cute kids.

They're asleep within minutes of grumbling, sprawled out over each other when Reborn peeks in on them again. Where he would normally feel a gentle, continuous pulse of flames from Nagi and especially from Yamamoto, now there exists only a vacuum. Reborn is careful to tamp down on his
own flames before they're pulled out of him. (Well, as much as he's able to, anyway.)

When the hell is Verde going to show up and explain all of this?

---

**Wiretap the conversation**, they said.

"...you **could** just have Mammon call my direct line."

Shichiro takes 2 seconds too long to translate the words from Sicilian into Italian and then back into Japanese. He makes another note of it on his datapad.

*It'll be easy*, they said.

*They* must have forgotten that the Sawada's newest houseguest was not, in fact, a **normal** Italian man. He was from Sicily. Where they speak gibberish. Just because Shichiro managed the **AGNUSDEI** profiling easy doesn't mean he understands gibberish!

..He's getting the hang of it though, and taking liberal, copious notes on the transcriptions. Every now and then he has to hit **rewind** and go through something again to make corrections, like when the software spits out **Marmion** instead of **Mammon**.


"*End of the year, frati. No later. Understood?*"

He checks that off, too.

Shichiro has gone though this multiple times by now, trying to piece together the bits and pieces they had managed to collect. He still can't believe this man was able to actually **bypass** the security protocols with an ingenious thing like a fucking chameleon capable of changing shape into anything. How does that even work? Is it an experiment?

...How much would the Research Facility be willing to pay for something like that?

Next to him, Shichiro's colleague has her head thrown back over the seat of her chair and is spinning around in lazy circles with her headset on, tapping through public buzzwords on the datapad in her lap. Easy work, but so damn boring. Shichiro's not exactly glad to be moved up to private monitoring though.

Still. At least now he can admit he knows how to say 'murder', 'kill', and 'invade' in about 30 different languages as well as any the possible code combinations for any of the three. Better than working for Kokuyo, anyway.

The recording ends again and he checks over his notes, double-checks, compares to the three others who had made notes of their own before the recording got to him, and finally marks it as **VERIFIED**. A bright green **COMPLETE** flashes on the screen, like an overenthusiastic signal of positive reinforcement.

Shichiro taps on his headset to connect to the Chief's office, and is put on a brief hold. Seconds
later, he's connected.

"Cho's office."

"Chief, this is Mori Shichiro. The Arcobaleno Reborn's international call has finished going through transcription verification. I have the list of buzzwords and names ready and compiled."

"Good work. Send it over and take a quick break. Come by the office after for your next assignment."

"Will do. Thanks, Chief."

He sends file through the Committee's internal network and stretches out with a yawn, suddenly and sorely tempted to spend his break joining his colleague in her lazy chair spinning. Unfortunately, he also needs to eat, so he leaves her to her mind-numbing madness to head for the cafeteria.

Seriously, though. Public Buzzword Monitoring is the first thing anyone does once they reach the Disciplinary Committee's Senior Division, and for good reason. It gets you used to listening in on conversations, teaches you what to look out for, how the software works, common mistakes (of which there are a lot, and they know they're mistakes because, aside from the Vietnamese Colony in the Southeastern part of the island, not a lot of people on the island really mean any of the Buzzwords they say), and in general how to work up to monitoring Off-Island and International correspondence. Where it is significantly less boring, but also more tedious.

Shichiro's been here a while, but aside from the AGNUSDEI case, he hasn't had to deal with anything actually international in the... 8+ years he's worked here. He knows a few that are practically veterans, 10 years and still going. Some of them still work in the same building as Shichiro, monitoring Namimori and its residents. Others have moved on, shipped out to either Gendo-cho or Kokuyuo for contracted monitoring.

He kind of hopes his turn comes soon. For various reasons.

---

"What do you think, Kaede-ssi?"

"Could you please stop calling me that," Kaede sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You sound like Vivien. It's grating."

Claude blinks. ".Well it's hardly my fault that you seem to hate everything about-" He checks his arm. ".-him."

"Him again?" She snorts. "At least he's being consistent lately. I still don't see why he can't just pick one and stick with it."

Claude frowns, leaning over to pause the recording. "Kaede-"

"I know, I know, I." Kaede drops her head into her hands again. It's been a long day, and ending it with this is not really something he's enjoying either. That's no excuse though. "I'm viciously inclined to murder something every time I hear about her. Him. Sorry. I'm tired."
"It's hilarious that neither of you even remember why you hate each other so much," he says with a mild chuckle.

"I'm so glad to know the feeling is mutual," Kaede says dryly. ". . . You were saying?"

He inclines his head towards the laptop, still on pause. "I am Vivien's cousin. We're not that different from each other."

She reaches out and taps play. "And yet I can tolerate you far more than I can tolerate Vivien."

"I know. Weird, isn't it? So."

The recording crackles back to life, static and feedback intermingling with snippets of Italian, Sicilian, accompanied by subtitles on the screen. Kaede skims through the transcript again. Claude has already gone over it twice before even bringing it up to her. This is probably Kaede's. . . third time listening to it. They're nothing if not thorough.

". . . I don't think it's worth bringing the Mayor in yet. I'll send her a missive, of course. If she wants it escalated then we will, but for now, we'll just have to do what we can. What's so funny?"

He clears his throat, having not even been aware that he was starting to laugh. The sound comes out warped and choked, like pained giggle.

"Just- stuff. Never mind." Kaede gives him a look. He can almost imagine what it would look like without the veneer of Mist hiding the burns and scars on her face. ". . . Just that we're more or less the de facto rulers and collectively control pretty much the entire island, and yet we still need permission from the Mayor. Always makes me laugh. Just a bit."

She snorts. "Of course we do. No one disobeys Keiko. That's why she's the Mayor. That's why the previous Mayor is dead in the water somewhere."

Claude feels his eyebrows going way up. What's this? ". . . How do you know that?"

"Oh, please. We put him in there ourselves. And don't say that like the Hibari Family didn't have a hand in it."

"I, um, didn't. Have a hand in it. I don't even remember the previous Mayor."

"Exactly," Kaede hums back at him. "Anyway-"

"No, Kaede, I'm serious." He sets aside his papers and leans forward, elbows on knees, entirely serious. "I've been on the island close to 30 years now and I've been Head of the Family for, what, 18? 19? Keiko was already Mayor by the time I got here, and you know how she got posted."

"I told you, she's the reason why the previous Mayor is no longer Mayor."

"Okay. Okay, but." He holds up a hand to stop her and tries to run the calculations in his head. Vivien hasn't ever mentioned the previous mayor either. It's been almost 30 years. It's. . . like the old Mayor never existed. Claude doesn't think he's ever even seen a portrait of one in the Administrative Building in the few dozen times he's been in there. ". . . this means Keiko has been Mayor for at least 30 years now."

"Yes?"

"So." He makes a very vague, very general gesture in her direction. " . . . How old is she exactly?
How old are you? I mean—"

Kaede has a rubber band she's been playing with in her hands and it strikes him very suddenly square in the forehead. His mouth snaps shut.

"Don't ask stupid questions," she says with a sound of disgust. "Honestly, I can't believe I thought you were being serious for a moment there."

"I was! Wait, so that means you're older than Vivien. Is what why you hate him? Because he's young and strapping and virile—"

Kaede snaps another rubberband right off his nose. Damn, she's got good aim.

"You're lucky I like you, Claude," she growls out, sitting back in her chair again. "Don't make me gut you and shove your own entrails in your mouth to shut you up— stop looking so delighted by that, it's revolting."

"I am a Cloud," Claude says smoothly, as though that explains everything, "and a Hibari. And I am Vivien's cousin."

Kaede makes another sound, this one far more frustrated and exasperated than repulsed. He has to actively resist the urge to laugh at it.

(Oh. Maybe this is why she hates Vivien so much?)

"Anyway..?"

"Anyway," she says, and smacks him on the head with a manila folder this time, "I'm shoving all of this onto you and washing my hands clean of it. He's sticking to your side of the island, after all."

This time he does laugh. It's a quiet chuckle, and the takes the folder from her. "Did you hear he's applying for a teaching license?"

"I did. If that's not a thinly veiled attempt at digging up the island's history, I don't know what it is. Even Nezu was more subtle than that."

"Kyouya says that Tsunayoshi says that the man wants to.. tutor him. Since no one here has any need or want of imported protection services. It's brilliant, really."

"It's also your problem." Kaede dusts off her hands and pushes out of her chair, stretching with a wince. Scarred tissue must not be too comfortable. "As long as the rest of Vongola stay where they are, in Italy and out of Japan, I'll consider it unrelated to me. Unless you want to try putting him under Mist suggestion to make him less of a threat."

Claude.. titters. Nervously.

"Of course, you'll have to find someone else to volunteer for that job, because I'm sure as hell not signing up for that again."

"I know, I saw the medical reports." He laughs again, both incredulous and terrified, honestly. "I haven't seen numbers that high since.. well, since Tsunayoshi. And his father. Reborn's Mist resistance is on par with any of the Sawada blood."

"And we both know what happened the last time we tried to Mist one of the Sawadas."

Oh, he remembers. He wasn't even the one carrying out the procedure but he could tell it was
exhausting just by being there as an observer. Damn Iemitsu.

"I take it the Artificial Resonance Field isn't working?"

"No, it's not. He's letting out too many flames... His resting fiamma release is too high for the Field to have any effect. Not to mention, according to the fMRI we had taken while he was comatose, he's apparently over-activating the part of his brain that fights off illusions, so it's doubly difficult to get him under suggestion. Jing Yu was the same, you recall?"

"Sort of. That's.. Fon, right?"

"Oh. Right, you weren't there the first time he came to us." Kaede leans back against the desk, scratching at her chin. Claude watches the light diffuse and filter through the veil of mist she keeps around her, like an almost invisible shroud. A defense mechanism. "Yes, Fon. From what he says, most of the Arcobaleno are the same. Due to the Pacifiers, their latent fiamma output is far higher. For them, it's so high that their bodies are unable to absorb any of the Mist Flames."

"Unless we do it through direct contact. But," he sighs as well, sitting up straight again, "that involves getting our hands on him and making sure he doesn't actively fight back."

"And someone who has a near infinite supply of Mist flames, likely."

His fingers drum a rhythm against his knee. ".We could have Tsunayoshi handle it."

"You want to let Daemon's kid deal with this?"

"Why not?" Claude tips his head at her incredulity. "It isn't going against what he's been taught. Tsunayoshi will be the one closest to Reborn for a while, if he manages to pass the teacher certification exam. Yamamoto Takeshi is easily available and capable of providing near-fatal doses of Rain flames, if need be. Not to mention, Nagi is currently with them. I haven't seen anyone else with close to her level of affinity for Mist flames since you, Kaede. If she accepts, that is."

"Nagi will, if we ask," Kaede says almost immediately. Reflexively, probably. She has trained the girl well, after all. "How do you know the other two will do it?"

"They're in the Committee." Obviously. "They are citizens of Namimori, and of the island. It is their duty and obligation and they understand that."

"They're not your son, Claude."

Claude feels his leg twitch. He says back, softly, "And Nagi is not your daughter."

There is no small amount of apology on his face, and there is no small amount of violent distaste and conflict on hers. Claude catches a brief, brief glimpse of the real fire-ravaged flesh of her cheek. Just for a moment. It's something that has to be said, because they are parents. They are, or they were. Maybe they want to be. Maybe they wanted to be.

These are children. Their children.

Kaede seems to relent at the same time Claude does. Their shoulders drop as one, gusting out a sigh that hangs like a brick in the air.

"..I'll ask her. And Tsunayoshi. Not Takeshi. He has no training."

"He's in the Committee. He's had training enough."
She gives him a look. As though playing at law enforcement behind the veil of a vigilante school gang isn't proper training. Well, it isn't, but the point is that he's had some training. From what Kyouya says, anyway.

"If they agree and they need it, we can help them with the particulars."

He nods. "If they refuse, we drop the matter and consider other options."

"Agreed- wait, what other options?"


Kaede makes a face, but doesn't otherwise protest. "Why Vivien? And why sandbags?"

Claude clears a section of the desk for this part. He uses various pens and pencils to create a half-ring, and pen caps to indicate positions.

"Vivien is going to be the one to beat this guy into submission, obviously. Here, down at the bottom of a cliff. The sandbags go up on top. That's where we stand, with coffee. It's going to rain so we need sandbags to keep our feet dry, and also to make us look taller than him, because he's way too tall. We'll probably also need hats. Or umbrellas. Both tend to look mysterious in the rain. It's textbook and cinematic."

She observes his diagram with a straight face and the utmost sincerity.

"...Is this from a movie you watched with Kyouya?"

"It.. maybe? Yes. It is. Why?"

"Mmmmm." Kaede nods indulgently and straightens up, giving his shoulder a quick pat. "Keep it as a backup plan, baby Cloud."

"I.. fine. Okay. Stop calling me that."

"Baby Cloud." She shoves at his shoulder, a smile flitting across her lips. Her hand comes down to turn the laptop a bit, probably to check the time. "I think Tsunayoshi's having his Resting Hour right now, I'm going to see if I can catch him before he's done. Are you heading out?"

"After I get everything organized."

"Don't forget to pay your respects."

"Yes, mother."

Jeong-Seo Kaede disappears through the heavy cedar door into the next room, sharp laughter trailing behind her.

Claude shuts down the laptop and stuffs it into his briefcase with the rest of the papers. He sets the pens and pencils back in the holder, dusts everything off until the desk is as clean as it was when they arrived. Neat and spotless. Anything less than that would be blasphemous.

He makes for the exit. The door clicks shut behind him, and for several moments, he is embraced by only darkness.

"I live to fight," he says to the shadows. The child he calls his son has said that he thinks the same
thing. "I fight so that others do not have to. I fight to maintain this peace of ours."

*I fight because I want to fight.*

"I resolve always to do so. With my Dying Breath, I will."

Violet erupts on his brow and in his eyes, wavering and bright. Sconces along the wall do the same, a double line of eerie, ominous purple flames lighting his path. He follows them, and they gutter themselves in his wake.

The central underground dome has walls covered in markings, made by the unaware trying to find their way out. Blood stains from infighting, tally marks in various styles numbering in the hundreds, knife tips broken and embedded in the stone. Their bones and remains have been long since removed.

Claude approaches the pedestal in the middle of the room and touches his fingers to his lips, presses them against the plaque that sits upon it, embossed with the word NEGGHIA [2]. He sends his flames into the stone and it surges down and out, lighting up the entire interior of the room. He never gets tired of watching the flames dance and swirl, listening to the hidden mechanisms turn and click. Then the darkness falls again and the light of his Cloud is all that shines from a far corridor, the only exit among a sea of false ways and dead ends.

The hall leads to a final set of stone steps. Ascending them is, as always, something akin to climbing a tower where awaits a prince or princess at the top, or climbing out of a prison. As though one were reaching out for something like hope.

Something like salvation.

Claude always expends too much flames at once in the Guardian's hall, though, second only to how much he uses in the Enforcer's; so his light flickers out just as he's pushing at the false backing of a hidden doorway. It swings open and he steps out, shuts it again carefully, because it is a rather priceless artifact. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by an unknown painter in Italy. Likely the original. [3]

Dramatic, as always. And fitting. They say the Founder picked it himself.

"Ara- Hibari Leader!"

Claude stiffens and turns, momentarily surprised- only for it to seep out as soon as he sees who it is at the other side of the hall.

"Nana-san." Sawada Nana smiles and greets him with a bow. Bright yellow dances on her brow, trailing in the air like neon lights in slow motion. Once it sputters out, her eyes return to their usual brown color. He dips his head in return. "Just finished your shift at the Research Facility?"

"I did, yes." She turns to shut the passage behind her, hidden by the false wooden backing of a woven Buddhist tapestry. "They're finally making a breakthrough with the particle accelerator, I heard it should end up on your desk within a few weeks. Oonami-san has been saying *winter will be here soon* for a while now, but if this works.. we just might end up in summer again."

"That's good to hear, though. We may need Tsunayoshi's help, and that of Sawada Yoshinao-san, if we want to meet the end of year deadline."

"I'll let them know to expect a summons."
"Thank you." Why Iemitsu would ever want to be apart from his wife will never cease to boggle anyone's mind. Unfortunately, Claude is not just anyone. He knows why. It's still a shame. "Will you be paying your respects before you go, Nana-san?"

"Oh, yes! Tsu-kun would never let me live if down if I didn't."

_Sweet child._

They walk down the hall together, passing by several other paintings and tapestries; some of them reproductions, others stolen original works, each one hiding its own secret, though none so great and potentially devastating in the wrong hands as the island's Research Facility.

It's a short trip to the main prayer hall, small and empty and largely unguarded. This building is their most precious secret, but it is also first and foremost, and always has been, a place of worship.

He and Sawada Nana both set down their items, toeing off their shoes before they approach the dais. Claude reaches the top first and kneels before a standing metal bowl that reaches his chest. He doesn't have to see her to know that Nana is in the same position next to him.

Raising the padded mallet, he strikes the rim of the bowl once, and the mere sound of it ringing suffuses the air with waves of flames. [4]

He lifts his head, and gazes upon the faces of Sawada Ieyasu and Asari Ugetsu.

_Our Watchers who came before us,_
_Hallowed be thy names._
_In Sacred Fire, thy kingdom come,_
_And thy Will be done._
_May we be a Candle in the darkness,_
_Rest for the weary, and Healing for the sick._

He strikes again. It rings.

_Forgive us not for our sins,_
_As we will not forgive others._
_For thine is the kingdom,_
_The power, and the glory,_
_And for thee shall we safeguard it,_
_To the last of us._

A third strike.

_And so I vow, with my Dying Breath_

And as one they bend forward, palms to the floor, until their foreheads touch the backs of their hands.

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"Sawada Tsunayo-"

Tsuna is screaming before his name is even fully uttered.
He whips around and sees a stoic-faced Kokuyo Leader emerging from the Mist. He himself is still mostly Mist, only a faint outline of his body visible in the dark. It's not his specialty, but he likes this Field more than he does the Sky, or any other one.

"..Uhm. Kokuyo Leader! H-hello?"

"Hello." She's smiling, just a little bit, like it's funny.

It's not. It's terrifying! No one looks for Tsuna during Resting Hour. Aside from Takeshi, anyway, and sometimes Hibari, whenever he deigns to actually nap during designated Resting times instead of whenever he wants. Mostly Hibari does it to bully Tsuna awake and back to class.

"U-uh, I suppose you a-aren't just.. visi-visiting, s-so. Can I help with any-anything?"

"You could." Her voice echoes, as most voices do in the Fields. There's no shadow behind her this time, not like there was when she told him their newest house guest had arrived and was receiving medical attention. The Guardian isn't here with her. "As you know, your house guest recently used a private phonebooth to place an international call."

"Yeah, I think. I- I mean, maman told me he made one."

"He spoke with a man named 'Teo'."

Oh, Tsuna doesn't say, but he makes the word with his lips anyway. He knows that name, he thinks. Oh.

"I don't know what he has been telling you about his reason for being here, Tsunayoshi, but he is still hiding something. Hibari Leader and I both feel it necessary to let you know that he and this 'Teo' are putting some plan into motion. A plan that involves you."

"M-me? B-but.. why? I'm just-" He gestures to himself, outline and all. ".I don't have anything to be involved with. Ex-except the whole Ieyasu thing?"

"Precisely 'the whole Ieyasu thing', we think."

"..W-well, it's, um." Tsuna shrugs. "Isn't that what the Guardian has been training me for? Or trying to train."

"It is. What you do with this information is between you and the Guardian, of course. But," and here she reminds Tsuna of him, of the ghost who watches this island, who guards its borders and its heart, who returns, always, to the altar where his Sky's ashes lay and where his own body is interred, "we are only assuming. And assuming is always a dangerous thing to do. So we would like to task you, Tsunayoshi, with making sure it is not so much an assumption as it is a fact."

"Meaning.." He gesticulates in the air, sending out ripples of Mist. ".You want me to find out what he's really up to?"

"To put it simply, yes."

"Are you learning how to be cryptic from the Guardian or have you always been like this?" Tsuna frowns. "Are all Mists like this? Because it's really frustrating."

Kokuyo Leader laughs. He'll never understand adults.

"Yamamoto Takeshi and Hokuto Nagi are also cleared for assignment, if you require their
assistance. The three of you seem to be closest to him on a daily basis and that should make it easier."

"Isn't this an adult's job?"

"It is." That's all she has to say on it. Tsuna sighs. "Do you know if Yamamoto Takeshi is here?"

"U-mm. hold on a moment."

Tsuna turns and dives into a pile of Mist, following a Rain signature that is undoubtedly Takeshi's, pulls and tugs on it like a fishing lure. With it comes the cheer of a crowd, horns blaring, wind whistling. The crack of a bat striking hide. Oiled leather, peanuts and cracker jacks. Namimori Junior High's anthem. Hibari, leading the morning pledge.

Metal sliding against metal. The tolling of the school bell, like an early morning death knell. A gunshot.

And so I vow, with my Dying Breath.

"Tsuna!" Takeshi materializes onto the Mist Field, a little more clear and solid than Tsuna is, and barrels full force into him.

"Oof," Tsuna says, crushed against Takeshi's chest. "Takeshi, ow-"

Takeshi laughs. Tsuna will never understand him either, but that's fine.

"What's up, Tsuna? You don't usually come to the Rain Field to find me. You should visit more often!"

"I like it here, it's quieter."

"It's creepier." But Takeshi snickers and lets go of him. "So?"

"Apparently Reborn and his boss are, um.. planning something. Involving me. Hibari Leader and Kokuyo Leader think we're the best bet at finding out what. Oh, any Nagi, if she wants to."

"Hmmmm." Takeshi makes a face of exaggerated contemplation. "He's supposed to be the World's Greatest Hitman, right? Are we going to fight him?"

"We're not going to fight him," Tsuna says flatly. "Just get him to talk? Somehow?"

"Somehow. He seems to like kids!" Then something glints in Takeshi's one eye, the other one an obscured and empty void in his head. "I do want to fight him too, though."

Tsuna bares his teeth, though it lacks any ferocity. "No fighting."

Takeshi stills and pulls back to himself. He's wearing the kind of smile that says 'yes, okay' but has no intention of actually going through with it.

Honestly? Tsuna is a little impressed by Reborn. Not because he managed to finish college in 3 years without having ever gone to school before, but because... the fact that he'd never gone to school to begin with. Because he never needed to. Because he didn't want to.

It's like the epitome of all things self-confident that Tsuna has been drifting through his own life trying to find.
(Reborn is also at least twice his dad's age and therefore sort of twice as cool? So far? And so much more easier to talk to than Iemitsu is.)

"..Just find out what his plans are, right?" He taps at his chin. "And if he doesn't, we can introduce him to the fish?"

Kokuyo Leader chuckles lightly. "Not this one, Tsunayoshi."

Takeshi is the one to cluck his tongue. "Darn."

"I think we can try," Tsuna finally admits, with some hesitance. It seems like a harmless job, but they'd said the same thing about Valensa and Toras, too. *That* hadn't ended well at all. "I mean.. I'm not super curious about it, but seeing as he's living in my- well, *maman*'s house, I think we have the right to at least ask him about it."

"That is acceptable." Kokuyo Leader flutters where she stands, Mist vibrating around her. "You may provide us updates as necessary on your progress, and ask for assistance as required. Would you know where Nagi is? She isn't responding to me."

"Okay. And, um... Nagi's around. Somewhere. She's always here." Tsuna would try tracking her down, but her signature is always moving. Always changing, always hiding. Keeps switching between one and the other, and Tsuna still hasn't memorized the other boy's signature. Soon. But not yet. "Nagi! Are you here?"

"I think I see her." Takeshi squints at something off in the distance and waves a pinprick figure. "Hey, Nagi!"

She approaches swiftly with a *fwip*, appearing before them in a puff of Mist and a yelp from Tsuna. She looks younger.

"Hey." Her head tips to the side. "I was just visiting Gina."

"Oh. Sorry to, um, pull you away. Kokuyo Leader has-"

"A task, I know." Nagi closes her eyes briefly, then turns to Kokuyo Leader. "They don't need my help, Kokuyo Leader. I'll continue to accompany Reborn-san, but there's nothing else I can do to help. I've.. also seen his medical report. I wouldn't be able to put him under Mist suggestion on my own, with or without their aid in subduing him. If they could subdue him."

"Probably not," Tsuna admits.

Something flickers over Kokuyo Leader's face. Conflict. Upset, smoothed and hidden. "..I see."

Nagi does not meet her eyes. Tsuna knows the feeling. He gets it every time Iemitsu drops by to visit.

"..We'll leave it to you two then, Tsunayoshi, Takeshi. You have until the end of the year. The sooner the better."

"With our Dying Breath, Kokuyo Leader," he and Takeshi both chorus. Takeshi salutes, and grins. Nagi does the same, but only smiles.

Tsuna does not.
A heavy *thunk* shakes Reborn out of a light doze. He blinks away from the text he'd been reading (a primer on the formula for converting adenosine triphosphate into abnormally high-density adenosine diphosphate, which is *then* converted to *fiamma voltage*; all of which is probably a remarkable discovery in the vein of flame research and good clinical information to have, but also terrifyingly boring to someone like him) and looks up.

Tsunayoshi has just thumped down a book of encyclopaedic proportions onto the table. The title seems to say something about a.. cookbook? Sawada Cookbook. *Sawada Family Cookbook.*

"..That was a quick nap."

"It's called Resting *Hour* for a reason."

"It's still a very short nap." Reborn leans back slightly in his chair, peering at the tome. "What's the book for?"

Instead of answering, Tsunayoshi opens it up to the first few pages. It's *packed* with words, and some really, really old illustrations. And *that* has to be a diagram of-

"This," Tsunayoshi says, flipping to the next page. Everything is in archaic Japanese, but the accompanying drawing is clear as day. "This is a compendium. A collection. An anthology and *encyclopaedia.*"

It shows Giotto, demonstrating his Dying Will State to a group of people.

Reborn asks, quietly, "On what?"

"On everything." Tsunayoshi cocks his head to the side. He's not smiling, but he looks lighthearted. Eyes too young, too old, too wise. If he's read this, Reborn can almost understand why. "History, technology, philosophy. Everything we've managed to accomplish on this island since Sawada Ieyasu came here."

"Uh-huh."

He's still staring at that drawing. Still wondering, *how.* Why. Flames are supposed to be a *secret,* they've *always* been a secret. Flames are synonymous with the Underworld, which is why it was so damn *weird* that Iemitsu already knew about them. Why it's so fucking confusing to hear the word *fiamma* being tossed around on the island as though it were synonymous with *electricity* instead of *crime.*

People have killed over Flames. Over Flame technology, Flame weaponry, Flame *anything.* Even Flame *users.* That's *why* Timoteo's sudden push for publicity is so dangerous, why all his heirs have gone to ground, why Reborn is *watching over one of those heirs* rather than protecting Timoteo himself. You don't threaten the *don* of the strongest Family in Sicily with death if you want him to stop talking; you threaten his children. His wife. His friends, his family, anyone and everyone he loves. You threaten his people.

Everyone seems to collectively agree that the matter of Flames should *not* be made public. They seem to agree enough to actually think about aggravating the wrath of a still-grieving *don.*

And of course, the media eats up any kind of drama. *Inter-mafia* drama happens to be their favorite.
"..Why do you have the island's Holy Bible in your house?"

"I don't." Tsunayoshi grins. The book snaps shut and lets out a burp of dust, then collapses under the weight of its own Mist. Impressive. But whose work is it? "But, I do know where it is..."

"Sawada Tsunayoshi, you are 40 years too early to try bargaining information with me. Good try, though." Tsunayoshi lets out a huff and drops into the nearest chair. "How do I know I couldn't get that sort of information from any old library?"

"Well," the boy frumps, chin propped in his hands, "you could. But, it just wouldn't be the same as seeing it in Ieyasu's own writing and fiamma signature..."

"..Tempting. But it's still a no. I'm not that much of a die-hard Giotto fan. You'd have better luck getting my boss to cave." Reborn goes back to his text on fiamma biology and makes a shooing motion. "Go on now, it's barely 3. Play outside. Have fun. Do whatever it is you kids do these days. I have... 4 years of studying left to do."

"...It's only been 4 days and you've gone through 4 years of material already?"

"Are you implying they're actually difficult to go through?"

"I'm 14, of course they're difficult to go through!"

"I hear everyone else in your grade is handling them just fine. You really are No Good Tsuna, aren't you?" Reborn lets out a hum and bites down on a pen cap, scribbling down notes and practice formulas. Math is good. Very calming. "We'll need to work hard to get rid of that nickname."

Maybe not so calming for Tsunayoshi, who looks like he's about to have an aneurysm when Reborn raises his head again to see what there's no response. Which is to say, he's swaying slightly in his seat and seems to be looking through Reborn, past him, at something else. Something that isn't there. He looks tired.

He looks tired.

"..Did you hear that from my dad?"

Yes.

"I heard some kids on the street call you that the other day," Reborn says instead. It's not exactly a lie.

"Hmph." He blinks. Tsunayoshi hops up and dusts himself off, looking every bit like the petulant child he hasn't been since Reborn first met him. Which is nearing 2 weeks now. And this is the first time he's actually seen Tsunayoshi behave like a child. A teenager. A prepubescent teenager.

"I'm perfectly fine with being No Good, for your information. You don't have to waste your time on me."

Christ, but he's missed dealing with whiny teens.

(No, he does not miss it. Not at all.)

"You are my third student in almost 30 years, Sawada Tsunayoshi. None of you have failed to say the same thing at some point in your lives. Honestly, it's getting old having to reassure all of you that I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be."
Tsunayoshi dares to roll his eyes. "We're teenagers, it's our job to be filled with crippling self-doubt and distrust of the world."

"Now you're just being overdramatic."

"That's our job tooooo." This is really so refreshing, having to deal with normal, *general* teen-child behaviour, instead of whatever weird concoction this island had managed to cook up in all of its kids. "Well, since you've already said it, *I'm* going to go out and have fun. Takeshi!"

Yamamoto's soft snoring cuts off with a bleary yelp of 'am I up to bat next?!' and probably a flail of limbs, judging by the thumps and thuds.

"Wh-what- Tsuna! Hey."

"Morning, sleepyhead." Tsunayoshi hangs over the back of the couch, one foot kicking back and forth in what could be an embarrassed sort of shuffle. "Wanna go to the batting cage?"

"Right now? Sure! Just let me- ow- wake up my leg-"


"You play sports, Tsunayoshi?"

"Haha, as if," the boy says in a flatly humorous tone, still keeping his back to Reborn. "I live my athletic life vicariously through Takeshi."

Given what he's seen of Tsunayoshi's physique (lanky, scrawny arms, small shoulders, probably the same kind of lack of muscle mass on his legs), Reborn wonders if it's actually case of 'not being able to' as opposed to 'not wanting to'. Or both.

"Yeah. I dedicate all my homeruns to Tsuna."

"How romantic," Reborn says tonelessly, while Tsunayoshi goes pink and mumbles *stop that*. Yamamoto looks delighted, and also like he's never going to stop it. "It would do you some good to join in. Exercise is good for the body and soul."

"What did you play in college? Or were you one of those people who focused on studies instead?"

"I considered *pallumi*. But I went with cricket instead."

"..I'm guessing you don't mean *balloons*, so, uh, what's that in *regular* Italian?"

Reborn almost wants to sneer. Cheeky brat. "*Calcio.*"

"Oh! Soccer." [5]

"Didn't you try that a few times, Tsuna?"

This time his laugh is dry and humorless. "Yeah. That didn't work out so well."

"You made your team lose, Tsunayoshi?"

"Uh, no, I- I have basically no coordination or aim, so uh.."

"Someone kicked a ball into his chest during.. 2nd grade?"
"Don't say it like it was on purpose, Takeshi. I tripped into the path of the ball, that's all."

Yamamoto frowns, but then grins. "And then last year, I heard he kicked the ball at that same guy's head and knocked him out cold."

Reborn raises an eyebrow. So much for No Good Tsuna.

"N-not on purpose! It was an accident.."

So much for not No Good Tsuna. He's just like Dino used to be.

"Okay, I'm ready." Yamamoto stretches his arms and shoulders the backpack he had come by with a few hours ago. "Let's go!"

"Do you need me to chaperon the two of you?"

"Not a chance, old man."

Yamamoto snorts and starts out the door. Tsunayoshi follows him.

"I want you two home in time for dinner, okay?" Reborn says without looking up from the text. "No lewd, indecent acts of passion, either. If I even get a whiff of hormones I will tell your mother."

"Gross!" Tsunayoshi's face is bright red. Even Yamamoto is pink in the ears. "Why would you even say that? You weird ossan! [6] — Oh, welcome home, maman. Takeshi and I are going out for a bit, we'll be back in time for dinner. Nagi's still sleeping."

"Okay? Be safe, you two."

"We will. No thanks to the WICKED STEPMOTHER."

The door slams. Nana pops her head around the corner, looking between Nagi still snoozing away on a futon in the living room, and Reborn doing his best to look the part of a clueless victim.

"I didn't do anything," he says. She gives him a look. "Alright, so I might have threatened to have that Hibari kid give them another week of summer classes if they didn't stop singing praises about me. It was creepy."

Nana sighs and shakes her head. Children.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable studying in the living room, Reborn-san?"

"The coffee is closer here and I need to stay awake."

She's still smiling when she opens the fridge to take out yesterday's leftovers to reheat.

"Varia HQ. Delfina speaking."


"Chiedo scusa, signor, Advisor Mammon will not speak with unauthorized persons. May I know
who is asking?" [8]

"Croquant Bouche. I'm calling on behalf of Don Timoteo. Put me through."

"O-of course. Just- just a moment.."

.
.
.

"Ciao. Croquant, is it?"

"Indeed. Hello, Mammon."

"It must be something important for Nonu to want to speak with me."

"He has a message from Reborn."

"...Go on."

"Reborn needs to get in touch with Verde."

"Mu. I can't help with that. My Sticky Picture can't locate Verde and he knows it."

"He knows. He'd like you to find Fon. Have Fon find Skull. Skull finds Verde."

"I've never understood how that idiot Skull manages to find Verde... Fine. But this is not Varia-related; external matters require external payment."

"Reborn says to contact him for payment."

"He wouldn't do something so generous. But I'll charge it to him anyway. Is there anything else?"

"..He had an incentive ready, in the event that you weren't willing to take the job. Regarding the cur-"

"Mu. There's no need. Reborn isn't contacting me directly. That's incentive enough."

[1] 60km radius = 120km diameter, which is about 70-ish miles. covers the entire island, and then some. it's not that big of an island.
[2] negghia: (sicilian) mist/fog, as opposed to italian nebbia
[3] [img]
[4] [for your listening reference]
[6] ossan: (japanese) shortened version of oji-san. something like 'uncle', or used to address someone older, but in a slightly negative way, especially if the other person isn't all that old.
[7] bonasira: (sicilian) good evening
[8] chiedo scusa: (italian?) my apologies, i apologize. equivalents are are 'mi dispiace' and 'scusami'.

Chapter End Notes
so ye i'm working with the italian names as they are in the manga/anime until someone can tell me for sure that 'croquant bouche' and 'coyote nougat' are actually in 'lastname firstname' format. and also that these are their 'underground names'. is timoteo even his real name?? who knows.
Chapter Summary

reborn reaches a very, very, VERY minor point of being Utterly Done With Everything, and deals with it the way Healthy Adult Hitmen do. Target Practice.

meanwhile, sawada tsunayoshi has been Done With Everything since Day 1. and not in the good way, as reborn is starting to notice. oh no. whatever will he do.

Chapter Notes

reborn is very observant and talks too much? but also not observant enough and doesn't talk enough.

anyway. foreshadowing and worldbuilding, as usual. things are Escalating. also a bit of insight as to why i'm not actually writing this in tsuna's POV.

**WARNINGS**: mentions/use of guns for sport shooting. implications of kids with guns. implications of casual murder (thanks, reborn). hana ranks high in the "misunderstanding-induced love at first sight" category and both she and reborn are equally horrified by this turn of events.

EDIT nov. 2016: added in some miscellaneously pertinent information, fixed some typos, cleared up a few things that were worded weird.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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but we do not talk about sawada tsunayoshi.

Reborn has no shame. This is a Known Fact of the universe.

Which is not to say that he doesn't have pride, oh, he has plenty of pride— but self-pride and self-confidence are different from shame. In his infantile form, he had even less of it, and took to terrorizi— teaching his students while dressed up as key figures from history. He found joy in unnerving others, seeing them try to decide between laughing at his very historically accurate Cleopatra disguise or be Respectful and look like they were dying inside instead.

Dino always squeaked. He squeaked and choked down laughs and tried to look presentable, and generally failed, because as well-made as his mask was, it seemed the hilarity of his infantile tutor wearing a seasonal insect costumes was too much emotion for him to contain. Which was good for him, all things considered.

Xanxus would choke on his laughs and then claim Reborn was trying to kill him that way. He was boring, really, but he still never failed to be Reborn's supplier of feathers and other imitation animal parts. Even if he did 'accidentally' send his tutor on a wild goose chase through the wilds of
Australia once.

Reborn got his revenge.

Unfortunately, it turns out Xanxus didn't look half bad in the undercut he had gotten to hide the part of his hair that Reborn had shaved off with a bullet. Rebellious teenager indeed.

So, in conclusion. Reborn will admit that he enjoys unnerving others. He has a penchant for dressing up *just* to unnerve others, and also because the prospect of having *so many weird clothes to change into* is just a wonderful thing that he will never take for granted until he goes senile, which will probably be some point in the next decade or so. He's pretty damn terrified of Australia.

He's good at reading when others are unnerved. Knows when to push it for maximum effect, when to pull back to let them cool off. Knows how to get them to let their guard down. When to pull the trigger.

..And he is starting to notice that Sawada Tsunayoshi *never has his guard down.* Not unless he's the only one in the room, and even then he's still probably *somewhat* aware of his surroundings. He's keyed up in ways Reborn doesn't quite recognize, even if he finds them a little familiar. A bit like how Reborn himself is, but more. Involuntary.

Good traits for a *suldàtu* in the making. Or a *capo.* [1] But not for a civilian.

Reborn could chalk it up to the boy's possible Hyper Intuition, but even Hyper Intuition shouldn't make for *this* much vigilance. He is a civilian. Namimori is peaceful.

Aside from, perhaps, whatever happened with the *agnelli di Dio,* if anything did indeed happen at all, there should be no reason for Sawada Tsunayoshi to be seemingly terrified of everything.

(He hides it so well, and for that Reborn has kept off asking him about it.)

(For now.)

This is assuming, of course, that Hyper Intuition is something that you can turn on and off. Timoteo and Iemitsu both say it crops up every now and then, though not necessarily as a conscious act on their behalf.

The chance of Tsunayoshi's Hyper Intuition just constantly being active *all the time* sound...

..A little tiring.

It may account for why Tsunayoshi's emotions are just *off* sometimes. Reborn doesn't understand why neither Nana nor Yamamoto *notice,* or at any rate why neither of them seem at all concerned. So it could just be a.. normal enough occurrence. Perhaps a medical thing. Which is still a bit worrying.

It's not even a case of being sarcastic or scathing or *mocking.* They're *earnest,* the way they show on his face. He might be inclined to believe Tsunayoshi's emotional responses are just a little off-kilter compared to your average teen, but..

Every now and then, Reborn notices a *lull.* A *wait.* The 2 or 3 heartbeats between a remark and a face. A delayed reaction, maybe. But always to the most inane things, like concerning the weather, or a classmate, or something that might have been complex, *should* have been complex. Like when Reborn asks how he's doing in class, since he has no access to the boy's school records. Why he has trouble in class, since Tsunayoshi is entirely *not* cagey about showing off his lower-than-average
test scores when asked about them.

He wants to ask why Tsunayoshi is so *blase* about being No Good, and yet whenever he hears the very words *No Good* being uttered, it's like a storm crosses his face. Just for a moment. Why he replaces it with a grin that could almost be sheepish, if he didn't also immediately accuse Reborn of blatantly staring at him in that same breath.

It makes him want to shoot something's head off.

"*Reboooorrnnn.*" Speak of the fluffy one. "Are you brooding again? I didn't know old men could brood."

"I am contemplating murder," Reborn says evenly to Tsunayoshi's face, scant inches above his own. The kid's getting bolder. He doesn't even flinch. That, or he's starting to get desensitized to Reborn's everything, which is unacceptable. "...Not yours, of course."

Tsunayoshi gives him the sharpest look he's ever seen on a kid since Xanxus' was in the middle of his Rebellious-Teen-Life Crisis. "*Of course.* You'd have to deal with *maman* if you did."

(Or has he always been this bold? Has Reborn simply never noticed? How?)

"Your mother can be terrifying, I will give you that."

"Mm-hm." Tsunayoshi plops down next to him, letting his feet swing over the hang of the patio. There's a fan blowing from inside the house, but all it does is push hot air against hot air. And *Christ* is it hot today. "So, who?"

"Who what?"

"Whose murder are you contemplating? If you are actually contemplating murder, I mean."

"Why would you even think I was seriously contemplating someone's murder?"

"Um. You.. said you were?" Tsunayoshi's brow knits together in a frown that seems more than a little honest. "And I mean, you're.. a hitman, right? You basically make a living through murder?"

"Is that what you think I do for a living? Murder?"

"...Isn't that what a hitman does?"

"Pop Quiz, Tsunayoshi. A lesson in Law, Legal, and Criminal Studies."

"That- I'm not even planning to take that class."

"I know, I read the text anyway." Reborn holds up a single finger, both to put some distance between him and Tsunayoshi, and to make the boy shush for a moment. "What is the difference between a *hitman*, an *assassin*, and a *mercenary*?"

Tsunayoshi makes a whining sound. Kind of like a dog wanting to be let into the house. Reborn knows, because Xanxus took in a *lot* of strays.

He likes these audible responses, because they're so much more reliable than any facial twitch that Tsunayoshi happens to make. The slight shifting of his limbs as he struggles to think of an answer. Bare feet brushing over the tops of overgrown weeds.

It's so damned hot today.
"..Mercenaries are, uhm. Like soldiers for hire? And.. I think hitmen and assassins are the same.. thing...? No?"

"I actually don't care about mercs at all, so forget about them." Reborn waves, like swatting away a fly. Mostly as an excuse to fan himself a little. "Why do you think they're the same thing?"

"Oh, they- they both get paid to kill. Something like that? I don't know, Reborn, I'm not a Kurokawa. There's no point in me studying something like criminals. Or criminal law. Or civil law or whatever."

"It's called a life skill," Reborn says, completely bypassing the point that he has no idea who or what a Kurokawa is. He'll find out later. "Believe me when I say I've lived long enough that every bit of knowledge will add up. So. Keep thinking, kid."

"Geh." Tsunayoshi instead just topples himself over onto his side. "It's too hot for this."

"Excuses. Also, gross, your hair is sweaty, get it off my leg."

"Your hairy leg is sweatier than my hair, ossan."

Reborn swats at the head of fluff anyway. How the hell does he get his hair to stick out like that? Does he ever wash it? Is it gel? Mousse? Curling irons?

..Well, no, if he looks closer enough, it can see it's more.. frizzy than it seems. Which is odd, for a Japanese. But Nagi has rather frizzy hair too. Though hers is more obvious if you manage to catch her in the wee hours before she has a chance to either a) attack it with pomade, or b) cover it up with illusions, which she apparently does a lot.

Tsunayoshi, though? He has no idea how Tsuna does it. If he even consciously does it.

Reborn can kind of see where Iemitsu is coming from with the whole No Good son thing. Kind of. Because Iemitsu also said his kid was terrified of everything (true), a nervous wreck (sort of true), crippling shy (might be true), and also stupendously kind and compassionate (a bitter, hateful lie, considering Iemitsu barely knows the kid).

...Okay, maybe not that much of a lie. Maybe Reborn just hasn't seen that side of him yet.

"You think hitmen and assassins are the same because they're both paid to kill."

"Yeah. I guess."

"..Alright then. Let me impart upon you my knowledge and wisdom." Tsunayoshi makes a face. Reborn ignores it. "Assassinations are usually linked to politics. If the dead guy isn't someone important or powerful, it's just another murder. Just another hit. A hitman, on the other hand, is just someone hired to do a killing. Likewise, a mercenary is hired to fight, but not necessarily to kill. Most hitmen are affiliated with criminal organizations. I am a hitman who contracts almost exclusively with Vongola. Do you know what I get paid in?"

"Wit and bleeding sarcasm?"

"Funny." Reborn swats at his head again, and the boy yawns. "But no. I'm paid in room, board, and protection. And occasionally cold hard cash, because I'm not technically in the Vongola itself."

"Wait, you're not mafia?" Tsunayoshi rolls onto his back to stare up at him. "I thought you were with the mafia all along!"
"Surprise, surprise, kiddo." Reborn slants a grin at him, elbow leaning on the knee of a crossed leg. "My adorable little brother is the current don, but I just do his extra dirty work that no one else can or wants to do."

"That includes.. babysitting his possible heirs?"

"That too. And other peoples' heirs."

"Why would anyone trust you with their children."

"I think you already know the answer to that, Tsunayoshi." He doesn't have to look to know what kind of face the boy is making. Confusion, contrition. Shock. Worry. A strange combination, as always. "And your father trusted me with you. Or don't you trust his decision?"

Tsunayoshi exhales through his nose, like a laugh. "I haven't seen him in 3 years."

"So?"

He means it flippantly. Granted, there aren't a lot of people that Reborn can trust. And those that he can trust, he doesn't necessarily trust with everything, especially not if he hasn't seen them in so long. There's no one like that in his life, and there likely never will be. That's the way the Underworld is. He doesn't expect anyone else to understand.

He doesn't expect Tsunayoshi to look so damned upset.

"Hey." Reborn gets his attention quickly enough. The upset curls up for a moment, then smooths out the moment Tsunayoshi looks up again to meet his fading grin. Tsk, "Any reason why you look like I just kicked your dog?"

"No," Tsunayoshi replies too quickly. "I'm fine."

"Mm-hm." Yes. Reborn completely believes that. He files that bit away for later, too. "Back on topic then. The main difference between assassins and hitmen, as told by Yours Truly, a long-time professional in the field."

"Assassins," Reborn says, shoving his palm against Tsunayoshi's head to unbalance him before he can be derailed any further, "are more stealth-based. Because they are usually unaffiliated or work for an organization that specializes in assassinations, there is more importance placed in not being caught. They kill for a reason, and, honestly, they are boring as fuck."

Except Varia. Varia isn't too boring usually..

"..I'm probably not supposed to cuss in front of you, so forget that I did."

"That's kinda hard to forget." Tsuna's face does weird things. "And I'm- pretty sure that last part is an opinion-"

"Hitmen, on the other hand, cannot be touched. More commonly the term refers to contracted killings made by mafia, as the media calls it. They put out hits on certain individuals and contract
one of their own men, usually, to do the job. If it's for killing a politician, some people might still
call it an assassination, but it is more widely regarded as a hit. Of course, it all depends on who you
ask. But either way, the killing of a hitman is always tricky."

"I'll.. take your word for it. Why?"

"Because, believe it or not, the Cosa Nostra does have an honor system. Don't give me that look,
I've been sleeping under your roof for the past 2 and a half weeks- which reminds me, your
remedial classes start next Monday, don't forget to finish your homework—"

Tsunayoshi loses his look of utter dubiousness and groans pathetically. Groans and whines. Like a
baby. That's kinda funny.

"—and I haven't harmed a hair on your head, so, yes, we do have an honor system. I am here to
protect you. I will honor that. Understand? Anyway. It's tricky because you need permission of a
made man's boss to kill him, and not a lot of bosses are going to let just anyone have permission to
off one of their own men, of course, unless they've done something especially bad. Like I said,
there's an honor system."

"Why are you suddenly giving me an introduction to mafia politics? Uh. Costa Nostra, I mean."

Oh, Tsunayoshi. If only you knew.

Reborn pats the fluff of his head... carefully, because Tsunayoshi is really picky about contact. "I'm
telling you because I don't want you to ever associate me with assassinations ever again. I am not
sneaky. I am not stealthy. I will never kill for political or religious reasons, unless it involves
someone else trying to stick their hands into Sicily. Then all bets are off. But, most importantly,"
and here he jabs a finger quite rudely down at Tsunayoshi, who goes cross-eyed, "I'm telling you
so you don't forget why I do what I do."

"..Which is?"

None of your goddamn business, is what he should say. What he would, normally, say. Not that it's
much of a secret amongst the Underworld why Reborn takes up the hits that he does. Why he
works with Vongola rather than freelancing completely and going solo. Why he's still there. Here.

Kids shouldn't know, though. Especially not civilian kids. Especially not civilian kids he's
supposed to be protecting.

(No one ever said anything about keeping the kid out of the Underworld, though. Timoteo and,
oddly enough, Iemitsu had never been that specific. What better way to keep him safe than to make
him aware of the world that's out for his blood?)

"For money." He jabs that finger again, this time against Tsunayoshi’s temple, thumb sticking out
like a cocked gun. "And to alleviate my eternal boredom with life."

"..You kill for money and because you're bored." Reborn loves unnerving people. It is, however, a
moot point when Sawada Tsunayoshi refuses to be unnerved by things that should unnerve him.
"That's.. gotta be the most normal reason for murder I've ever heard. That's weird."

What the fuck, Tsunayoshi.

"What sort of movies have you been watching?"

"N-normal ones!" Tsunayoshi squawks, eyes wide. "And this has nothing to do with movies! But-
but like. It's always like, *I gotta kill to make money to feed my family, or I have a man I want
revenge on,* or something like *because humanity is full of shit and everyone deserves to die* or
something really bland recycled material like that. *Or it's fun, but no! Not you!"

"..I *did* just say I kill people for pay because I'm bored. And you think I don't do it because it's
fun?"

"Well, yeah, but.. that doesn't really mean you think it's *fun,* right? Like, just because I—" He cuts
off. Snaps his mouth shut and makes a sound like he swallowed water the wrong way, and looks
about the same. About. "..just because it cures boredom a little doesn't really make it.. *fun.* You
know?"

Reborn knows. He doesn't know how Tsunayoshi knows. Why Tsunayoshi would know something
like that. But he knows. And he seems to understand.

"If.. if you were actually.. *bored* with life... if you had no reason for- for living... to stay alive, to-
um. Well. Anything that keeps you going- it wouldn't have to be fun, right? It's just.. something.
Something to hold onto. Just.. *something.* Any.. anything."

The boy is looking at his right hand. Crooked, bent fingers. Nails surprisingly clipped and filed all
the way down. Scars shaped like scabs on the back of his hand, all along his arm. Both arms. His
other one is curled over his torso, pressed up against the right side of his ribcage. He looks, as

*(They've always been too young. The world does not wait.)*

*Meu Dio.* He did not sign up for this. He did *not*—

"You want to know what I *do* find fun, Tsunayoshi?" Reborn stretches his legs out, jostling the
boy's head and making him yelp and sit up. *Guns.* Is there a firing range anywhere on the island? I
am, after all, a hitman. I need practice."

Tsunayoshi stares at him, wide-eyed. Not as frightened as he probably should be at the prospect of
a hitman asking for a gun to hold and shoot.

"I-I thought you were going to tutor me."

"I need to relieve stress from taking that dumb certification test, too."

"You *would,* Tsunayoshi mutters under his breath.

"What was that, hm? Did you want to learn, too?"

"Ahaha, uh, *no.* The boy backpedals like crazy, hands up as though they could form a barrier
between him and Reborn. "I'm- I'm really awful at guns. I can't aim anything. I'm terrible with
recoil. I really hate loud noises. Uh, no thank you."

It's better than the utter *lostness* he had seen on Tsunayoshi's face earlier. But this one is altogether
too terrified for his liking, too. For someone that Reborn is not supposed to be terrorizing to death.
He always was too good at doing that accidentally, back before he was cursed. Is, now.

"...And, um! There.. there aren't any.. normal.. firing ranges..."
"By normal, you mean?"

"A-as in.." Tsunayoshi wiggles his fingers. The ones on his right hand move kinda funny. Jerky, like a marionette on strings. "Weee... don't have any ranges with live ammunition."

"I can deal with Airsoft guns. Or dummy rounds. They're weak and pitiful, but I can deal."

Tsunayoshi lets out a tittering, nervous laugh. "Um, no. I mean. They're.. can you use fiamma weapons?"

..Are you fucking kidding—

"Yes."

"Oh." The boy's face lights up. Actually lights up, and yet something inside him dims at the same time. "Great! Um. I can see if Kurokawa knows which range is the best, depending on your, er, preference in firearms. Did you want to go like.. right now or later? Tomorrow? I don't think she had any plans for the summer vacation so she's probably free whenever."

"Sometime soon. Whenever this friend of yours is available." Wait- "..I thought the Kurokawas were criminal lawyers."

"She's not my friend. And they are! Sort of. Civil lawyers? She will be. When she's in high school, which is... next year? Yeah, next year."

He's going to be taken to a shooting range by a middle-schooler who also happens to be a civil-lawyer-in-the-making. That's.... wow. Just.

Wow.

"Sure. Okay. Do any of them have AC? Your house doesn't and I'm dying here."

Tsunayoshi smacks Reborn's bare, sweaty arm, with his own bare, sweaty hand, and both of them cringe at the same time. Because, ew. That was kind of gross.

* * *

"I thought we were on an island," Reborn bemoans. "Islands are meant to be cool and refreshing. Like Sicily. I can taste salt on my skin and it's not sea salt."

Tsunayoshi thumps his head against the wooden patio flooring. "Please stop talking, oh my god."

"How have you managed to survive these past 14 years?"

"I sit in my room with the air conditioning on and play Mario Kart on my DS all day long."

"Alone?"

"That's lame, no." Tsunayoshi lifts his head and his nose scrunches up into something genuine, something real. "There's online competitions, okay? And I play with Takeshi sometimes when it's really hot and no one's even outside to warrant patrols. Like.. today. Which I should be doing. Except you had to go complaining about me being a hikikomori and making me stay out in the hot, scorching sun with you."

"You could just let me share the AC in your room."
"Eurgh, no. No adults allowed in my room."

_Brat._

"When is your friend getting here? It's been an hour."

"Kurokawa isn't my friend! I just- I just know her because she's Kyouko-chan's friend. And she should be here soon, it's only been _a few minutes._"

"It feels like an hour. Feels like _days._" God, to Hell with this heat. "Who's Kyouko?"

"She- um- she's a- a friend. A friend."

"Oh?" Reborn looks sideways at the boy. "A friend you _like_?"

"Please stop talking," Tsunayoshi groans, and drops his head again. Reborn gets a glimpse of the slight pink on Tsunayoshi's face though, coupled with the angry-looking scowl. But it's hard to tell if he's really embarrassed or just really angry. "First of all, she is _off limits_ , do not even _consider_ talking about me and her in the same sentence if you value my life."

That's.. not how that saying is supposed to go-

"_Second_, she is _just a friend._ Okay, maybe I like her- _as a friend._ As a friend. _Please._ Don't.. don't."

_Don't what?_ Reborn wants to ask. He wants to ask, he needs to know. He can't figure out _what not_ to do if Tsunayoshi won't say it. Contrary to popular belief, he cannot, actually, read minds.

If he could, he wouldn't be thinking that Sawada Tsunayoshi may actually be allergic to romance. But then there is the matter of everything pertaining to Yamamoto Takeshi— which, actually, since Tsunayoshi has just been reacting with harmless violence and embarrassment, maybe actually lend support to the whole _Tsunayoshi Is Allergic To The Very Concept Of Romance_ theory.

Or, maybe he's not into romance. Like Mammon. But even Mammon wasn't _this_ adverse to it.

"Are you gay?" He asks instead, as nonchalantly as possible. Reborn metaphorically and literally wants to shoot himself in the foot right now.

"..Why would you even ask- no. No?" Tsunayoshi looks, and likely is, violently offended, because he seems about ready to punch something and then go into hiding for a decade. "I don't know. Who cares? What does that have to do with anything?"

...Maybe he _is_ just allergic to romance.

"It.. doesn't?" Reborn blinks. This feels.. familiar. Why does this feel familiar? He hasn't had this sort of conversation since- oh. Since _Xanxus_. "I didn't ask that to be offensive, Tsunayoshi."

Tsunayoshi bristles and draws his shoulders up. Defensively. Like a porcupine. "It _wasn't._"

"..Or to upset you."

"I'm _not._"

"Or to irritate you, or bother you, or hurt you, or annoy, vex, infuriate, exasperate, irk, enrage, inflame, incense, or _anything_ like that." Reborn watches, slow and careful, as the sudden cloistering heat and fury from Tsunayoshi's eyes dims and ebbs away, like a tidal wave. "...Okay? Better?"
The boy stares at him for a while, silent. Then sniffs, just softly so, and rubs at one of his eyes, and, ah. That's Dino, there. Baby stallion trying to prove that he's strong. He doesn't sound as watery as Dino used to, though. Dino used to cry so easily. "...You lost me at vex. But I guess they all mean the same thing."

"We," he says with a tip of a nod, "are going to need work on expanding your vocabulary."

He gets a tongue stuck out at him for his efforts. If Reborn were, perhaps, half his age, and if he cared a little more (if he were actually the boy's father), he would consider making a grab for Tsunayoshi's tongue.

Instead he throws his sweaty towel at that irritationally Iemitsu-like face and listens, content, to the sound of Tsunayoshi's horrified screeching.

* * *

Kurokawa arrives exactly 15 minutes after Tsunayoshi made the call. Reborn swears it was longer than that, but the clock does not lie.

He doesn't know why he was expecting her to show up in a school uniform or a yukata. After all, everything he seems to know about Japan has long since gone down the drain. He hasn't seen anyone else in Namimori wearing a yukata.

But he does expect it, and so Reborn is a little surprised to see a girl just slightly taller than Tsuna in a blouse and a long, flowing skirt. And a walking cane? Weren't they going to a shooting range?

"Reborn, this is Kurokawa Hana. She's a year ahead of me, same as Kyouko-chan. Kurokawa, this is Reborn, our house guest."

"Hana's fine." She seems to think about it for a moment, then holds out her hand. Reborn stares for another moment, and... shakes it. She's got a firm grip.

"Stop staring, Kurokawa."

Hana hisses and shoves at Tsunayoshi's arm with a strange look in her eye. "You never mentioned how tall he was."

"Uh, I did. I told you he was really, really tall. Like, a lot taller than me."

"Everyone's taller than you."

Tsunayoshi makes that nose-scrunching face again, like he wants to say something about it but knows it's pointless.

He elbows Reborn in the side instead. "Go get dressed, fool."

Hana snaps out of whatever staring she had been doing in the general direction of Reborn's face. "Wow, Sawada. Way to be nice to your house guests."

"Oh, bite me, Kurokawa. Aren't you going shooting? Why are you all dressed up?"

"I have a sense of beauty unlike you, you lazy slob."

Tsunayoshi looks down. He's still in the clothes he woke up in, a t-shirt and a swelteringly hot-looking pair of long pajama pants. Covered in penguins prints.
"It's like 40 degrees out there!" [2]

"Slob!"

Reborn can't help it. He reaches out and ruffles Tsunayoshi's head, sweaty as it is. Then heads for the stairs, looking at his hand as though he's just made a grave error.

"You can pick out anything that fits from dad's closet if you need to, Reborn!" Tsunayoshi calls after him.

"And you're sure he won't miss anything?" Reborn says back.

"He's not here to miss anything."

There is the tiniest hint of scorn in Tsunayoshi's voice. It makes him sound like the frumpiest little balloon Reborn has ever had the pleasure of meeting, and Reborn has known plenty of frumps.

"..You trying to replace Iemitsu or something, Sawada?"

Does no one call Iemitsu by his surname? As should be proper here, especially from younger folk? What even is this island.

"Reborn is way too cool to be my dad, Kurokawa."

He makes a valiant effort not to trip over his own feet on his way up the stairs. He succeeds. Partly.

"Are you saying he's too cool to be a dad, or too cool to be your dad, Sawada?"

But something about the way Hana says it makes Reborn stop for just a moment. Something about the way Tsunayoshi retorts with a 'shut up!', something about the way Hana responds, 'there you go again, not acknowledging your feelings!'

Makes his spine go cold down to his toes. He's starting to get an idea of what sort of a child he's dealing with now, and he doesn't like it.

This is not what he signed up for. And it's not something he's prepared for.

What the fuck does Iemitsu think he's doing?

He's back down the stairs again in record time, swapping the gray tanktop for a more public-appropriate bright yellow sleeveless shirt. Where Iemitsu even gets these, he doesn't want to know. Nor does he want to know if Iemitsu ever dared to wear it before.

Tsunayoshi looks.. better. He's talking (arguing) candidly with his not-friend now, less downtrodden than he had sounded earlier. In fact, he's got a shit-eating grin on the moment Reborn walks up to them like he owns the place.

"You're going out dressed like that?"

Reborn looks down. Aside from the shirt, he's just wearing a pair of oversized shorts, cinched around his slight-smaller-than-Iemitsu's waist with a belt. He thinks he looks fine, given the weather, and loafers are good for any occasion.

"It's too hot to wear a full 3-piece suit, Tsunayoshi. I'll settle for just the hat."

The boy hums.
"..Can I look after Leon, then?"

He's reaching up before Reborn can even say yes or no. And Leon is climbing down before Reborn can decide whether he wants to have a reliable weapon and his partner at his side more than he wants to make sure Tsunayoshi isn't left at home alone.

(There haven't been any disturbances, aside from when they're actually out on the streets. The house itself is left.. relatively in peace. It's probably safe to go without.)

"..Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

Tsunayoshi makes an urk sound. Hana cuts in.

"Aa, don't bother. He's awful with guns, for one. For two-" Tsunayoshi hisses. Hana stops, and scowls, but drops the topic. "..Well, yeah. He's just really bad at guns. And around guns. He'd just get in the way."

"Yeah. I'll be fine by myself for a bit." He does another one of those nose scrunches that he's apparently so fond of. "You guys won't be long, right?"

Reborn shrugs. Firing ranges are all, hilariously enough, hit and miss. "Might be. Not if there's an assault rifle, though."

"We have the Howa Type 89," Hana informs him a little too quickly. "Modified."

"..Modified?"

"Swapped out live rounds for fiamma pulses, of course. Scope, laser targeting, lighter weight, and comfort grip included. The island's Type 89 FAR models have additional firing options like concentrated beam, burst rounds, and buckshot."

"—You've added buckshot rounds to an assault rifle?"

Hana grins too wide, too eager, but also all too earnest. "Hell yeah."

"Okay." Reborn exhaled and pulls his fedora down more firmly over his head. Wow, his trigger finger is bad. He's been fidgeting too much ever since arriving on the island. "I would've preferred a Beretta, but okay. I'll take that one.

"I know just the place. Pretty sure they have Berettas, too. Handguns and assault rifles."

"CZ pistols?"

"75 and the 527 rifle, I think."

He presses a palm over his chest. Were he a lesser man, he might have shed a tear. "I feel the hands of salvation upon me."

"I like him," Hana stage-whispers to Tsunayoshi, who is still wearing that shit-eating grin. "It's about time you introduced me to some decent guys."

Aaaand Reborn freezes.

"You two are scary, you know that? You're like a perfect match." And yet Tsunayoshi is letting out a very comical, very devilish heh heh heh sort of chuckle that makes Reborn's spine even colder than it was before. "Come home in one piece. And don't wear him out too much, Kurokawa. He's
He watches Tsunayoshi toddle off into the kitchen to do whatever it is that wicked teenage boys do in the kitchen. He feels like he should know. He had been a very wicked teenage boy himself, back when he was still a teenage boy.

Leon looks back at Reborn from where he's curled around Tsunayoshi's neck, mouth curved like a cat with a canary. Reborn makes strangling motions at his partner. Leon's head bobs in silent laughter.

Hana is very, very silent. Reborn waits about two minutes before he figures it's okay to herd her out the front door and close it behind them. Her face is blank and her gait is stiff, but she moves. Mechanically.

"...Kurokawa, I-

"Hana," she says in a croak. Then clears her throat. "Just.. Hana is f-ine."

"Hana." Goddamn you Tsunayoshi. ".I take it he didn't tell you when he called earlier."

"No." Hana laughs the beginning of a crazed laughter. "No he didn't."

"I don't mean to assume, but were you—"

"Yes."

"Diu nni pirduna [3]." Reborn mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Dooon't say things like that oh my god— I thought you were, like, 20! Maybe 25!" Hana shrieks, covering her face with both hands and looking like she wants to melt into the ground. Her face will likely melt if it gets any redder, anyway. "Sawada is such an ass."

Reborn.. well. He agrees.

And he pats her on the shoulder. Very gingerly, and very briefly.

"I know I'm very handsome," he says with as straight a face as he can manage. He's too old for this. "But to be mistaken for someone your age is a compliment I will never forget, Kurokawa Hana. And 20 is still too old for you to go after."

"But everyone younger than that is all monkeys!" Hana near-wails. Reborn suspects she doesn't get to talk about that a lot. "Boys! Juvenile! Immature chimpanzees! Ugh, I can't believe this, the only decent guy who shares my interest is near-ancient."

"What is with you kids and your issue with the older generation?"

"I am going to slaughter his high score in Mario Kart when I get home," she seethes into her palms instead of answering him. "I will do this if it's the last thing I do."

Reborn swears he can see electricity flickering off her skin and in the air around her and along the length of her walking cane. Do it with a Dying Will, as he always says. At least that part has remained unchanged, if a lot more easily available.

"I fully support your decision. But-" And he gives her another tap on the shoulder, pointedly ignoring the buzzing numbness that seeps into his hand. "Let's get me to that firing range first."
Hana calms down pretty quickly. "..Right. Firing range. You still want the-

"Howa Type 89 fAR with the buckshot setting, yes. Pi favuri." [4]

"You—" She whirls on him, one hand jabbing a finger rudely in his direction and the other gripped white-knuckled around the cane. Instead of continuing, though, she lets out aborted noises, as though unsure what to say, and makes plenty of neck-wringing type gestures that leave Reborn grinning. "I will get you the worst gun ever."

"Oh, come on, Hana-

"Don't you come on Hana me, ossan."

SERIOUSLY though, what is with everyone and their beef with older folk? Still. It's music to Reborn's ears. Hana is storming ahead, probably to lead the way.

She leaves a scent of scorched ozone in her wake, and it is quite lovely.

* * *

"..So I tell him, I don't care how great your firing range is, if I ever see another red gas-powered firearm in your store again, I will have the Hibaris on your ass like hounds on a hunt, and it will be one hell of a hunt."

Reborn snorts. He'd probably pay to see the Hibaris on a hunt, if they're anything at all like Hibari Kyouya.

"I mean, HCFC-22 is banned, and not just because Japan says so or because the Americans did it first. We used to use Freon-12, you know? And we got rid of that for the same reason!" Hana makes a disgusted sound and fires a repeated burst of bright green pellets at her target. Not perfect, pinpoint accuracy, but pretty good for a 15 year old civilian with a revolver. "Yeah it's cheaper to modify, and, yeah, it makes some of them easier to fire, but it's also so much more dangerous. Like, holy hell, what the hell was he thinking?"

"You have flame resistant guns but you don't have a solution for ozone depletion?"

Hana rolls her eyes behind her goggles and steps off to one side so she can reach the panel to replace the target. "No one has a solution for ozone depletion. That's why it's banned everywhere."

He turns the switch on his rifle until the character shika [5] blinks back at him. Looks like the right setting.

"Want a bigger target? I can call down a bear or something. Fiamma buckshot goes about as wide as regular buckshot does."

"I'm well aware. The same one is fine." Reborn puts the butt up against his shoulder and checks the scope.

Rather than a simple magnification of his target, the upper half silhouette of a man, he sees a miniature screen that reminds him more of a digital camera's functions than a scope. Most prominent is a projected blast radius for the average input of flames, as well as a metered bar that's probably for measuring flame input.

"Turn the inner band." Hana points to a ridged ring of plastic near the back of the scope. "The forward band focuses the lens. Rear band cycles through scope functions."
There's readings for firing mode, flame attribute, and *automated targeting*, from what Reborn can see as he switches through them. What he thinks he can recognize, anyway.

"This is pretty hi-tech, I'll admit."

"You haven't seen the sniper rifles yet," Hana says, grinning cheekily again. "But Touko doesn't have any here. We'd have to go to the mountains for that. Shu-Yi has a bunch, but that range is on the outer edge of Azayakatani, near the mountains."

"Why so far out there?"

"We commandeer the whole mountainside for the annual Hibari-Kokuyo Cops&Robbers game."

"...That's extravagant."

"It's crazy fun." Hana laughs and jostles his shoulder, only possible because he's crouching down to prop the muzzle of his rifle up on the table. "Come on, old man. Lemme see what you got."

"Don't you come on old man me, Hana."

She goes pink, but doesn't stop grinning. Reborn sends his flames into his hand at the trigger as per the instruction manual, and feels them being absorbed into the handle. The scope's meter even gives him a clip count. Just like loading a magazine.

He aims, and fires.

It's been quite a few years since Reborn felt the kick of recoil against his shoulder this much. This one is a little stronger than the usual AR recoil, but less than a shotgun's. He rolls with the familiar sensation of it and takes aim again. Something beeps to tell him it's ready to fire, barely a second after the first shot, and he does. Empties the clip. 5 shots.

"Looks like about 25 hit the target at least," Hana says, squinting. "Maybe 10 of them actually do any damage. You got him in the shoulder and gut. Not bad, not bad."

Not bad at all.

Reborn loads the magazine with another pulse of flames, bright and glowing, and doesn't bother hiding the glee dancing in his eyes. "Pull down another, I want to try something."

She does. When he fires again this time, all 9 rounds strike the paper sheet, though only 4 of them actually hit the silhouette. It's a lot more difficult than his usual Chaos Shot. Buckshot spreads too far apart to pull them together fast enough, which is why he's never bothered having Leon learn about shotguns before.

By the end of the clip he's reached about 70% accuracy and leaves a web of flames arching through the air. His target is missing the entire right shoulder, a chunk of rib, and most of the jaw, along with a dozen other not-so-minor imaginary wounds.

"Holy shit. How did you-" Hana gapes. She fumbles with pressing the buttons to get the target sliding up to them. "Oooh my god, that's- how?!"

"Many, many years of fine tuning my flame control." He tugs primly on one of his sideburns. "Want to try?"

"Shit, yeah. That's not the automatic targeting function is it?"
"Cristu, no, I wouldn't touch that even if you paid me. Whatever it does. Here, get the next target up. All you do is basically focus. Remember that Flames are an extension of yourself. Your emotions, your thoughts, your feelings, hyper condensed. Understand?"

Sun Flames glow and radiate warmth and heat, not unlike Storms and Skies. Hana's Lightning element flames crackle as they crawl over the surface of her revolver, fills their stall with the scent of ozone and sulfur again. She turns the barrel three times until a voice reads out *manual mode*, and loads it up.

"You want it to hit the head. You want it to hit nothing but the head. Theoretically, if you think of nothing but this, if you think about it hard enough, your thoughts will linger in the flames and direct its trajectory."

"Theoretically?"

"I never quite understood the science talk behind it. Try it."

It takes her a few seconds of concentration, but she does. The first one strikes chin. She raises the barrel a few degrees and fires again, and hits an ear this time. The next 8 hit mostly air, but they're still centered around the head rather than into the chest where she's actually aiming the gun. Like his, her shots leave distinct lime-colored trails in the air, weaving in spiral formation until they reach the target.

"Not bad," he says, and snickers when she curses. "You did better than most kids would at your age. Well. Unless those kids are me."

"Have you been shooting long?" Hana asks, like it's a completely normal thing to ask. "Do you have a gun?"

"..I started around your age, I think. And yes, I do have guns. Lots."

"Yeah? Is it easy to get them in Italy?"

"I knew a military man. He had guns lying around everywhere."

She wrinkles her nose, kind of like Tsunayoshi. "That's not very safe."


"I've been visiting firing ranges since I was.. 9, I guess. My mum took me to one over the summer, after my first fiamma response. It was great, even though I couldn't actually hit anything."

"That doesn't sound very safe."

"It's not like she was letting me handle them off the range. The island's always been pretty strict about guns." Hana lifts her shoulder in a shrug, setting up another target and reloading. "Not a lot of people own guns, and definitely nothing bigger than a handgun. There's not a whole lot of danger that warrants having one to begin with. You literally have to go through hell and back for licensing. Took me 2 years for mine, and I couldn't even get a Concealed Carry permit approved until last year."

Which means that, somehow, Kurokawa Hana probably has a gun on her person. Somewhere.

She finishes off another target, nailing 10 rounds in the general area of the silhouette's solar plexus. Judging by her frown, she was probably aiming for the heart.
Reborn swaps the rifle for a CZ75 handgun. It's a little lighter than Leon is, but the shape of it is just as familiar in his hands.

"Where'd you learn to use fiamma weapons, Reborn?"

"I work with Tsunayoshi's father. We were able to manufacture bullet casings a few decades ago that could contain Flames in Sicily, and I was one of the first testers for the prototype. They're a bit different from the guns you have here on the island. Our casings are vaporized after firing and we have to reload the magazine when it's empty. How do you set this up for target practice?"

"Here, let me-" She bumps him out of the way and goes about fiddling with the settings panel. "Man, that sounds like a pain. I think some of our larger gauge rifles use shells too because of how much flame you need to fire them, but most of the smaller guns just compress the flames in the barrel. The Type 89 is the only rifle we've been able to modify for barrel compression. Everything else is pump, bolt, or lever activated. How's this sequence?"

Reborn leans over the screen and watches a preview of the targets dropping down from the ceiling, one at a time. "Can you speed it up?"

Hana raises an eyebrow at him. "This is already pretty fast."

"They're up for 2 seconds and there's a 3 second delay between targets."

"Yeah... That's the usual setting."

..Of course it is.

"How do I..?"

She gives him a confused frown but shows him how to change the speed settings anyway. He lowers them. A lot.

"What's the reload time on the CZ?"

"Uh.. I have no idea. It doesn't use a lot of flames so the compression rate is pretty fast. Storage chamber capacity is moderate, as long as you keep putting flames in. About 9 per clip if you don't. There's hard upper limit of I think 12, for safety reasons."

"Wonderful." He charges up all 12 and listens to the warning beep with relish. "Let 'er rip."

"What? This is, like, superhuman speed, you can't possibly—" Reborn presses START, courses flames through his body like he does on a hit, and, well. Lets it rip. Reminds him of the triad raids, only with far, far more targets. Fun times, those were.

1 minute and 120 shots later, Reborn surveys the 30 or so targets that had been cycled out for him to massacre. Only a few headshots; at this speed it's better to go for the chest and shoulder. If they'd been actual people, he would be surrounded by a mess of broken ribs, shattered shoulder blades, and at least a dozen sternum-related injuries that would probably end in nothing but heart failure.

Not bad.

"...What, um," Hana squeaks out next to him. ".What did you say your job was again?"
"Hitman," he says blandly. "Sawada Iemitsu hired me to protect Tsunayoshi, more or less."

"From what? An army?!

...Well that's not wrong, per se. Xanxus and his crew are definitely enough to qualify as a 6-man-1-robot army. Even if they're supposed to be an assassination squad. You know. Discreet.

Hana takes one look at his face and groans, dropping her head into her hands again.

"Noo, please, no crazy things. I'm almost in high school. I just want a peaceful, normal, middle school life. No hitmen, no Iemitsu, no one trying to kill Sawada again—"

A sudden chill washes over him. Washes over them both, because Hana lifts her head and freezes mid-rant at the same time. Maybe it's a draft.

"..A draft?"

"You- you felt it too?" She looks up at him, as lost as he feels but will never admit. "..But you've only been here barely a few weeks."

"What difference does that make?"

"Nothing. It's.. probably nothing. Um. Never mind. Yeah. It was just a draft. They kick up the AC sometimes when it's really warm out. I'm sure he's- everything. Everything's fine. Don't worry."

Hana rakes a hand through her hair, tousling it out of its otherwise neat and tidy fall. Her smile is a bit shaky. "Do you, um, want to shoot another round?"


He leaves it on manual.

"Yeah. Same settings."

He's got 2 weeks of what the hell is going on here to work out of his system. If paper people have to pay the price for it, then so be it.

* * *

Kurokawa Hana is a surprisingly quick learner.

They're at the range for at least 2 hours, and she's already learning how to manually rapid fire. And he's found her to be a rather pleasant person to be around, once she's gotten over the fact that she had been trying to hit on a man unknowingly 4 times her age. If Reborn is the kind of guy she would go for, he's going to have to keep an eye out. He, at least, has some semblance of self control, by sheer virtue of being as old as he is.

He doesn't want to consider her trying to go for someone like him, but younger. More impulsive. Kids shouldn't associate with people like that. Especially not civilian kids.

It does things to the mind.

"..So how's Sawada been?"

Reborn glances down at her. Hana walks easily enough with the cane, keeping pace with him
despite his longer stride. Even more impressive, knowing now that she's actually wearing a brace around one knee.

*Gimped it during Cops&Robbers a few years ago,* she'd said. Proudly. *We still won.*

"He's a little strange."

"Strange?"

"Mm." Reborn rubs the side of his neck. It's cooling down now, but still warmer out than it had been in the range. "Good kid, I think. Scared of everything? But also really vicious."

Hana stares at him. And then starts laughing.

"God, yeah. I know what you mean. He's always been like that, though, even before he got his flames back."

He finds his pace slowing, just a little bit. "..He had his flames taken away?"

*How does she know about that?*

"That's what Kyouko said. She heard it from, uh,. Yamamoto, I think. Which is really weird, because Yamamoto and Sawada weren't friends at all until, like. 3rd grade? It was super weird. Yamamoto said they were 10 when Sawada's flames came back. If you can believe it, anyway."

"Why wouldn't you believe it?"

"Well for one, he *still* can't do anything. I mean. He doesn't fall down everywhere now, and he's *supposedly* doing better in class, but he's just barely passing. He can't fire a gun, he can't make even the simplest illusion, which actually probably has more to do with him being a Sky than being actually a failure. He can't even light the *testing canister*, he-"

Reborn lets her ranting continue, until it trails off into silence, echoed only by the clop of their shoes against the pavement. There are a lot of things Sawada Tsunayoshi cannot do, apparently, that others can.

"..Is that why he's called No Good?"

She nods. Or starts to, then stops halfway. "..You probably shouldn't call him that. To his face. Not unless you want to get hurt."

He raises an eyebrow. "I've heard other kids on the street calling him that. He didn't do anything to them."

Her grip goes white on the handle of the cane. "Don't call him that when Yamamoto's around."

"Yamamoto Takeshi?"

"Yeah. He's vicious, too."

"Hmm. Might be that Tsunayoshi uses it as motivation." Reborn did. So did most of the kids that he knew.
But then, street rats always did what they had to, to survive. Like Xanxus.

"He doesn't." Hana shifts her gaze elsewhere so Reborn can't see her face. ".I mean, he's not insulted by it, either. He just doesn't care. It's weird, but everything he does is weird. Yamamoto cares though, so don't do it."


"...Yeah. It's weird."

"Ugh. Thank god I'm not the only one who noticed."

He snorts. Hana laughs, just so.

Just so.

For someone who says she doesn't care for Sawada Tsunayoshi, she seems to know quite a bit about him. She never did answer why he's called No Good.

Tsuna watches them leave from the kitchen window. Watches Hana freak out, watches Reborn take it all in stride. Hana's flames leak out a little and it makes Tsuna sneer before he can stop himself. 

Lucky her.

He watches until he can no longer see them from the window. The kitchen radio reads 3:27PM. His mother will be home soon. Dinner isn't for another few hours... Reborn will probably be back by then, too.

Tsuna scratches at his wrist and returns to the living room to fall onto the couch, then curses because he doesn't want to get up to turn the fan his way.

"I don't suppose you could turn the fan for me," he muses, petting chameleon curled around his neck with a finger. It snuggles closer and makes no move to detach itself. "I'll take that as a no. Why are you sleeping there, anyway? My neck is all sweaty."

Leon is, of course, a chameleon, and therefore cannot answer, which is only a bit better than those who won't answer.

He clicks on the television, because the remote is something he can reach from where he's sprawled out. It's just a kid's cartoon. Something he used to watch when he was young. Younger.

It's a show about friends. Going out on kid-like adventures, doing kid-like things. It's one of the few mainland-produced cartoons cleared to air on the island. Learning how to play ball, learning how to count. Learning about colors. Juvenile. Elementary.

They're laughing, the kids on screen. Smiling, and joking. Playing. Having fun.

Something he used to do when he was young.

Younger.
Something cold, in the hollow of his chest.

[1] suldatu: (sicilian) soldier, a standard rank in the mafia / cosa nostra. i can't find a sicilian equivalent for capo/caporegime, but it basically means 'boss / boss of a crew', a rank above soldier, but less than the actual 'don' boss.

[2] 40C: about 104F

[3] diu nni pirduna: (corsican/sicilian) god forgive us

[4] pi favuri: (sicilian) 'please', more or less

[5] shika: (japanese) 'deer', referring to the 'buck' part of 'buckshot'.

Chapter End Notes

i THINK there MIGHT BE arcOBALENO THINGS NEXT CHAPTER. not pleasant things though. never pleasant things. but there will be more feelings.

there was a lot more i wanted to include in this one but i'm trying to limit chapters to ~8k chunks... partly because that's about how much i manage to write in time for weekly updates and also because i feel like it's a good length for easy reading. does anyone find them short? want longer updates? more rainbows?
[oyster fortunes daily] it's time to talk about sawada tsunayoshi.

Chapter Summary

what tsunayoshi and takeshi share is more than just a gun pointed at them. what tsunayoshi and reborn share is more than just a life they're unsure of living in. what nana and reborn share is more than just a boy who needs them.

what reborn has is a mission.

Chapter Notes

continues directly after the previous chapter. it doesn't go in chronological order exactly but i think it should still make sense at the end... if anyone's confused about what's happening when, please let me know and i can provide a quick summary.

i realize i had kyouko and nagi's ages wrong in chapter 1. kyouko (and hana) are 16 and nagi is 17, going on 18.

WARNINGS: flashback scenes. quite a few pov changes. allusions to depression? possibly. platonic physical intimacy? kids cuddlin'? some sort of emotional codependency. emotions in general. troubled parent/child relationships. suicidal mentions, both of the vague teenage sort and the 'cannot be captured by the enemy' variety. Poetic Writing (i can't help it). yamamoto 'casually romantic' takeshi.

nothing written is being suggested as proper or valid coping mechanism, i'm not knowledgeable enough about that.

edit december 2016: fixed some details, reworded a few lines for better flow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---

**have a care, now.** that child is my savior.

"..Are you sure you don't want me to walk you home first? I know it's not dark out yet, but—"

"Are you kidding me, do you know what my dad would do if he saw you." Hana looks at him, exasperated in a way that feels exhausting. "Do you know what my mother would do."

"..No?"

"He would give me another long talk about- about stuff. Like.. like sex stuff and-" Hana shudders, violently. "No thank you, okay? I've heard enough of that to last a lifetime. And my mother! She- she would. Try to recruit you for next year's Cops and Robber's game. That's bad."

"I thought you said it was 'crazy fun'?”
"Well, yeah, it is, but if you join in, then Hibari Vice-Leader will want to join, and then Hibari Leader would join, and then Kokuyo Leader would join too and then we would all be just, just slaughtered. I don't want to be slaughtered."

Reborn really hopes she's just using the term metaphorically. But also literally, because facing off against the Hibaris sounds like fun.

"Oh my god you are just like them—!" Hana shoves him in the side, probably at the sight of unholy glee on his face.

He can't help it. He's still getting used to having fully developed facial muscles at his disposal.

"I'll take that as a 'no, please don't walk me home like a gentleman'?"

"Some damn gentleman you are."

"Hey, now, there's no need to be rude."

She's smiling though, or trying not to. It's good thing Reborn has had experience with abrasive personalities and also being abrasive.

Hana waits at the edge of the lawn while he knocks on the door. Nana should be home by now. She seems to be working a lot more lately, even though he recalls her admitting that she tried to only work when Tsunayoshi was at school or otherwise away from the house. Makes him wonder what kind of work she does at that research facility that gives her such a flexible schedule.

"It's- it's unlocked! Please come in!"

And that speaks volumes to just how peaceful this island can be.

"It's Reborn. I'm... back," he says, just barely stopping himself from saying I'm home. "I went out with Kurokawa Hana for a bit."

"Oh- welcome back, Reborn-san." Nana's voice is coming out from the kitchen. "Hana-chan? Is she out there? Oh, please have her come in!"

"She's outside still." Reborn sticks his head out again and makes a beckoning gesture at the girl. He can see her frowning even at this distance, but she trots over.

Nana comes out and Reborn is immediately tense and alert, even before she steps into the hallway. Her eyes are rimmed red and puffy, watery, shoulders drawn up. She's wiping slightly shaking hands on her apron.

"Sawada-san—"

"Reborn-san." She stops in front of him, her hands doing this thing that he's seen Tsunayoshi do before. They're balled up at her sides, not quite fists but not quite relaxed either. Like she wants to wring them together but doesn't want to let it show. "Tsu-kun is upstairs. Can you wake him and Takeshi-kun and tell them dinner will be ready soon?"

When the hell did Yamamoto get here? Why is he here?

..Yamamoto cares. Is that why?

"..Of course. Sawada-san, are you..?"
"Thank you." She gives him a bow, though he doesn't know why or what for. Surely it's not that daunting a task to wake up a slumbering teenager made of fluff and teeth? "Thank you, Reborn-san."

"You're- you're welcome, Sawada-san. I think?"

_Nana, why._

He edges out of the doorway, takes off his shoes, hangs up his hat, and heads down the hall. When he looks back over his shoulder, Nana is heading out to welcome Hana in. Reborn passes by the kitchen and smells shrimp and... steak? Something like steak. And spices. Something spicy. The stove doesn't seem to be on anymore; whatever's cooking is slowly sizzling down.

"Hana-chan! Will you stay for dinner?"

"Um, thanks, Sawada-san, but I- I can't, my parents are expecting me. Thanks, though."

"Let me walk you home then."

"I couldn't-"

"I won't let you walk alone, young lady."

Reborn can just imagine the look of bewilderment on Hana's face. He double checks _just_ to make sure the stoves are off before continuing down the hall.

"..Are you okay, Sawada-san?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine, it's just.. Tsuna-"

He loves having Sun flames, really. _Really_. It's _such_ a great method of eavesdropping on things he shouldn't be listening to without having to get close enough to be caught. Not that Reborn would ever _be_ caught. But this time, he doesn't stick around to hear the rest of what they're talking about. Not to mention they're already out the door and out of range of even his enhanced hearing.

Tsunayoshi. Nana was crying and it has something to do with Tsunayoshi.

He makes a bee-line up the stairs to the boy's room. He knocks.

"..Go 'way, Reborn."

"Takeshi, if you fall asleep you'll fall into the water."

Takeshi splutters and jerks upright.

"I'm- I'm awake! I'm awake-" He yelps, tipping over in his chair and onto the ground. Luckily not into the water.

He's gotten better over the years, so there probably won't be any bruises from this. Still stings, though.
"Ow, dad." Takeshi rubs the back of his head, sitting up. "What was that for?"

"I take you out fishing with me on this glorious day and you just go to sleep?" His dad shakes his head, but there's only humor on his face. "Did you stay up too late last night?"

Takeshi yawns as his answer. Yes. Yes he did.

"Why did you even want to come with me if you were just going to fall over dead on your feet?"

"Because, dad, I wanted to spend some time with you. Obviously." Takeshi rolls his eyes. His father laughs. "Between the Committee and baseball practice and classes at the Island Defense Academy and-" and Tsuna "-and everything, I'm never home for more than a few hours anymore! Also you're always gone for hours whenever you go fishing, and it's hot in the house."

His father snorts. "Why else do you think all us old guys are fishing in this weather?"

Takeshi looks around. There's plenty of other people on the breakwater, some alone and others with company. Some of them are sleeping, just like Takeshi had been doing; but he knows those ones will wake up the moment their lines are pulled on. Fishing is a game of patience, sometimes.

"..You mean it's not like an overgrown frat party surrounded by water?"

The fisherman next to them, Fujita Hwan, laughs. "More like glorified clean-up crew, kid. You ever fished on the breakwaters before?"

He shakes his head. "Just some fly fishing on the rivers. Dad took me oyster raking once in Kaki Lake, though."

"Ah, oyster raking. Classic. The Miuras are hosting another one this year in the fall, did you hear? Breakthrough at the facility. They're celebrating."

"Oh, no, dad, not again. We brought home so many oysters last time," Takeshi groans. "I can still taste them."

"Takeshi was really enthusiastic about it. Even after the depuration fee, we had oysters to eat for.. a long time."

"I can still taste them."

"I think he found a pearl in one of them," his dad continues on, as though oblivious to Takeshi's internal shellfish suffering.

"Oh, yeah. My kid found 3 last time, too. We let the Miuras pawn them off to the mainland and put the money towards her savings."

"Now there's an idea. Takeshi, what did you do with that pearl you found?"

Takeshi slumps back in the chair, tugging his baseball hat down over his face to shield it from the unforgiving sun. "Gave it to Tsuna."

His dad, of course, laughs. Hard. His dad thinks everything he and Tsuna do is hilarious. Adorably hilarious.

Fujita does not. But Fujita also knows better than to say anything when Takeshi's dad is around. Takeshi can feel his stare at the back of his head though.
Maybe he shouldn't have joined his dad after all.

"Tsuyoshi!" Someone else calls out from further down the break. Takeshi pushes the brim of his cap up. Miyamoto Kohaku. He recognizes that one. "We got another one."

Takeshi watches his dad freeze for just a moment. It's times like these that his dad is not actually an islander, despite doing everything he can to fit in. And it fits in well. His dad's an assassin, after all. Was.

Assassins are good at being undetected. Staying hidden.

Takeshi trots over, because he loves seeing what they fish up out of the depths of the waters. It looks like a vest this time, and a matching blazer. The cloth is all worn down by now, after sitting in the sea for so long, but he can tell it was probably expensive.

That's not what they're focusing on though. Not on the fact that it's not a suit-piece that would ever have been manufactured in Japan. Not on the fact that it's a piece of clothing that's been out at sea for so long. Not even the fact that it's been fished up and if he angles his head enough, he can see a finger bone caught on the folds of the sleeve that Miyamoto had missed.

Takeshi's dad reaches out with slightly trembling hands and examines something pinned to the suit's chest pocket, a tarnished bit of metal. He pulls up the vest to look at those buttons too.

"Yeah, he's a Votivo." [1]

"Man, that's the 3rd one we've found this week, isn't it?"

Takeshi's dad nods, grimly. He always is when they bring stuff like this around the house.

"I didn't know you were Italian, dad."

"I'm not." His dad's smile is a little slanted. He pulls out the pin and wipes it down on his jeans. A fee, they said. He has to take a fee. He has so many of them now. "Check the padding, Haku. The outside cloth and the vest are probably done for, but whatever they use for bulletproofing inside might still be salvageable."

Miyamoto takes out a switchblade and starts cutting through the seams at the shoulder. Takeshi watches with rapt attention. A shoulder pad comes out first, little more than mush and mulch. Miyamoto hooks two fingers into the opening and pulls the cloth apart.

"You'd think silk would disintegrate after all this time," he says, shaking his head with a wry grin. From between the two pieces of cloth, he yanks out section after section of thickly woven silk. "They must've had some deal with the triads for this sort of quality."

"Don't be ridiculous," Fujita scoffs. "The mafia hates the triad. It's probably from India."

"It's Italian," Takeshi's dad says, and Takeshi can tell he's trying not to roll his eyes. "They've been breeding silkworms since the 11th century. This can probably be considered an antique now if you have it appraised. Genuine late 19th century Italian silk."

International assassin. Gotta be.

"I could make a killing?" Miyamoto asks, hopeful.

Takeshi's dad snorts. "More like pay your electric bill for a few months."
"Damn. Well that's.. something, I guess. You want them, Takeshi?"

"What am I going to do with bulletproof silk padding?"

"You could give them to Tsuna."

"Dad!"

"Sorry, sorry," his dad laughs, waving guiltily. "Here. As an apology, I'll give you this."

Takeshi catches the pin and peers at it with his one good eye and a petulant scowl. Miyamoto claps him on the back, also laughing. Takeshi huffs.

It's brassy, worn and buffed smooth by the sea and about 3 inches wide. It looks like tree branches.. or like antlers, all tangled up, ending in things that might once have been crescent moons, keys, a hand holding a sword. Maybe there were gemstones at some point, but they were either lost long ago or came loose in the water. Really small gemstones.

"Cimaruta," his father says. "Sprig of rue. It's an Italian charm to ward off the evil eye."

"What's what?"

"It's a.. hm. A superstitious thing. You see it a lot more in Europe. They say that when you look at someone with envy or jealousy in your eye, you unknowingly wish for bad things to happen to them, and that sort of curses them to bad luck. The charm protects you from that. If you believe in it, anyway." His father's hand is firm on his shoulder, squeezing. "Never hurts, you know?"

"..Yeah."

"You going to give this to Tsuna, too?"

"Yeah." Takeshi grins. "Can I give it to him now?"

"You'll.. probably want to get it sterilized first. It's been down there god knows how long."

"I'll boil it when I get home. Can I?"

"..What happened to spending the day with your old man?"

"Um." Takeshi shrugs, sheepish. "..All I'm doing is sleeping anyway?"

"Because you pitched your fishing rod into the waves right at the beginning."

"I-It's a habit!" Takeshi sputters. "A bad habit! I'm working on it!"

He is not working on it. He will never work on it.

"Yeah, yeah." Takeshi's dad ruffles his hair, grinning. "Go ahead. And thanks for helping me carry everything over here."

"Thanks!" Takeshi throws his arms around his father for a moment, listening to the chuckling rumble of his father's chest under his cheek. Then he springs to his feet, folds up the chair he'd been using, and dumps it with the rest of their stuff so his dad doesn't have to later. "I'll, um, probably be back in time for dinner? Maybe. How long are you going to be out here, dad?"

"We'll, we need to take a boat out to find the fishing rod..."
"Dad!"

"C'mon, I was just joking!" His father throws an arm around Takeshi's shoulders. Takeshi still can't believe they're practically the same height. "I don't know, really. But we do need to find it before we go. Hwan, Haku, how long are you two staying today?"

"I'm leaving once I get a good dozen bass," Fujita says, scratching the stubble of his chin. "The wife and I are having a family get together tomorrow. She's put me in charge of procuring dinner."

"Oof, tough life you have there, Hwan." Miyamoto snickers. "Me, I've been wanting to try night fishing for a while now. There's some others joining me tonight. I brought a shichirin so I'll just have my dinner here." [2]

"Hope you're eating something else besides just grilled fish, Haku," Takeshi's dad frowns. Life of a sort-of-single father. Takeshi picked up that habit too.

"You sound like my girlfriend, Tsuyoshi."

"Yayoi and I found you your girlfriend."

"You say that like you gave Kumiko-chan away to me and Taka at the wedding."

"Sure as hell felt like we did." His father sighs, and Takeshi snickers. "I'll try to make it home by.. 6? Maybe 7. Sun's going down pretty late now. If I'm not back by then, you think can you manage dinner by yourself, Takeshi?"

"Yep!"

"Right then. Have fun at Tsuna's, and don't do anything I wouldn't do, okay? Murder doesn't count."

Takeshi laughs, throwing his backpack over his shoulder. The water bottle inside sloshes, still full, and he slips the cimaruta into his pocket.

Before he can take off, though, a shiver crawls up his spine, like cold dread. He's felt this before, he thinks.

"Ooh, that's a chilly breeze," his dad shudders, like he does when Takeshi sticks ice cold hands (or just ice, now) under his dad's shirt in the morning to wake him up. "You going to run back, Takeshi?"

"I skipped out on baseball practice for a few days, so I gotta get back in shape!"

"Crazy kid. Call me when you get there, alright?"

"Yeah. See you later, crazy dad."

Takeshi grins, waves for good measure, and takes off.

Gendo-cho is, as always, bustling with activity. Even at nearly 4 in the evening and at peak temperatures, the dock's fish markets are packed full with sunhats, sun-blocking canopies, and the smell of fish. Fish everywhere. Fish, crab, shrimps, shellfish.

Takeshi waves to one of the stall owners, one of the Yamamoto household's neighbors. She waves back.
The streets are too full, so he paces his way through the dirt back roads, kicking up dust behind him. Even here there are people walking though, so he keeps off the actual road as much as possible. It's been raining just a little lately, and they're so close to the water that the days are not just hot but humid. Sometimes he thinks it's even hotter than the mainland.

Not that he's ever been to the mainland, but his dad likes to complain about it a lot. The heat, that is. Not the mainland.

Takeshi considers sending Tsuna a text to let him know he's coming over, but in the end decides to let it be a surprise. And also because texting while jogging is both difficult and dangerous, and he doesn't want to stop just for a text.

Surprisingly, he runs into quite a few of his and Tsuna's classmates on the way home. Some of his teammates are skipping practice too. They're definitely going to get chewed out by the coach, but it's so hot today, maybe practice gets canceled halfway through.

..Man, but Tsuna's laziness is rubbing off on him.

Speaking of which... the chill from earlier still hasn't gone away. It's like he's hungry, a gnawing pang in his belly, but he's already eaten. It's like running too fast, too far, too hard, like his lungs are burning for air while he's standing still. Like salt and bile, hollow in his chest, as he laughs with his dad.

Like fire, burning and numb and cold on his tongue.

Takeshi reaches the border between Namimori and Gendo-cho, separated by little more than a little wooden fence with no gate, broken only by the open road. He hops over it and heads South-ish, towards Tsuna's house instead of his own.

"I'm home!" Nana calls out, toeing off her shoes at the foyer.

"Welcome home, maman," her son says from the living room, alongside the chatter of the television.

It still makes her giggle to know that Tsuna calls her maman instead of okaa-san. She knows the Japanese like to teach their children about respect as early as possible. Her own father had insisted on being greeted and addressed in Japanese, but her mother found the term maman to be rather sweet and didn't mind it so much. And just because Nana never called her mother okaa-san didn't mean she respected her any less.

It's the same with Tsuna. Nana had been so nervous about raising Tsuna by herself... but her son is such a good child. He tries so hard. A little picky about food, a little particular about what air freshener they use, a stickler for the detergent and how much is used. He complains, but he helps, too. And they share secret grins when she complains to Iemitsu that their son doesn't do anything around the house.

Though, she will admit.. he's been getting a little worse lately. But maybe it's just the summer weather. Maybe it's the new grade and the new classes. Junior High is when all the real learning starts, after all. She just hopes Tsuna has been able to keep up. His test scores are certainly saying
that he is, but only just barely.

"Tsu-kun?" Nana drops her purse onto the kitchen table. "Why are you watching TV down here? Is the AC not working in your room again?"

"Mm, it's fine. Just hanging out with Reborn."

"Oh, is Reborn-san there too? I didn't hear him."

"He was. He's.. out with Kurokawa onw." That's.. a little worrying. "They went shooting."

Oh. Okay. Not as worrying.

"You didn't want to go with them, Tsu-kun?"

"Don't like guns."

Ah, that's right. She feels her shoulders dropping at that. How could she forget?

"Well, I'm sure they'll get whatever it is out of their system before they come back!" It is a testament to how much she believes in both Reborn's upstandingness and Hana's ability to, as she says it, kick the ass of anyone who needs their ass kicked, that Nana doesn't worry about any alternate motives Reborn might have. "Is there anything you'd like to have for dinner, Tsu-kun? I found some tofu on sale, we can have mapo tofu with shrimp."

"Mm."

"Tsu-kun?" Nana pops back into the living room, brow furrowed. "Tsu-kun, are you okay? Is it the heat? Oh, you really shouldn't sleep out here like this. And you left the side door open..!"

She bustles out and back in with a glass of ice water and a wet washcloth. Her son sits up, wobbly but able to hold the glass on his own. Nana pats down his face and neck with the cloth, relieved to see that he is actually sweating, as the heat of his skin should indicate. Why would Reborn let them both in the sun like this?

..Well. Maybe Tsuna just didn't want them in his room. Her son is at that age, after all. He doesn't even like Nana coming into his room, announced or otherwise.

"Are you okay, Tsu-kun? Dizzy? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Maman, I'm fine," Tsuna whines, just a little. He takes the cloth from her and shoves his face into it. She fights back the urge to smile. "Just sleepy. Sun is sleepy."

"Yes, yes, sun makes you sleepy. Do I make you sleepy, Tsu-kun?"

"Maman is very sunny," Tsuna says and smiles, lazy and tired. "Reborn too."

Nana giggles and presses a kiss to her son's forehead, right where that tiny little scar is. The children on TV laugh happily behind her.

"So, mapo tofu with shrimp? How does that sound?"

"Sounds good." He scrubs at the spot she just kissed with the cloth and Nana clucks her tongue. Tsuna hides a snicker. It doesn't take long for that smile to fade, though. "..Maman?"

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She hums questioningly, using her hands to rake his hair into some semblance of 'neat'.
"..Was I no good as a baby, too?"

She feels her blood run cold.

"Tsu-kun! How could you even ask something like that?" Nana is quick to say. She feels bile rising. "What brought this on, now? ...It wasn't Reborn, was it? Did he say that to you?"

Oh. Oh it better not have been. He better not have said something like that to her son.

..But if it was him, if he did say it, whose fault was that? Did Reborn hear about it from Iemitsu? And if he did, who did Iemitsu hear that from? Who did Iemitsu believe it from?

"No," Tsuna says, eyes wide. "No! No, it... we were just talking and I- I just.. I think we're, um. Kind of the same.. me and Reborn. He's- he's really cool? I'm... not...So I just wondered. If I was. If.. if what I remember is real or- or just- just a lie."

"Tsu-kun, no, no." No, no, no. She gathers him into her arms, even though he's not crying. Can he cry? Has he ever cried where she could see? It doesn't matter. She doesn't care. She feels like crying. "You were a wonderful baby, Tsu-kun. A wonderful child. You walked and talked before everyone else did, you learned languages by yourself, you were wonderful. You were such a wonderful boy, you..."

You were.

"..You still are. You're still my son. The best son I could ever ask for."

"Even though I'm no good at anything?"

"Honey," she says, misty and wet, "you never stopped trying. You never stop trying, and maman is very proud of you for that."

She wonders if this is what Tsuna needs to hear. What he wants to hear. She doesn't know, but it's what she has to give.

"Tsu-kun.. maman loves you. You know that, right? Maman will always love you. Okay?"

You were. You were, you were, you were.

"Maman was always worried Tsu-kun would grow up too quickly and leave before maman was ready. You're not no good, Tsu-kun. You never were. Maman doesn't care if you were. Don't ever think that, Tsu-kun. Don't ever think that. You know I don't mean when I talk to your papa on the phone."

"I know," he whispers, arms around her back. He's so small. He's so small. "I know, I know, I just-"

He swallows. His shoulders are smaller than Nana's. His limbs are thinner than hers. They're the same height but she always feels so much bigger than Tsuna. So much more.

"I just don't want him to think I am. That I'm no good. I don't even know why, I don't- I don't care what anyone else thinks, but I still—"

She holds him. She holds him, and holds him, and holds him, because this is her resolve, now. This is what she would fight for. What she would die for. Her family. Her child. This is her resolve and she lets it suffuse them both with warm, sleepy coziness.
Healing isn't just for the body.

For all that she hasn't seen him really smiling or laughing since he was a child, she had been rather confident that her child was doing well, as she had in her childhood. Especially once they managed to find a solution to stop the other children from picking on him, physically. He doesn't complain about school anymore. Doesn't come home injured and beat up, doesn't try to pretend he's okay. She doesn't have to call the school anymore. Doesn't have to confront her son's bullies and their parents.

She's so glad that Hibari Kyouya and Takeshi are Tsuna's friends.

She is. She's sure that she is.

Or she was. She thought.

Tsuna is a Sawada, after all, and Iemitsu did say this might happen. That's what Nana was supposed to be here for.

"Maybe we should have stayed with your grandfather," she says wistfully. And then she says, as though the thought had ever entered her mind, once upon a time,"Maybe I should have remarried after all."

And maybe it had. Once upon a time.

"..He's not dead, maman."

"I know. But he isn't here for you, either."

"I don't need him," Tsuna mutters. "I don't need a dad. I just need you."

_I do. I need him._ But she can't say that. Not to her son, who has done nothing wrong. Her son, who Iemitsu claims is his reason for not coming by more often, but through no fault of his own.

She can't tell him that. She won't blame him.

"You need a Sawada, Tsu-kun."

He pulls out of her hold, hands on her shoulders, jaw set. "You _are_ a Sawada, maman."

"That's what Nao-san tells me," Nana says with a small smile.

"Well, it's true. Nao-san knows a lot. Nao-san knows everything."

"That she does." She pulls him into another hug. This one for her, more than it is for him. He doesn't refuse her this. "It sounds like you look up to him, Tsu-kun."

"Who, Reborn? He's awful. Why would I look up to him? I barely know him."

"_Tsu-kun._" Nana gives him one last squeeze and pulls back, one last time. He's avoiding her eyes, which usually means he's trying not to admit something. She never did manage to get him to break his habit of always making eye contact. "._.It's okay if you do."

"...He's a hitman. A.. killer."

"And? Tsuyoshi-san used to be an assassin. No one minds."
"Used to be."

"Well, you don't have to like the hitman part, then. There's more to someone than what they do, or can't do. You know that more than anyone, Tsu-kun."

Tsuna huffs. Nana knows then that she's said enough, and the rest is up to Tsuna to decide. He already had his answer. He always has his answer, she's learned, but likes to hear it from someone else, too.

"..So. Tofu hamburger steak instead?"

"I'm almost 15, not 5."

She giggles, tremulous, and smooths the hair from his face. "Is that a yes?"

"..Yeah."

"Okay. I'm going back to the kitchen, okay, Tsu-kun?" Nana draws back, pats him on the cheek before standing up. "I want you in your room. I want that AC on, but don't turn it down too low. I don't want you getting heat stroke down here but I don't want you freezing up there either. Okay?"

"Okay." Tsuna scrubs at his face, eyes wet but not spilling over.

She gives him another kiss on the cheek, and he does squirm away from this one, and it makes her smile. Then something tickles her own cheek and she looks down, surprised to just now notice Reborn's pet curled around her son's neck.

"Oh. Did Reborn-san leave you behind?"

"I'm chameleon-sitting," Tsuna says, petting the reptile with a finger. "He's keeping me company while Reborn goes crazy over guns."

"I see he's keeping you cool, too." He looks better now. A little bit. Not quite so forlorn, not quite so lost. Not quite so weary. Not quite so old. She doesn't feel quite so pained to stand up and give him some space now. "Upstairs, okay? Stay safe."

"I will."

Nana turns the TV off and heads back into the kitchen. The door to Tsuna's room shuts and she hears the air conditioning turn on with a rumble, so she goes back to getting the evening meal ready.

About halfway through draining the tofu and getting potatoes out of the pantry, there's a knock at the door. She pokes her head out the kitchen for a moment.

"Is that you, Reborn?"

"It's, uh. It's Takeshi, Sawada-san."

"Takeshi-kun?" That's odd. Nana dries her hands, but by the time she opens the door, they're damp again and trembling. "Not that it isn't a pleasure to see you as always, Takeshi-kun, but.. weren't you out with your father today?"

"Yyyyeah, I was. We were fishing! It was cool, except I kind of, um, threw my fishing rod into the water- anyway!" Takeshi scratches the back of his neck, shoulders hunched and trying not to look as tall as he is. "I, um, I wanted to see Tsuna. Is- is he okay?"
"Well, yes.. why wouldn't he be okay?"

"I.. I dunno, I just- just thought he was sad. Sad-ish.... Um?"

Nana.. isn't sure what to say to that.

"..He's- he's fine now, I think. Oh, please come in. Tsu-kun is in his room. You know where."

Takeshi nods and steps inside, bending down to take off his shoes. They're still covered in dust and maybe a bit of mud on his ankle. It's like he came here straight from the docks. On foot.

"Thanks, Sawada-san. And, um.. he's not. Fine. I don't think." Takeshi tries and fails not to look affected by this, and the Mist over his right eye wavers. "..He's still sad."

"How do you-" How do you know, she wants to ask. "..What do you mean, Takeshi-kun?"

"I.. I don't know. I just- I just know. It's... something I feel. Inside? I know it sounds weird, Sawada-san. But it's.." He shrugs, shifting from foot to foot. "Can I.. can I still see Tsuna?"

Of course. Of course, of course.

Nana doesn't work at the Fiamma Research Facility for nothing. She knows the signs and symptoms of it, even if they don't teach it explicitly to the kids. Resonance. Synchronization.

Harmonization.

"Of course you can." She hopes she isn't crying. She's cried enough for years. Decades. Cried enough when Tsuna was pronounced dead on arrival. Cried enough when they finally listened to her and realized he wasn't actually dead. Still alive. Still alive. "Will you join us for dinner after? I was just getting started on it."

Takeshi flashes her a grin, one that seems as real as Tsuna's are. Used to be. "Yeah. I'd love to."

Nana doesn't have that same kind of connection to Tsuna, not quite that sort of Resonance. She's only his mother. The warmth she feels, the pulse in her chest, next to her heart, says nothing of his sadness. Nothing of his anger. All it says is the same thing her heart says. A steady beat.

Still alive. Still alive.

"Tsu-kun!" His mother's voice comes up the stairs, along with a patter of feet. "Takeshi-kun is coming up!"

Oh god no—

Tsuna is up and scrambling back before the door even opens. And when it does, he stares Takeshi down, as though daring him to come any closer. His heart is beating a little too fast to be healthy.

"...Tsun-"

"I'm fine," he says, too quickly. "I'm.. I'm fine. Really, Takeshi. Were you out with your dad? Fishing, right? You were texting me all night about it. Why are you here?"
Takeshi's already closed the door. Crosses the room, stepping over the manga Tsuna had left out from last night's reading. His Nintendo DS, probably out of battery by now. Clothes from last week that he'd thrown somewhere and forgotten to take out for wash, only to find them again a few days after.

"You should be with- with your dad. You said.. you said..."

Takeshi crawls onto the bed. Tsuna, at least, has the decency to go pink, even though this isn't the first time and it probably won't ever be the last. Even though all Takeshi does is sit down in front of him, legs crossed. Even though the look in Takeshi's eyes doesn't speak of anything but sadness and worry and I'm here, I'm here.

Even though the only thing that happens is Tsuna finding himself pulled into Takeshi's arms, like the first time. And the second. And the third. As always.

Takeshi is so tall. His arms are long, his legs are long, even his hands are long. Takeshi is some kind of tall person alien.

Tsuna's mom hugs him just right. Just enough. Like soft blankets, warm and smelling nice. She hugs him the way the smell of freshly baked bread wafts out from the open door of a bakery, beckoning and accepting.

Maman loves you, Tsu-kun. Maman will always love you.

It's not quite what he wants, though. Not quite what he needs. But he will never blame her for it.

Takeshi is an ocean wave, forever rising and receding. Takeshi is water, pulling bits of sand from the shore, smoothing out footsteps. Like nothing was ever there to begin with. Takeshi is the river, overflowing and washing everything away. Takeshi is Rain.

Drowning.

Drowning.

"Tsu-kun."

Not drowning. Takeshi would never. Takeshi would never...

"What's up, Tsu-kun?"

"...He asked if I was gay," Tsuna says in a croak.

He feels more than sees Takeshi's wince above him. "Oh. Ouch. That's a dick move of him."

"Well.. he asked about Kyouko first. If I liked her. And I said- well, I said not like that, so then he asked if I was gay."

"Ooooh. That makes a little more sense." Takeshi's hand rubs soothing circles over Tsuna's shoulder blade. ".Still kinda rude though. What'd you say?"

"Told him no. I guess? I dunno."

"Wait, you're not gay? What have I been doing all these years then?"

Tsuna digs his fingers into the soft spot right under the edge of Takeshi's ribcage.
"Ow- ow ow ow, Tsuna, that tickles!"

"Shut up, you romantic menace—!"

Takeshi bowls them both over through sheer force of being over 20 centimeters taller and just as many kilograms heavier than Tsuna is. Tsuna says oof and shoves at him to keep from being crushed under the weight of Takeshi's everything.

Unfortunately, he is small and can lift maybe 15 kilos at his best, so Takeshi doesn't even budge.

Takeshi doesn't even budge.

"I got scared," Tsuna says, quietly. "I.. I thought he was gonna be like the others. I thought he was going to think I was weird or something. No Good Tsuna. Can't even make up his mind about something to simple."

As if he had to choose between one or the other. Or both. And nothing else.

"Tsuna," Takeshi says, nose pressed to Tsuna's temple. "I'm glad you're alive. You know that right?"

Tsuna's fingers clench in his shirt, dusty and smelling of sea salt and raw fish. Also sweat. Ew.

"..I'm glad you're alive too, Takeshi. S'not that special."

"Yeah, but it's different."

He stares at the line of Takeshi's throat, huffing out a breath. "How's it any different?"

"Well, when you say it, it's kind of like.. I'm glad I saved you, that kind of thing. Isn't it? You know, I'm glad you're here, I'm glad you're okay. And that's it. It's.. like, selfless."

Tsuna shoves at his face. Romantic menace. Takeshi laughs and grabs Tsuna's hands as he sits up. Holds them. Large, warm, worn and calloused from swinging a bat too much, too hard. A bat, and not a baton.

"..Mine's selfish though." Takeshi's smile down at him is wavering. It's been a while since Tsuna last saw the other eye, unhidden, either by Mist or by patch, resolutely fixed on nothing and out of sync with its counterpart. "Mine doesn't stop at just being glad you're alive. I'm.. I'm glad you're alive because you're glad that I'm alive. I need that, Tsuna."

Tsuna stares back. Owlish.

"..Your dad's glad you're alive. Yayoi-san too."

"Yeah, well, they're my parents. They're supposed to."

"Mm." He understands. "Maman says she'll always love me."

"Yeah, like that. She your mom, she's supposed to love you. It's like an obligation of parenthood."

Tsuna frowns. "That's all wrong, too."

"Well, either way! It's like... congrats for not being a shitty human being, that kind of thing. It's, it's different. It's not. it's not the same."
It is, though. Tsuna doesn't say it. He just stays quiet, watches Takeshi fidget with his fingers, the ones that won't straighten out, the ones that fold all crooked. It is.

drowning, drowning, drowning

"How do you ever even survive being in contact with me for more than a few seconds," Tsuna mutters, wiggling his fingers in Takeshi's hand.

"My resolve is pure and strong," Takeshi says, gesturing widely with his other arm. "Like water that flows from the mountain. Filtered through the stone of my heart and soul. Cool and refreshing."

"I will bury you next to the Black Tie Graveyard if you keep saying stuff like that." [4]

Takeshi smiles at him, twitchy. Hopeful. "Bury yourself with me?"

Tsuna doesn't even bat an eye. "We better go out with one hell of a bang if I'm going to be buried next to you."

The other boy laughs, part gurgle, part relief. "Well, if you say so, Tsuna, it's definitely gonna happen."

"That's what I'm afraid of." He grips Takeshi's hand though, as tightly as his hand is capable of. ".Really though, why are you here?"

"I dunno. Felt like you needed someone."

"And that someone would be you?"

"Wow, Tsuna," Takeshi grins. Sharp. "You're really cranky today. I even got you a gift and everything."

"Shut up and lay down." Takeshi does. Tsuna finds himself staring at Takeshi's neck again, damn his height. His feet are probably hanging off the bed. Or would, if they were straightened out. ".What gift?"

Takeshi wriggles and pries something out of the pocket of his shorts. It's a pin shaped like a sprig of mistletoe, but with objects, moons, keys, instead of berries. It's tarnished brass.

It's for luck, Takeshi says. For warding off ill fortune and ill wishes. Jealousy and envy. As if that's what Tsuna's problem is.

He takes it anyway and wrinkles his nose. "It smells like fish."

"Super cranky."

Tsuna cracks a smile. Takeshi does the same.

He hates it.

Hates how easily they've fallen into his habit, this quiet exchange of words. How simple it is to let Takeshi wrap his arms around him and believe it's okay. Hates that Takeshi always says I chose this, I chose to put you under my protection. Hates that he doesn't know if those words are true, honest feelings, or if that's just Takeshi's Mist-muddled mind talking, like everyone else who calls Tsuna a traitor and an outsider even though he hasn't done anything. Hates that he doesn't know who to be angry at. Hates that he's angry at himself. At everything.
Hates that Takeshi can press a hand against the right side of Tsuna's ribcage, where the web of scarring hides, and Tsuna will just curl into him, weary and defeated, repeating a mantra in his mind as they fall into a doze together. Flames shifting between them, back and forth. Like the tide.


We're alive. We're alive.

We're alive.

The second time someone knows at the door comes a while later. He doesn't know how much time has passed, how quickly it passes, lying here with Takeshi. Takeshi is a Rain, and Rains are slow to change.

With it comes a pulse of Sun that tastes like sea salt and ashes, smells of gunpowder, bright and tangy citrus. An angel's chorus. Copper, blood, his hand wrapped around someone's wrist and theirs around his own. Blood, dripping onto an small statuette. Fire.

May I burn like this icon should I betray you, my brother. This I swear. This I swear

A rattling breath.

Tsunaya lifts his head and he says

"..Go 'way, Reborn."

"I'm not Reborn," Reborn says in a very convincing pitched falsetto tone, not even bothering to wonder how the boy knows. He hears Tsunayoshi's strangled laugh. "I'm your mother. Dinner is almost ready."

Tsunayoshi groans the groan of one who does not want to get out of bed. Reborn is catastrophically curious as to why that is.

"..Can I come in, Tsunayoshi?"

"Mom's not allowed in my room."

"I'm not your mother."

"Old men aren't allowed either."

"I'm only 35."

Tsunayoshi doesn't respond right away. Reborn cracks the door open and sticks his head in. A rush of cool air greets him, as does Tsunayoshi's head and puff of hair propped up on a prone figure's arm. The boy wears an expression of complete disbelief.
"I really am, you know. Do I even look 64?"

"You look like Nao-san, and she's 64."

"I can only hope I look half as good as she does when I'm that age." Again. Tsunayoshi doesn't say anything to that. "..Coming down?"

He turns to look down at the sleeping figure, whose back is all Reborn can see, and shakes him by the shoulder. Probably Yamamoto. For a moment Reborn thinks he's awake, but the sensation of alertness fades away just as quickly as it crops up.

".. In a bit. We didn't fall asleep that long ago so it'll take him a while to wake."

"Flame exhaustion, right?" Tsunayoshi stiffens. Reborn supposes it was a close enough guess and eases himself through the door, shutting it behind him to keep the air from escaping. "I guess you guys call it fiamma exhaustion here. Are you the one taking his Flames, Tsunayoshi?"

The boy hunkers down, eyes sharpening into veritable daggers. One of Yamamoto's arms is wrapped around his torso and Tsuna's own hand clutches at the other boy with renewed vigor. Claw-like.

Reborn lifts his hands again, just like he had done with Hibari Kyouya. A visual indicator that he does not intend any harm, as if Tsunayoshi couldn't read it in his lax and nonthreatening body language. Or disregards it the way Hibari Kyouya does not.

"That's how your body is adapting to sintumu ciammi dispersi, isn't it? Or is that something else here, too? Sindrome fiamme sfollati?" [5]

He knows, from the telltale freezing of the child's frame, that he is, again, correct.

Oh, but he wishes he weren't. He wishes, for once, that he was wrong.

"They say it's like trying to walk again after losing your legs," Reborn says, coming closer. There's a chair by the desk and a plush beanbag in the corner, but Reborn doesn't sit in either of them. Yet. "That's what you do, isn't it. You take someone else's legs and walk on them."

Is it something only Skies can manage? Is it the Harmony factor, or is it simply Flame control? More importantly, can it be reproduced others?

The human body is naturally susceptible to the absorption of Flames, he knows. At a ratio inversely proportionate to the amount of Flames already present in the body itself. And even if the body were chock-full of Flames, it's not impossible to absorb even more beyond that.

What Tsunayoshi is doing, absorbing enough Flames to render someone unconscious, he would need an insanely low amount of Flames to have that effect. That, or Yamamoto's Flame reserves are absurdly high. Law of osmosis.

With the way Tsunayoshi is still holding onto his friend, it's probably both. How blessed he must be.

The Arcobaleno never had anything like that. Their Sky wasn't there when they needed her.

Luce wasn't there when they were cursed. Luce wasn't there when their bodies were shrunk without explanation. Luce wasn't there when they found their Flames being forcibly extracted into a pacifier, being used like a battery for something they didn't understand. Luce wasn't there when
they could barely get through the day without exhausting themselves.

Luce wasn't there.

...But they managed. Somehow.

Viper had been young. So young. Only Skull was younger, probably. Young and strong, but only just strong enough. Only just determined enough. Nowhere near as young as Tsunayoshi must have been, though.

_I Prescelti Sette._ Some fucking bullshit that was.

"...Is that what the nightlight is for?" he asks. Tsunayoshi nods, looking away. He's not a shy child, as Reborn has come to realize, he just doesn't.. like looking at people sometimes. "Do you want it plugged in right now?"

Tsunayoshi shakes his head. "I.. I have it on a prescription setting. For Flame Displacement. There's a- a set schedule for when I have to use it."

They have a doctor who specializes in Flame related syndromes. They have the _technology_ to balance unbalanced Flames.

What a world.

"There's others with Flame Displacement?"

"Just mild symptoms, at the worst. Um, you can.. sit. If you want. If you're staying." Tsunayoshi peers up at him, no longer clutching at Yamamoto like a lifeline. More the way that one would hold a pillow to their chest, for comfort. Reborn pulls the beanbag over and drops down into it.

Something launches off the bed and onto his head. He's going to assume it's Leon, unless Tsunayoshi has found another chameleon capable of curling its tongue down for the express purpose of licking Reborn's nose.

"There's.. some people who have trouble with flames," Tsunayoshi continues. "It's always been an issue on the island, but we've, um. Found ways around it. Collective Resting is one of them. The nightlight is the other. Physical contact has always been the easiest way to do it, though."

Reborn dips his head at the two of them. "Like so?"

"Y-yeah." Tsunayoshi shrinks a little more, fidgeting. Reborn is surprised Yamamoto hasn't woken up from all that moving around. "Takeshi.. he has a lot of Flames. It- it helps with his.. his condition. His resolve is- strong, he says. Like Hibari-san. Like- like yours, too."

Yes. Of course. Reborn is the Strongest Arcobaleno. The Greatest Hitman. His resolve is clad in steel, and diamond-studded. Immune to corrosion and decay.

_(It is an oath sworn in blood, arms clasped, to not die. To never die. To live forever and to make a legend of themselves. It is a pill of triple-dose cyanide stashed in a false tooth, lost years ago to decay, every time he takes a contract from Timoteo. It is a bullet with his name on it if he is ever captured, lest anyone learn what secrets he knows of the Vongola. Before he was cursed. And even after.)"
"Do you have a resolve, then, Tsunayoshi?"

"I- well, I wouldn't be alive if I.. didn't." The boy looks away again. Child. Too young. Too old. ".There are those who can't make a lot of flames though. They're the ones who get the implant. It stops the body from letting flames leave, keeps it.. inside? Yeah."

"Ah, yes, that implant."

"Yeah. But, I don't have it. I.. do have a resolve. It's enough."

"Barely." Reborn is the one looking up now, though he is by no means looking up. Tsunayoshi is so small. He seems much smaller than his mother. "Whatever you do, it never feels like enough. Isn't it? Just like that."

"Yeah," Tsunayoshi says, hoarse. Wide-eyed, but not quite ready to cry. Not yet. "Just like that."

(It is taking turns with Fon and Adami to look after the others. She goes by Lal Mirch now. Taking turns going out and finding ways to procure enough food for the others. Taking turns trying to figure out what the hell just happened. Trying to get help from where they had sequestered themselves away, in a remote village high up in the mountains. A village with legends of cherubs and powerful children descending from on high, heralded by a flash of bright light.)

"You're okay though," Reborn notes. Tsunayoshi's skin is clear enough. Not translucent, not saggy, not hollow in the cheeks. Not now, anyway. Did he look like that before? Before they found something, someone, who could replace his missing Flames with their own, so that he wouldn't look like death warmed over? "You look alright enough."

"I try," Tsunayoshi whispers. He shoots a glance sideways, down at Yamamoto again. "..That's all I can do, really. Keep trying. I don't want to.. to worry maman, or anyone else."

The boy's expression crumbles and something real, something honest comes out. Something that makes Reborn want to soothe it with a steady hand, encased in Flames of glittering yellow.

Reborn thinks, Ah. That's what it was.

Reborn thinks, What a liar you've spawned, Iemitsu. Just like yourself. Even if you didn't raise him.

Reborn thinks, He'll be perfect for Vongola.

"What's your resolve?" The question is a chance, a risk. One that's startling, to Tsunayoshi, if the look on his face is any indication. "Mine is-"

"W-wait, um, a-are you sure you should be telling m-me that?" The boy squeaks. "That's-"

"I don't mind telling you," Reborn says. Head slanted. "Why?"

"It's- it's private! ..Isn't it?"

"Not in the Underworld." ...Well. "Then again, most of us have pretty predictable ones. We're still criminals in the end, we all want the same thing. Join the family, leave the family, protect the family, destroy the family. Take over the family, take over the city, take over the government.. destroy the government. Kill this person, kill that person..."
Reborn ticks them off on his fingers, one by one, like counting lives. One, two, three. Counting deaths. Four, five, six.

Counting kills. Seven, eight, nine.

50 years worth.

"I think I've told you mine, actually. Earlier today." He shrugs. "To alleviate my eternal boredom with life."

And Tsunayoshi looks at him again with those same eyes. Too young, too young, too innocent and naive. And yet too tired. Too old. He shouldn't have eyes like that.

"...Normally people are terrified to know that I kill for fun. Although, as you've said." Reborn presents a gesture in Tsunayoshi's direction. "It's not necessarily done in fun. It is still.. entertaining. Most of the Underworld knows, anyway. Mine. Because the average person finds it a terrifying thing to have as a resolve, and I like to capitalize on that."

"Yours can actually be terrifying, though," Tsunayoshi huffs, no longer quite as tense. "Especially if you pick murder as a profession."

Reborn grins. Teeth. Disarming, inviting. "Anything can be terrifying if you apply it properly, Tsunayoshi."

(It's listening to Skull try to convince them to leave him alone. Because he is immortal. He will live, even if he dies. Or so he believes. It is all that he has.)

The boy bares his teeth back, but with no ill will. Cute. He's not quite as irritating now as Reborn had thought he was initially. Now that he knows the source of that irritation has just been Tsunayoshi inadvertently lying away his emotions, anyway.

(So where does that leave Iemitsu, whose face Reborn still wants to stomp to bits?)

(Ah, well.)


There's no reason why an infant should be able to access the concept of Dying Will. No reason why an infant should keep that same Dying Will around through their childhood. No one studies the phenomenon, because it's impossible to effectively reproduce. It's human research. It's borderline child experimentation.

The Estraneo had the right idea. They just went about it in all the wrong ways. And they just had to have a child who could call for help through the Vongola, of all Families.

Losing Flames... now that's something only Vongola has access to. Officially speaking. There are, after all, asylums full of lobotomized individuals, incapable of sustaining even the briefest of Flames outside their bodies. Balanced, instead, through a cocktail of chemicals and medicines. Nowhere near as healthy. Nowhere near as effective.

And isn't that where you belong, Tsunayoshi?
Instead he has this island. An island where Flames are rich in the atmosphere, in every breath of air. Just enough to survive. Just enough for fiamma nightlights and this thing called Collective Resting to keep him going.

*Now what would happen if he were to leave here..?*

This won't do. This won't do at all. Vongola will need him in Italy.

"You haven't tried to change your resolve, Tsunayoshi?"

"It's not that *easy,*" the boy grouses, reluctantly. ".And I don't want to."

"Even if it would make your life easier?"

"Nothing would make my life easier right now."

"That's a bit overly dramatic."

Tsunayoshi scowls. Reborn tries not to find it endearing. And fails. It's hard to hate the kid when he reminds Reborn so much of himself, but in a better place. In a better life. A better situation, with better choices.

*Disgruntled little child.*

"What *is* your resolve then, if it's so great that you won't let go of it?" He accompanies this with a pulse of his own Flames. Healing and comfort. A tried and true tactic for getting anyone to accept his presence.

It works. Well enough. Tsunayoshi doesn't look like he wants to run away so much now.

".It's a stupid one."

"Now now, it can't be that stupid if it's keeping you alive."

"Can't it? We're not criminals. We're kids." Tsunayoshi sighs. Breathes Flames in and breathes Flames out. "We don't think about protecting or saving or anything like that. We're mean and we have stupid resolves."

"Flames keep you alive, Tsunayoshi. Your resolve keeps your Flames alive." Reborn leans in, just enough. He never signed up to be a life coach. But then, he did kick Xanxus out of his funk. He did manage to get Dino out of the wrong crowd. "There's no such thing as having a stupid reason to stay alive."

('Children,' Fon had said, at Skull's side. Sad, so sad. 'Children, so young. So small. What is this to be? What is this meant to be?'

*I Prescelti Sette.* The Selected Seven.
The Strongest Seven.
Arcobaleno.)

Trust is a path that one walks on. Trust is a gate with a lock at every corner. Trust is the key, hanging nearby. Trust is earned, respected, revered.

*Trust is for fools,* said the Underworld. *Trust will get you killed."

Trust takes time.
..Well. Time and a healthy amount of Sun Flames in just the right places, at just the right moment.

"..Maman told me once," Tsunayoshi says, in a soft, soft murmur. "She said.. she said she doesn't care what I do. Or what I can't do. If I have a plan for my future or not, just.. as long as I can wake up and think, ah, it's great to be alive."

He wears a smile. Small, brief. Wears it, as one would wear a shirt, or a hat. It fits him, but not the way Dino's smiles fit him. They fit Tsunayoshi as though he's made himself fit them.

"That's.. it. I guess. That's all it is. I've- I've always been like that, even since I was a kid, so.. I can't just change it."

For someone who goes through life dreaming of nothing but living, adaptation is an essential survival skill. From what Reborn has seen of how Tsunayoshi's peers regard him, he can imagine it so easily. It's almost sad, and it makes him wonder. Wonder if the boy's aversion to guns and possibly violence is a byproduct of growing up the way he did.

If those crooked fingers were really accidents. If they were really his own accidents.

"You want to live, not just survive." Reborn lifts his shoulder in a shrug. "And right now, you're not enjoying life as much as you could be."

"Don't say that like you have some cure-all remedy."

"I think it's pretty simple though, don't you?" Tsunayoshi gives him a skeptical look. Reborn supposes he doesn't look as convincing as he could look, given what he's wearing. This is fine. "We just have to find a way to let you enjoy life again."

(It is knowing that he stands on the edge. The edge of the edge. Is wanting to stand on the edge of the edge. That is his resolve.)

Tsunayoshi doesn't seem all too impressed. Of course not. He's a boy with no goals, and his mother is supportive but places no expectations on him. Something that does more harm than good, in his case. Zero plus zero is, predictably, still zero.

Reborn will just have to add himself into the equation.

"Let's start with dinner. Get a good night's rest. Tomorrow we'll start turning your life around."

"...How?"

Good, he's not protesting too much. Or maybe he will? Once he finds out what Reborn has in store for him.

"Figure out what things you enjoy doing and do more of them." Probably. He's working on it. It's easier dealing with his own enjoyment of life than it is dealing with someone else's.

"I don't enjoy anything," Tsunayoshi says blandly. Almost mechanically.

"You enjoy watching Yamamoto bash peoples' heads in."

"Takeshi doesn't bash peoples' heads in," the boy sniffs. "He cracks baseballs in half. It's very cathartic."
"Is that what they call it these days?" Reborn raises an eyebrow. "Well, regardless. That's something you enjoy. Why not take a swing at it yourself?"

Tsunayoshi scowls, but Reborn figures that's more because of his horribly timed pun than anything.

"..Because I can't play sports worth a damn. And also I'd probably break someone's legs."

"What have I said about being overly dramatic, Tsunayoshi?"

"Um. Don't do it?"

"Goodness, no, that would make life so boring." Reborn clutches at his chest, stricken, as though to prove his own point. "Don't over-exaggerate the truth. Especially do not over-exaggerate what you can do."

"..Why not?"

"Because the less they expect of you, the easier it is to surprise them."

"Oh." Tsunayoshi frowns. "..Who are we surprising now?"

Reborn picks himself up with a heaving breath, brushing the nonexistent dust from his pants. He ruffles a hand through Tsunayoshi's hair again, fluff and frizz. For all that the boy as shied away from physical contact, he doesn't seem to mind it too much.

Then again, Reborn can barely feel the pull of Flames from his body now. That might have something to do with it.

"The world, Tsunayoshi," he says, as he retracts his hand. And the boy looks, for once, hopeful.

He can see now just how tangled up Tsunayoshi and Yamamoto are. Limbs akimbo, arms here, legs there. How many years did it take them to become that comfortable with each other, to share not only Flames but also themselves?

*(It's hard to hold a child, when one is also a child. Hard to carry an infant, when one's body is also that of an infant.
They never did like each other. But that honestly didn't matter once they'd all visited death's doorstep, one by one.
Once they'd all pulled each other off of it.)*

"You're going to surprise the world."

* * *

That evening, Tsunayoshi smiles a little more. Kicks Yamamoto's shins under the table more than usual because the other boy won't stop squinting at Reborn. He scowls and grimaces more, too, but now Reborn finds them more endearing than ever. He likes honesty. Likes when people are honest towards him. Especially likes it when his targets are honest towards him.

Reborn leans against the window sill, cool night air filling his lungs. In the distance, the fog rolls in, dull and indigo-night colored. In the next room over, Tsunayoshi is finishing his homework. He claims he can do it himself. Reborn will see about that. Nana is watching her shows again, downstairs.
Step One, Infiltration.

Successful.

He's going to have to see if they have smoking pipes here on the island. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

[1] votivo: (italian) 'votive', as in a votive offering. what exactly does tsuyoshi mean by it, though? we'll see. we'll see!!
[2] shichirin: (japanese) a portable grill
[3] roughly, rounding. there's a difference of about 10in/25cm and 45lbs/21kg between them... monster takeshi. 15kg = about 33lbs.
[4] black tie graveyard: a play on the concept of a 'black tie event'. if you've read kakishima's history (which you can now read on my!! tumblr!! nudge nudge), this is where the hibaris buried all the mafia they took down. a graveyard of suits. (psst it's next to the Senior Health Spa.)
[5] sintumu ciammi dispersi, sindrome fiamme sfollati: (corsican/sicilian, italian) might be recognized from (we think we're invincible. direct translation is 'syndrome (of) flame displacement', but more practically is Displaced Flames Syndrome. commonly known as just Flame Displacement. it's generally a term used to describe any negative imbalance of flames in the body.

Chapter End Notes

i did not mean to hit 10k with this chapter but i did and here it is, enjoy.
reborn starts on his quest of tsunayoshi's self-fulfillment.
nagi, shouichi, and friends cooking up something ominous-sounding. well, mostly just
shouichi and friends. nagi's the governmental supervision.
fon cares a lot. mammon pretends not to.
kyouya has changed. tetsuya doesn't know if anyone else has noticed.

so i should say now that this fic is very au, if you haven't already noticed, although not
super duper out of whack. the general storyline will sort of follow... just not in any
particular order and not at all similar. and there is no 'travel to the future' arc. i say this
because marshmallow boy is here and you should not trust him or anything he says.
probably.

i realized i write a LOT of dialogue. it's weird. i usually don't like dialogue.

WARNINGS: in no particular order: Science, soft violence, more italics. general
island creepiness.

edit dec. 2016: clarified some stuff. reworded some things in tetsuya's narrative. typos..
fixed.....

or, y'know, everything just likes to happen all at the same time

SAWADA RESIDENCE; early morning

"Are you sure you can't just..." Reborn makes a vague, pleading gesture with his hands, "..shit out a
bullet for me?"

Leon looks at him with something akin to maybe mild disgust.

"..Pretty please? Pi pavuri, picciulu." [1]

Leon shoots his tongue out and sticks it to Reborn's forehead. He sighs.

"I'll take that as a no."

The chameleon climbs onto his shoulder again, nuzzling into the fabric of his sleepclothes. Reborn
leans back, propped up in the guest bed with a pillow. Not for the first nor last time, he laments the
loss of his main and preferred method of training for Dying Will Flames. The good ol' Dying Will
Bullet. Or at least, that was the traditional method of training that Timoteo had decided for himself and his kids. After Reborn returned with a chameleon capable of mass producing them, anyway.

..Come to think of it, how did the Vongola train the Dying Will Mode in the past? How did they even manage to make Dying Will Bullets back then? Obviously it was possible. Reborn just never figured it was something he would've needed to know, seeing as his own method for making them is largely superior. Surely there has to be a way for him to make the bullets here, on the island.

He's been thinking about it for the past two weeks now, but of course, every option he could come up with still included the main ingredient that seems to be impossible to obtain here.

A bullet.

A metal bullet. A *prime* bullet, or *primed*, whichever it was that the scientists mentioned. Whatever that meant. They gave him the bullets and he let Leon wallow on them until they everything was done.

"Do you know what that means, Leon? This whole.. *prime* bullet thing. What makes a bullet prime, anyway? If I stick a bullet in you, can you tell if it's prime or not? What's so *special* about your body, anyway?" Besides the fact that it can change shape and form into just about any conceivable object and non-consumable substance on the planet. So long as he's provided with a reference for it first. "I wonder if I could trade you in for some bullets. Kokuyo sounded like they'd find some value in researching you."

Leon punches Reborn's cheek with his tongue.

"You're right. If I traded you away, I wouldn't be able to put the bullets in you. Not to mention I can't trust them to give me *prime* bullets."

Leon punches him again, this time on the nose.

"*Alright*, alright!" Reborn swats the offending... appendage? Away from his face. "*Diu*, you're getting brutal in your old age."

If chameleons could scoff, this one would be doing just that. It's cute, how Leon thinks he can scowl with a face as adorable as his.

"..What if I emptied out the magazines from the guns I brought with me? The pellets. You can turn *those* into a bullet, right? I'd do it myself but I think getting my hands on a mold for the shell and the round would be rather suspect. Just melt them in your body or something, *picciulu*. I just need *one* bullet..."

That's probably not how bullets are made. Leon's eyes tell him as much.

"Fine then, be that way." He throws himself back against the pillow and heaves a sigh. "Honestly, why didn't Iemitsu tell us about the weapons restriction? If I knew it was going to be *this* difficult to get my hands on bullets, I would have tried to smuggle some in. Maybe I'd even refuse the job. How am I supposed to get him to use his Flames if he can't access them? Though I guess I shouldn't be putting him into Dying Will Mode right away without knowing if it would even work. I don't need a dead heir on my hands..."

Leon says nothing, because Leon is a chameleon. From the way he rubs his head against Reborn's neck, he figures his partner understands the dilemma. That, or Leon is asking him to shut the hell up so he can go back to sleep.
Which, not a chance. Suck it up, Leon.

"...But that's a problem for another day. We still need to make sure he has what it takes. Well, I still need to make sure. All you do is sleep all day."

Reborn flicks Leon on the nose and Leon tries to bite his finger. Tries, because he does manage to grab it, but Leon is, again, a chameleon, and thus has no teeth to do any damage with. At most he is gnawing. Mouthing. Teething, maybe.

"Yeah. I feel the same way." He pets the chameleon on the head again. "Well, it's late enough. I think I've talked to you plenty for today, old friend. Time to wake the principi." [2]

Shrugging on a bright yellow track suit he'd gotten at the local mall a few days ago, Reborn has Leon change into an airhorn and marches down the hall to Tsunayoshi's room with it..

..and blasts it through the door like he's at a palluni game in Sicily and it honestly doesn't matter whose team is winning, because it never, ever does.

"Rise and shine, bella [3]!" he declares over the sound of Tsunayoshi's sleepy, startled screaming, and sticks his head in. Then the rest of him. "Morning exercise."

"It's- it's 4 in the morning!" Tsunayoshi squawks from his nest, eyes wide and bleary and hair all akimbo. "..What the hell are you even wearing?!"

"I've been up since 2, waiting for a decent hour at which to come and fetch you from your eternal slumber. This is called a track suit, and it helps with circulation. Come on, get up."

"...It's 4 in the morning." Tsunayoshi just stares, so bewildered and so sleepy. "And you look stupid in that."

Wow. Cranky morning baby.

..Then again, Reborn did just wake up him up with an airhorn at 4 in the morning.

"You know, the good thing about it being 4 in the morning is that there are very few people out there to tell me I look stupid. Not that I cared much to begin with. Are you going to let me stand here and look stupid by myself?"

"....It's cold."

Reborn takes out a smaller, matching track suit that he had been hiding behind his back. Tsunayoshi buries his face in his hands with a groan.

"I also have a natural abundance of Flames, if you really need a pick me up."

"That's just cheating!"

"I know."

---

NAMIMORI NORTHWEST; late afternoon
Nagi yawns.

"Um- am- I'm not boring you, am I, Nagi?"

"Hmm?" Nagi leans over, propping an arm up on Shouichi's shoulder. "Shou, we just had lunch. You are a Sun. I'm full and sleepy, not bored."

"Oh." Shouichi lets out a breath, relieved. Nagi almost wants to roll her eyes. "Good. Because I thought I was doing something wrong or, or something-"

"Shou!" Nagi hipchecks him, except she has a few inches and about a dozen kilos of weight on him so it sends him stumbling away with a yelp. "You're not doing anything wrong."

Shouichi gives her a small smile.

"Because we're not doing anything for anything to go wrong with in the first place."

Shouichi deflates.

"I- I mean- we're just hanging out, Shou, you can't... you can't really mess up something like that. Right?"

"Ugh," Shouichi groans, leaning back against her again. "We're so awful at this. I probably did do something socially unacceptable and neither of us realize it."

"Hey, I've gotten better!" Nagi protests, jostling his shoulder a little. "I think I can tell when something is or isn't socially unacceptable."

"You used an illusion to pants someone at your Junior High graduation ceremony."

"Nothing is socially unacceptable within Kokuyo city limits."

"Then- then how do you know if you-" Shouichi makes a wide, dramatic gesture with his hands. ".How do you know if you actually know?"

"I'm from the Mainland, I'm pretty sure I can tell."

"You have borderline social anxiety."

"Yeah, and you get ulcers when you're even the slightest bit stressed. And you're from the Island! Aren't you supposed to be more well-adjusted than I am?"

They square off, staring each other down. Shouichi's frown has taken on stern light ever since he hit puberty, making his occasional rough temper even rougher. Nagi, on the other hand, prefers to let her eyebrows to the talking from under the wide brim of her sunhat.

..Until she feels her face heating up and Shouichi is the first to dissolve into a fit of giggles. Nagi rubs at her cheek as though she could make the blush go away.

"It's way too hot for this," Shouichi laments. Nagi has to agree. She slings an arm over his shoulders and starts them both walking again. "Ew, Nagi, you're getting your sweat all over me."

"I'm going to punch you for that."

"Okay, now I'm going to get a stress ulcer."
"From what? The horrors of your own existence?"

"From being in your general presence." Nagi takes off her sunhat and shoves it hard onto Shouichi's head and down over his eyes. "Ow- Nagi, I can't see—!

There's no one else around, so she lets him walk into a telephone pole. He takes the hat off and tries to bludgeon her with it as he chases her, laughing, the rest of the way home to Shouichi's shared studio apartment.

"Good evening, Momo!" she calls out, bustling through the open doorway, and passing by one of Shouichi's housemates as she does.

Xu Jin Momo veers backwards just quickly enough to keep her soda bottle from being dashed open on the cold, hard, unforgiving floor. "Hey, mom. Where's-"

"I'm home!" Shouichi zips by after her, still swinging the hat like a bug net.

"There you are. Don't blow up anything today, we're recording in the garage!"

"It's called soundproofing for a reason, you won't even feel it."

"I don't want to hear that from a mad scientist like you, Shouichi."

At the bottom of the stairs, Nagi watches Shouichi all but screech to a halt and turn right around to go back up. "NO SCREAMO."

"KILL JOY," Momo screams back.

Nagi clutches at the laughing stitch in her side, leaning against the wall of the stairwell to keep from falling over. Shouichi knocks her one in the arm and shoves the hat back on her head. He fumbles with his keys and she catches her breath, even drops them a few times while trying to catch his own.

"Ooh. Running after eating. Never a good idea."

"Don't say that like you're using any atrophied muscles to do your running with, you mountain of muscle," Shouichi wheezes. "I thought you were an artist. When did you turn into Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

"Ever since I found out that exercise helps with my creative moments."

"Really?" Shouichi's face scrunches up. "Doesn't help with mine. Makes me feel like a noodle for days."

"Wrong kind of exercise, maybe?" Nagi shrugs. The basement door unlocks with a buzz and she helps yank the door open. "Maybe try yoga? Gina likes that."

"He would enjoy yoga."

The other boy mutters something colorful in their mind. Nagi snickers.

"What? What's so funny, what did he say?"

They go about turning on all the lights and powering up the non-essentials. In the corner of Shouichi's lab, a set of computers are still whirring away, processing data and uploading the project files that Shouichi had started setting up this morning. One of them looks like it's running
calculations on something.

Nagi wonders if it's been calculating the same thing since the last time she was here. Which would have been... a few weeks ago. Damn.

"He thinks you'd look cute in yoga pants."

Gina screeches something about no, no I do not, I did not, stop telling him lies, while Shouichi rolls his eyes and shrugs on a lab coat. Nagi does the same, hanging the sunhat up on a hook.

"Well, I'm definitely not putting on yoga pants then. Maybe I could try Tai Chi."

"What, what?" A voice crackles out from the laptop in the corner in a mixture of English and Japanese. "Shou-chan is going to exercise? I have to see this!"

The two of them freeze for a moment, staring at the black screen until something clicks in Shouichi's head. "..Oh my god—"

"Turn on the webcam, Shou-chan, I want to see these yoga pants."

"I'm not wearing any yoga pants!" Shouichi rockets across the room with a whine like a wind-up toy. "How- how long have you been there, Byakuran?!"

"Since you two left for the research facility."

"That was hours ago."

"Yes! I have been playing shiritori with Spanner. Through chat." [4]

"You've been playing shiritori for four hours?" Shouichi hesitantly moves the wireless mouse. Nagi peers over his shoulder and both her eyebrows shoot up when she sees how long the word chain is. "You're playing in four different languages? Wait- why is it still going? Spanner isn't even there."

"Oh, he popped in for a minute, so decided to test out our shiritori programs against each other. If we could just get another terabyte of memory we could add a few more language banks for it to work off of..."

"You're using our precious resources to make a shiritori program?" Nagi doesn't find it too surprising, though. From what she's heard, this Byakuran sounds exactly like the type of person who would do something like that.

And, oh, look at that. He did do it.

"Nagi-chan!" The boy on the other side of the laptop chirps.

She doesn't know he chose a white orchid for his online handle (because she's pretty sure he's not from Japan, or even remotely Japanese) but he does remind her of one. A white one with an indigo center.

Gina thinks the same thing. [5]

"Byakkun," Nagi says with an acid-like smile. Too bad he can't see it. "Stop calling me that."

"Ah, Nagi-chan, you wound me. Why do you let Spanner call you Nagi-chan but not me?"
"Does he still call me that? I'll deal with him next time he comes around."

"He's doomed," Shouichi says, having moved aside to the worktable to check up on the data transfer. "It was nice knowing you, Spanner. Rest in peace."

"I will write his obituary. I'm very good at writing obituaries." Byakuran chuckles. "So, Shou-chan! What have we got?"

"Okay, my scientists friends- er, my other scientist friends- well, I guess they're not actually friends... anyway! I went to, um, meet them. They indulged me and my silly ideas. They said, sure, we should be able to downsize the Mosca's particle beam."

"Ooh, goodie."

"Iiiif we had a few hundred billion yen, a decade, and an army of trained monkeys. I mean, scientists. Physicists and biologists with fiamma degrees. Which of course we don't have, nor do we need." Shouichi rolls his eyes. "And then they offered to donate some of their research material to our little school project."

"Oh. What did they send?"

"Well, I was rather offended by their assumption that the three of us trying to rework a fiamma compatible prosthetic wouldn't be as competent as they were.. I mean, you and I were there and helped with the calculations for sizing up the particle beam, and this is also not a school project. So, naturally, I told them to take their research and shove it up their collective asses. I think my stomach's going to leak acid soon."

Byakuran whistles low. Nagi shares a shaky high-five with Shouichi.

"We still have the funding, though. and I still have a copy of what we worked on from that time anyway, so it's not like we're going into this blind. Not to mention Spanner basically has the bible for the Mosca system, I think we can handle it on our own."

"Haha!" A delighted laugh comes through the speakers of the laptop. "Damn right we will."

"Shouichi, do you want me to turn on the video chat?"

"Hm? Yeah, sure. Won't need it for long but it won't hurt. I'm double checking the files and their integrity so we can get started."

Nagi leans over to turn on the webcam and is treated to the sight of one young Italian man's head of extraordinarily bleached hair.

"Oh, gross, tits. Is that you, Nagi? You're amazing and everything- well, from what Shou-chan says, anyway -but please get your bosom out of my face."

Nagi leans in closer, slowly, and starts humming the Jaws theme until Byakuran's protesting turns into muffled, shrieking laughter.

"Oh my god— Nagi, stop trying to cybermolest him."

She draws back, giggling, covering the red on her cheeks with a fine net of Mist. Byakuran has both hands over his face, though she can see him grinning too.

"Are they gone? Can I open my eyes yet?"
"Yeah." She turns the camera and points it at Shouichi instead. "Here's something better to look at."

"Shou-chan! My, but you're a sight for these very sore eyes."

"You're embarrassing," Shouichi mutters, his face red and pointedly not looking their way. "Both of you."

"And that's exactly why you hired me, Shou-chan." Byakuran grins, stretching the tattoo under his left eye. "So! Are we ready to get to work?"

"Almost. The files are done uploading... let me know when everything syncs up on your side, Byakuran."

"Will do!" Byakuran pushes back from the desk his camera is on and rolls away on a chair over to another computer.

Like Shouichi's it's much larger and bulkier looking than the average setup. And loud. Cooling fans. He's wearing a lab coat too, with a symbol printed on the back that matches his tattoo. Nagi wonders if that must've hurt to get. The tattoo. And she wonders if it's like a logo or something, since it seems worth emblazoning on the back of something like a lab coat.

She wonders where his funding comes from. Spanner's, too.

"I haaave it! Pulling everything up right now... Oh, this is good. I remember this from last time! Scaling the size and energy requirements up wasn't that difficult. Sizing them down, though..."

Shouichi grabs the laptop and camera to bring it closer to the workstation, and he and Byakuran fall into the sort of scientifically technical conversation that Nagi can only barely follow. Not that she needs to; she's already heard the overview and briefing of the project back when Shouichi was trying to get the Authorities to approve funding for the project. Took months of phone calls and appeals and an endless marathon of Blood+Pepper blasting through the speakers, not to mention Momo and her garage band trying to be as optimistic and encouraging as possible.

Bunch of Suns playing music for a hobby, just like Shouichi did. They could probably wake the dead if they wanted to.

"...how small exactly are we going to make this?"

"Oh, uh.. we still have to get tester's arm measurement don't we? We didn't need it for the particle cannon. Nagi?"

"Hmm?" She checks her phone. "It's a bit late right now.. I can text him and see if they're free for it. We should probably do it tomorrow though. You can come with me when I head back, Shouichi."

Shouichi makes a sound of agreement and Nagi starts tapping off a message to send.

"Why not just call him?"

"He doesn't like talking on the phone."

"Classic hikikomori in the making," Shouichi says musingly, eyes glued to his computer screen. "I certainly know that feeling."
"You're a bit more of a reclusive mad scientist, Shou-chan."

"Why does everyone say that? Why does everyone think I'm a mad scientist?"

"Well," Nagi says, shrugging, and hits send, "you do have the plans for some diabolical weapon of mass destruction on your hard drive, under every lock, key, and encryption known to mankind, and you're using it to make a prosthetic arm capable of firing particle beams without killing the user. I think that fits the criteria of mad scientist."

"I thought it was having to be insane, eccentric, and amoral? Like me?"

"You aren't allowed to be a mad scientist, Byakkun," Nagi sniffs. "Because if you were, that means we would be your accomplices, and I'm not letting us be accomplices to any bullshit you manage to cook up in, where are you even, Austria?"

"Italia!"

"Italy. I mean, you're probably mafia, for all we know! So please don't get us involved in your mad scientist mafia bullshit."

Byakuran's grin is sharp as he salutes. "I, codenamed Byakuran, nerdiest mafioso in Italy, do hereby swear not to involve you two innocent civilians in my antics. May I burn on the cross if I break my vow."

"That sounds super mafia-like," Shouichi says, sighing. "Wait, what about Spanner?"

"Spanner is neither innocent nor a civilian! He caught the army's attention at a science fair last year. Something about a Mini Mosca. Anyway, they probably saddled him with some easy stuff that he can do in his sleep. He'll be back before we know it."

"Spanner's working for the army? Wow. He's not even that much older than we are..."

"..Shouchi." Nagi throws the nearest non-life-threatening blunt object at the back of Shouichi's head. It happens to be an eraser shaped like a croissant that rolls away under the desk somewhere. "I work for the Authorities. The Authorities are funding your project. Byakkun is probably in the mafia. Why are you so surprised that Spanner's working for the army? And isn't that technically called contracting? He's not actually joining the military, right? He doesn't seem the type."

Shouichi snorts and rubs the back of his head. "Yeah. Can you imagine him, like, buff? Or any of us? With muscles?"

Nagi pulls up the short sleeve of her t-shirt and flexes. Byakuran lets out a delightfully tittering snort-giggle-laugh.

"You don't count, Nagi." Shouichi swats at her bicep until she moves out of the way. "I think we're ready. Is everything set on your side, Byakuran? How's the holo system that we sent you? Up and responsive?"

"As far as I can tell, Shou-chan. I have the room set up exactly as the blueprint says and all my tables are cleared off."

"Okay. Put the visor on, Nagi?"

"Here to do my duty." She stretches, cracks her knuckles, and approaches the pedestal in the middle of the room. Puts her hands on the glass canister, hooked up to wires and cables and half a
dozen cameras on the pedestal itself, maybe a few dozen more scattered around the room. "This tech is still a little experimental, so if you start feeling nauseous, take off the visor and let is now."

"Kind of like Virtual Reality, isn't it?" Byakuran grins. "I can handle it."

"Alright. Everyone ready?" Nagi receives a confirmation from the other two and takes a deep breath. Lets it out, and takes another. "Starting up Mist-actuated holo-link in 3, 2, 1..."

I want to see you.

The thought fills her like smoke fills a jar, sudden and bright. Fills the room like sublimating dry ice, dripping and pouring from every node on each hidden camera. Like water in a jug. Smells sweet, like chocolate and malt. Sounds like chanting. Blood dripping.

"Oh. That's very neat."

Nagi lets go of the canister. The flame burns on, now powered by a quasi-perpetual engine located within the pedestal itself that won't need to be refilled or reactivated for a while. A Mist projection of Byakuran slides out of the Mist as it clears up into something more translucent and less like a burning hours. He peers at the device with great interest.

"..You look so dumb in those goggles, Byakkun."

"I feel like a mad scientist," he croons, skipping over to Shouichi. "I love it."

"You are so embarrassing," Shouichi hisses, but not without fondness.

He heads over to one of the side tables and pulls the sheet off, revealing a massive, detached robotic arm underneath. The Mosca original, shipped straight from Italy. Identical to the one they had received last year for the canon. How many of these do they even have in Italy? No one will say and it's apparently not pertinent enough for the Island's Authorities to dig into.

(Or at least, not pertinent enough to divulge to Shouichi and friends.)

Nagi drops into a chair with her phone a little ways away, waiting for a reply. She doesn't wonder how Byakuran got his hands on those.. hands. He probably is mafia after all.

But, so is Gina? Sort of?

"Alright. Let's take it apart." He shares a look and a flicker of a smile with Byakuran, who grins back wildly, fingers wiggling and skimming over the arm. "...Again."

She pulls up the Robot Unicorn game that she and Gina have been playing since yesterday and sets out to beat his current high score. He hisses at her.

* * *

When Nagi and Shouichi arrive at Tsuna's house the next morning, they find him and Yamamoto Takeshi collapsed in a heap on the front lawn. Reborn is discussing boxing posture? With Sasagawa Ryouhei? In a track suit?

Reborn is. In the track suit. It's a blinding shade of yellow and so are Ryouhei's shorts, under his Committee uniform.

"Hm? Oh, good morning, Nagi-kun." Reborn beams at them, looking so completely refreshing next to Sasagawa. "Back from your friend's again?"
"Mm. Reborn, this is Irie Shouichi. Shou, this is Reborn, Tsuna's house guest."

Shouichi stammers out a querying noise and gives up after a moment, instead gesturing between all four of them.

"Ah, I took Tsunayoshi out for a run this morning! We bumped into Yamamoto and Sasagawa here on the way, so they joined us. Now only Sasagawa is left."

Sasagawa shouts a greeting and proceeds to throw his fist out, while Reborn observes and makes comments and suggestions, comparing form and posture.

Nagi sighs and pulls Shouichi over with the tape measure to start measuring Tsuna's limp arm before Shouichi shuts down from having to experience Reborn's everything up close and personal.

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**TRAPANI, SICILY; midday**

"..I am rather surprised Xanxus let you get this far from the HQ, Mammon."

"Mu. Arcobaleno business is Arcobaleno business." Mammon's head tips just slightly. "Boss understands, and this is still Vongola territory. He was pretty nosy, though."

Fon chuckles quietly, pulling the handmade teabag from his mug and setting it aside on a saucer. "Assassins and hitmen usually are."

Mammon sips their strawberry milk and fiddles with a small bowl of chocolate gelato. Nearby, Fon's assistant is having a Greco-Sicilian lunch with Lichi and a little girl. Fon nibbles on a Greek pastry before starting on his tea.

Mammon has both tables shrouded in Mist, keeping eyes off and ears turned away. It's Vongola territory though and nothing to really worry about.

.. Nothing much. Fon isn't Vongola, after all.

"You've put quite a bit of effort into tracking me down and getting me into Sicily, Mammon. Any particular reason why?"

"Reborn needs a favor."

"Now isn't that a surprise?" Fon shakes his head, smiling. "What does he need this time?"

"He needs to get in touch with Verde."

"Oh, my." Fon's mouth twitches and Mammon snickers. "And here I thought they hated each other."

"You know that's impossible, Fon."

"That I do. I also know that it is almost impossible to find Verde without Skull."

"How does that work, anyway? I've always wondered. I know those two definitely hate each other."
"Mutual sort of hate." Fon waves his infantile hand, as though presenting some idea. "Skull is a Cloud. A drifter. He knows where to hide, how to hide, and Verde is always hiding."

"Simple as that, is it?" Mammon's mouth twitches. "Mu. I thought there would be more radar and tracking technology involved."

"Oh I'm pretty sure there's plenty of that too. Especially on Verde's side. He does try his best to keep Skull from finding him."

"If he weren't so stingy, I could provide him with some top-notch illusions."

"If you didn't charge so much, he would take you up on that offer."

Mammon cracks a bit of a smile. That's good. Children shouldn't be so serious all the time. They shouldn't have to be.

...But Mammon is older now. Fon remembers. All grown up and left the nest. Doesn't mean he can't still worry about them all. He's entitled to at least that much.

"I've been having some trouble locating Skull, as a matter of fact." The other child. The one who always manages to get himself into a whole shitload of trouble when no one's looking—and no one is ever looking. "But I'll see what I can do."

"Well, see if you can do it fast. Seems urgent." Mammon shrugs. "Then again, everything is urgent with Reborn."

"He isn't too patient, no. I don't think he even feels as old as he is."

"Unlike you?"

Fon would smile, but he is already smiling. So he smiles wider. "Quite."

Storm rages inside him like hornets in a nest, angry and pulsing. Anger gets tiring, after a while. It's been long, long years since Fon has felt truly angry. It is the one thing with which he might have some empathy for Mammon's boss. Not that he's ever met the man, but in this local region of the Underworld, few don't know of the cruel and brutal, tempestuously Wrathful assassin of Vongola.

Not that Fon is from this local region of the Underworld. But he knows Mammon. Mammon likes to talk sometimes, and Fon likes to listen at all times.

"Have you been well?"

"Mu.. Assassination isn't my specialty. It hasn't been too bad, though. Boss doesn't care for anything but skill so even I've been pulled out of bookkeeping. Boss has been considering officially finishing up his Guardian set. It's probably a test."

"I didn't ask about work, Mammon," Fon sighs, just slightly. Mammon fidgets. Just slightly. "How are you doing?"

"...Well. Enough."

"Now was that so hard to say?"
"Yes. Shut up."

"Come now, it's been a few months since we last spoke. I worry for you. You and Skull. I haven't seen him in a while, either."

Mammon snorts. "You worry about everyone. We're not kids anymore, yéyé." [6]

"Maybe not." Fon takes another sip of tea. "But your employer has the wrath of an untempered Storm. I won't stand by and watch something like that destroy a friend of mine."

Mammon's small hands tighten on their carton of milk. The wide brim of their sunhat shadows any expression Fon would otherwise make out, but he has never needed to see someone's face to read their emotion. The downset of Mammon's mouth is telling enough. Always has been.

"We're not friends."

His own smile falters. That's right.

"No, we're not."

They're not friends. Just a ragtag group pulled together haphazardly and made to work with one another. Use each others' skills to the utmost. Making the best be better. Heists, break-ins, sabotage.. kidnapping, hits, assassinations. Making the strong stronger. Cull the weak.

No, they're not friends. They're 7 people deemed mighty by one man and chosen to uphold some ludicrous responsibility.

(Their Sky is missing, but Lal Mirch still makes 7. The only fool army that Fon will ever willingly be a part of.) [7]

"..But that doesn't mean I can't care. For you, or any of the others. I even send Verde care packages whenever I can."

Mammon laughs. "Yeah. I can imagine that. I bet he throws everything out without even opening it."

Fon shakes his head in good humor. "He wore one of the scarves, once."

"Wait, you gave him that?"

"Woven bamboo fiber, flame resistant. A gift from the triads," Fon chuckles. That had been quite the heist, and not really anything the triads would notice. Just a single scarf. "He's probably using it to mop up spills now, but it's the thought that counts."

"Mu, what a waste. All he knows how to do is spend money."

"I can't blame him.. the world is much different now than it was before."

"For you more than the rest of us, I take it."

"Spoken as an Esper, Mammon. As though you actually know how old I am."

"I do." Mammon pushes the empty carton aside. Fantasma hops down to the table and nestles itself under Mammon's hand. "You told us, after the changing. We all did. Don't you recall?"

"Did I?" His fingers drum along the surface, small and pudgy. He drains the last of his tea, tastes
powdered mica and lotus roots in the back of his throat. He's had this tea enough times to tell what's what. "...Must be old age getting to my memory."

It also helps that he tried all the ingredients separately once, out of curiosity. The triad certainly cooks up the most interesting things. Like himself.

"Have you spoken with Lal Mirch or Colonello any?"

"No." Mammon shakes their head just enough to indicate a negative. "Lal Mirch isn't directly under CEDEF and Colonello goes wherever he wants. Even Varia doesn't have that kind of information. But I could find out, if you're interested in contracting."

"Aren't you tied to Varia contracts only?"

"Mu, I told you. Boss gave me permission to go off on Arcobaleno business. That means I can take whatever contracts I like until I head back to Varia."

"Hoh. You need an excuse to check up on your fellow Arcobaleno, Mammon?"

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

"Of course not." Fon smiles, fleeting and small, and Mammon mirrors it back at him. He considers another mug. "Tea?"

"I wouldn't drink any of that even if you paid me."

"I have people bleeding to get their hands on this, Mammon. Sure you don't want any part in it?"

"I am. Because I know it's practically poison for anyone but you."

"Touché." Fon quirks another smile and raises his little hand to flag down a waiter, requesting another hot water for his tea. They share an amiable silence until his mug comes back from inside the cafe, steaming. He drops the used tea bag in and lets it steep a second time. Mammon strokes a hand over Fantasma's head until the frog-viper climbs back into the depths of Mammon's petticoat. "So, will you take the request?"

"Hm. I suppose I could make time to visit Mafialand to see Colonello. I don't know about Lal Mirch. She's still in and out of COMSUBIN, last I heard."

"That's fine. How much do you want for payment?"

"You can pay for my trip to Tunisia."

"..Are you talking just the ferry ticket, or..?"

"Ferry ticket. Both ways." Mammon smirks. Cheeky kid. "Hotel and living expenses for 1 week, and a bit extra. I have some gifts to make a purchase on."

"Esper Mammon, buying gifts... I never thought I'd live to see the day." Which is a lie, because he's lived this long already. Fon raises his hand again, this time to wave over his assistant from the other table. "Ya Tao, qǐng guò lái. Xiǎo Jun can stay, I just need my bag." [8]

Ya Tao comes over and sets the bag down on the table, glancing between Fon and Mammon. "Fēng-shīfù xū yào xiànjīn? Need cash?" [9]

"Not unless I have 1,000 euros in there somewhere. Or more." Ya Tao grins but shakes his head,
dislodging the braid from his shoulder. Fon digs around inside it until he finds his card case. "Here. Bill it to this address."

Mammon takes the card that Fon holds out. And then stares at Fon. Or at least, seems to be staring. "..You know I can't read, right?"

"It has braille. Just for you." Fon smiles, pleasantly.

Mammon's teeth wink at him and the card disappears into the pocket of their petticoat.

"Is that all, then?"

"You tell me, Mammon. You're the one who called me out here."

"Mu. I'm showing some decency."

"Then, no, there's nothing else. I'm going to drop xiǎo Jun off at the monastery before I look for Skull. Reborn isn't in any rush, is he?"

"He didn't try to contact me directly, so I assume it's urgent."

He nods with a thoughtful hum. "I'll drop by and say hello to him, too, while I'm there."

Mammon's head tips to the side. Fantasma does the same, and with a faint ribbit. "You're visiting him?"

"The island I'm frequenting is the same Madreperla Reborn is on. Haven't I told you guys that before?"

"Hah." Mammon snorts and laughs, lips curled in a cackle. "You haven't. That should surprise him. I almost wish I could be there to see it."

"I'll have Ya Tao take pictures for you. It'll be a test of his reflexes." Fon looks up and smiles. The young man rubs the back of his neck, laughing quietly. "You should come by some time. I'll even extend a formal invitation on your behalf."

"If Boss wants to, I'll go then. No sooner. I flew past it once, you know. There's no way I'm getting anywhere near that dense of a Mist shroud without some sort of compensation."

"It's not as bad as you think."

"Says you who drinks poison recreationally." Mammon stands and, with barely a gesture, conjures up an attendant of their own. A middle-aged Italian woman, unremarkable and not very memorable, to draw less attention. They float up and sinks into her arms, cradling the infantile form to her chest. Easy and foolproof. In the Overworld, anyway. "If that's all, I have a ferry ride to check up on. I'll head to Mafialand and track down Lal Mirch once I'm done in Tunisia. You better be ready to pay my invoice by then."

"I'm always ready to pay your invoices, Mammon."

"I'm going to make you regret saying that."

"Ciao, xiǎo shéshé. " Fon beams and waves as they leave. Lichi hops onto the table next to him and mirrors his action, chittering. "So hello to your parents for me."

"They won't even remember you."
He doesn't say anything back, but chuckles. It doesn't matter if they do or don't. It's the thought that counts, isn't it?

"Bàba, are we going somewhere?" [11]

Fon hops down onto the seat so that he can be eye-level with the child, little Jun Fu. "We're going to meet your sister, xiǎo Jun. What do you think about that?"

"Jiějiě? I don't have a jiějiě." [12]

"You will now. But she only speaks Cantonese, so you have to be patient, okay?"

The girl frowns. "I don't know Cantonese..."

"You can teach each other. I know you can do it, xiǎo Jun." He pats her on the head with a hand that's far too small, and she grasps at it. "I have something very dangerous to do and I don't want you or Ya Tao to get hurt."

"Mm." Jun Fu grabs for Ya Tao's hand instead when he presents it to her. Fon is glad to see her responding more now, and not shying away from them so much. The triads are harsh enough on their prisoners as it is. Forcing children to become Flame active, though, turning them into assassins... "Bàba, what is her name?"

..That's always been a Shen Xian specialty. Fon would know. [15]

"She's called Ping Zhi now. Wong Ping Zhi. I took her out of Shen Xian, just like you, xiǎo Jun. She's.. 10 years old now, 3 years older than you."

"Then, Ping-jiějiě? She's like me?"

"That she is." Fon finishes his tea and uses a subtle pulse of Storm flames to clean off any trace of residue or DNA. The triads have no place here in Sicily, but it never hurts to be cautious. "Let's go, Ya Tao."

"Where to, shīfù?"

"Mainland Italy. I need Hokuto Yuu to pass on a message to the island so they can prepare for our arrival, and I don't want to make the request over a phone line."

"Then we are going to Messina?"

"Messina first. Then Naples." He hops onto Jun Fu's head, chuckling when she tries to look up at him and almost succeeds in accidentally throwing him off. Lichi scrambles up and into the inside of his robe. "And then we go to Kakishima."

"And then I can meet Ping-jiějiě?"

"That's right, xiǎo Jun." Fon smiles. "There will be lots of other xiōngdì for you to meet there, too." [13]

Jun Fu giggles happily. This is what he lives for. Little assassins learning how to become more than what they're made to be.

Learning how to live again.
Tetsuya knows when things are serious if Kyouya throws off the *gakuran* hanging across his shoulders before lunging into the fray. Fortunately for him and the majority of the school population (and the town, to be honest), Kyouya doesn't see any reason to go that hard unless someone's life is at stake. And even then, it's fairly debatable whether he will or won't.

*This* is certainly *not* life-threatening in any way, but the *gakuran* does look close to slipping off of Kyouya's shoulders.


It's only through countless rounds of being Kyouya's punching bag in the past years that allows Tetsuya to evade most of his attacks, lets him know what to expect and when, know how to dodge the worst of Kyouya's strikes. Kyouya obviously knows this, or else he wouldn't look so *bored* or unperturbed while simultaneously seeming as impatient as Sasagawa Ryouhei waiting for his cup ramen to finish 'cooking'.

Tetsuya will probably never be a fighting match for Kyouya. But at the very least he can keep from being clobbered as best as he can.

Which, actually, his best doesn't seem to be working, because his arms are littered with red marks and his legs are already sore from being clipped over and over again. God, does Kyouya never tire? He's not even *breathing hard!*

(Maybe Tetsuya will stop smoking, if nothing else. He won't be able to keep up with Kyouya for much longer at this rate.)

Of course, that one brief moment of distraction is all Kyouya needs to make another strike at Tetsuya's head. He ducks, and in doing so backsteps onto the very empty bottle of beer he had been drinking from not half an hour ago.

And, *of course,* Tetsuya trips and falls flat on his back with a grunt. Another blow comes to his head and whacks him good. It doesn't break skin though, because living with Kyouya has awakened Tetsuya's own flames in the most defensive of ways and he is practically made of diamonds now, only far less valuable and still susceptible to everything Cloud-like, like Kyouya.

But Kyouya's goal has never been bloodshed, so as long as Tetsuya lays there blinking stars from behind his eyelids, nothing else happens.

"..Kyouya-sa—" *Whack.* "—Ow, Kyouya-san- what was that for?!"

Kyouya stands over him and Tetsuya shakes his head, letting his vision clear up. The other boy's form is haloed by the light coming from the other side of the underpass. The sun is low, the light is yellow, red, and orange all at once, and the sky is growing purple.

Kyouya's eyes are black in the shadows. Always so black.

"For avoiding punishment."

Tetsuya groans. "You're punishing people for avoiding punishment now?"
"Yes." Kyouya's foot digs into his side until Tetsuya relents and rolls with a huff. Then he sits down, his back to Tetsuya's, wooden tonfa clacking on the ground.

There's a set of retractable metal bludgeons hanging on the wall of Kyouya's room. They're completely decked out; steel-tipped on one end and barbed on the other. Twist the handle to make spikes slot out around the head. Twist the body and it detaches into a shorter version of a two-section staff. A two-section rod.

The entire thing was custom-ordered and designed for Kyouya's 18th birthday, and had been completed early. Unfortunately, because it is retractable, he is not allowed to use it while on duty. Amongst Committee members, concealed weapons are not permitted, and it seems to be one of the few codes and rules that Kyouya isn't insistent on breaking.

Tetsuya is a little glad. Even with his skin Lightning-hardened, he still doesn't want to pit it against actual metal combined with the might of Kyouya's brute force and will. He's not even sure where Kyouya would be able to hide something like that.

"..Why?"

"Why what, Tetsuya? Why am I delivering punishment?" Kyouya makes a tsk sound and settles in, leaning heavily against the curve of Tetsuya's spine. "You are neglecting your duties. You are supposed to be on patrol during summer school attendance. Instead you are here, on the other side of town, drinking and smoking. That is a Class 3 violation of school code and you have been given multiple warnings—"

"Why do you keep doing this? I'm not going to stop. Besides, summer classes are out by now."

"Because it is my duty, as it should be yours."

Tetsuya tries not to snort. It was cute at first, when Kyouya was 10. When he was 11, when he was 12. 13. 14. Duty, duty, duty.

Tetsuya has come to understand that Kyouya is a little different. A lot smarter, a lot less talkative (or a lot less willing to speak, in any case), a lot more disciplined. Discipline. Discipline and duty.

(He caught Kyouya moving the stuffed animals around in his room more than once, for seemingly no reason at all. In both of their rooms. And throughout the house, because they just have so many. Sometimes three times a day, if he's home all day. It takes him the better part of a half hour to do it, and it takes Tetsuya another hour to even find out what's been moved where, and why. He never actually finds out why.

He wonders if this is just an extension of that compulsion. The need to categorize and reorganize, and then to move them all back where they were. To understand them?)

"What, Tetsuya? You don't think it's your duty to do the same?"

"No, I don't."

"You're a Cloud. Like me. Why not?"

Kyouya's back is warm against Tetsuya's. Always so warm. Tetsuya squints off at the distance, at the road and the park at the other end of the overpass.

"..I'm not a Cloud like you, Kyouya-san. My flames are Lightning."
"You have Cloud, therefore you are a Cloud."

"I'm not—" Tetsuya twists around until Kyouya's back falls against his stomach instead, though he doesn't turn to look or even react at all. "I'm not like you, Kyouya-san. I'm a Lightning. I'm not a Hibari, I'm not a Cloud. I'm.. I'm a Kusakabe. I'm Tetsuya. I am my own person, can't you understand that?"

Kyouya doesn't say anything. But he slides down, until he's more or less on the ground, shoulders propped up on Tetsuya's midsection. Still looking out into the sunset.

"..You are Kusakabe Tetsuya. You are my second-in-command. You are Vice-Chairman of the Namimori Precinct Disciplinary Committee."

Tetsuya nods, pillowing his head on his arm. He's going to bruise later where Kyouya hit him—already is bruising, and laying on the ground isn't going to help. But he's has nothing if not fortitude and resilience. Better him than some other poor sap out there who hasn't done a thing to earn Kyouya's ire.

"I'm also more than that, Kyouya-san."

"You're an aspiring drunkard and you will get lung cancer if you continue smoking."

Kyouya does turn to look at him then. Just his head. He has a look of pure confusion, disbelief, and upset all rolled up in one. "Then what's the **point** of doing either of those?"

"For **image**, obviously. I think it looks cool."

"You're a fool, Tetsuya," Kyousaya says with a huff. It's a thing they picked up from each other, probably. Tetsuya doesn't remember anymore who started it.

"Maybe. But at least I'm my own fool."

"There's nothing good about being a fool."

"How do you know? You've never tried."

Kyouya thumps the butt of a tonfa into Tetsuya's chest, not quite hard enough to bruise but enough to leave him wheezing and wincing. He isn't saying anything in return though, so Tetsuya counts that as a good sign. Considers it a victory, which is good. Kyouya has been too similar to the other Hibaris lately, especially Hibari Leader. It's.. disconcerting.

Inevitable, his father says. But still eerie to watch.

He knows the Hibari Family has that sort of thing, just like the Sawadas and Kokuyo. Knows that they like to take in those who are like them. Who share mindsets and values, who share certain personality traits. Who share flames, and flame characteristics. Everyone gets linked up to the Resonance Fields, like some kind of low-level hivemind. Even the Kusakabe clan has one.

But Kyouya was never like this before. Not this dedicated, this fierce, this **ruthless**. This isn't Kyouya. Kyouya-
Kyouya is the boy who holds Tetsuya's hand when he's uncomfortable. The one who sits in the yard at the crack of dawn when he thinks no one else is awake, listening to the songbirds and letting them land on his head and shoulders. Who has somehow managed to convince their pet canary not to fly away when they’re outside together, who has learned how to mimic chirps and whistles to call her back. Who surprises people by agreeing to pet-sit their rabbits and cats and dogs and any animal under the sky. Not all at once, of course, because even Kyouya knows how to say no, and knows how much he can or cannot (or does not want to) handle at any given time.

Kyouya flourishes in being rigid and unchanging. In keeping order and making sure nothing is altered, nothing steps out of line. In protecting and reassuring small animals that they are safe, that this is a safe place to be, in his presence, under his rule.

Tetsuya still sees that part of him. But now it's hidden, behind teeth and snarls and I'll bite you to death. It hides behind the twitching of Kyouya's fingers, reaching for his tonfa at any given moment. It hides behind his dwindling tolerance for crowding, his insistence on the more harmless grouping. It hides behind the brutal intricacies of Cloud, of Hibari.

Kyouya doesn't notice it. Kyouya will never notice it and will never admit it, no one else thinks it's a problem, and Tetsuya doesn't know what to do. He's heard the stories, the nature of the Hibari Family and the things they are capable of. Is it because they are Clouds? Is it because they are Hibari? Is it right?

It hides behind Kyouya's smiles, sudden and new and dripping with a desire for blood. A face and expression that Tetsuya had never seen before until that moment. He didn't even know it was possible for Kyouya to show an emotion like that, or even feel it. But now he does. He feels it and he shows it with smiles, frowns, scowls, twists his mouth into ways that could be construed as happy or sad or frustrated.

He doesn't know if Kyouya's getting better, or if he's getting worse, if that's even a phrase that can or should be used. Or if he's just growing up. Or if it's something else entirely.

It must be something else entirely. He sees it. In Kyouya's eyes, gray when they're not black, glimmering with the same sort of violet haze that can be found following Hibari Leader and the Vice-Leader. The same glimmer in their eyes, in the eyes of all the Hibaris. Even their caretaker.

Something else. Something wrong.

("That's what our clan is for," his father said once, leaning against the doorway. His hands are scarred and he won't ever be able to hold a baton again, but he still has his legs. "I worked with Claude when he first joined the Hibari Family. Your mother had Vivien, that's how I met her. And your great-aunt Sakaki was quite the retainer for the previous Hibari Leader.

"Don't suppose any of them remember or need us anymore, but the fact of the matter is that they need us there, our Lightning. That's your job, Tetsu. Hibari-kun chose you for a reason.

"You shan't disappoint him now, will you?")

Tetsuya won't. If Kyouya needs him then Tetsuya will be here, because this is the island. This is Kakishima.

...Kyouya has fallen asleep. The dying sun bleeds his skin and hair into a shade of red-orange. Bloodies the end of his tonfa with the color of burnt petolgyne. [14]

Part of Tetsuya, the part that loves this island, that loves his home, wants to see what Kyouya will
become in a few years. How much life will be ended by his hands, how red his fangs will drip. How far he will go to protect them all, as the next Hibari Leader.

The other part of Tetsuya just doesn't want to be forgotten. The way Hibari Leader has forgotten his father.

[1] pi favuri, picciulu: (sicilian) please, little one.
[2] principi: (sicilian) prince
[3] bella: (sicilian) beautiful
[4] shiritori: a game played in japan. you say a word and another participant has to say a word that begins with syllable that your word ended with. i.e. tsuNA > naTSU > tsunaMI > midori, etc. certain language versions will work with the last letter rather than the last syllable.
[5] white orchids: carries the meaning of sweet innocence, symbolizing reverence and humility, or wealth and luxury, or virility, depending on which culture you ask. however! nagi and gina/mukuro have a shared sort of synesthesia that relate the color white (and indigo) to something else entirely.
[6] yéyé: (chinese, mandarin) grandfather, grandpa
[7] from the I Ching (a chinese classic and ancient divination text), 'Hexagram 7 is named 頂 (shī), "Leading". Other variations include "the army" and "the troops".'
[8] qǐng guò lái: (mandarin) please come here
xiǎo: (mandarin) little, small. used like a nickname. xiao jun in this case meaning 'little jun'
[9] Fēng shīfù: (mandarin) feng is the proper mandarin pronunciation of fon's name. shifu means 'master' or 'teacher'. the rest of the line just says 'do you need cash?'
[10] xiǎo shéshé: (mandarin) xiao again means 'litte', shé is 'snake'. shéshé is like a cute way of saying it, 'snakesnake' or 'snakey'.
[12] jiějiě: (mandarin) sister, namely older sister
[14] also known as purpleheart wood
[15] shen xian: (mandarin) a triad group. means 'immortal' or 'celestial being'.

Chapter End Notes

if anyone's still wondering:
reborn: 64
mammon: 50
fon: 86
tsuna: 14, turning 15
nagi: 17, turning 18
shouichi: 16, turning 17
byakuran: 17
spanner: 18
kyouya: 17
tetsuya: 17, turning 18

i'm.. going to have an arcobaleno page up on the tumblr at some po i n t . . . trying some things with characterization and it's kind of odd but i have a plan i swear.

as usual if anything is confusing pls leave a comment or an ask/pm/whatever and i will
try to answer!!

notes from the edit: for more on the Resonance Field stuff, see this link, the section at the bottom explains a little about how it works. :u i have a new website for IIB.
[oyster fortunes daily] and the storm rages on.

Chapter Summary

an adventure in casual violence. things from the past coming back to bite you in the ass.

Chapter Notes

so much foreshadowing... not a Lot of warnings, but some medical-related ones.

WARNINGS: i have no idea how to word this but i think '(implied) forced medical treatment' works?? it's in the latter half once they reach the school. also less subtle implications of conditioned kids and people accepting 'forced medical treatment' as 'normal' and 'okay'- except, of course, the 'patient'. casual violence.

EDIT: sssllliight?? ableism in the use of the term 'cripple' in the latter part of the chapter, unironic or otherwise. further explained next chapter. 
EDIT ALSO: fixed a tiny mistake; 'we don't make chunky granita in CATANIA', not palermo. they do make chunky granita in palermo. 
edit dec. 2016: some big changes to narrative and wording, clarified some things i hope. originally i'd written this without intending to have the massive mochida-tsuna friendship backstory that's revealed in the later chapters, so i went and added in some references to it to make it seem Less Jarring later on. 8U

See the end of the chapter for more notes

not that storm. the other storm. what other storm? oh, that other storm.

It's amazing how quickly time can pass, especially when one is trying to get a child to enjoy life again. And that thought in and of itself is... worrying.

Reborn hadn't ever expected it to be tedious, per se, but he wasn't expecting a walk in the park, either. So it is to his surprise that Tsunayoshi proves to be more... willing than most kids his age would be about making changes to his lifestyle like waking up at the crack of dawn for morning exercise.

Maybe it helps that there are others who are just as ridiculously enthusiastic about jogging and ungodly hours of the day. Like Sasagawa Ryouhei.

The past week and a half have gone like clockwork. Reborn wakes, probably an hour or so early, and proceeds to shake Tsunayoshi out of his bed at exactly 4AM with a plethora of methods. The airhorn is his favorite, but he also has the bike horn, trumpet, obnoxiously loud cowbell, the good ol' fashioned Bucket of Cold Water, and, of course, the worst and arguably most effective of all tactics.
(Sizzling Bacon™.

(Granted, since Tsunayoshi cannot actually eat meat, they have turkey and vegetarian versions instead of pork. Reborn quickly learns that this is just as effective as regular bacon. And also just as tasty.)

He gets the boy dressed up, freshened up, and takes him out for a jog. Or a walk. Or just down to the nearest park to chase him around with Leon, the giant bug net.

(Tsunayoshi is apparently really good at climbing trees and seems to have no discernible fear of heights, which is all the better. Annoying to get him down though.)

...And then there's today. Tsunayoshi probably did not get enough sleep the night before and remains stubbornly passed out at the kitchen table, no matter how much Flame Reborn pours into him. Not even the airhorn wakes him up.

It's probably the reason why Nana hasn't ever been woken up by the noise and why Reborn hasn't heard of anyone filing a complaint yet.

Bummer. He can't even tell if it's because everyone is still dead to the world at this time of the day or if it's just so normalized that no one bats an eye (or an ear) at it. Or if it's just a combination of lack of sleep and possible minor Flame exhaustion for everyone. Fon says Flame exhaustion is a bit like being depressed. Not that Reborn would know, but he'll take Fon's word for it.

Then again, he has also noticed a distinct avoidance in the townsfolk when Tsunayoshi is around. Chances are they're just.. ignoring whatever happens in the Sawada residence.

"It's like you said, Reborn," Tsunayoshi says quietly while they're helping Nana with the groceries one day. The grocer keeps throwing them dirty looks. Nagi always sends them back tenfold.

"Flames power the body. If you or maman or Takeshi weren't around, I'd be getting mine from anyone nearby, because it's either them or me and I'm not quite ready to let myself d- um, go into a fiamma exhaustion-induced coma just yet."

Good save there. That's a morbid thought, though.

"...That or they just think it's weird that we're holding hands. I mean, you're really damn old and all."

Reborn snorts and squeezes his hand tighter. It hadn't taken either of them very long to get used to it, and for him, the drain is a little less than that of an Arcobaleno pacifier around his neck..

What he doesn't understand is why it's okay for the Island itself to take flames for research, while Tsunayoshi is treated like a leper even though he's only taking them to live. Really, the rest of this place is just so pleasant.

He also doesn't understand why Tsunayoshi doesn't seem to question this himself. Unless he has already, in the past. When no one would listen to him. There's still no one to listen.

But Yamamoto doesn't have a problem with it. Yamamoto also seems to have some kind of obsession with the boy. It's probably related. Definitely related.

What Reborn wouldn't give for some bullets in a gun and proper contacts to gather information for him. His current status as a house guest isn't doing any favors so he has to rely on what Nana or Tsunayoshi tell him. He could ask Hana, or Sasagawa, but that would involve asking Tsunayoshi how to contact them, or else go wandering around town spewing Sun Flames everywhere and
hoping to hook in a few people willing to spill details.

So, maybe Nana, then.

He sips his morning coffee and considers, once more, the purchase of a Moka pot. Every time they've gone out for groceries he forgets, more caught up with observing the surroundings and watching Tsunayoshi to make sure nothing extensively harmful happens to him.

Sure, there's no assassins here, probably, but danger doesn't always come from the outside. It comes from inside, too.

It comes from the slight twitches of Tsunayoshi's hand whenever they pass by a certain bridge. It comes from the too-long gaze Tsunayoshi gives the docks, the way he stares too intently at the water. It comes from the way his eyes shutter at crosswalks, as though seeing some other scene. The way he looks around at odd times of the day, straining to hear some far off sound.

It comes from the way he edges closer to Nana or Reborn himself, for no apparent reason. Until a siren wails in the distance and an ambulance drives by, followed by a squadron of white-and-violet clad Committee members on motorbikes. Adults, Nana says, from the Emergency Response Division.

Nana always puts an arm around Tsunayoshi whenever this happens, even before the sirens begin. Like it's happened too many times before and she already knows.

Reborn doesn't know what it's all about, but he tightens his grip around Tsunayoshi's hand the next time the boy shifts about nervously, and is pleased to see the tension seep out by the time the wailing reaches them.

There could be all manner of reasons to explain it.

Exhaustion, for one, making him more jittery than usual. Not Flame related, but just regular old exhaustion. The boy probably isn't used to starting up as early in the day as he has been this past week or so. Even if Reborn has been helping with the Flame problem, the body unfortunately catches up very slowly. He'll have to get used to it.

Personally, Reborn can't seem to find a way to stay asleep longer than the crack of dawn with how quickly his Flames rebound from whatever absorption this island goes through during the day. Or at night. He never did get a clear answer when he asked about it.

So, it could be fatigue. But Reborn noticed all of these things even before he started waking the boy up, so it has to be something else. Unless Tsunayoshi is just always exhausted during the day, regardless of how much rest he gets. Which, actually, also seems pretty likely, but would be a little more difficult to combat.

Could be hallucinations. Brought on by heat stroke, or exhaustion.

Hydrophobia, if the way he dislikes taking baths is related his stiffness when they pass a river or glimpse the ocean. Some past trauma. Trauma gets everyone at some point.

Could be medical. He'd glimpsed an old, long past-due prescription paper in the trash once, for medication that he recalls is for Attention Deficit Disorder. Or is it ADHD now? That would explain why going over Tsunayoshi's summer homework had taken several tries because he just wouldn't pay attention long enough. Or couldn't pay attention long enough. But why is in the trash instead of in the medicine cabinet? And why hasn't Nana noticed?
No Good is what everyone calls him. Not because he is no good, but perhaps because he hasn't gotten better. Because he isn't doing anything about it. Because he trashes prescriptions rather than taking them. Because he sleeps a little too often, a little too long, and he still only seems half-functional for the better part of the day.

If it's Flame exhaustion causing this behavior, Reborn hasn't heard about anyone being in that kind of state for such an extended period of time. There's no telling what sort of symptoms they would show.

...Well, actually. Reborn did stick around Xanxus for at least a few months after he got out of the ice. The man's flames weren't sealed, necessarily, but the whole point of the Zero Point Breakthrough is to render them... well. Inert. Meant to it so that you're unable to use or possibly even produce flames. And Xanxus had been like that for a good... 8 years? Christ. 8 years. He wasn't conscious for all 8 years, like Tsunayoshi likely was, but that's besides the point.

Had Xanxus been a lesser man, had he not been Timoteo's son, had he not been Xanxus, he would probably be stuck in a lab somewhere, being examined and tested and experimented on by the world's leading Underground Flame researchers. The Zero Point Breakthrough is a sealed technique.

It's... rather a good thing that Xanxus had been legally independent at the time. And that Italy has no laws that happen to pertain to the quasi-cryopreservation of a live human being against their will. Child welfare may have been consolidated in Italian law, but they are Sicilian. And also, of course, Cosa Nostra, and no law would have stopped Timoteo from doing it anyway. But Reborn supposes it's nice not having to be forced to go through any consequences of it.

Like, y'know. Fatherly guilt.

Honestly, sometimes Reborn wonders why Timoteo ever bothered adopting Xanxus. Still does. He's wondering that right now.

...What he's also doing right now is watching Leon slowly headbutt Tsunayoshi's cheek repeatedly. Maybe an attempt to wake him up. It's kind of adorable.

Okay, it is adorable. Tsunayoshi is just so small and fluffy-headed. Like a lop bunny. A vicious lop bunny.

Maybe he might have dosed the kid with a little too much Flames to calm him down.

Good thing about Sun Flames, though, is that while they can have the same cozy, sunny, calming effect as Rain if used properly, they can also be used to wake someone up. Reborn is no doctor, oh no- but Vongola prefers all their Suns to have some medical experience. Helps in emergencies.

Helps to more accurately send someone into Dying Will State with a single shot, too.

Reborn reaches out to the back of Tsunayoshi's head and sends a brief, targeted pulse of flames into his brain stem, to activate the sleeping center and tell it to wake the hell up.

It... works. Maybe a little too well.

Rather than easing out of a doze, Tsunayoshi sits straight up, wide-eyed and terrified and clutching the back of his head. Both of Reborn's hands go up on reflex, and even Leon jumps back. Well, hops.

"...I guess being a black hole of Flame Exhaustion magnifies and speeds up the effects of Flame
Absorption too," Reborn muses, and with little guilt. "I've never seen anyone wake up that quickly."

"What?" Tsunayoshi blinks at him, breathing maybe a little too hard. It takes him another moment to level out. ".Oh. S-sorry. Maman usually just.. taps me a little."

Then he frowns and rubs his neck.

"..I think you did way more than a tap."

"I'm not a scientist, so I can't specifically tell you how much, but I assure you it was just a tap."

"Okay. I think I need to have you cleared by my fiamma care physician before you do that again."

"Diu, boy, how many licenses do I have to have to be in your presence? To live under your roof?"

"Technically none but you're actually doing things to me, so I'd rather you be professionally certified."

"Certified to teach, certified to give Flame injections, should I be a certified child psychiatrist too? Do you know how easy it is to forge a certification document?"

"What, is your mathematics degree a lie? I should've known. Who earns a degree from nothing in 3 years without forgery and cheating?"

"You are unreasonably cranky and verbose this morning." But Reborn is more close to grinning than he is frustrated or annoyed.

Tsunayoshi shrugs wildly, shoveling eggs and turkey bacon into his mouth. "I have chronic fiamma exhaustion and you just shot me up with Sun flames. In my spine. Who even does that?"

"It gets to the brain faster from there, obviously. It's like not like I can just inject it straight through your skull without something of higher velocity."

Like as a bullet. Or a laser. Reborn would like to try a laser on someone. Though he supposes that would just shoot through the head instead of lodging within the brain like a Dying Will Bullet should.

It's another sort of Dying Will, probably. Bit more deadlier.

"Why does it sound like you're thinking of shooting me up? Like, literally shooting. With a gun." Tsunayoshi eyes Leon for a moment. "...He can turn into a gun, can't he?"

"If I ask him to and he wants to."

Another wary glance. "Please don't."

Leon stares at him.

"..I don't like guns."

Leon's tongue flicks out and licks Tsunayoshi's cheek. He smiles. It's like a family reunion. Nice and happy.

"Why do you think I would shoot you, Tsunayoshi? Haven't I only said repeatedly that my job is to protect you?"
"Yeah, like that's not suspicious at all." The boy is smiling a little though, so Reborn smiles back just a little. ".I get twinges."

"About guns?"

"No, about- about anything. Things happening. It's just paranoia, probably. Who really thinks their own bodyguard is going to shoot them, right?"

Tsunayoshi lets out a small, soft snort of laughter, because it probably sounds ridiculous to a civilian.

Reborn does not. Because that is a fairly normal thing to be cautious of in the Underworld.

"How long have you been having these.. twinges?"

"..As long as I can remember? Why?"

"You have no idea what it is or why it happens?"

"It's just a family thing, okay? It's genetics. We all have it, I just- I just have it a bit worse."

Worse, he calls it. Not better or stronger, not advanced, not sensitive. He calls it worse.

What an interesting choice of words.

"Didn't your father have it too?"

"Hm? Oh, right, you work with him. Yeah.. I think he does. Nao-san said so. You noticed it?"

"It's common among the Vongola bosses and their bloodline. We call it Hyper Intuition. Sort of like precognition, but a little different. Iemitsu has demonstrated it a few times and admitted to having it. He didn't know what it was, of course. Not until we told him."

Tsunayoshi regards him with a level sort of gaze, calm and suddenly intensely focused. Maybe this is his answer.

"..Vongola Primu- Giotto, he was the first to document it, before he retired. His cousin, Ricardo, also had it, though his was.. somewhat weaker. Iemitsu's Hyper Intuition is probably stronger than that of the current boss, who is descended from Ricardo rather than Giotto. Ieyasu."

"Why doesn't dad inherit the Vongola then? I mean, we're all related. If I'm eligible enough to be targeted, he should be eligible enough to inherit."

"Too old," Reborn laments. "Or too young. Or too Japanese, too foreign, too unknown, too inexperienced. Pick your poison and I guarantee someone has said it. He also can't inherit unless he steps down from his current position. No one wants Iemitsu to be the next boss, honestly. No offense, Tsunayoshi, but I would sooner shoot the idiot than let him run Vongola."

"Hey," Tsunayoshi frowns, though his mouth twitches into something like a smile. "That's my father you're talking about."

"Last I checked you didn't even like him."

"Still my father." Reborn gives him an odd look and Tsunayoshi shrugs, a little more subdued. "Still family. Grandpa Sato didn't want to disinherit him so he's still family. We.. protect family."
What a lovely upbringing. If only he'd been raised *Cosa Nostra* instead.

(..It's not too late to start.)

"Do you want him to inherit Vongola?"

Tsunayoshi pushes the remainder of his food around with his fork silently. "..Would it help keep us safe? Would people stop targeting me and *maman*, would he have to fight or kill or do any of that mafia stuff?"

"At this point, Tsunayoshi, the only way to keep yourselves from being targeted is to somehow convince the entire Vongola Family that you're not interested in taking the title. Formally denounce it before the most prominent members and anyone who doesn't want you there. They might even want you to make an Oath of it, on pain of death if you go against your word."

"Is that like a.. mafia oath? I can't make a mafia oath, I'm not even mafia. I'll probably never be mafia, how would I make an oath like that?"

"You want to know?"

"...Not really, no."

"Damn."

"Stop trying to drag me into your dark secret society, Reborn."

"Can't drag you into something when you're already in it."

Tsunayoshi's face scrunches in distaste and pushes his plate away. "I thought you were supposed to keep me out of the mafia."

"*No*, I said I was here to *protect* you from being offed by anyone loyal to the next heir. Slight difference. Never said anything about keeping you out of the *Cosa Nostra* entirely."

"I've been *lied to*," the boy groans, dropping his head onto the table. "My peaceful, boring school life is over. I've stepped onto a crime show. It's going to be all guns and explosions now and I won't get another night's rest."

"On the plus side, it'll be *exciting*."

Tsunayoshi lifts his head just long enough to give a withering glare.

Reborn responds with an inappropriately amused movement of his eyebrows and pulls the discarded plate over to finish it off. Waste not want not.

"Come on," he says after. The fork clatters noisily in the sink. He'll have to wash that when they get back. "It's still early. Let's go for a walk before you head to your final remedial class for the rest of summer break."

"Summer break is over *today*."

"Yes, it is. And if you skip *again*, Hibari Kyouya might just try to give you detention."

The boy snorts. "He can't give me detention, only teachers can give detention."

"Oh? I sense a *but* there."
"...But the Committee passes out remedial lessons like you'd pass out lì xì on New Years. The alternative is a challenge to battle to the death, so no one really argues." [1]

"That sounds fun."

"Scary as hell, very literal, and also really fun unless you get Hibari as your opponent. Do I really have to wear that track suit today? It looks stupid and there's going to be people around."

He raises just one eyebrow this time. Well. Tries to. "Thought you didn't care."

"I'm 15, of course I care."

"Is that what you say, Tsunayoshi? Or is that what everyone else says?"

Tsunayoshi gives Reborn and his bright yellow track suit the stink-eye, then sends another out the window like he's personally offended by the sunshine rays beaming down outside.

It's kind of childish, the way he seems to resent the world for being so happy and bright this early in the morning.

It should be. Just childish.

* * *

Ten minutes later and they're out the door, not bothering to wake Nagi up for this excursion. Reborn decides to let Tsunayoshi pick their path today. Tsunayoshi stares at him for a good few seconds, then starts heading towards the shore and the docks. He doesn't stop the boy from ending their little jaunt to sit down on the concrete breakwater, feet dangling over the water.

It's not the first time Reborn has left the course to Tsunayoshi's decision, but usually he just takes the same route they've always taken. A trip to the park, or down to a nearby convenience store for breakfast and even cheaper coffee. Stops by the Buddhist temple every now and then. Visits the shrine with Yamamoto, when the two of them happen to cross paths.

The only time they've ever gone to the docks before is when Reborn wants to look at the water. It's routine for him whenever he's in Catania or anyplace coastal in Sicily. Which, given that Vongola happens to own most of coastal Sicily, tends to be most of the time. He grew up hearing about the waters, about ships that could take them far, far away. About where the food on his plate came from, so that he would never take anything for granted.

The first hit contract to take him near water took longer than usual. Not to find his target, no, that was easier than finding someone affiliated with the Cosa Nostra in Palermo. Throw a rock any which way and you'd hit someone's suldàtu or associate. His job was done within days.

He spent the rest of the week by the water. Smelling salt and sand and rock, chatting with the locals. Only returned (home) to his safe house once he was sure enough time had passed for another contract to attempt to reach him.

It smells different here. Still salty, but.. sweeter.

Sickly sweet.

Tsunayoshi tugs on Reborn's sleeve, looking up and gesturing down at the spot next to him. Reborn shrugs and sits. Leon sticks his head out from inside the track suit, joining them in their ocean-viewing.
"Look over there," Tsunayoshi says, pointing off to the distance north of the island. Reborn leans his head over and tries to follow the boy's line of sight.

"What? Did you see a whale or something?"

"I wish." Tsunayoshi shakes his head. "Keep looking, you'll see it."

Reborn keeps looking, not even sure what he's looking at. The water? The sky? The horizon—Oh.

"See it?"

"Yeah," Reborn says faintly as the sky shimmers again.

It's the kind of feeling you'd get from watching rain fall somewhere far away. Clouds hovering over a patch of land, blocking out the light and the shadows of a downpour. That's what it looks like, a storm at sea. But it shimmers and it shifts, it moves like fog. It runs east and west, hiding the faintest outline of the coast behind it.

"Is that..?"

"The Shroud," Tsunayoshi says with a small smile. "Our Island Defense Field, made almost completely of Mist flames. Causes atmospheric disturbance, messes with electromagnetic waves, radio frequencies... At its strongest it's a rank SS illusion, but that's only for the few days after New Years when it's renewed. Right now it's probably.. AA. By the time January rolls around it'll be ranked B at best. It looks really nice then." [2]

"When it's destabilizing, you mean?"

"Yeah. Mist flames aren't very dense, so they're not easily visible on their own- except when they're destabilizing. Especially when you have a Shroud that covers this large of an area. It's really pretty during New Years."

Tsunayoshi grins, shifting and bouncing in place, like an excited child watching a parade for the first time. Reborn feels like he's witnessing the apocalypse.

It's kinda cool. Really cool. Sicily should get one of these.

(It also means he can tell Timoteo that December or January would be the best time send his envoy.)

"You just sit around watching the Shroud collapsing in on itself on your off time?"

Tsunayoshi shrugs again. "People go whale-watching on boats. They watch auroras over the mountain range out west and up in Hokkaido. We watch Mist Shroud destabilization on the coast."

Reborn hums, leaning his arm on Tsunayoshi's shoulder. "Kind of like fireworks."

"The New Years fireworks are pretty great, too. You'll be around to see them, right?"

"I could be." If Tsunayoshi survives that long. "...If you call me dad at some point though I'm leaving on the next flight out, whether they let me go or not."

Tsunayoshi snorts. "I don't need another dad. Or any. Maman is enough."
"Wouldn't hurt to have at least one. Being a single parent isn't easy, you know."

..Maybe that's why Timoteo treats his sons the way he does. Or doesn't. It's not just Xanxus, honestly; he's been withdrawn lately, ever since Dania was more permanently situated in the hospital. It won't be long before she decides to go into hospice care instead of taking more treatments.

"Yeah, I know." The boy sighs, shoulders dropping. "I just want to.. make it easier for her. I wish I could. Takeshi says the same thing about his dad, his mom works a lot too."

"Sounds like she'd be fine as long as you're fine," Reborn says, musingly. "Isn't that what you told me before?"

"..Yeah, I guess."

He's a good kid. Better than many would be at his age, as unpopular as he seems to be and with a father as absent as he is. And, well, as much of a brat as he can be, at times. Sky trait, perhaps? Can't be. Xanxus was a menace. Still is. Endearing, but a menace.

"Aren't you?"

"Dunno. Depends how you'd define fine."

"Oh I have some pretty low standards in regards to that." Reborn picks up a pebble and tosses it into the approaching waves. Tries to find a flatter one so he can skip it. "Me? I think functional is just fine. Fine is having two hands that can still hold things like guns, knives, iron pipes. It's having two feet to take me where I need to be. It's having just enough to do to get me through the day. It's telling someone they can't have a chunky granita because we don't make chunky granita in Catania."

There aren't any ones flat enough. Everything here is mostly just crumbled cement and granite, chunks ranging from the size of a fingernail to that of a fist, but nothing flat. How dull.

"..Fine is boring." He settles for another rock to chuck as far as he can, and another wave swallows it up. "That's why I'm here, anyway."

"All those people you could kill in Italy and you'd rather be here teaching some snotty kid to enjoy life?"

"Would be, if you were actually snotty." Reborn tousles Tsunayoshi's hair again, relishing the dissatisfied puppy growling sound he makes. "But you're not. Snotty. Or fine. You're not fine, and you're not boring, so I'll stick around."

"Gosh, that's such a relief to hear."

"You're getting snippier," he announces almost proudly. "Does that mean you'll stop stuttering because you're no longer terrified of me now?"

"I'm not terrified of you! It- it just happens sometimes. It's just nerves."

"Aaand there you go again." Tsunayoshi digs an elbow into his side harmlessly. Reborn leans back, breathing in salty-sweet air with a smile on his face. "Honestly? I'm just staying for the moment when you call me papa in front of Iemitsu. Your mother thought it would be hilarious and I happen to agree. Then I'm leaving after that, because the thought of being anyone's papa is horrifying."
Tsunayoshi doesn't say anything for a good few seconds.

Then, he starts laughing. Then he falls onto his back, still laughing, probably so he doesn't pitch forward into the water.

Reborn draws one leg up and tosses another piece of rubble out. In the distance, the Shroud sparks and shimmers, searing the air with burnt molasses.

Yes. Sicily would do quite well with one of these.

"Tsuna-kun!"

Tsuna looks up and finds himself beaming, warmth bubbling in his chest. "Morning, Kyouko-chan."

"You sure you don't have a crush on her?" Reborn whispers as she jogs up to meet them.

Tsuna jabs his fingers into the older man's side. And then winces and cradles his hand, because ow. "Do you have rocks for abs or something? Holy hell that hurt."

The only thing that makes Tsuna feel better about his sore fingers is the fact that Reborn looks at least the slightest bit pained and hunched over.

"I think you just gutted me with a knife," he says with a grunt.

"I hope I did," Tsuna replies, scrunching up his face. "Enjoy the feeling of your colon being turned to stone."

"You didn't do anything like that."

"No, but I could."

Reborn grins down at him, sharp and daring. Tsuna lets out a huff.

"Morning, Tsuna-kun. Is this your house guest?"

"Yeah." He nods and gestures to them respectively. "Reborn, this is Sasagawa Kyouko. Kyouko-chan, Reborn."

"I thought only Hibari and Yamamoto were supposed to know about me," Reborn mutters. "So why does it seems like everyone knows about me? Not that it isn't a pleasure to finally meet you, Sasagawa-chan."

"We like to gossip," Kyouko chirps. "And Ryouhei is my older brother."

"Aah. I can.. really see the family resemblance."

"Onii-san takes more after mother than I do." She giggles and falls into step on Tsuna's other side. "I'm sorry if he made things worse for you that day, Tsuna-kun. I've seen you running in the morning sometimes and.. well. I know you're just starting, and onii-san is always a bit.."
"Extreme?"

She gives him a smile and a shrug, entirely apologetic. "Yeah. I'll tell him to tone it down next time, if he runs into you again."

"He's welcome to join us," Reborn manages to say with a grunt, rubbing at his side. "Healthy competition makes everyone work harder."

"It does! But, Tsuna-kun is allergic to competition."

Reborn raises an eyebrow. Tsuna repeats Kyouko's words flatly with an equally flat expression. "I'm allergic to competition."

"..That's an odd thing to be allergic to."

"It makes me tired."

"That's not an allergic reaction, that's just being exhausted."

"It's just as bad as being allergic."

"Kid, competition is the spice of life. It's evolutionary, it's what makes us tick, it's change, it's--"

Reborn keeps talking and Tsuna is vaguely aware of it, just as he's vaguely aware of Kyouko listening to him with a smile that's more than polite. Just as he's vaguely aware of something coming up behind them at mach speed.

He feels the prickle on the back of his neck before he hears a crack, like a bat striking a ball. Or bone. The whistle of something flying through the air, or wind through the trees. Blood pouring like rain.

He turns to face the approaching blur.

It's the only thing that keeps him from screaming when a pair of arms wrap around him and haul him up and around, spinning in circles until Tsuna is laughing against Takeshi's chest amidst the alarmed calls of both Kyouko and Reborn.

Takeshi lets him down after another bout of spinning, grinning like a loon. Today his eyepatch has a smiley face drawn on it and it makes Tsuna smile too.

"Morning, Tsuna!"

"Morning, Takeshi," Tsuna says with a merry hum. "I'm going to throw up my breakfast on you."

"Hey," Reborn cuts in as he and Kyouko catch up. How far did Takeshi even drag him while spinning around like that? "I worked hard to make your breakfast today. Don't you dare throw it up."

Tsuna fakes a retching sound and pretends to heave all over Reborn's loafers. The man leaps back with a smooth litany of curses, none of which Tsuna recognizes, and Takeshi barks a laugh.

"Where'd you learn to cook, Reborn?"

"He wakes up at 2AM for snacks," Tsuna explains between laughs. He's gotta get Reborn to teach him Sicilian curses.
"I'm a chronic night eater," Reborn says with a shrug. "And I was living alone for a long while."

"Mm, life of a bachelor." Takeshi nods sagely in agreement. "I totally get it."

"You're 15, you're not a bachelor."

Takeshi beams. "Not if I have you, Tsuna."

And with that, Takeshi loops an arm around Tsuna's shoulders and pulls him away into another set of wide, looping spins, like some badly coordinated waltzing dance. Mostly he suspects it's an excuse to get them away from Reborn and Kyouko for a while, because Tsuna knows that Takeshi finds Kyouko a little... unsettling.

...Which, okay, Kyouko is pretty outrageously perceptive and has some magical powers of compulsion that she wields with little compunction. It's not that weird though. Or scary. Tsuna doesn't get why Takeshi is so insistent on avoiding her. It's not like she'd use any of her magical powers on them.

Probably.

Takeshi links their hands together once they come to a stop again, his one eye bright as he looks down at Tsuna. Tsuna doesn't notice, because he's too busy eavesdropping on Kyouko and Reborn's conversation behind them.

"What're they talking about?"

"He's.. asking her if we've known each other long. And- oh, Kyouko-chan was on her way to the Defense Academy."

"Aw, man. If we didn't have remedial lessons I'd be going too." Takeshi sighs "Why're you talking so quietly?"

"Because they're both Suns with Sun-enhanced hearing? Kyouko-chan already knows but I don't really want Reborn to know I can hear them."

"Ooh, right. That'd make spying on him a lot more difficult, wouldn't it?" Takeshi grins. Sharp and natural. "How's that going, by the way?"

"He talks to himself in the morning when he eats. Or I guess he's actually talking to his chameleon."

"Does it talk back?"

"No."

"So he is talking to himself."

Tsuna shrugs. He honestly doesn't know. "Maybe living alone with nothing but a chameleon does things to you."

"And that's exactly why we need to stick together, Tsuna. Otherwise we'll end up old, bitter, miserable, and crazy, just like him."

"As opposed to.. what? Just old?"

"Are you admitting that having me around would keep you from being bitter and miserable?"
"I will nerve pinch you in the ribs, Takeshi."

Takeshi shouts *not my ribs!* and dashes away. Tsuna chases him, making crab claws with his hands and trying to grab at Takeshi's sides, both of them grinning all the while. It doesn't last too long though, because Tsuna has all the stamina of a newborn kitten and is pretty quickly wheezing with his hands on his knees and a stitch in his right side. It gives Kyouko and Reborn another chance to catch up, anyway. Again.

"Tired from just a little running, Tsunayoshi?" Tsuna makes a jabbing hand motion in the direction of Reborn's voice and hears a chuckle from him in response. "How do you even survive gym class?"

"By remaining as still as possible, lest I trip and break an arm."

"Or aim the ball at the wrong person and break their arm."

Tsuna looks up at Takeshi's wildly grinning face. *That guy deserved it. I only gave him a fracture, anyway.*

"What evil deed did this boy do to incur your wrath, Tsunayoshi?"

"Threw a ball at my face in dodgeball last year. Even though headshots don't count."

"Really?" Reborn peers at his face- or more specifically his nose. "Doesn't look broken."

"It's *not*—" Tsuna grimaces and swats Reborn's face away so he can start walking again. "He didn't break it, it just bled a whole ton."

"..And this warranted you breaking his arm?"

"Fractured it, okay? And, yes, I might have.. thrown it back to him a little too hard. I was trying to get his face, anyway... What? I told you I can't aim worth a crap."

"You can't aim but you're able to throw an otherwise harmless ball hard enough to break someone's arm." Reborn snickers and Tsuna rolls his eyes. "Not going to call it an accident this time? Like you did with the other guy you hit in the head with the soccer ball."

"I really wasn't trying to hit that one."

Reborn looks at Takeshi, who is a traitor and does not corroborate Tsuna's story. Instead he just shrugs with a look that screams *Who knows? I sure don't know. It is a mystery.*

"You need to be more careful, Tsuna-kun," Kyouko says, concerned. "Every time you hurt someone you end up the nurse's ward, too."

Tsuna grumbles. "It's not *my* fault I can pull muscles just from swinging a bat."

"Kyouto's right, Tsuna." Takeshi slings another arm around his shoulders. "Getting hurt in sports is my job! But if you really want to bean someone in the head or break a leg, make sure you stretch first. You'll get a less torn muscles and sprains that way. Oh, and taping helps, too. That's what Ryouhei-senpai said. Right, Kyouko?"

Kyouko gives them a thumbs up, showing her own bandaged hand. "Keeps your joints from bending weird."

"You take boxing, Sasagawa-chan?"
She shakes her head. "Aikido. But I pick up onii-san's habits sometimes, so he helps me tape my hands for Defense classes, just to be safe. Oh, speaking of! Did you still want to see the Academy, Reborn-san?"

"Not like a date, right?" Kyouko laughs and shakes her head again. Reborn gives Tsuna a look. "Why does everyone keep asking me out on dates?"

"Don't worry," Tsuna says, patting him on the arm. He's still wearing the dumb track suit even though Tsuna has changed out of it and into his school uniform. "I'll make you a sign that says I'm 64, not 18 in big bold letters."

"How do you any of you even mistake me for an 18 year old?" Reborn mutters towards the sky, as though praying for some answer. "But that's a yes, Sasagawa-chan. Since I can't attend Tsunayoshi's classes with him and Sawada-san said there isn't much to do around the house today. Nagi-kun has something to attend to, also, so I'm free as a bird."

"You're going to walk there, Kyouko-chan?" Tsuna frowns, trying to duck out from under Takeshi's arm, but to no avail, because Takeshi is monster tall and has arms like bear traps. Only the strength of a god could pry them off. Or Kyouko, who has learned how to stop her brother from fighting bears. "It's pretty far off..."

"Azayakatani isn't that far. Surely you've jogged further than that before?"

"I've been exercising for a total of 2 weeks, Kyouko-chan," Tsuna says in a deadpan, because he is not ashamed of his very sedate lifestyle up until now. "Gym class doesn't count."

"He still gets winded just from walking to the edge of town," Reborn says in a stage whisper to Kyouko, who covers her mouth politely for a giggle. Tsuna resists the urge to elbow him again. She regards him sympathetically. Understandable, because it took her a while to get used to a daily regimen too. "You'll get there one day, Tsuna-kun."

He sighs. "I don't know if I even want to get there."

"But then we could go running together, Tsuna. Every morning."

"Reborn, can you smack him on the head for me? I can't reach."

"Just lift your arms."

"I'm tired."

"I'm not going to carry out violence against children on your behalf just because you're lazy, Tsunayoshi."

Tsuna groans and leans his full, paltry weight against Takeshi's side. It's still enough to make him veer off course. Takeshi yelps when they collide with a wall, but Tsuna is still stuck where he is. A little bit of elbow digging gets Takeshi into a fit of uncontrollable giggles and Tsuna finally manages to slip out of his hold with a triumphant hah!

And then Kyouko starts fussing over him.

"Kyouko-chan I'm fine, you don't have to—"

"Your hair is going flat, Tsuna-kun," she says, raking her hands through it to make it stand up
again. Tsuna concedes to this with a mutter under his breath, because it is a necessary evil. Reborn observes this with great interest. "You mean that's not his natural hairstyle?"

"My natural hairstyle is very depressing."

"It's natural if we make it natural," Kyouko chirps. She tugs at the spikes to test them out and steps back once satisfied. "There. And besides, it's his trademark look now. Just like our Founder."

"Thanks." Tsuna blows at his fringe to get it out of his eyes.

"Mousse? Gel? Long lasting hairspray that you can restyle on a whim?"

"No, just humidity."

The interest turns into incredulity and disbelief. "You keep your hair upright through badly managed hair cuticles? That's not exactly natural or healthy for it."

"Where do you even learn this? All of this?" Tsuna gestures vaguely at Reborn's entire being. "This endless pit of knowledge? What forbidden fruit did you consume?"

"I am the World's Greatest Hitman." Reborn dusts off his shoulders, looking far too regal for someone wearing a sunshine yellow tracksuit. "I know everything. I can even read minds."

Tsuna seriously doubts that.

But then Reborn leans closer, just a tad, and he has a flinty edge in his eyes that does not make Tsuna's gut quiver in fear. It does make the hair on the back of his neck prickle and tingle. It makes the world sharpens at the edges, just around the peripheral of his vision. It makes heat rush to his fingers and toes; Takeshi's Rain calming his nerves, Kyouko's Sun hyper-activating all of his nerves and senses at once.

Everything is processed in a moment, what he sees and what he feels. His heart beats, rapid and steadily.

The voice in the back of his mind says, *This man is not a threat. This man is not a threat. He will never be a threat.*

Reborn says, "*I can kill you with my brain.*"

Tsuna... blinks.

Then Reborn blinks too, and a moment of confusion flits over him as he leans back. He looks at Takeshi and Kyouko, both of whom have stopped to stare.

"..What? Was that too dramatic?"

"Little bit," Tsuna wheezes, finally able to breathe again. Everything dulls back out, colors and sharpness, sounds and smells. Leaves him feeling a little numb and lightheaded.

"Hm. I'll have to think of something else then."

Maybe it's because he's been holding his breath. Tsuna's ears buzz like he's been sleeping on one side for too long and he feels all.. hot. Clammy skin. And his pants are making his legs itch, even though they still feel kind of burning numb.
Tsuna lets out a snort of laughter. Kyouko follows up with a muffled giggle, and even Takeshi titters out a cackle.

"What's so funny?"

"Noth-nothing," Takeshi coughs, failing to hold back another laugh. "Just- adrenaline rush. Wow. I've- I've never seen Tsuna hold back on a beat down before. Usually he never hesitates."

"I- I wasn't even thinking about it," Tsuna admits, fingers tingling. "I mean it's.. it's not like he'd actually do anything. Right?"

He looks at Reborn. Reborn looks back, oddly silent and contemplative. Even Leon blinks down at him from the brim of Reborn's hat.

"..Right," the man says, slowly. Like he's trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

Tsuna grins. He doesn't need any convincing.

* * *

They reach the school gates uneventfully after that. Tsuna tries to send Kyouko and Reborn off to the Defense Academy because he doesn't need anyone walking him to school. Kyouko says she doesn't mind the detour.

Reborn just says he won't be jealous if he and Takeshi cuddle and hold hands in his presence. It makes Takeshi beam and grab Tsuna's hand again, pulling him close. Tsuna can't elbow them both, given that one arm is being held up (haha) by Takeshi and the other one is lacking in reach due to being linked to Takeshi, so he makes angry scowly faces in Reborn's direction for, like, 10 seconds.

"Well, well, you two are as domestic as always."

Ah, great. Mochida Kensuke. Once Tsuna's friend, now little more than a third year loser extraordinaire. He's just about the only student who doesn't have remedial lessons and isn't in the Disciplinary Committee, and yet still insists on patrolling the campus as though he has any right to.

...Well, okay, he does, because all citizens have the option of voluntarily carrying out Committee Duties. Mochida is probably just the only one doing it while expecting something in return. Loooser.

"Morning, senpai," Tsuna says brightly and tightens his grip on Takeshi's hand. But not even Takeshi's flames can tamp down the rising fury and anger seeping in through his skin and making a warm little tinder nest in his chest. "You seem lonely, as always. Still trying to ply with the Disciplinary Committee? When are you going to accept that they're just not going to let you join?"

Mochida scowls, arms unfolding into fists at his side. Tsuna feels like he's seen this scene before, some time in the past year. "Watch your mouth, Dame Tsuna."

"Watch yours, Damesuke."

("I thought underclassmen were supposed to respect upperclassmen in Japan," Reborn whispers in the back.

"He does," Kyouko replies blithely. "Just not Kensuke. They used to be friends? Tsuna's also part French and Italian so that probably has something to do with it, too."
"...That's a good point.")

"What did you call me?"

"I called you what you are, Damesuke."

"Goddammit, Sawada, you No Good piece of—"

It's amazing they've been able to go even a week without jumping at each others' throats. Probably because Takeshi didn't walk with to school with Tsuna the last few days.

Tsuna drops his bookbag and launches at Mochida with a snarl, eyes blazing, ramming his shoulder into the other's chest. Mochida wheezes and shove him aside, clipping Tsuna in the face with his arm. The difference in size and weight means that Tsuna stumbles further away than he would if he were someone Mochida's size. Like Takeshi.

Takeshi, who has his arms hooked under Tsuna's to keep him from lunging again and is probably saying something to the effect of calm down, Tsuna! But all Tsuna hears is fight, fight, FIGHT, and all he registers is the roaring cheer of a crowd that isn't there, blood rushing in his ears, a howling hurricane.

Mochida steps into range. Whether it's to stop or continue their tussle, Tsuna doesn't know. All he knows is Mochida is still angry for whatever reason he has to be angry about, and that means Tsuna is angry by sheer proximity to that amount of anger. So Tsuna's foot strikes out and nails him right in the solar plexus.

Mochida's down flat on the ground for all of two seconds before something bright and glimmering enters Tsuna's vision, once again throwing everything into sharp relief. Tsuna inhales, sharp and tangy. Citrus and salt water.

Not a threat. Not a threat.

".ou trying to kill him, Tsunayoshi?"

Tsuna blinks, shakes his head, but his vision doesn't clear up. Doesn't blur down. Everything is too clear, too apparent. He can hear Reborn's sideburns. That's so weird. And also kind of cool.

".Yes?" Of course? Of course he is.

Reborn blinks, and Tsuna hears that, too, thin and squeaky. Hears every shift of clothing, every twitch of muscle. Blood pumping.

His legs are itching again. Itching like mad.

"Well.. don't?"

"Why not?"

"Because it-" Reborn blinks again and looks just a few degrees upwards, rather than at Tsuna's face. "Is he seriously asking me why he shouldn't kill a fellow classmate?"

Takeshi chuckles low above Tsuna's head. Probably a little muffled by his hair, too. "Told you he doesn't usually hold back on a beat down."

"I'll kick him in the face next time," Tsuna says, snarling again when Mochida's eyes meet his.
Burning. Burns inside him, raging like wildfire, and the tinder is an inferno. "Make him bite his tongue."

"Yeah? I fucking dare you to, you hackneyed, crippled pipsqueak." Mochida wipes spittle from the corner of his mouth as he gets up, coughing and shaky. Then he turns his attention to Reborn, who is still staring at Tsuna with something akin to wonder. "Who the hell are you anyway? Are you protecting that loser? Get the fuck out of my wa-- ghhk—!

Whatever he was going to say next cuts off with a gurgle and dies in his throat. Specifically in the part of his throat currently under Kyouko's forearm pressing against it in a chokehold.

"Takeshi, a little help here?"

"I'm, uhm—" Tsuna jerks about, trying to get out of his hold. Again. "A little busy here!"

"Reborn-san, if you could- No, get Tsuna, please. I need Takeshi over here. Stop moving, Kensuke."

Reborn moves. Tsuna's eyes snap up and the snarling fades. The burning, and anger, the wildfire, everything just fades. That never happens.

Not a threat.

Takeshi drops Tsuna onto his feet and his legs give out the moment Takeshi reaches Kyouko's side, landing him on his rear. And Reborn is. Way too close.

"..Um." Tsuna's nose scrunches. Reborn is pulling at his eyelids and turning his face from side to side, examining him like a doctor would. "What are you doing?"

"He got you in the face," Reborn says quietly. How does he even have eyes that black? "I'm checking for blood or broken bones. How's your eyes?"

"They're- I'm fine, nothing's broken. Just bumped my nose a bit." He rubs at it and scoots backwards. Not too far though, because this is too much exercise and Tsuna is, again, a pathetic being with all the stamina of a newborn kitten. He is dead tired. And there are people staring, too. Tsuna scowls at them. "What're you looking at?"

The residual heat escapes in one last snarl at onlookers and sends his peers scuttling away.

"Hey." Reborn snaps his fingers and Tsuna snaps back to attention like a trained attack dog. He.. should be a bit more concerned about that than he is at the moment. "You sure you're okay?"

"I just tried to kill him and you're more worried about me?"

"Like you could actually kill him, Tsunayoshi."

"I could!"

"Right." Reborn looks more amused than skeptical. "Well, even if you could, I still wouldn't worry about him. He's not my responsibility. You are. So I'll ask again: are you sure you're okay?"

Tsuna's gaze slides past Reborn, watching Mochida struggle in the not-quite stranglehold that Kyouko has him in and fighting against whatever Takeshi is trying to do. Sedate him, probably. And probably the only reason Mochida is still trapped is because Takeshi has a vice grip on his wrists.
"Come on, Takeshi, just put him out already. He'll be fine, he can handle it."

"Kyouko do you even know what my sedation percentage is? You have no idea how unfine he will be if I use any more."

"You have class soon! And so does Tsuna. This is going to take hours at this rate. Kensuke, you're going to hurt yourself if you keep struggling!"

"Tsunayoshi."

"I'm- I'm fine." Tsuna blinks, once more. All the air in his lungs leaves in a rush and his shoulders drop. Everything goes back to normal again. A din of noise that he manually filters through to figure out what's what. ".I'm fine. Exhausted. But fine."

"You barely went half a round with him, how can you be tired already?"

Tsuna frowns and opens his mouth to say something, only to be cut off by a shadow looming over both him and Reborn. Someone in a Disciplinary Committee uniform. Someone with a pair of tonfa swinging at their sides.

"H-Hibari-san! Um- this is- eh..." The prefect lifts an eyebrow. Tsuna leans back subconsciously. "..I hit him first."

"I know. I was watching."

"..From where?"

"The Committee Room."

"Did you- you didn't jump down from the second floor again, did you?"

"So what if I did?" Hibari lets out a soft scoffing sound and reaches out to poke and prod at Tsuna's face. Tsuna swats at his hand, too.

"Stop- stop that, Reborn already checked. I'm fine."

"Did he?" Hibari's eyes go flinty and narrow.

Reborn shrugs. "I have some first aid training. I thought it would be best to make sure he wasn't hurt as soon as possible."

"Then you can also accompany him to the nurse's ward as well. Make sure he does not pass out on the way there."

"..Is that really a concern?"

"It is. It has happened before. He will," Hibari stresses, glancing pointedly at Tsuna before he can even open his mouth to protest. "I do not want to find him sleeping through classes on a stairwell. Again."

"It happened once!" Tsuna grumbles even as Reborn pulls him up with a roll of his eyes.

He manages to stay upright for no more than a handful of breaths before his legs turn to jelly completely. Reborn arm hooked under his own is the only thing keeping him from skinning his knees on the ground.
Hibari gives Reborn a look that screams See? I told you so. "I will accompany you both, then."

"Hibari-san you don't."

"We could get the wheelchair instead."

"Uh." Tsuna swallows audibly. "...No. No thanks. Please come with us."

He feels like a drunkard being led on a walk of shame, except he's not drunk and this isn't so much shameful as it is just annoying and embarrassing. For him, anyway. Reborn just looks endlessly amused.

"Yamamoto Takeshi, Sasagawa Kyouko."

"Chairman! Um. We were just- just going to take him to the nurse's ward for fiamma balancing. Is that alright?"

"Take him to the Committee Room. We have the emergency treatment in there as well. Tetsuya is there and will be able administer it. He is also tasked with informing Mochida Kensuke of his punishment for provoking a classmate and Honorary Member of the Committee.. again."

"His-" Takeshi's mouth opens, then snaps shut. "..Okay."

Mochida, however, is far less cooperative.

"Let- let go of me- Hibari, Hibari I'm fine I don't need treatment, I won't— Hibari!"

"You have skipped multiple appointments, disregarded warnings, and proven yourself to be violent and detrimental to the health of your peers, Kensuke," Hibari says flatly, and with little more than a cursory look. "You will be given emergency treatment for now. We will speak more of it later."

"No! Don't- Kyouko, don't, don't do this—"

"Hush, Kensuke, you'll be fine." Kyouko smiles down at him tightly. She hasn't let him go yet, but it's obvious that she isn't actually trying to choke him. The threat of it is real enough, though. "Just- calm down, okay? We'll get you there as quickly as we can. Reborn-san, I'll come find you once we- once we get Kensuke settled down."

"Sounds like a plan," Reborn says, nodding, expression unreadable. He hoists Tsuna up higher.

Tsuna meets Mochida's eyes as they pass by. Still angry, still burning, still smoldering. Still raging. Like a wildfire.

But like a wildfire that's burnt itself out.

* * *

"...That's his punishment?" Tsuna gawks, looking between Mochida, who groans into his hands, and Hibari, who just raises an eyebrow at Tsuna's outburst. "You're putting him in the Committee and giving him babysitting duty?"

"He is on probation period until the two of you learn how to deal with each other, Tsunayoshi. When you are capable of going more than a week in each other's company without destroying school property or each other before the end of the school year, we will see about swearing him in. Are we clear?"
“Wait, what about me? What happens to me if we don’t.. get along?”

Hibari looks at him for a while. The furrow between his eyebrows eases up, just slightly. He reaches out and Tsuna leans back a little, wary, but all Hibari does is pull out the Committee cloth badge hiding inside Tsuna’s uniform shirt.

"You have been causing trouble as well, whether involuntary or otherwise," he says, and lets the badge flop against Tsuna's chest. "If you cannot learn to get along with Kensuke, who is your peer and upperclassman, I will have to revoke your Honorary Member status, Tsunayoshi."

Tsuna presses the icepack harder against his ribcage and wishes he could pull his legs up right about now. Too bad they'll be sore and practically dead weight for the next half hour.

"Keep that in mind."

His toes are tingling, though. Probably because they're the part of his body closest to Reborn, who is sitting at the end of the bed staring at Tsuna with that same expression of interest. Curiosity.

Wonder.

[1] li xi: (vietnamese) those little red envelopes that are given out on lunar/chinese new years and during weddings. contains cash and are meant to be well wishes.

[2] tsuna is talking about lunar new year, which generally takes place during the new moon in january, which tends to be near the end of the month rather than on january 1st

Chapter End Notes

i promised disciplinary committee hierarchy breakdown months ago and it's right over here 8')

editing the notes on tsuna: tsuna's got a multitude of stuff going on, but basically the point is that hyper intuition manifests as a 'hyperawareness' that comes from the brain working overtime to both take in and process audio and visual sensory information. being sealed cut off only the processing part, leading to something like SPD. being unsealed doesn't solve the problem, because the hyperawareness is now sucking up any and all flames it can get as the result of being flame-starved for years. hence. the black hole-ing that sucks up his and anyone else's flames that are close by enough. and since flames have lingering emotions in them in this au, tsuna gets affected by that too! he's just never aware of it. oops.

for more indepth information about this, see his page on the website.

another side note about what takeshi says re: the 'beat down'. tsuna reacts to directed Hostile Intent by literally slipping into quasi-DWM, and then overreacts by launching himself bodily at the offender. it happens a lot. no one really notices the difference or finds it Overly Unnatural because all the sawadas are like this, although tsuna's is more keyed up and exaggerated. he gets very easily tired from it, even if he doesn't do anything. reborn and kyouko being Sun users tends to throw this quasi-DWM into
overdrive because sun activation hypes up all his already hyped up senses, which is where the 'everything thrown into sharp relief' comes in.
Chapter Summary

A perfect septet has always been commonly considered to be a grouping of 7 unique flame wavelengths. One of each, for balance and harmony. All for one sky, and one sky for all.

That's what Italy wants everyone to think, anyway. Really, septets are so overrated.

Chapter Notes

Medical jargon and oh gosh so heavy on the lore and infodumping everything happening all at once. I didn't mean for all this to be in one single chapter but it is. More Mochida stuff, Flame lore stuff, Sky lore stuff, and Nagi!! The 'buddy' system being talked about is a fictitious islander thing, kinda self-explanatory? It takes the senpai-kouhai relationship and makes it.. official and regulated.

I seem to be trying by damnedest to expand on every single one of these characters, it probably will get more confusing before it makes sense.

Also a gentle reminder that none of these characters should be considered 100% reliable narrators. Maybe 80%. 90%?? At best. Everyone's biased about something. Or everything.

Warnings: lots of cursing, slight ableism, as in more usage of 'cripple', but nothing else beyond that? Everyone's a jerk. Everyone's a nice jerk. Medical bullshit. Problematic medical bullshit. Very clinical mentions of lobotomy and bloodletting and implied massive drug and alcohol (ab)use, Gj Kakishima.

Also forewarning for my very bad and basic understanding of Mario Kart gameplay (I've never played).

Edit Dec. 2016: Reformatted the flashback scenes to make them more streamlined and get rid of all the italics. Using headers to denote time/scene change, hopefully that helps! Some narrative changes too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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*It beckons to everyone.* It sings, you're almost there. It's almost over. You've done good. You've done good.

2014, May

"..You really think they're going to give you Kyouko?"
"Why not?" Kensuke sniffs, stuffing more rice into his mouth. "She's the only one I deserve."

"Well, for one, that's completely disgusting, stop talking with food in your mouth. Two, don't be an entitled dickbag, Kensuke." Lan rolls her eyes. She's been his best friend since their first art project together in grade school and has absolutely no reservations about tearing him down when need be. "That's disgusting too."

"If it was actually disturbing you'd be chewing my head off about it."

"Because you're pining," she says, mockingly. "You've been pining for three years and, honestly? It's getting kind of embarrassing to watch."

"Aren't you supposed to be on my side?"

"Not when it comes to your girl problems, no."

Kensuke frowns. "But, Lan, bros before—"

"Hey," Lan snaps, brandishing her chopsticks in his face. "If you continue that very rude and disrespectful line of thought I will shove these up your nose."


She lets out a hmph and munches on another piece of okra tempura. "Also, three-"

"There's more?"

"Kyouko is in the same grade as you, you hair-brained idiot. You can't be assigned a Buddy to someone in the same grade."

"I will. And if I don't, I'll be assigned someone who's friends with her. Or friends with whomever she's assigned to. And then I'll have an excuse to hang out with her."

"Oh my god," Lan groans, rubbing at her forehead. "Ken-chan, you're so lame."

He makes a face at her and steals a shrimp from her bento.

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**2015 (Present)**

The Island Defense Academy, as they call it, is like a massive, multi-tiered, dojo that services the entire island and caters to just about every martial art and self-defense style known to mankind. Or so Reborn thinks, anyway.

He's also pretty sure he shouldn't have been allowed to walk into that compound. Because, wow, that was way more than an academy had any right to be. If he hadn't known better, he'd have thought they were training the up-and-coming Varia recruits. Not quite Varia quality, considering they're all civilians with, supposedly, no taste of the Underworld, but well on their way there. And Sasagawa Kyouko, a 16 year old girl, attends classes there. So does Yamamoto. And so did Tsunayoshi, at some point, though he hasn't been in since last year.
Tsunayoshi doesn't seem the type to do something like that though. Except maybe be a punching bag.

Reborn caught a glimpse of the curriculum and was more than a little surprised to see *Weapons Handling* and *Naval Infiltration* listed next to *Tai Chi for Health* and *Capoeira*. Defense academy or Recreational academy? Whose defense are they training these civilians for?

(*Island Defense.* He should've realized it sooner. They may not have a standing army but they just might have the *entire island population* at their disposal. He'll have to tell Timoteo to be very, very careful. Think of it like trying to invade Sicily.

The irony of that is astounding.)

Unfortunately, since Reborn is not a registered citizen of Kakishima, he cannot sign up for any classes or even look in on them. The lobby and courtyard is about as far as he gets. He takes a brochure though. To try and convince Tsunayoshi into going back.

"Who is Mochida Kensuke?"

Nagi looks up from the couch. ".One of Tsuna's classmates. Why?"

"Why does Tsunayoshi hate his guts so much?"

She shrugs. "I'm from Kokuyo, I wouldn't know that much about Namimori."

"I thought you were my guide," Reborn drawls from the patio. So glad the days have cooled down. "You're supposed to be able to answer any questions I have."

Nagi doesn't answer. When Reborn looks up again, she is, miraculously, dead asleep. Probably? Her chest is moving, so she's not actually... *dead*. Probably. And the phone is still in her hands like she's just resting, rather than convulsed onto the floor, so it's not a.. stroke, or seizure, or some other attack.

She's just.. *out of it*.

And that sickly sweet Mist smell that's always hanging around her is getting stronger. Some kind of ambrosia. Similar to the cloying smell that the Shroud gave off, but of a different intensity. Yamamoto and Tsunayoshi smell of it too. So does this house.

Island Mist.

Weird. Reborn hasn't met any other Mist users who smelled so strongly of it, other than... Mammon. And Croquant. Then again, few other places on this planet have flames hanging in the air like morning fog. Except it's all day fog. Honestly, these people are lucky that Mist flames aren't known particularly for density in its natural state, or no one would be able to see more than a foot in front of them.

Reborn might just be biased, though. Against Mist. It makes his nose itch.

Nagi's foot twitches, shaking him out of his thoughts and back to the matter at hand. She wakes with a mighty breath, like someone surfacing from a dive, and sits up in one smooth movement.

"Good nap?"

".Mochida Kensuke. Age 16. Attends Namimori Junior High, class 3-C." She blinks and tips her
head to the side, still staring at the armrest at the other end of the couch. "..Former Captain of the Kendo Club."

Now she looks at Reborn.

"Why do you want to know about him?"

That wasn't odd at all, no.

"..We may have had an altercation with someone by his name."

"By altercation, you mean..?" Nagi makes a gesture that clearly says please continue.

"I mean that he's now somehow responsible for.. more or less babysitting Tsunayoshi?" Wait, no. "I believe Hibari Kyouya's exact words were that they had to learn to get along."

"Oh, then they'll be fine," she says, waving dismissively. "They were friends for practically all of last year. Almost."

"That's not what the footprint-shaped bruise Tsunayoshi left on his chest says."

"Kinky." Nagi laughs, just a little, though she does turn a little pink too. Reborn tries very hard not to let his mind wander on that topic. "..I don't know why they hate each other. One of Mochida's classmates was having her Resting Hour in the Resonance Field so I asked her about it, but I guess she didn't know that much."

"Hmm." How unfortunate. It's better than nothing, though. "What about his condition? They mentioned something about treatment. For Flame balancing."

"Mm, it's a pretty normal thing around here. Fiamma imbalance, we call it. It's when the body produces either too much or too few flames— doctors like to use fancy words, like hyperincaendia if you have too much, and hypoincaendia if there's not enough. Hypoincaendia is also known as fiamma exhaustion; you already know the symptoms for that."

"Tsunayoshi has it, no?"

"Chronic hypoincaendia, yes. The symptoms for fiamma imbalance... aren't always the same. Depending on flame type and personality, it could manifest in strange ways. Yamamoto is hyperincaendiac, but he manages just fine. Mists, Rains, and Clouds are pretty harmless in unbalanced states, very calm and controlled on their own. We've.. never seen an imbalanced Lightning, so far. If there are any, it's not been made a medical issue... Suns have to worry about their physical health and cellular degeneration more than others— oh, Clouds have to get regular physicals if they're hyperincaendiac. They get a lot of benign tumors in weird places, but we've always been able to catch them early enough. Mostly because they're always in for frequent checkups and injuries. They're.. well, you've heard about the Hibari Family by now."

"I have heard quite a bit about the Hibaris." About how vicious and bloodthirsty they can be. Which brings him to his next concern— "What about Storm?"

Nagi fidgets with her hands and the phone she's holding. Times like this, Reborn is reminded that Nagi is, probably, just about 17, if she wasn't lying about her age. Almost an adult, but not quite. Still quite mature and professional about it all.

"Storms are... very aggressive. Not in the way Clouds are— both types are susceptible to hyperincaendia, but the Hibari Family starts alternate treatment as early as grade school. The
Disciplinary Committee, is more than just law enforcement, it... it helps those with *fiamma* imbalance learn discipline and control over themselves and their flames. Like the current Chairman, Hibari Kyouya. He's *way* hyperincaendiac, like..

She makes this *exploding* gesture with her hands, complete with puffed up cheeks and sound effects. *Boom.*

"*Way* too many flames. Crazy amount of flames. But he has a lot of natural control, he joined the Committee when he was 6, and every now and then he takes the imbalance treatment, so he's... more or less perfectly functional. But Storms, they get... unnaturally violent. Irritable, rash, impulsive, and destructive to just about anything in front of them. Clouds get violent, but Storms get *aggressive*. Mochida probably never showed any signs of hyperincaendia until recently, or else he would have been relocated already."

That sounds... not right. "Relocated?"

"Their tendency towards aggression puts them... on the edge of things." She shrugs. "Most of our Storms are concentrated in the south. On the Hibari side there's a monastery in the mountains, there's a small town and a school up there and everything too. It's very well known for having calm, controlled Storms, probably because of their proximity to the Sawada Compound. Skies are really good for attaining enlightenment, I guess. And on the Kokuyo side, they tend to gather around the Vietnamese colony in the southeast. The Tran Foundation down there takes care of them. They have free clinics throughout the island for *fiamma* imbalance treatment and even do house calls for those in rural areas. Mostly they just like to get together to light fireworks and... blow things up. They, eh, have their own method of control. It's really nice on New Years, though."

"That's what Tsunayoshi said, too," Reborn says with a wry smile. Now he really wants to watch those fireworks. "Do... Sky attributes ever get hyperincaendia?"

"..Medically speaking, yes. I think Tsuna *used* to have it. Most of our Sky types have hyperincaendia, actually, but... we don't really call it *fiamma* imbalance, in their case. The thing about Skies is- they can't *be* imbalanced. They're- well, they're balance personified. They are harmony, they are..." Nagi trails off, then starts tapping away on her phone. "Hold on, I read it once somewhere—"

Curious, Reborn gets to his feet and trots his way inside, closing the screen door behind him. He looks between the other couch next to Nagi and the ground, and wonders just how old his bones are and whether they can survive sitting on wooden floor for prolonged periods of time, Sun-enhanced or otherwise. His spine's a concern, too.

He chooses the couch.

"Ah, here we go. *Oozora no Katagi, Heaven's Most Perfect Being.* [2] One of our people released an interview with Sawada Yorifusa a few years back."

"*The Yorifusa? From the SKIES Movement?*" [3]

"Oh, you know him? Good, I won't have to explain too much. Can you read Japanese? There's a video too if you can't."

"He spoke in Naples last year." Reborn reaches out to take the phone that she offers to him. "I didn't think anyone could get an interview with him. And in case you hadn't noticed, I just went through 8 years of textbooks in a week and a half. In *Japanese.*"
"So that's a yes?"

Reborn doesn't stop himself from rolling his eyes at her cheeky grin. ".Wait, you mean he's that kind of Sawada?"

"..Yes? How many Sawadas do you know?"

"I thought it was just a common surname," he mutters darkly, scrolling past the article title on the screen. "Iemitsu didn't even mention— oh, I can actually read this without a magnifying glass."

"I made the text bigger for you," Nagi says sweetly. "Because you're so old and stuff."

Nagi is great. Everyone here is spectacular. It warms the dead corners of Reborn's heart.

---

2014, May

"So? Come on, spill. Who'd you get? I'm babysitting this little Lightning, she's, like, 5 feet tall. I could hold her in my hand, she's so tiny."

"...Sawada."

"...Say that again?"

"I. They assigned No Good Tsuna to me," Kensuke says again, utterly dejected. "I got the most loser of all losers, I- Lan, stop laughing! I'm serious! How can I show off how cool I am to Kyouko if this losing loser of a loser has to tag along?! How can I show my face to her? She'll laugh! I'm the laughingstock of the whole school right now. Case in point, you!"

"I would say I'm sorry, Kensuke," Lan says, not looking sorry at all, "but, you know, you've honestly been a right dick about this whole Kyouko thing, so this is probably, like, divine retribution. The Committee decides the buddy-ups, right? Maybe you've finally pissed off Hibari enough."

"I've- I haven't done anything! He's never pissed off, anyway!"

"Well, you had to have done something or they wouldn't be making you deal with No Good Tsuna."

He groans into his hands and resists the urge to lay down on the ground to let it swallow him up. "I must have offended some god in my past life. Why, god-that-I-must-have-offended? What have I done? Do you not want me to succeed? My school life will be a disaster."

"Okay, now you're just over-exaggerating. He can't be that bad."

"...Lan. It's Sawada. It's No Good Tsuna. We don't call him No Good just because he's tiny and wimpy. He's really, really No Good. Like, actually hopeless. He's been hopeless since he started grade school, it's almost embarrassing."

The Committee loves you. Kyouko might even be impressed."

"..Kyouko might be really impressed. Maybe she'll even go on a date with me."

"You're an awful person, Kensuke."

"What? You said it first!"

---

2015 (Present)

"..Did you specifically give me this article because it talks about Tsunayoshi?"

"Hm? Oh, that's right, I forgot they talked about him a bit. No, it's just the only article about Skies I know about that actually makes sense. Talking to a Sawada is like.. cleaning toenails."

Reborn raises an eyebrow. "They smell?"

"Gross, no. It's.. not difficult, but it's- it's tedious. Potentially harmful to your health if you have Athlete's Foot or just don't like talking to nice people. I mean, 'Nice People'." Nagi makes air quotes as she says it. "And, yeah, they smell like fermented tofu a lot, too. At least down in Sawada Town they do."

"They're.. not actually nice?"

"No, they're.. really nice. Like, Really. If you ever catch Tsuna on a really good day, you'll see what I mean. It might be a while though, I haven't seen him have a good day since.. the day we fetched you from Kokuyo, I guess. A better day. He doesn't really have good days, from what I hear."

"That was Tsunayoshi on a better day?" Reborn squints at the portrait of Sawada Yorifusa. It looks far too much like some unholy combination of Yoshinao and Iemitsu for his comfort. "..I can't imagine what he's like on a good day, then."

More specifically, how irritating he would be.

..Then again, Reborn has more or less established with himself that the only thing he finds irritating about the boy (and consequently about Iemitsu) is the fact that they seem to be project some veneer of emotion that feels almost fake. Like they're acting. Lying. Trying to be something they're not.

They're good at it. If Reborn wasn't the World's Greatest Hitman with senses that had been honed over the years (and a generous amount of Sun flames to help it along), he wouldn't have suspected a thing.

The question is, does Timoteo know? Does he know that his outside advisor is a liar? Does he know that one of his own remaining options for an heir is just as accomplished an actor already? Does Iemitsu know what kind of a person his son is, to even consider suggesting him as a candidate?

Judging by what Yorifusa says in this interview about Skies, what it possibly says about
Tsunayoshi, the boy would either make the worst, most gullible, naive, childish and trusting individual in the Cosa Nostra... or he could be the most terrifying thing since Giotto himself.

And Reborn did more or less raise himself to enjoy things that terrified others. Love them, even.

Not sure he's quite ready to love this one though.

"Personal question," he says, holding up a finger as he turns his head to look at Yorifusa's picture sideways. Instead of, y'know, turning the phone itself. Or, he tried, but then the photo just turned itself right side up again. Very unhelpful. ".Maybe medical question? Should I ask you or Tsunayoshi himself?"

".Depends."

"His eyes glow. Have you noticed?"

"Y..es? Everyone gets it sometimes." Nagi squints at him. "Yours glow too."

"My eyes do not glow," Reborn protests out of habit more than anything. "They are black. Black as the night. Black as the abyss that festers in my dark and lonely heart."

Nagi blinks. "They're black?"

Reborn... is not sure what to say. Yes? Obviously? ".You haven't noticed?"

Wait, she did say his eyes.. glowed?

"You didn't think I was some yellow-eyed demon, did you?"

"No, I thought they were p- uh. Pink? ..Huh. I guess they don't glow, then."

".Wha-" What.

"I mean, purple. White? No, re- What? They keep changing." Reborn keeps staring. Not like Nagi has sprouted another head; that wouldn't surprise him at all, honestly. Stares at her like he's really curious about what she's seeing. He wants to see it too. ".I see colors?"

The statement is so obvious that he has to wonder what she really means by it.

".You see colors. You see flames?"

"Well, that too. The Islanders, their- their eyes change colors sometimes. It's a fiamma response, it's completely normal. Earliest one that children get. What I see is different. It's- a thing. Completely unrelated."

And Reborn is so completely interested. He props his chin in his hand, elbow on his knee. Practically screams 'do tell me more' ".A thing, huh? What kind of colors do you see? Why pink? Purple? Red?"

Her frown deepens and a furrow appears between her eyebrows that Reborn has never seen before. "It's- It's not my thing, it's Gina's- I can't talk about it."

"Why not? If it's his thing, it's yours. He sees it, you see it, therefore, it's also your thing. There's no reason wh- ..Nagi?" Uh. That's. "Are you cry-"

"Shut up!"
Oh. Shit. Ooooh shit.

"Did I say- what- Nagi I'm-"

Reborn tries to string words together to make something coherent but gives up after a few tries, leaving Nagi to her exaggerated attempts to breathe and calm herself down. It.. takes a few minutes.

A few very, very awkward minutes. He can almost feel Leon staring accusingly at him from his shoulder.

"My god, you crotchety old geezer," she says finally, trying to glare at him with wet eyes. "Have you never seen a girl stress-cry before?"

"No," is all Reborn can say, and dumbly so. It's not like he's never made anyone cry before but he's- he's always done it on purpose. Not. Not like this. "..Was it something I-"

"Of course it was something you said, moron. Ugh." Nagi sniffs again and rubs fiercely at her eyes with the heel of her hands, smudging the yellow eyeliner at the corner of her lids. "Sorry, it's- it's just been a bad week."

"Don't- uh. Sorry? About the." Week. Say it, Reborn. He's so bad at apologizing. He doesn't know how to deal with crying kids, civilians least of all. "..I'd ask if you need to talk about it but-"

"Not my week," she sighs, but without much hostility now. "Not mine to talk about."

Ah. Gina, then. Or whatever his name actually is.

"..Is he okay?"

"We're fine. We'll.. be fine." Nagi wipes at her eyes again, just as her phone buzzes in his hands.

A envelope icon wiggles around on the screen, so Reborn hands it back to her. She taps on it, eyes roving over whatever message was sent.

"..Sorry, Reborn-san, I'm-" She makes a gesture towards the stairs and stands, jerky and halting. "- I'm gonna go talk to him. It might, um.. take a while."

She looks tired. And worried. Not upset enough to be crying, though; which makes sense, if he's to understand that she's crying at least half of someone else's tears. However that works.

"No worries," Reborn says, because he is not completely heartless. "My questions can wait."

Nagi nods and makes some aborted move, like she's still unsure if she wants to go or not. He tips his head towards the door, and she goes, clutching the phone to her chest.

He has maybe a moment of silence before Nana pokes her head into the living room.

"Was Nagi-kun crying?"

Jesus Christ on a—

"I didn't do anything," Reborn says immediately. Then, because he notices she's wearing an apron, "..Are you cooking already? Lunch?"

"Oh, no, Tsu-kun sent me a message a few minutes ago. Takeshi-kun and Kensuke-kun are coming
over for dinner today, so I have to cook a lot!"

"Oh." Oh. Wait- ".You know Mochida Kensuke?"

"Mm-hm! He and Tsu-kun used to be friends, he would come by pretty often last year. Until..."
Nana trails off, her expression taking on a saddened tinge. ".Things.. happened. Things changed.
Maybe they just wanted a break from each other?"

She brightens, then.

"But it sounds like they're friends again, so I'm going to put together a huge celebration dinner
for them! Do you want to help, Reborn-san?"

He considers telling her that they're not actually.. 'getting back together'. That they're just being
punished for starting a fight on school grounds (probably, is what it sounds like).

Instead Reborn shrugs and says "Sure," and follows Nana into the kitchen to peel what looks like a
mountain of vegetables.

"..Sawada-san? You.. wouldn't happen to know about the treatment processes for hyper- and
hypoincaendia, would you?"

2014, May

The kid looks like a rat up close.

..Well, maybe not a rat. That's an insult to rats. At least rats have some brains and can solve
puzzles.

Sawada Tsunayoshi is neither and can do neither.

"What'd you do to get a buddy, Sawada? Bribe someone? Sell yourself to the Hibaris?"

Sawada just stares at him, eyes lidded and even. Makes Kensuke want to throttle him.

"I'm a citizen and a student," he says like it's obvious. "School regulations do not make exclusions
for any reason."

"Che. I supposed you'd know that, wouldn't you."

"I did read the rulebook." And then he smiles like a damn idiot, like he doesn't know that Kensuke
probably hates everything about him, just like everyone else does. Like he doesn't know or doesn't
care. "You're Mochida-senpai, right? It's nice to meet you!"

Pretentious, hopeless, and annoying. What a great combination.

"Why the hell did they pair us up, anyway," Kensuke grumbles, waiting for Sawada to finish
packing his bag. The lunch bell has already rung but it seems the kid won't leave his stuff behind in
the classroom. "What the hell is Hibari thinking?"
"Hm? I thought it was rather obvious." Sawada shoulders his bag and checks in his desk for anything he might have missed. "You're a Storm. I'm a Sky."

"...Still don't get it."

"Well, obviously I'm supposed to help you manage your temper. And you're supposed to help... give me emotions, or something. Make me more lively. Something like that." Sawada shrugs. He doesn't make any sense. "I think I'm lively enough, honestly. Anyway, you wanna have lunch with me and Takeshi? He went ahead to grab his Buddy."

"Uh, no thanks. I'm not attending some convention of losers."

"It's Kyouko-chan."

Kensuke stops and finally looks back at Sawada. Looks a him properly, and goddammit the kid is wearing some kind of unholy grin that belongs on the face of the devil.

"So, is that a yes?"

2015 (Present)

"...You are coming by for dinner, right? Because I told my mom you would and you know she's probably going to cook for a million people, you need to be there to eat."

"I already told you yes, Sawada, how many more times do you have to ask? It's not like it's the first time I'm meeting your parents."

"Parent. Singular."

Kensuke frowns. "..Wasn't your mother seeing someone?"

Sawada makes a weird face. "..She's still married, you asshat."

"But- but that guy, that guy that's always bringing her flowers-"

"..He's a friend who happens to be a florist."

"He's.. he's a guy! He's a guy! He brings her flowers!"

"Your best friend is a girl, don't be a hypocrite."

"That's not- that's different!"

"Whatever!" Sawada rolls his eyes and slouches down in the bed, pulling the covers up to his chest, like a kid trying to hide. "I'm just.. worried you won't show up."

"..You kicked me in the chest just a few minutes ago and now you're afraid I won't show up at your house for dinner?"

"It's a valid concern."
"How is it a- Ugh!" Kensuke groans and slouches down too, kicking his feet up onto the bed. At least the damn chairs in the nurse's ward are comfortable. "You are just- how does anyone even put up with you?"

"You're the only one that can't put up with me, Mochida. Senpai."

"Don't just add that in as an afterthought, you ungrateful kouhai."

Sawada sticks his tongue out. Kensuke makes a face at him and considers kicking him in the legs, but that would be mean of him.

Oh, wait.

Kensuke kicks him anyway.

"-Ow, what the hell, Mochida?!" Sawada yelps, rubbing at the sore spot on his leg under the blanket.

"That's what you get for trying to beat up an upperclassman."

"Well maybe you shouldn't have called me a crippled pipsqueak."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have gotten into a fight that left you a crippled pipsqueak."

"Exactly what part of me is crippled?"

"This." Kensuke jabs a finger violently at Sawada's leg, making him wince and pull away, though not very far. "Your ribs. Your everything."

"That's only temporary!"

"Temporarily crippled pipsqueak then. There, happy?"

A pillow smacks him in the face and Kensuke falls back, sputtering. He scrambles to sit upright again, ready to spit out another round of insults at Sawada's face, that- that No Good face. Angry and yet not, like it's mocking him.

God, he hates it so much.

"No fighting in the ward."

Kensuke lets out a strangled yelp. "N-Nurse Shiomi...!"

"Hibari-san's orders." The elderly nurse narrows her eyes at them. Behind him, Kensuke hears Sawada utter some sort of a whimper.

Hibari is only really terrifying if you break the rules, knowingly or otherwise. Very specific, structured rules upheld by the Hibari Clan since the founding of the Committee.

The school nurses, however, are something else entirely.

..Could also be that Kensuke just has some ingrained fear of them after so many impromptu fiamma balancing treatments. Maybe Sawada too. Still. Doesn't change the fact that they probably some of the only adults in the building capable of making students behave.

"Yes ma'am," Sawada says quietly.
Kensuke nods furiously. "Promise not to fight! A-again."

Nurse Shiomi doesn't look like she believes them, but she does retreat, still squinting at them all the while. Once they hear the sound of her pen on paper at her desk again, Sawada tugs on his sleeve.

"..Um. What say we.. get out of here before we destroy something and get in real trouble?"

"Good idea."

He tries to get up and leave, only for Sawada to tighten his two-fingered grip and yank him back by no more than the cloth around his arm.

"Hey- hey wait you can't just leave me here alone!" Sawada hisses.

Kensuke hisses back, "Hell yeah I can!"

"You can't babysit me if you leave me here."

"I won't need to babysit you if you're stuck here."

"I will scream bloody murder if you do not get me out of here in the next two secon—"

"SSSHHH!" He hisses again, so tempted to shove his hand over Sawada's mouth just to shut him up but settling for waving it frantically in his face instead. "Alright alright I'll get you out of here! Just- don't scream, god, you're going to get us all slaughtered."

Sawada sticks his tongue out again, teeth and all.

"I'm not carrying you though."

"I'd strangle you if you tried," the kid huffs back, arms crossed over his chest. "I will permit you to put your hands on my person and help me into a wheelchair."

"...You hate wheelchairs."

Sawada makes a face. "Yeah. I hate medical rooms even more, and you know I'm a walking nightmare on crutches."

Kensuke scowls at him for a good, long moment. Sometimes he swears he doesn't know how he was ever friends with this....  brat.

(Except, he does know. Still remembers.)

"I can't believe I'm actually agreeing with you on this," he says curtly after the silence. "Fine. Fine. I'll get you a damn wheelie and we're blowing this joint."

"You'd be surprised just how much we agree on, senpai," Sawada says to his back, in a quiet tone that Kensuke hasn't heard since.. well.

A while now.

"Uh.. nurse..." Kensuke peers around the curtained partition, trying figure out a way to get Nurse Shiomi's permission without making the pot boil over, so to speak. "..Sawada says he's feeling better. Can I borrow a wheelchair to take him to class?"

She gives him a flat look. "If he needs a wheelchair to get to class, he's not feeling better yet."
"He's prone to sudden temporary disability, nurse, he'll never *not* need a wheelchair." He swallows and tries to sound a little less... scathing. "It's just- taking precautions. Please?"

Eugh. *Please.* For *Sawada the Loser.* The things Kensuke will do for the Committee astounds even himself.

"Please, nurse?" Sawada says from behind him. "Senpai said he'll make sure I won't keel over on the stairs again."

Nurse Shiomi looks 2 seconds away from rolling her eyes, much to Kensuke's- actually, no, he's not offended by it at all. Maybe a little. Just a bit.

She pushes the curtain aside to look at Sawada directly, startling him with her sudden appearance. "And you actually believe him?"

"Um." Sawada frowns. "..Yes? Of course?"

Kensuke wants to hurl a textbook at his head for how *honest* he sounds, because he has *got* to be fucking lying, and if he actually is he is *too damn good at it.*

"..He broke two of your ribs last year and you actually trust him not to shove you down a flight of stairs?"

"That was an accident!" No it fucking wasn't. "And anyway, I started that fight."

No he fucking didn't.

"Alright then." Nurse Shiomi pulls her rolling chair up and crosses her arms, squinting again. "Give me one good reason why I should let him take you out of here on a moving death trap, Tsunayoshi."

Kensuke tries to communicate *DON'T TELL HER THE THING* by making neck-slashing motions at Sawada, who's probably going to tell her about the thing anyway. It's not even official, he doesn't even have a *badge* yet, he doesn't want everyone to go around crowing about it.

Nurse Shiomi looks at him and he pretends to glower uninterestedly at a poster on the wall depicting the various reproductive organs and possible combinations thereof. There's.. wow, a lot. He never noticed the hotline number printed at the bottom before, either.

"..Hibari-san let him join the Committee, but he has to look after me as a trial run."

*That* gets her attention. And Kensuke's. Kensuke also makes strangling motions at Sawada.

"Did he?"

"Yeah! Because I get hurt so often, you know?" Sawada grins, *so grateful,* and Kensuke can't tell if that's honesty or blatant self-deprecating pandering. He hates both options. "And I really want to help senpai join the Committee for good. I-I mean, as much as I can help, anyway."

To his surprise, the nurse seems to actually *believe* Sawada. Kensuke isn't the best at reading faces, but even he can still that she looks a little.. *softer.* And so does Sawada, for that matter. *Why.*

"..Isn't that just sweet of you." And then she turns to Kensuke, *smiling,* Nurse Shiomi practically *never smiles* this is pretty scary. "They finally let you join, Kensuke?"

"-Uh. Yes. On a.. probationary period."
"Well, congratulations. I'm glad to hear it. Really." She sounds like his grandmother. She sounds exactly like his grandmother. Or, well, she would, if his grandmother was still alive. "Alright. Alright, I'll admit him from the ward. *Just this once,* Kensuke."

"..Thanks? I-I mean, thank you! Thank you very much, Nurse Shiomi." Okay, that's weird. But he'll take it.

She writes a note onto the clipboard hanging off the wall next to Sawada. "I'll be right around with the wheelchair."

Sawada thanks her too, beaming like a miniature sun. Kensuke scoots back into the chair to try and peek at the medical chart on the clipboard. He doesn't get very far because Sawada keeps shoving the pillow in his face until the nurse comes back.

"Make sure you return it once he can walk properly. *Or* if he needs it for more than a day- what are you two doing now?"

"He's being nosy and looking at my chart," Sawada says, probably, because Kensuke is currently being smothered by a pillow and can't actually hear him all that clearly.

"If you're going to be under Kensuke's protection, Tsunayoshi, even if only temporarily, then he should know some of what's on there."

"But he already knows."

"I know *last year's* chart," Kensuke says, finally shoving the pillow away. For a kid half a foot shorter than Kensuke is with supposedly zero upper body strength, Sawada can be surprisingly strong sometimes. "Who knows what other stuff you've got cooked up in you this year."

"I'm not a walking meth lab, *senpai*, there's nothing new on there."

"Whatever. Come on, princess, up and at it. We're escaping the dungeon."

"Yeah, yeah, be *patient.*" Sawada makes a face as he heaves himself into the wheelchair with only minor help from Kensuke. Mostly he's just spotting to make sure the kid doesn't slip and crack his head open on the floor. "Just remember I'm not a Go Kart. Don't shove me off Rainbow Road again."

"Will you *never* let that go? *Ugh,* you're insufferable."

"Good luck now, Kensuke." That.. actually makes him look up and jerk back a little. In surprise, of course. "And remember, don't tell Hibari-san I've been letting you skip your treatments. Both of you."

"A- Um. Thanks. Nurse. We won't!"

She gives him another smile that makes his stomach want go all fluttery and yet simultaneously shrivel up and die. Sawada snickers the moment they're out of earshot of the ward.

"What the hell's so funny?" Kensuke growls, pushing the kid along a little too quickly. He's just sitting there, clutching his book bag as though it were a pillow that he'd like to swing at someone's head.

"Your face."
"Why'd you even tell her about the Committee thing? Did you even think for a second that I might not want everyone knowing about it?"

"Nurse Shiomi isn't everyone. Besides, she's on your side."

"Yeah? How do you figure that? That intuition of yours again?"

"Her niece is a Storm." Sawada tips his head back until he's looking up at Kensuke, rather than just turning his head around like a normal person. "She wants to join the Committee too."

"..How exactly do you know that?"

"Uh, she talks, obviously. I listen."

"No one talks to you, Sawada."

"They do if I talk to them first. And you do! Sometimes."

Sometimes, Kensuke mouths mockingly.

Then he stops so suddenly that Sawada nearly pitches over and out of the wheelchair with, only managing to hang on with a yelp.

"Wait, you've been skipping your treatments too?"

"I've been skipping them for years, seeing as they don't actually, y'know, work for me."

---

2014, May

Yamamoto Takeshi won't stop laughing at them. Even after Kensuke tries the whole 'I am your senpai don't you dare laugh at me' shtick. It just makes it worse.

It probably doesn't help that Kyouko seems on the verge of laughter herself, though she's holding it in well. Her shoulders are shaking. It's.. kind of cute.

Lan is in full on hysterics, face buried in the bend of her elbow to muffle the most of her dying hyena sounds. The Lightning she happens to be Buddying with sits next to her and keeps shooting them worried looks.

Kensuke's face is probably red and he's avoiding as much eye-contact as he can, especially with Kyouko.

No Good Tsuna is the only one actually eating, looking back and forth between the three of them with some kind of heightened amusement in his eyes.

He smiles a lot, Kensuke would later realize. Smiles, grins, snickers and cackles. But never actually laughs.

(At least that's one less thing to worry about. Being laughed at by his own underclassman. Well, another one.)
Anyway, he doesn't see what's so funny. Just because he happens to Not Want to be Sawada's Buddy with every fiber of his being, has Never Wanted to be within 10 yards of the kid, and now happens to be stuck showing him the tricks and trades of Namimori Junior High...

..Okay, so maybe if someone else were in his position, Kensuke would find it completely hilarious. But it's not someone else. It's Kensuke.

He shoots a glare at Sawada. Sawada just grins and shrugs.

"Look on the bright side," he says, but then doesn't say anymore.

"..What bright side?" Kensuke grinds out.

Sawada tips his head towards Kyouko, who goes a little pink and says Tsuna! in that chiding tone of hers.

Kensuke drops his head to the table with a groan, narrowly avoiding his lunch, and Lan is positively howling.

2015 (Present)

"Nagi-kun explained the difference between the two, yes?"

Reborn nods, slowly. Not that he's particularly trying to concentrate on peeling vegetables, but it never hurts to pay attention with sharp things in his hands. God knows the kind of messes he's gotten into before without realizing it.

Good thing he used to help his mother with things like this. Muscle-memory is such a blessing.

"In hyperincaendia, the body produces and stores more flames than it can process and use," Nana reiterates, probably to make a point. "The result is increased effects of flames on the body. Excessive calmness, extra energy, elevated tempers, higher incidences of lashing out, depending on the flame type, or types. It can also damage the body if left untreated for too long. In hypoincaendia, the body doesn't produce enough. The result across the board is general tiredness and exhaustion, but hypoincaendia can also indirectly lead to muscle atrophy and soreness in the limbs and joints due to lack of movement."

He nods again. Tsunayoshi had trouble walking after throwing himself at the other boy. Sudden extreme activity after an extended period of being very, very inactive.. like the crash after a high. Be it from adrenaline, sugar, or some other illegal substance.

"Have you ever heard of polycythemia vera, Reborn-san?"

"I can't say that I have." Though from the sound of it, he's surprised that Nana has.

"It's a condition that affects the bone marrow and makes it produce more red blood cells than it should, sometimes too many white blood cells and too many platelets, too."

"I definitely know those."
"If left untreated, polycythemia thickens the blood and causes clots, swelling in the extremities, and nerve damage. It can be fatal, actually." She says this so cheerfully, all while cutting rhythmically and methodically at the counter behind Reborn. "Treatment involves either medication such as aspirin to thin the blood, chemotherapy, or other radioactive measures to suppress the bone marrow and keep it from overproducing. The other option is, of course, to just regularly remove the excess blood from the body."

He stops peeling. Nana keeps talking, and now he starts feeling a curious, cold sort of dread in his fingertips. Shivers.

"And, well, when you've lost too much blood, all they need to do is put blood back in. Unless you have aplastic anemia. Then we have to treat what's keeping that same bone marrow from producing enough blood, like transplanting in healthy bone marrow. And hoping the same thing doesn't happen to that bone marrow."

"..Let me guess. The same thing applies to Flames?"

"More or less!" Nana is just so lighthearted about this, it's almost scary.

Reminds him of Shamal, still so young but already morbidly intrigued by and attached to all the illnesses he contracted since birth. Attached enough to give them all dumb little names just so his childish mind could remember what they were and what they did to his body.

"We have various devices capable of extracting flames from or transfusing them into the body. That's considered an emergency, short-term treatment, like painkillers for a headache, or aspirin for polycythemia. For most, a one-time treatment is enough for a one-time event." She sweeps by and bundles up the carrots and other assorted vegetables that Reborn has managed to finish peeling before he stopped, takes them to the cutting board to continue dicing. Reborn thinks she's a little too knowledgeable about all this, for a housewife. "For others, like Tsu-kun and Kensuke-kun, they have the option of grouping up for Collective Resting. The Resting Rooms are designed to facilitate the simultaneous extraction and absorption of flames between various bodies, to help balance out both. Failing that, they can either continue having flames extracted or transfused regularly, or they can treat the underlying cause."

"..What would that be?"

"The very, very delicate balance between flames and the emotional state, of course! I think Italy calls them... Dying Will Flames, right? Well, we don't really call them that here, but the Dying Will that creates a flame in Italy would be the equivalent of our Resolve. It's kind of like a goal we make for ourselves, a dream or an aspiration. Something we would do with our 'Dying Will', because we'd never be in a position to need the Will of the dying. Don't you think?"

..Reborn nods. Then adds, "That sounds about right," because he remembers that she's probably not looking at him.

"In both cases the Will and Resolve is a result of the mind, the emotions, and, as a result, the chemicals that govern emotions. Then there's the Flames themselves that affect the emotional state... and the emotions in turn affect flames. Like an unending feedback loop. Neither is the sole cause of the other, but if you treat one, then the other will generally follow. The balance of chemicals in the brain are so easy to alter these days. You have recreational drugs, cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol... and prescription medication, of course."

"Hmm." He nods again, absently. "..You seem to know a lot about all this, Sawada-san."
"I do some work at the Fiamma Research Facility," Nana hums. Right. He'd forgotten about that somehow. "And Fiamma Biology classes are mandatory in the last year of junior high. Have you finished the rest of the carrots, Reborn-san?"

"Hm?" He looks down and, uh. Oops. ".I was.. thinking. A lot."

"Idle hands," she says.

"Idle minds," Reborn hums in return, and wonders if that's why Iemitsu has coffee and a smoke every morning. Why Nana and Nagi and Tsunayoshi all take a cup of coffee in the morning, too. Why Xanxus has taken to drinking so much.

"...What about lobotomy?"

"They.. used to." She looks briefly over her shoulder. "But it harmed more than it healed, over the years that followed the treatment. Especially the children. The island was pretty unanimous in helping ban it in from Japan in the 1950s. We took up drugs and medicines instead, and it's been all for the better."  

For a moment there's only the sound of her knife tapping against the board.

"I.. heard from Nao-san that the Founder, Ieyasu, had theorized something similar to lobotomy using a fiamma-based procedure to seal off flames. She says it was probably something he developed in Italy... You wouldn't have happen to know anything about it, would you, Reborn-san?"

Reborn looks at the clock hanging off the kitchen wall, and watches the seconds tick by. Considers. Considers Tsunayoshi. Considers Xanxus.

He picks up another carrot and starts peeling it. Imagines it's like sharpening an ice pick. Zero Point ice pick lobotomy.

"..Can't say that I do, Sawada-san."

2014, June

Kensuke is convinced that Sawada Tsunayoshi is just a loser who can't do anything. Can't make friends, can't pass his classes, can't play sports, can't do anything worth anything.

He, like everyone else, makes these assumptions based on what everyone else says. Which is funny, because everyone is basing these claims on what.. others say. Which is also based on what someone else has said. He, like everyone else, figures this entirely long telephone chain of everyone agreeing that Sawada Tsunayoshi being a loser must be right and true. And anyway, Sawada never denies it. His test rankings are always subpar and dead last.

Everything else must be true, then.

No one seems to be aware of the fact that No Good Tsuna has probably the most vulgar, most violent vocabulary out of everyone on the entire island. Excepting, maybe, Hibari Kyouya himself.
This is, of course, only valid when he, Yamamoto, Kyouko, and Kurokawa are playing Mario Kart. Or, as they call it, a No Holds Barred Death Match On The School Roof.

Yeah. Kensuke was completely convinced up until that point.

"What the hell, Sawada," Kurokawa hisses, "did you get in last place just for the damn Lightning again?"

"Why the fuck else would I be dead last for this many rounds?"

"Holy shit, Tsuna, no," Yamamoto whines, elbowing Sawada in the side. "I want to win this time please just let me have this one victory—"

"No mercy for the weak, Takeshi. DIE!" He smashes the button almost viciously. "Eat my blood-soaked gym socks!"

Kensuke watches over Sawada's shoulder in morbid fascination as the kid zaps every racer ahead of him and everyone responds with either a groan or a string of curses- even Kyouko!

"Son of a dick sucking absinthe guzzling mule, Tsuna," she says. Kensuke feels part of his childhood crush withering away. The rest of it returns with a raging metaphorical— "How many Mushrooms do you have? How did you even get that many?!

Sawada does not answer. Instead he cackles like a comic book villain, using Mushroom after Mushroom to speed up and methodically run over every single one of them as he passes them by. There is a lot of swearing involved. Kensuke is impressed by their creativity, and also by Sawada's steering.

"Sawada if you run me over I will Blue Shell you to hell and back- Hey! Kyouko did you just steal my Shell?!

"Now why would you think I would do something so despicable to you, my best friend? Don't worry, I'll use it on Tsuna."

"Oooh no, don't you even think about it, Kyouko, you know it won't do you any good."

"This isn't Wii, Tsuna, you can't just Mushroom your way out of a Blue Shell- how the hell did you Mushroom your way out of that, HOW."

"I," Sawada crows, veering out of the way of yet another Blue Shell, "am a magical Mushroom genius. I am a leaf on the wind—"

"Oh, fuck, who threw the Green Shells? C'mon, own up, who the hell do I gotta teach why we do not throw Green Shells at Sawada?"

"Um," Lan croaks, barely able to stay upright because she's been laughing so hard, "I did?"

"Oh my god," Kurokawa starts chanting under her breath, viciously stabbing at the buttons on her DS as she jerks it from side to side. "You are so dead, you are so dead you are so dead, Touno Kim Lan I will personally MURDER you AND your dead body-

Kyouko's screeching reaches a fever pitch. Yamamoto's yelling cycles between a litany of goddammits and shit, shit shit shit SHIT NO TSUNA WE ARE NOT FRIENDS ANYMORE."

"—watch me soar, shitheads."
Sawada somehow manages to evade every single one of the Green Shells bouncing all over the track and glides past the finish line, taking first place by a mile and a very, very loud chime of victory. Lan is too busy keeling over and dying of laughter to be mad about coming in last. Probably because it's also her first time playing.

Kensuke does not even have words for how Not Hopeless that was.

Then Sawada turns to him, eyes wide and bright, grinning sharp and toothy and taunting—

It feels like the first time ever caught a real glimpse of Kyouko three years ago, all over again.

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2015 (Present)

"..Why are we on the roof, Mochida? This isn't the classroom."

"Of course it isn't, I don't have Summer classes."

"I do."

Kensuke snorts. "I know you don't actually need remedial lessons, Sawada."

"Maybe not? But Hibari-san assigned it, so it's practically mandatory." Sawada leans over the armrest and scrunches his nose down at where Kensuke is laying on the ground. "I thought you'd be all gung-ho about following the rules now that you're finally in the Committee."

"I'm not in the Committee yet, smartass. And I'm not going to be seen wheeling you around like a dumbass. So sit tight, get your legs working, and then we'll scram."

He kicks back, despite itching to go to the gym to see how the Kendo Club is doing. He'd take Sawada with him, if it weren't literally a safety hazard to have those two things in the same vicinity as each other. Sawada and the Kendo Club. Or Sawada and anything involving potential weapons, honestly.

"Is this what they call senioritis in America?"

"One, this is junior high, senioritis doesn't start until high school. Two, it's Summer, we're supposed to be lazying about. What does that have to do with anything, anyway?"

"I just.. thought you'd be making more effort now that you actually have a chance to join the Committee."

"Che. What do you care?"

"Um, of course I care? I may think you're extremely lame for wanting to join for the past... what? 6 years? But who gives a shit what I think? Yeah, I care. You've been trying for 6 years, and now, what? What's going on, Mochida?"

"Shut up and stay out of my business, loser," he scoffs, closing his eyes to the warm sun on his face.
And then sits up sputtering and coughing, because Sawada just upended a bottle of water onto his head.

"What the fuck are you trying to drown me?!!"

Sawada stares down at him and doesn't say anything. Not for the longest time. It's ridiculous.

"...You dropped out of the Kendo Club, Mochida." Gee, wow, news sure does spread fast. "You stopped taking your shinai everywhere, you're not picking fights with me—you practically try to avoid me and Takeshi whenever you can, and then you just show up on the last day of Summer break? You haven't even been bothering Hibari-san that much lately!"

"If I'm bothering him it's probably a good thing I stopped then, isn't it?"

"Come on, you shit-spitting dullard, don't make me roll over your nuts."

"Fucking hell you've gotten violent, Sawada," Kensuke hisses, scooting away from the suddenly very threatening wheel next to his hip. "What the hell happened to you?"

"I grew up, like you kept telling me to."

"Bullshit."

"Yeah? What's your bullshit excuse then?"

"None of your fucking business."

"I'm a Sky, Kensuke," Sawada snarls, wheeling himself around to face Kensuke head on. "It is my fucking business."

"Like hell it is!" He hates it. Hates how much Sawada insists on caring when he has absolutely no reason to. When he was just a useless, hopeless kid before he got his flames. Before he got them back. "You're not my Sky, so just—fuck off!"

Now he's got this whole Sky thing going on and he's shoving his Skyness on everyone, it's- it's baffling. It doesn't make sense.

Their classes always teach that Skies are selfless, how caring and open they are, how great it is to Harmonize or even just Resonate with a Sky, even if it's only temporary. How accepting they are. It's so much bullshit. No one can possibly be that naive, that forgiving, that- that stupidly compassionate.

And then fucking Sawada happened. And then Sawada almost dies, and literally nothing changed.

Kensuke has been keeping out of his way since school started again and Sawada is still refusing to let go. A grip like a vice, fingers deceptively frail and brittle wrapped around his wrist. Small. Unassuming. Eyes bright. Unwavering.

Temperamental. Aggressive. Raging, like a hurricane.

Who could possibly stand to want a something like that?
Sawada follows him around like a puppy. Not a lost one. Not even an extraordinarily peppy, perky puppy. Actually, maybe not like a puppy at all. More like a.. cat?

"..You do know this doesn't make me your friend," he says. Sawada is trying to pick out an ice cream bar at the convenience store now that club activities are over. All he really did was do his homework while Kensuke tried to keep his club members from picking on the kid too much, as is his duty as the Buddy. "I'm just here to make sure you follow the rules so Hibari doesn't beat you up too bad."

"And to keep me out of trouble, right?" Sawada smiles, he's always smiling so damn much. Doesn't it get tiring? "Friends do that too."

"We're not friends. Don't even think about it, Dametsuna."

"Says the guy who lost to Dametsuna in Mario Kart. Three times." It's a light hearted quip, but it's also sort of the first time Kensuke has ever really thought of No Good Tsuna as something other than a useless, hopeless kid with no friends, no dreams, and no ambitions. No luck, no finesse. No cares. "So, why not?"

Yamamoto runs up to them before Kensuke can say anything. Throws his arms around Sawada and makes him squeak with the sudden weight. Their hands link together smoothly and they're grinning and picking out ice creams without missing a beat. Kyouko comes up, waving, followed by Kurokawa and Lan, and Lan's little Lightning kouhai.

Kensuke waves back at Kyouko, weakly. Sure, he'd thought about hanging out with her and her Buddy like this, but actually doing it? Is so surreal.

"You didn't drag that kid along for shits and giggles, did you Lan?"

"Who, Sasaki? Nah. She's new in town, remember? Kusakabe's distant... something. Cousin? Yeah. Anyway, I told her I'd show her around and not to worry, because the Kendo Club's Captain is on our side." Lan grins, patting his shoulder. Sasaki hides behind her. "So keep us safe, yeah?"

He looks at this sudden explosion of people and, really, wonders what the hell he's gotten himself into.

Because Sawada denies having friends. Always. And yet, he holds hands with the baseball team's ace player, he trades quips and violent Kart-related threats with the school Idol, and now he's saying why not? to Mochida Kensuke.

Lan nudges him over next to Kyouko and flashes him a supposedly encouraging smile. Kyouko giggles a greeting, still idol-like even outside of school. Kensuke smiles, tentatively.

Okay. Maybe it's not so bad.

Then Kurokawa hip-checks him out of the way with a move over, monkey, Kyouko's best friend coming through, and he shoves her back.

It takes a while but they finally settle on a walking arrangement that satisfies everyone desire to walk next to someone or other. Which is good, because Kensuke is about ready to challenge
Kurokawa’s weaponized walking cane just for the right to stand next to Kyouko.

(Oddly enough, Kyouko isn’t what leads him to a duel with Tsuna.

Kyouko isn’t the reason he ends up inadvertently sabotaging whatever it is they’ve got going on here.

Kyouko isn’t even why he wanted to join the Committee 5 years ago.

But Kyouko is—

[1] hypo-, under. hyper-, over. -incaendia, from latin 'incendium / incaendium' meaning 'fire', or more literally 'DANGER' as google translate says, but i’m sure that's also works as a synonym for 'fire'.

[2] actual 'article' can be found [HERE] if you are interested in extra reading.

大空の気質 oozora no katagi, lit. '[the] sky's temperament'.

i used the japanese wording to emphasize something. 'sora' is just sky, but in canon they use 'oozora' meaning basically 'BIG sky', as in the Big Kahuna. every other element is just one character, but sky has that 'great' preceding its actual element character.

the rest of the article title, 'heaven's most perfect being', refers to the fact that in chinese the character for 'sky' is 天空, where 天 is equivalent to 'heaven' and 空 actually carries the meaning of 'air' or 'empty'. personally speaking, i’ve only ever heard 天 used when talking about the sky.

[3] also explained in the external 'article'. the movement is basically about educating and raising public awareness and knowledge about the dying will flames. there's many of them, but this particular one is headed by several members of the sawada line. as a reminder, Flames went public in 2005, not long after xanxus was frozen. it's currently 2015. everyone's playing catch-up.

[4] fact: japan did permit the use of lobotomy, mostly on 'problematic children', up until the 1950s, when they followed russia in banning it as a treatment.

Chapter End Notes

for the rest of that last sentence, please refer to the chapter title, because i’m Very Clever.

as usual if anyone needs me i’ll be screaming on tumblr @vongolastic, you can also find me on twitter @esquitor. ask questions if you're confused about anything. i have a website for iib that i’ll be throwing everywhere bc i spent Much Time on it and want to show it off, and also it can help clear up some things too.
Chapter Summary

no one wants to admit that sawada tsunayoshi has changed since the day he nearly
died. and if no one else will admit it, neither will he.
this is a problem.

Chapter Notes

mochida pt 2 / 3. catching up with everyone else. like kyouya. and gina. ooh, gina.
forewarning, mukuro, ken, and chikusa are.. 15/16 and will have slightly different
names in the beginning (as evidenced by mukuro = gina). they may or may not
transition to canon names later, depending on how it all goes or.. what i decide along
the way haha.

WARNINGS: mukuro is NOT actually crazy, there will be a perfectly logical
explanation for what's going on with him and nagi. later. uh, light bullying. casual
violence. casual self-depreciation. mmmm more worldbuilding shit, as always. more
lore!! hints to lore!! weird island stuff and islanders not caring about how weird it is.
the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

______________________________

we are beauty beyond compare.

______________________________

There is actually a surprising amount of paperwork that amasses from doing nothing but excusing a
student from classes whenever they see fit. Really, so much of the school thinks it's as easy as
putting a stamp on something and saying 'sure, go ahead and skip class'.

Namimori's schools all work on an elevator system, but no one learns anything if they just get
bumped to the next level regardless of their marks.

Tetsuya heaves a sigh and sifts through the stack of papers regarding Mochida Kensuke's most
recent class-skipping privileges. They've had these forms for years, honestly. He submits them
every semester, so they know his grades aren't the problem.

The problem is expecting too much. Wanting too much.

Kyouya lets Mochida do as he wishes; patrol the grounds, guard the school gates, cover for actual
Sworn Committee members when they're unable to work. Lets him do just about anything a
Committee Member is sworn to do.

Except join the Committee.
And, well. Most of the island citizens are fine with this. Most of them don't want the pressures of joining the Committee, but they still want to help.

Mochida Kensuke wants to join.

Mochida Kensuke is Not Permitted to join.

..Until now.

Kyouya is going through half of the pile, discarding any old, outdated grade reports, and setting the newer ones aside for filing. Idly, Tetsuya notes that while he himself has his own file of grade reports, Kyouya... does not. It isn't the first time Tetsuya has thought about, but Kyouya has never really given a straight answer. Shouldn't the Chairman be subject to the same scrutiny as every other Committee member?

..Then again. Kyouya is a Hibari. And their Chairman.

"Kyouya-sa," Tetsuya says, instead of asking about Kyouya's very distinct lack of track record proving his ability to keep up in class while not actually being in class. Not that anyone doubts Kyouya's ability. Kyouya doesn't let anyone doubt his ability. "..I'm not so sure we should be putting Mochida and Sawada that, well, that close to each other."

Kyouya grunts. It's been a wordy day. "He's not getting better."

"..I agree. Which is why I don't think it's a good idea."

"He was getting better." Kyouya makes a face that Tetsuya has come to understand as irritation, even though to anyone else it would just be something... odd. "Last year. You weren't here last year, Tetsuya."

"..Mochida was getting better last year? I thought this all.. started last year."

"No. It's accumulative." It's been building up, then. Adding up. Tetsuya certainly hasn't noticed. Last year was.. the last straw? "..He stopped crowding. For a while."

—That's definitely news to Tetsuya. There's hardly any student that just.. stops crowding altogether that suddenly. According to Kyouya, anyway. Once crowder, always a crowder.

But where normally Kyouya would protest this breaking of his classification of their fellow students, here he seems to relish it. Unless this is just another way of protesting.

Besides, isn't it a good thing that at least one student isn't crowding anymore?

"But," Kyouya continues, still making that face, "now he is no longer grouping."

Damn. Two classifications broken at once. That's got to be a new record.

"Are.. you saying he's a carnivore now?"

"No," Kyouya hisses, but not in anger. Tetsuya draws back a step anyway, just in case. Eyes the paperwork, lest Kyouya lash out and disorganize everything again. "He is a stray. Lost. Separated. The small animal will bring him back into the fold."

"You really think Sawada can do something like that? What if they destroy the Kendo Club's dojo again?"
Kyouya gives him a look. A different look. The kind that speaks the obvious but also tries not to be condescending, as opposed to the one that does try to be condescending.

"Two is company," he says.

"..And three is a crowd," Tetsuya says, thinking of Yamamoto Takeshi.

Kyouya dips his head in a nod.

"If one is a Sky," he murmurs, "there can be seven."

It's a little hard to imagine that. Small, harmless, terrifying Sawada Tsunayoshi. Handling 6 other people with no intentions of crowding at all.

Then again, they do have that saying for a reason. If there's anyone who can do something like that, it would be a Sky.

"..You could just beat some sense into them, Kyouya-san."

Kyouya scoffs. "I have tried."

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Yamamoto corners him right after class, a few weeks after they've received their Buddy assignments. That's not too surprising.

What's surprising is Kensuke can't see Sawada anywhere. Usually the two are joined at the hip- or hand, unless Yamamoto isn't there. Then Sawada's trying to stick to Kensuke's hip and honestly that's just plain weird. Weird because hasn't the kid heard of boundaries? And also because Kensuke is never aware of him hovering so close by and keeps.. accidentally bumping into him. Or smacking him in the head with his arm when he turns around.

Weird that Sawada isn't doing that right now.

"Senpai? Are you listening?"

"Where's the mouse?" Kensuke blinks and shakes his head. "I mean. Sawada."

Damn, Hibari's getting to him.

"Tsuna? I told him to wait a little, I wanted to talk you to first before you sweep him off on your romantic outings from now on. He'd probably get embarrassed if he was here for that."

"What- what romantic outings?! Who'd want to go on a romantic outing with him?!"

"Uh, I would?" Yamamoto frowns at him with that slanted sort of 'are you sure you're okay?' smile. "Anyway, senpai, um.. the Baseball Club is getting kind of busy? Like, a lot of practice. Apparently I'm some kind of ace and honestly, I think they just want to get rid of Tsuna, which is really rude of them, but—"

Yamamoto throws a glance over his shoulder. The hallway isn't too crowded, despite class having just gotten out. Most students are quickly filtering into their respective clubrooms, which he and
Yamamoto should be doing right now.

"..Tsuna was almost hit in the head a few times this week. And, y'know, I told coach about it. He said Tsuna just had to.. sit behind the fence instead of in the dugout during practice."

"Lemme guess," Kensuke sighs, "they're still pitching at him through the fence."

"Well, they're trying, because our pitchers can't throw that hard. Except me, but I'm trying not to give out my shoulder anymore. Anyway it's not that they're trying to hit him- which is pretty rude as it is, honestly. It's.. ehm. It's the noise, actually. Tsuna doesn't really.. "

"He doesn't like loud noises? We're already used to that, Yamamoto. Hibari doesn't either. And he's more violent about it."

"It's not that he doesn't like them, they just- they startle him. A lot. They scare him a lot more than he'll admit, so.." Yamamoto trails off.

Right. Kensuke remembers something about that from a few years ago. Something about a shooting in Namimori, rumors that Yamamoto kept the both of them from being gunned down. Some older kids coming to their rescue. [1]

"..Anyway, he doesn't want me to quit, so I think it's just.. better if he doesn't come to practice for a while. Maybe until the team cools down. But he doesn't have any club of his own, so-"

"What, you want him to hang out with the Kendo Club instead?"

"Yeah! He's already been there a few times, right? Tsuna said he's gotten used to the gatatata noise now so he'll be fine." Yamamoto says this while doing a chopping motion against his other arm. He probably means the sound that the shinai make when they strike each other.

"..If he wants to, I'm not going to stop him." Kensuke shrugs. "Can't promise the guys won't do anything to him, though."

"They had better not."

He blinks. Yamamoto stares at him, down at him, because mother of god Yamamoto is tall for being just 13. 14. Stares at Kensuke with a hardniss in his eyes. The kind of hardness his mother gets when someone tries to suggest that Kensuke might be too volatile to play with other kids. Or when they assume he's an troublesome, unruly child who can't behave, who doesn't obey, who would just as likely hurt her than listen to anything she says.

Kensuke does actually know when he should take someone seriously.

Getting the rest of him to understand that, however, is another matter entirely.

"So!" Yamamoto breaks into a grin. "There's a few things I think you should know before I let you go on a date with Tsuna, senpai."

"This would be helpful if I was actually going on a date with him why are you even— aren't you dating—?!"

Yamamoto has a whole list of things to rattle off. Things like, don't go near the docks unless absolutely necessary, avoid the short route from his house to the school because there's a bridge, don't let him go into the arcade on 6th Street with the really flashy sign and the pushuu pushuu
sounds coming out of it.

It makes him sound like an actual parent letting their kid go on the first outing of their life. It's... honestly kind of surreal. Hearing someone talk about No Good Tsuna like that.

Assuming this is, of course, the same No Good Tsuna that manages to trip on flat and even ground. Who doesn't talk back or fight back at all. The same No Good Tsuna who's in the nurse's ward for god knows what at least once a week.

"...most important of all, remember to hold his hand!"

Wait, what-

"Wait, what? Why?"

"You can't?"

"It's not- can or can't, it's why?!"

"Uhm.. because he has chronic hypoincaendia? He needs flame energy."

Kensuke doesn't know what to say to that. He's too busy trying to figure out what hand holding has to do with Sawada's apparent fiamma exhaustion.

"..So the hand holding is for what exactly?"

"To.. transfer flames, of course. Like Collective Resting, but not Resting. Well, I guess just playing touching anywhere would work, but hands are less awkward? At first it's like, gooh gooh, and then it's shuushuu-" Yamamoto waves his hands back and forth, like windshield wipers, "-like that, and he's all good! For a while."

Whuh—

"You give him your flames. Just like that?"

"Yeah!"

"...Well I'm glad you have such a high hyperincaendia rating but I don't."

"Oh." Yamamoto's expression falls to something like 'oh no'. "..Then I guess just stay nearby? He'll.. get what he needs, I guess. Um, just call the nurse if he gets droopy, then. Nurse Shiomi knows what to do."

"..Right. Fine. Droopy. Whatever. Where do you even get all this from? You read his medical charts?"

"Uh, no? I've been Tsuna's friend for, like... 5 years? I notice things?" He stops and rubs his chin, humming thoughtfully. "..Does that make me his best friend? Yikes. That's a weird thought."

"I'm just going to- go." Kensuke gestures down the hall. This is awkward. Getting more awkward. "And find the mouse- I mean, Sawada." Goddammit Hibari. "Before someone shoves him out a window again."

Yamamoto barks out a laugh that sends chills crawling down Kensuke's spine, cold and icy. Okay, he kinda gets why no one shoves Sawada around anymore. Having someone as tall and proficient
with a metal bat as Yamamoto around probably does wonders.

Not that Kensuke would know. He had to swing his own metal bat around, though his is more like a surprisingly sturdy bamboo shinai. It works just as well.

He barely makes it two steps before Hibari Kyouya himself sweeps by, trailed by a pair of first year Committee members. Wherever they're going, they're in a hurry.

"Hey- Chairman!" Yamamoto calls out, jogging after them. "Wait- wait, what's going on?"

Oh, right. Kensuke forgets that Yamamoto's in the Committee sometimes. He only rarely wears his uniform, barely ever shows the badge over his school clothing. For some reason, the Chairman hasn't done anything about that.

"The little animal is being crowded," Hibari says in a tone that borders snarling. Yamamoto deciphers his words before Kensuke does, because he has his baton out in a heartbeat. "Why is he not with you?"

Yamamoto opens his mouth, but all that comes out is a squeak. Or, that isn't Yamamoto, but it is a very distinctive squeak coming from the end of the hallway, and Yamamoto seems to think so too, because he's already heading in that direction.

"Hibari-san!" A girl calls out, waving them over.

Kensuke goes with them, still feeling pinpricks and shivers along his arms even where there's hair that's supposed to keep his skin warm. So the teachers say.

He reaches the corner just in time to see a two students stumbling back with a yell. Someone's bookbag comes flying into his face and knocks him flat on the ground, followed by a string of expletives that aren't actually expletives. Kensuke even recognizes them, because, well—

"You're a pile of maggot-infested LARD, INOUE."

—that's either Sawada himself, or Kyouko has hit a whole new sort of puberty and Kensuke may just fall for her all the more for it.

Nope. It's Sawada. Damn.

"Hi-Hibari-san," one of the boys babbles, scrambling backwards. The other is cradling an arm against his chest. There's a very suspicious looking circular red mark on it. "It's- it's No Good Tsuna, he's- he's crazy, look at him!"

Hibari looks at Sawada. And then looks back at Inoue. "You were reported to be crowding first year Sawada Tsunayoshi. If he has attacked you in anyway, it is considered retaliation in self-defense."

"He bit me!"

"YOU TOO, TAKADA, YOU OVERGROWN ROSE BUSH."

"Wow," Yamamoto says, laughing dully. "Tsuna's never done that before."

"What? Bitten someone?" Kensuke asks weakly. The kid's worse than he is.

"No, he's done that before definitely."
"Get back over here you cowards," Sawada growls, only because two other Committee members are holding him back. "I'm going to rip your spleen out and FEED IT TO YOU."

Yamamoto laughs again. Titters, really. ". . . Usually he only blows up like that when I'm nearby."

"What, you mean this happened before?" And Kensuke never heard about it? What the hell? This is prime gossip material, this is rumor mill fodder. This is like- like finding another vein of gold in that old dilapidated mine in Aikawa. [21]

This is pure. This is great.

Unfortunately he doesn't hear what Yamamoto says next, if he says anything at all. If he isn't watching Sawada go deer-in-headlights still under Hibari's scrutiny, like Kensuke is. And he means scrutiny. Because Hibari isn't just staring.

Hibari is peering. Leaning in close, eyes narrowed, looking for something on Sawada's now slightly more slack expression. Maybe slack is the wrong term, but compared to what was like earlier, it fits. Too average, too normal-looking. Generic.

Calm.

. . . He doesn't even twitch when Hibari starts prodding at his face, turning it this way and that. But Sawada does incidentally look in Kensuke's direction, and he looks thoroughly bewildered for all of 2 seconds.

Then the two Committee members let him go and he drops with another squeak. Darts forward to grab his bag off of the ground where he'd chucked it through the air, and then shoves through the thinning crowd to . . .

... bury his face in Yamamoto's shirt, wow. Wow. And Yamamoto laughs and just pats him on the back like he's comforting a kid instead of a— well actually that's probably not too far off.

"No worries, Chairman! We got him."

"Sorry for running off," Sawada mumbles into Yamamoto's shirt. Even though Kensuke is pretty sure Yamamoto just earlier admitted to leaving Sawada by himself.

Yamamoto elbows him in the side and flashes a hard, sharp grin at him before directing it at Hibari. "Yeah. I'll, um, keep a closer eye on him. We both will. Sorry for the trouble, Hibari-san!"

Hibari looks at Kensuke.

Kensuke resists the urge to salute. Instead he bows, just enough to show respect. "I take full responsibility for not looking out for Sawada as is my duty as his senpai and assigned Buddy."

It. . . seems enough to appease Hibari, at any rate, because the Chairman gives them a stiff nod and puts away the tonfa that Kensuke doesn't even recall seeing him take out.

"See that it does not happen again," Hibari says as he brushes by, no doubt on his way back to the Committee office. "Small animals always attract trouble."

Kensuke looks back down at Sawada, still ensconced in Yamamoto's arms— geez, PDA much? — and whining something like Takeshi I'm so tiirreeedd so quietly that Kensuke can barely hear him, and he's standing, like, right there.
Reborn looks up when the front door opens and a voice that is distinctly Tsunayoshi's calls out *I'm hoooome*. Nana responds with a *welcome home!* from the dining room.

"You're.. home early." He looks around, but fails to find any indication of what day it is. "I know it's only half-day today, but..?"

"No club activities," Tsunayoshi drops his bag onto the ground and drops himself onto the couch next to Reborn. Luckily he'd had the foresight to move all his papers and notes to the table earlier. "Mochida quit his, I'm unemployed, and I didn't feel like watching Takeshi crack skulls open today."

Mochida Kensuke, who looks entirely awkward and like he wants to ask *who the hell are you*, stands, awkwardly, in the doorway.

"But you said you *love* watching him crack skulls open," Reborn drawls, with no regards to the way Mochida's face and body twitches.

"Those were not the words I used."

"If I recall, your exact words were that you found it *cathartic*." Reborn looks at Mochida. "Can you believe it? He probably thinks snuff films are cathartic too." [3]

Mochida mouths words *snuff films, cathartic*, looking as though they were the most sinful words he'd ever heard in his entire life. A bright green pillow with eyes smacking Reborn in the face draws his attention away.

"I do not, that's so gross, why would you even think that!"

"*The boy doth protest too much, methinks,*" Reborn hums, patting Leon back into his usual chameleon-like shape. "Now why don't you invite your friend to sit down, Tsunayoshi? It would be rude to leave him standing."

"I'm not *protesting* I'm *denying*," Tsunayoshi grumbles. Reborn blinks, because he hadn't thought the boy would know an English quote. [4]

Probably should have. This is the modern age, after all.

Regardless-

"Why aren't you inviting me to sit down then?" Mochida mutters, scooting into the room and towards one of the lone couches.

"I'm just a freeloader," Reborn says.
"He's just a freeloader. " Tsunayoshi confirms it. "And Mochida already knows he can sit. It's not like it's the first time he's been here."

"Unlike some people I know a thing or two about manners," Mochida hisses and all but throws his own bag down next to Tsunayoshi's before storming off again. "Please excuse my intrusion!"

"Ara, Kensuke-kun! Don't be like that, you're always welcome here."

Tsunayoshi makes a 'see what I mean?' gesture. Reborn snorts softly.

"I can see why he'd be cross at you; you did kick him in the chest this morning. But what are you so upset about, Tsunayoshi?"

The boy stares at him for a moment, then slumps down further in his seat. ".He won't tell me why he quit the Kendo Club."

"I didn't know you were the nosy sort."

"It's not being nosy, I'm just- he was the Captain! Not some two-bit, no good shinai-swinging dirtwad, he was Captain. He made Captain last year and now he just- he just throws it away!"

Tsunayoshi is a lot more animated than he'd been a week ago. And definitely more than when Reborn first met him. If he thinks about it, actually, it's been building up over the past week or so, just little by little. Too gradual, but also too quickly.

And now...

"..So why are you worried?" Reborn tips his head when Tsunayoshi looks at him again in confusion. "I mean, he's not a friend, is he?"

"So?" Tsunayoshi says, instead of claiming that he is a friend. "I can still be worried about him."

"You don't worry about anyone else," Mochida snipes back, returning with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of water and he places on the empty part of the table.

Reborn gathers up his papers into a neater pile, but doesn't bother putting them away completely. It's not like the kids can read Arcobaleno code anyway.

"I don't care about anyone else, obviously."

"Then why do you care about Mochida? He's not considered anyone else?"

"..I'm a Sky, Reborn. It's my job to care."

"What the hell? His name's Reborn? Who names their kid that?"

"I named myself that, thank you."

"Oh- oh." Kensuke falters, just slightly, like he wants to ask why. Then he whips right back into his argument. "And- didn't we just point out the fact that you don't care about anyone else?!"

"I care about those I want to care about! What's wrong with that?!"

"Well why would you want to care about someone like me? I broke two of your fucking ribs, in case you've forgotten!"
"Because I'm—"

"If you say because I'm a Sky one more time I will throttle you, Sawada, stop fucking spouting that shit like it means anything because it DOESN'T!"

"YES IT DOES!" Tsunayoshi yells, and chucks yet another Leon-pillow, this time into Mochida's face.

Reborn quietly takes the tray and his papers and moves them elsewhere. Away from the table. Actually, he takes it back to the kitchen and moves his papers up to his guest room to work on for later, because he sure as hell isn't going to get anything else done down there with those two around.

They're still going at it when he comes back down the stairs. He's not even sure what they're shouting about anymore; whatever slightly standardized Japanese they'd been using has completely slipped back into their accented island-dialect, complete with loanwords from so many languages that Reborn stops trying to keep count after the first 10 seconds.

Mochida's letting slip some Mandarin and what sounds like Vietnamese? And English? Tsunayoshi is throwing out French and Italian euphemisms like party favors, along with all of the above.

And that's just the stuff that Reborn recognizes. Christ, what are they teaching these kids in school? What is up with the so-called 'No Good' kid doing inexplicable not 'No Good' things? Like kicking people's asses, getting into screaming arguments when he's otherwise completely passive (if snippy), or... learning profanities in at least 5 other languages?

"My, they're so lively," Nana says with a sigh. "It's been far too quiet around the house."

"Sorry for not being noisy," Reborn chirps back. He leans against the doorway, not wanting to get in the way of this now room-wide verbal battlefield. "How many pillows do you even have in there?"

"Seven," Nana hums. "One for the smaller couch, two for the loveseat, and four for the sofa. It's safer than coffee mugs."

Reborn catches the Leon-pillow before it can hit either of them. They stare at Leon's beady eyes for a moment.

Nana throws him back into the fray. Reborn swears he can hear a 'wheeeeee' coming from the pillow, even though he knows Leon can't actually make any sounds at all.

Tsunayoshi finally dips back into Japanese and starts calling Mochida things like monkeybutt and self-absorbed wet towel, which Mochida responds creatively with losing loser of a loser and soft-spined hedgehog.

It's only then that Reborn leans towards Nana and asks, as quietly as he can, "They wouldn't happen to be Harmonized, would they?"

And then tries to remember if Nana would even know what that is. It's like he keeps forgetting whether to treat her as a civilian, completely in the dark, or a member of the mafia, completely in the know. Or both.

"Oh," she says, covering her mouth in surprise, and then tapping her cheek in thought. That
answers his other question, anyway. "..Are they? They do seem a little like it. But aren't they a bit.. rough with each other? Tsu-kun isn't like this with Takeshi-kun."

"That's what I thought." Reborn rubs at his chin. "..Or it could just be Tsunayoshi trying to be more companionable. There's been studies done that show an increased rapport if you imitate someone's body language when conversing with them." [5]

Nana looks at him and gestures towards the two squabbling children. "This is a bit of an extreme case though, isn't it?"

"Extremely extreme," Reborn says, borrowing the words of one Sasagawa Ryouhei. Nana giggles. "Well, there's only one way to find out."

"You're going to ask them?"

"Even better."

He picks up the discarded Leon-pillow. The chameleon changes into a flyswatter instead, entirely harmless, and Reborn swings for the back of Tsunayoshi's head like he's going to lop it off.

Two pillows nail him in the face before he makes contact, one thrown, and one swung with all the force of a sack of foam against the side of his cheek.

And the two perpetrators look at him like they aren't even sure of what they'd just done. Well, Mochida isn't sure, but Tsunayoshi gives him a sort of 'what was that for?' stare.

"Yep. They're Harmonized," Reborn says, patting Tsunayoshi on the head with the floppy end of the flyswatter. "Or something close to it, anyway."

"..We're what?" They say at the same time. Then look at each other like the other's grown a second head.

"See?"

"I'm not Harmonized with him," Mochida says as though it physically pains him to even consider the idea. Or it pains him to deny it. "I don't even want to be."

"I did say something close to it. There's Resonance, at the very least. Maybe the process was interrupted. That's good news, you can just start it up again and finish it, and everything will be fine."

"But I don't WANT to be Harmonized with him! Ever! Ever in my life!"

Tsunayoshi looks up at Reborn owlishly. "The boy doth protest too much."

"Methinks, too." Good kid, this one. Flawless English. Maybe he'll pick up Sicilian as easily as Iemitsu did. Reborn looks back at Mochida, who's starting to change colors in his anger. "Clearly you did at some point, or else you wouldn't be so instinctively compelled to maim me every time I did this."

He swings again and, once again, yet another pillow thuds onto his chest before he can actually make contact with Tsunayoshi's head. And once again, Mochida stares at his hands, unable to believe what he just did.

"Mm. Definitely safer than coffee mugs, Sawada-san."
"How can you even tell we're Harmonized?" Tsunayoshi frowns. "...Or something close to it."

"For one, he's instinctively trying to protect you without any conscious effort on his part. Except maybe just staying conscious for it... In his case, it probably only works when he's nearby. I think if he runs out of pillows he's going to start throwing books or couches, though, so we'll stop testing it."

"Haha, he'll turn into Takeshi." The boy grins. "Takeshi throws people."

"That's because you're Harmonized with Takeshi-kun, too, Tsu-kun," Nana chirps from the doorway.

"He is?"

"I am?"

"He's what with who!"

"You are!" She sing-songs, gliding over to ruffle through Tsunayoshi's hair and straighten out the flyaway mess of it. "I found out when Takeshi-kun came by to give you that pendant, remember? That cimaruta. Whatever did you do with it, Tsu-kun? It was so lovely."

"It's, um, in my room? Safe. In my room."

"You're supposed to wear a cimaruta, Tsunayoshi," Reborn interjects. Where did Yamamoto even find one of those? Probably thrift shop. Old, fake junk. "It's meant to keep you safe."

"Won't do me any good if someone steals it." Tsunayoshi looks up at him, then at Nana, and then back to Mochida, who blinks and eases out of his oddly tense posture. "...If I'm Harmonized with Takeshi then this.. isn't Harmony? It's. Weird. Different."

"Because it's most likely not finished, boy. You two have to sit down and let it run its course instead of waging a civil war every time one of you tries."

"No! Never!" It's almost funny how animated Mochida is at denying it. Even funnier is the fact that Tsunayoshi seems to have stopped imitating it. "What the hell are you so calm about, Sawada? Don't tell me you- you want to—?! It's- that's—!"

"It's Harmonization, Mochida, not sex," Tsunayoshi says in a drone. Mochida sputters. "Grow up."

"I am not," Mochida hisses at Reborn while jabbing at finger at Tsunayoshi, "Harmonizing with him. I do not want to. Ever!"

"Don't tell that to me," Reborn says with a roll of his eyes. "Tell that to yourself. And to him. If you can actually say it to his face."

"Of course I can!" He watches Mochida turn his attention to Tsunayoshi head-on, his jaw set, every part of him confident and sure. "Sawada, we are not going to—"

Aaaand watches him falter and lose all that confidence, bit by bit, now doubt under the heavy weight of a Sky's gaze. Reborn knows, even though he can't see Tsunayoshi's face. They're the eyes of one too young and too old. Naive and wise. Trusting, earnest.

Too weak. Too strong.

Far too accepting of everything.
"..not.. I won't- you're a damn idiot for ever— ugh! Stop looking at me like that! You're—!"

Mochida gives up pretty quickly and storms out the back door with a wordless sound of fury, full of frustration and probably a healthy amount of confusion. Tsunayoshi just drops back down onto the couch.

"...For two," Reborn continues, leaning over the back of it, "emotions tend to line up easily when in each other's presence. Which you were doing just fine up until that last bit."

"Sawada doesn't HAVE emotions!" Mochida shouts from outside. "There's nothing to line up!"

Reborn ignores him. "You were screaming angrily at each other literally 2 minutes ago. I'd call that lining up."

"I wasn't angry," Tsunayoshi says, miffed. "I was upset. Because he wouldn't tell me why he quit the Kendo Club."

"Then maybe he was also upset at you."

"NO EMOTIONS!"

He ignores that, too.

"..But he's right? I don't have feelings. There's nothing to line up."

"You were upset about something, that's an emotion."

"It's.. not? It's. It's a state of being."

...What—

"It's a state of being unhappy or disappointed, Tsunayoshi. Both of which are emotions, just so you know. Feelings. You have feelings."

At some point Nana had managed to step out without Reborn noticing. She comes back just as quietly, hiding something suspiciously nightlight-like behind her back.

Tsunayoshi looks like he's just found the meaning of life, the answer to it, and all things related to Evolution and Creation.

He looks... lost.

Reborn shares a tentative look with Nana, unsure if he's just. Broken her son or not. What a weird thing to get hung up over.

"..Maman?"

"Yes, Tsu-kun?"

"I'm... really tired." ..Well that was anti-climatic. "I'm going to take a nap. Can you, um.. wake me up when Takeshi gets here?"

Nana smiles, soft and gentle. "Of course. Do you want to pull a cord up for your nightlight, Tsu-kun?"

Tsunayoshi shakes his head and holds out a hand for the nightlight, cradling it against his chest.
when Nana turns it over to him. He lays down on the cushions where he is, and is out within moments.

"I've been trying to tell him that for years," Nana murmurs to Reborn after she tucks a blanket around her son. It's still Summer, but it probably doesn't hurt to be careful. It's not that hot anymore, at least. ".But I guess the other kids tell him otherwise. A lot more than I can tell him that they're wrong."

"What do they tell him?"

"That he doesn't have feelings. Or emotions. That he's.. faking everything." He is, though. Most things. Reborn looks at Nana, conveys as much with the slant of his mouth, and her smile goes sad. "Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for... And more honest than we might like them to be, sometimes."

She goes around the room, picking up the throw pillows and putting them back in place. Sticks one under Tsunayoshi's head, too. Reborn picks up the ones behind the couch, the ones that had been thrown at him specifically.

".To me, Tsu-kun is trying his best. I don't know if he just wants to fit in, or if he wants to prove them wrong, but he's.. trying. I think- I think that's as real as anything can be."

The clock ticks on. Reborn wonders.

"I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything, Reborn-san."

He nods. She bustles the tray of glasses and jug of water back into the room, onto the table, and leaves again.

Dinner won't be ready until Yamamoto is done with club activities. That should be.. another hour or two. Yamamoto seems the type to linger a little longer. Unless he actually is Harmonized with Tsunayoshi, in which case he'll be home as soon as possible.

He's gathering his Septet without any prompting at all. Yamamoto will make a good Guardian, when the time comes.

_Mochida Kensuke_, however. Reborn's going to have to grill that one good. It could just be the possibly incomplete Harmonization bond left festering for too long, but the boy seems far too willingly antagonistic. Not a very good trait for a Guardian. Unless Tsunayoshi insists.

Which, from what Reborn has seen so far, he most likely will. Which means Reborn will have to make sure he's worth it the insisting.

So he takes two glasses and the jug out to the back porch where Mochida is currently.. sulking. And pours him one.

".Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Reborn. Hitman. And Tsunayoshi's home tutor," he adds the last part when Mochida's head whips up so fast he swears he heard bone creaking. "I'm the.. houseguest? Yes. The houseguest. The guest of this house. A freeloading houseguest."

He can definitely _feel_ the Storm radiating off of this one, now that Tsunayoshi isn't in the vicinity to suck it all up. It's.. extremely potent. And this is supposedly _after_ whatever treatment he's been supposedly given for hyperincaendia.
Having your flames wrenched out of your body would make anyone cranky for a while, though. Tired and cranky.

"The question is.. who are you?"

"I'm- what?" Mochida frowns. "...Uh. Mochida Kensuke. Third... year..."

Reborn squints. "And who are you to Sawada Tsunayoshi, that he would care so much about you?"

"..I have no idea," the boy says into his knee. If looks could kill, he'd probably have set fire to the lawn by now.

Reborn nods, and hums.

"Good answer."

It's a start.

* * *

Reborn asks Yamamoto about this potential Harmonization bond between him and Tsunayoshi when he finally arrives. Yamamoto immediately scoots Tsunayoshi up and takes a seat where he'd been laying, so that the smaller boy ends up leaning sleepily against his side, and launches into a spiel what it feels like.

Except his vocabulary for describing it is limited to 'Tsuna' and various sound effects that only Tsunayoshi nods understandingly to. All Reborn and Mochida understand are the very confused looks they share with each other.

This does not help at all.

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*There's an objection right on the tip of Kensuke's tongue. Something about don't go near the docks unless absolutely necessary.*

Really? Sawada looks pretty calm. Nothing bad. He's not freaking out or anything, just.. settling down on the pier. Weird. Why would Yamamoto...

The Shroud flickers. Sizzles. It's halfway through the year and so it's halfway to almost nothing. Nice colors though. Not many people come out to watch.

"..Hard to believe sometimes, you know?" Sawada says, knees drawn up like a.. like a kid. "This whole island. Covered with Mist."

"Hm?" Kensuke pulls his shoes off and dips a toe into the darkening water. He's quiet during kendo practice. "What's hard to believe about it?"

"That we're here, living in it." Sawada inhales, deep. "Breathing it."

"...O..Kay. I think you've been doing too much homework, Sawada."
"I'm a Sky." Like Kensuke hasn't noticed that. He knows. **Everyone** knows. "It doesn't work on me. Not unless I want it to."

"What, the Mist?" He scoffs and drops onto his back, hands behind his head. "Doesn't work on me either, even if I want it to. Which, y'know, I don't really care either way. What's so hard to believe about that?"

"Have you ever thought about it?" Sawada glances over, wide-eyed. Looks into the distance again, where indigo and violet mix together with blue and bleeding orange. The red of the dying sun and the flash of green energy being discharged from the Shroud.

Wouldn't want to be caught out in that.

"Thought about what?"

"Everyone else. I do. I think about it a lot. Like maman, and Takeshi, and... Iemitsu. My dad. Do they know? Is that why he left? Why didn't he take maman with him? Do the other Sawadas know? Do they care? Do they—" He breathes in again, shaky and shuddering. Kensuke watches his shoulders hunch inward, making him even smaller than he is. ".What does the Shroud even do? Is it... is it just to hide us? From others? Or to hide them from us? Does it- does it to anything to us? Does it make us do things, does it change us, does it—?"

Kensuke sits up suddenly and grabs his shoulder, shaking him until he unfolds. "Hey, Sawada, **breathe**. C'mon, don't get all panicky on me, I can't deal with stuff like that."

He hauls the boy up by his shoulder and all but bodily drags him off the pier, picking up both of their bookbags along the way. Not easy, considering the fact that Sawada won't go without a fight.

"Stop- Mochida- **senpai**, let me go, I have- I have to watch! I—"

"You don’t need to see the pretty colors in the sky anymore, I know a good arcade that can do that for you— stop struggling!"

"I'm- I'm, I have to watch, I'm a **Sky**, I have to watch, I have to—"

"You don’t understand," Sawada whines, nails digging into Kensuke's shoulder. "I'm a- I have to—"

"Stop fucking talking like that, Sawada!" Kensuke shoves the kid up against the nearest surface- the metal hull of a shipping container, empty now, but probably held some kind of cargo before. Goods. Hazard symbol stamped on the side. "You- need to stop thinking like that!"

"Like- what- what? Mochida- **ow**—"

"**Listen,**" he growls, shaking Sawada by the hold he has on his shirt until he goes still and quiet and just stares back like the lost kid that he is. Just a lost kid. "I don’t want to hear any more of **Sky this** or **Sky that**. You've been going **on and on** about it since Day One and frankly, I'm **sick and tired of it**, alright? I've heard **enough** about it, you know? So **stop it**."

The only thing he hears is the echo of vibrating metal, the ring of his own voice hanging in the air. It's weird. Weird how he never noticed that the kid's eyes aren't as dull and brown and muddy as
he'd always thought they were. No, they are, but—

But.

"Storm," Sawada says, and somehow two of Kensuke's knuckles feel both hot and cold against the skin of Sawada's collarbone. ".You're a Storm."

"Yeah? I'm more than a fucking Storm, and you are not just a damn Sky. Get that into your skull."

"You're a Storm," Sawada says again like a broken record. Except he seems calmer now, not as wild and terrified. Not as desperate to stare at destabilizing flames. ".You're a Storm. You're-pickled eel?"

"I'm- I'm a what now?"

Sawada stares. Sawada tilts his head, still staring, as though considering something. Then he blinks, and it's like some kind of spell is broken, and he's back to something nervous and jumpy, trying to squirm out of Kensuke's grip. "Nothing! Never- never mind, um- what.. what were you saying a-again?"

Kensuke stares, too. And he lets go, because this is too much weirdness for one day. He does bop the kid on the head though, just to make sure his message gets across.

"I was saying, stop thinking like- like that. Like you.. have to be a Sky, or whatever." He sticks his hands in his pockets, clammy and prickly. Weird. They were so warm a moment ago. Must be the adrenaline rush leaving his system. "Like you can only be a Sky. Stop it. It's damn annoying."

Sawada keeps staring. But he starts walking too, when Kensuke turns to leave. Even takes his bag back when Kensuke holds it out to him.

Doesn't question it. Doesn't ask why. Doesn't ask where they're going now.

".Do you think the Shroud works the way Mist Illusions do?" He asks after a while. Walks a little too close, and their arms bump against each other for a moment. "Like.. Illusions are only as real as you believe them to be. Someone could.. I dunno. Power through the Shroud by sheer force of will?"

"What the hell brought this on? You sure you're okay, Sawada?"

The kid shrugs and drifts even closer. Really, Kensuke should be weirded out or creeped out by this, but he's watched Sawada and Yamamoto do the dance too many times by now to really find it anything more than just odd. At least he doesn't just grab for people's hands randomly.

"Illusions are pretty useless once you stop believing in them. I just.. I just wonder if the Shroud is the same way."

".You'd have to be pretty damn stubborn to ignore an Illusion like the Shroud, coming in."

"Yeah," Sawada breathes out a laugh. Something funny. "I wonder what kind of person would be able to reject something so completely."

Kensuke doesn't say anything to that. He doesn't move away, either.

Sawada's warm, at least.
"I want to see Nagi."

The boy's whisper is lost in Lancia's side where he's curled up, small and thin and terrified. Lancia wonders how many years will be lost because of this. He's made so much progress— or at least, Lancia thinks, because he is not a doctor, and while they did try to find the best they could, there's really no specialization for kids who have been experimented on and more or less tortured with various, multiple deaths.

A kid. Who has been experimented on. And tortured with various, multiple deaths.

Lancia has never been more grateful that the other two boys didn't go through the same thing. Not exactly.

Cane and Cachi hover nearby, each holding bars of chocolates new and unopened.

"He won't eat, Lancia. Says.. says the nightmares are too bad."

Cachi nods.

Lancia waves away the guards, twice, because the first time they're not sure if they should actually leave or not. The kids are dangerous, yes. Of course they are. Mafia children are always dangerous, these three especially so. Lancia has the scars to prove it.

He doesn't care.

"Come, sit. We'll eat together. How does that sound, Gina?" The boy at his side says something else, muffled, but he nods. "And then you'll have to eat some real food."

That's definitely a grumble, but the boy nods again. The other two teens drop down as well; Cane sits on the floor in front of Lancia, and Cachi presses up against Gina's other side. Both of them break off pieces of their own chocolate bars and hold them out.

Gina's hand trembles, but he takes them both. Nibbles on them, like a squirrel would. Good for the nerves.

Lancia takes a piece himself, even though he doesn't like sweets all that much. It helps the kids feel better about eating, and honestly, he'll do whatever he must to make sure they eat their fill. Of decent food, anyway.

"Better now?" Gina nods and uncurls just enough to stretch his legs out. It makes him look taller than he actually is, the proportion of his limbs. Cane and Cachi are putting on weight more easily than Gina is. "Do you want to talk about it, Gina?"

It takes a lot of effort not to call him bambino still. They're grown up now, almost adults, legally. Lancia thinks he'll always see them as bambini, though.

"..talk.." Gina whispers, hoarse. He has a tendency to not say anything for weeks at a time, and it has been quiet a while since the last. ".They talk to me."
Lancia looks at the other two. They shake their heads.

"Who talks to you?"

"They. The- the people in the.. in the fog." Gina coughs, dry, and swallows. "They- they say-

He coughs again and Lancia gestures to the side table at the other end of the room, next to the bed. "Cane, can you get a glass of water?"

The boy nods and bounds off, like the animal they had designated him as. Hopefully he doesn't jump around as much on the way back. Water doesn't like to stay in the glass when it moves that much.

"They want to- kill." Lancia looks down. Gina is grasping at thin air, like he's trying to hold onto something that isn't there. Like a knife. "Kill. I have to- kill, I- I don't want to—"

Cachi takes Gina's hands in his, murmuring quiet things. Fratello, fratello. It's okay. We're safe here, fratello.

Gina starts laughing, quiet, soft, muffled. No, no we're not. We're not safe. They're here, they're everywhere.

"He was just fine a few days ago, Lancia." Cane holds out the glass of water. Lancia takes it and hands it to Gina, who stares at it for the longest moment. "Then.. I dunno. He talked to Nagi and- and when he woke up he just, he wouldn't go back to sleep. He didn't want to eat, and then—"

And then he took a knife from the kitchen and tried to gut the Anacleto. Twice.

"Kill them." Gina grips the glass until his knuckles go white. "Kill them all. We have to kill them."

The smell of something sweet seeps into the air, and Lancia does not need to see to know that Gina's eye is acting up again, spinning like a bar on a slot machine.

He sees it anyway, because Gina lifts his head. Reaches out to tug on Lancia's sleeve.

"Kill them for me, zio."

"No," Lancia says. The boy's face contorts into a snarl and the sweetness intensifies until it's cloying, sickening. Lotus-eater. Lancia uses no Flame, but that doesn't make him untrained in Mist resistance. "No, Gina. If you kill them, you can't see Nagi."

The snarl freezes and immediately falters into something more smaller, more fragile. "I want to see Nagi."

"Don Cleto sent word to Vongola, do you remember?" Gina nods. He contacted Vongola even though the boy tried to kill him. Or maybe because the boy tried to kill him. "It's going to be a long shot. The Cosa Nostra and the Camorra aren't on very good terms. But if you kill them, there's no chance. You want to see Nagi? Then no killing."

The boy's eyes narrow. "...I could kill them and then find Nagi on my own."

"You wouldn't make it out of Campania on your own."

"Yeah, Gina." Cane barks out a laugh. "You can't even go outside of Naples without us."

"Not that we would let you," Cachi says with a smile.
Gina groans and shoves at the latter, growling something about invading personal space and being too close and trying to grind his knuckles on Cachi’s head. Slowly, the scent of Mist recedes, and Gina's eye goes back to normal. Dark brown, instead of a glowing, glimmering, mechanical red.

Lancia bundles them back into bed. They still sleep together, sharing the same blanket that's right now twined around Gina's waist and around his legs. It's been 5 years since the Serpico Clan brought them in them, and not a lot as changed.

..Well. They did get a lot bigger.

"Lancia." He looks up. One of the associates at the door beckons him over. "Don Cleto wants to see you."

Lancia nods. He leaves Gina and them to their pillow squabbling with a buona notte and closes the door behind him.

"They're fine," he tells the guards outside. "Just a nightmare. I checked the room, there's no knives or weapons hidden anywhere."

They murmur to each other, glance at him. Suspicious. He's not surprised. There aren't many people siding with the kids, not after what Gina did. The only reason Lancia is pushed around as much is because the Don actually trusts him, and because he is, after all, the Strongest Man In Northern Italy.

Which is honestly only the strongest among the non-Flame users. Not that anyone has wanted to try testing it out.

"Don't touch them," he says for good measure, and leaves them to their midnight rumormongering.

Lancia heads down the hall and into the wing where Anacleto and his guardians are staying, and knocks on the door. It's late, but the Don always stays up to finish work. Sleeps during the day instead.

"Boss, it's Lancia."

"Ah, please, come in." He does. The Don is at his desk, tired and aged, but still jovial. A pile of papers have been set neatly to the side. "How is he?"

"Nightmare. But he's.. fine now, I think." Lancia pulls a chair up. Raffaele, Anacleto's Storm, sits on the chaise lounge against the wall, peers at him over the top of his newspaper. "If I didn't know he was a Mist, I would have thought someone was trying to use some sort of Mist suggestion on him. He's.. He was. Very out of sorts."

"Only Vongola would know if he is or isn't. We do not have their sort of technology yet." Anacleto shakes his head with a sigh."Oh, yes. Your cousin called."

"Levi did? That was quick."

"Mm. Vongola won't meet with us."

Lancia mutters a curse under his breath. Raffaele snorts.

"Instead, they're putting us in contact with someone else. A civilian." Anacleto taps a pen on the table. "..He will be in the Sassi di Matera."
"Basilicata," Lancia notes. "Vongola territory."

"After the Alfieri incident with CEDEF, I don't think Vongola will agree to meeting on Camorra grounds any time soon." [7]

"That was 13 years ago."

"Forgive, but never forget. That is the Vongola way, Lancia."

So it is. And a good way to go about it. If Lancia hadn't met Anacleto when he did, he might have been inclined to work for the Cosa Nostra instead.

..Or maybe not. His cousin does work for them.

"I'll go alone, then. It's only a civilian, right?"

"A civilian who knows how to find this Nagi of yours, that no other Italian has been able to find. Are you sure she even exists?"

"I've seen her. Once." As a Mist construct, made by her own strength and Gina's.

Real as flesh. He's sure.

Anacleto regards him with something like worry, though Lancia wouldn't know why. No reason to worry about him. He and his line are built like stone. Anacleto knows that.

"Don Cleto?"

"Yes, yes. The meeting will be in a few days' time. Thursday, the 27th, Sassi di Matera, in front of the Chiesa di San Francesco d'Assisi."

"A Catholic?"

Anacleto dips his head, but also shrugs. "Levi says the man is many things. Perhaps he is a Catholic. Is that a problem?"

"No. Not at all. But it would be a strange place to meet if he wasn't."

The Don smiles, ill-hidden humor. "His name is Hokuto. Levi says he'll have a photo sent over before the meeting day. Pack light, Lancia. I hear it's going to be a hot one."

---

It's the laughter that gets Kensuke's attention, finally.

Sawada has been coming to the Kendo Club for a little over a week now. It went fine the first few days. He stayed on the sidelines where none of the members would have any chance of stumbling into him, stayed quiet, did his work. Sometimes Kensuke would catch him texting on his phone, sometimes even smiling at it. Which is really weird. Because that means Sawada is socializing. Positively socializing.

Then there are the times he'd yell out Kyouko-chan says hi! and Kensuke would go red with both
embarrassment and fury because first of all he dared Sawada talk to Kyouko so casually, and second of all oh my god Kyouko is indirectly saying hello to him.

It was fine. It went well.

And then some of the third years started getting bold. Even though Kensuke told everyone to just ignore the kid and leave him alone. So many times. God, what was up with Sawada being some kind of bully-magnet? Was it the hair? His size? The babyfat on his face?

It’s very squishy babyfat. Yamamoto demonstrated once.

Kensuke doesn’t even notice the constant tripping anymore. He’s pretty sure Sawada’s been tripping less than he remembers from grade school. Which is really, really weird, because everyone still calls him the clumsiest thing on the island. And that’s counting the failed juggling machine some of the high schoolers were trying to make.

What’s even more weird is that he’s thinking about Sawada so much. Really fucking weird. He doesn’t even like Sawada. Well, okay, he likes Sawada a little, in that Sawada’s like a mouse that nibbles and bites and is kind of, urgh, adorable? Like, god, like a small animal. Hibari is always right. Except, lately he goes absolutely batshit if you make a dig at him, and Kensuke really likes that Sawada. Even if he tries to sleep on Kensuke afterward, at least until Yamamoto shows up.

Which he always does, if he isn’t already there. Somehow. Every time.

So, Kensuke isn’t too partial about the kid, except when he’s gone nutso and biting anything he can reach. Like he isn’t, right now. He’s under the radar. Kensuke’s almost forgotten he’s even there.

It’s the laughter that reminds him. Not the kind that comes after a joke. The kind that comes after accidentally throwing a shinai at a kid who’s dozing off and watching him startle awake with a squawk.

The not-nice kind.

"Sorry, Captain. Slipped out of my hands."

"If it’s slipping out of your hands, Morita, you should be working on your grip. Not terrifying the pipsqueak. You too, Saitou."

"No harm meant." Saitou waves dismissively and saunters over to pick up the shinai.

Sawada all but scrambles out of the way, shoving papers and pencils into his bag. Kensuke hasn’t seen him look that terrified since... just last week, actually. Seems to happen on and off at the weirdest times.

Their eyes meet. Sawada gives him a tiny smile and scoots away from where he was before, from that particular pair of students. Saitou and Morita aren’t in any position to throw anything at him anymore, so Kensuke pops over to the first year area to check on their forms. Many of them have their own Buddies hanging out nearby, those with clubs whose activities they could skip for a day or two, or those who weren’t in any.

It isn’t until practice is almost over that he realizes both Sawada and his bookbag are missing.

"Oh," one of the second years says when Kensuke asks those nearby, "I think he said something about going to wait outside. For air? It’s a bit stuffy in here lately, with all the Buddies."
He calls his Vice-Captain to take oversee the cooldown while he goes out to check up on the kid. Sure, Sawada might be fine, and if Kensuke hadn't been assigned to, well, help the kid out, he probably would have just left it alone. He wouldn't give a thought to how sluggish Sawada has been lately, how insistent Yamamoto has been. How watchful Hibari has been.

He wouldn't have found Sawada collapsed outside the Kendo Club's dojo.

"Oi- Sawada! Sawada, get up!"

Sawada responds to the shoulder-shaking, but very slowly and very listlessly. Lazy, almost. Kensuke drops his shinai and kneels down to get a better look at Sawada's face. He looks... really, really exhausted.

"Sawada, I'm taking you to the nurse, so you need to stand up—"

"No!" Sawada shakes his head furiously, albeit still slow. "I don't- I don't need the nurse, I don't need—"

Kensuke is trying to haul the kid up again, like he'd done at the pier. Really, for someone this light it should be easier, but the kid just won't stop kicking up a fuss every time. Except now he sounds too much like those other kids Kensuke sees at the clinic, in the nurse's ward. Just another kid.

..He really has to stop thinking of Sawada as a kid. Not that he isn't, but, they are almost the same age. Sawada's just.. smaller.

And sneaky as all hell.

Sawada shoves a hand into the gap between Kensuke's glove and the sleeve of his kendo jacket, fingers like ice around his wrist. Cold. Colder than cold.

His face goes still again, slack and eerily calm. Kensuke would say something about the way he says I'm sorry, the way he keeps tugging at Kensuke's wrist, the way he seems to vibrate with energy the more and longer he holds on, eyes sharper and clearer than Kensuke has seen in years.

He would. If the ice wasn't spreading up his arm and making his legs go weak in the knees and unable to stand up, or even pull his arm away. It's like putting in an IV, cold saline fluids rushing through his arm and the rest of his body. But this one isn't putting anything in. It's taking out. And the emptiness that it leaves behind settles in his chest like a rock, heavy and numbing.

"..What the hell?" Kensuke wheezes. His breath comes out thin and high, and he's surprised he isn't shivering yet. It's not a physical sort of cold. "This is what Yamamoto—?"

Feels cold inside.

This is what he puts up with?

How is first and forefront on Kensuke's mind as the cold slowly recedes, his own flames surging through his limbs again. Whether that's him or whether it's because Sawada has moved his hold to his still-gloved hand instead, Kensuke doesn't know.

Why is another. Why is the most important.

He lets go of Kensuke's glove instead of pulling it off. Sits himself upright and draws his knees up
again. He looks.. a little better.

"Yeah," Sawada says into his knees. ".Sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Kensuke can move his legs again, but the only direction they're going is down. He knows better than to get up right after having flames extracted. Not that he's ever heard of it being done without some sort of equipment, medical or otherwise, but he's not going to risk all those various side-effects hitting him at once.

(Which, actually, how does Yamamoto go around holding the kid's hand like it's nothing?)

Sawada lifts his shoulders and drops them, like a shrug. He doesn't lift his head up, though.

"Sorry you have to look after a loser."

Kensuke huffs out something between a tired groan and a sigh, and he drops down next to Sawada, propped up against the wall of the building. He can start taking off the bogu armor at least. Less to remove once he can get indoors.

"Honestly, Sawada, what do you think the Buddy system is? It's not that stupid. It's volunteer, extra credit shit. Gets us used to the protection clause in high school. We get brownie points and stuff for keeping your freshmeat asses out of trouble. If I can't handle the kid I'm assigned, I tell Hibari and he gets me reassigned. If you don't like your Buddy, you can go tell Hibari and he'll get you reassigned. Alright?"

Sawada doesn't answer. Probably moping, the little brat. Kensuke elbows him in the shoulder.

"Besides, I haven't been that much of a jerk, have I? And you're.. not. Much of a loser. As much. You were a damn loser in grade school, that's for sure. So tough it up, kid, I'll kick the loser out of you if it kills me- hey, Sawada?" Kensuke prods him in the head. It lolls to the side. "Oi, are you listening t—"

...  

"..Did you just fall asleep?"

"Aaand now I'm just talking to myself. Great. Thanks for nothing, Sawada. This has been a great bonding experience."

And the kid has the gall to go all mumbly and smiley in his sleep.

What the hell, Sawada.

* * *

Yamamoto finds them, because of course he does. Rushes in like the room is on fire, like a Man on a Mission.

Sawada woke up five minutes earlier and has been staring at the dojo's main doors ever since he scared the living shit out of Kensuke (not that he would admit it) by barging into the changing rooms unannounced because he was wondering where senpai had gone. Kensuke wishes he'd
thrown more than just his sweaty kendo clothes at the kid.

Yamamoto kicks up even more of a fuss than Sawada did about not wanting to go to the nurse's ward. Except he's fussing more about Sawada not going than anything.

"Why don't you just suck it up from everyone around you?" Kensuke asks before Yamamoto can nod off. He's still gotta make sure everything is cleaned up and put away. His Vice-Captain is good, but it never hurts to double check. "I mean, Yamamoto says I just have to be.. what, in range? You sit against the wall and there's always someone in range."

Sawada blinks. "That's... rude?"

"You slam doors open and you wanna talk about being rude?" Sawada repeats his words in a mocking whine and then demonstrates a very hushed, exaggerated version of the scream Kensuke had let out earlier. Kensuke rolls his eyes and throws his tie, having given up on trying to put it on again. "If you're just going to take them from me and Yamamoto, then.. I dunno, join the club or something. Do some of the katas, practice swings, I dunno. If you're on the floor of the dojo, I'm bound to be somewhere nearby."

"..I don't think that's very safe," Yamamoto frowns, sleepily, half buried in Sawada's hair. "Fluff thing. Kensuke doesn't remember it ever being that big.

"You have a better idea? Your club's the one that has it out for him." Sawada throws the tie back at Kensuke, his face twisted disapprovingly. "What? If you have a stick you can at least hit anyone who hits you first."

"Is that even allowed? In- in the club. I thought kendo was all about.. honor. Or something."

"Kendo is about training and disciplining the mind and body. I'm pretty sure everyone knows that we live in a tooth for tooth, eye for eye kind of place, so honor doesn't mean jack shit. And, honestly? If they're that bad that you can hit them, they deserve to be hit. Seriously. Your arms are twigs."

Yamamoto wraps his arms around Sawada's waist to keep him in his lap, and to keep him from launching himself at Kensuke with a flurry of tiny flying fists and gnashing teeth. Sawada's smiling though. A sharp lilt of his mouth that isn't quite angry.

Yeah. The kid smacks some sense into his bullies, and Kensuke gets some entertainment in watching his most arrogant, stuck up club members get their asses handed to them.

What could possibly to wrong?

* * *

(Everything, apparently. Everything.)

[1] not entirely accurate reference to the 'AGNUSDEI' incident from the end of (we think) we're invincible, completely unbreakable;
[2] IRL Sado Island did have a gold mine in the town of Aikawa that was worked until 1989.
[3] snuff film: "a movie in a purported genre of movies in which an actor is actually murdered or commits suicide", often distributed for financial exploitation, or at least for the purpose of entertainment.
the original shakespearean phrase didn't use 'protest' to 'deny' or 'object', but to 'confirm / affirm / vow'.

it's True. just, well, be a little sneaky and gradual about it. conversely, if you're comfortable around someone, you might end up taking on their body language, wordisms, etc.

cane: (italian) dog, pronounced 'ca-nay'. cachi: (italian) one of italy's many ways to say persimmon, pronounced 'kaki'

reference to the scene in *the way we fall (apart)*. the previous CEDEF head was accidentally killed when the camorra bombed members of the alfieri clan.

Chapter End Notes

i think it's a given that i will only ever write in tsuna's pov once in a blue moon. which is weird, because this fic is more or less about him and the havoc he and his will eventually wreak on, like, everything. but everything is both more and less confusing with his pov though so maybe i will toss one or more in next chapter.... just for fun.

can you believe i actually managed to fit everything i planned to fit into this chapter this time? it's 10k long but it!! fit!! so much. so many words.
Chapter Summary

the one in which sawada tsunayoshi (almost) dies. again.

(and again.)

(and again.)

Chapter Notes

before you start reading please be aware that this chapter is like, 17k words long. in case you hate having to step away in the middle. just so you know.

i remembered i had a bunch of Obscure Sorrows saved for using as themes and shit so here we go. using them as themes, and shit like that. there's two in this chapter actually! but only one is defined explicitly for now. the other one is hinted at.

rubatosis: n. the unsettling awareness of your own heartbeat, whose tenuous muscular throbbing feels less like a metronome than a nervous ditty your heart is tapping to itself, the kind that people compulsively hum or sing while walking in complete darkness, as if to casually remind the outside world, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

WARNINGS: Misleading Roof Scene(s). you know the one. vague suicidal implications. violence!! actual violence. Fight Scenes. Fight Fight Fight. tsuna's thought processes are probably not healthy, don't do what he does unless you too have magical dying will flame-type powers. mild blood warning.

forward note on the rigged kendo matches in this chapter (yeah we finally get to them): i did a tiny bit (read: a lot) of looking into kendo gear and figured it'd be pretty hard to make it extra heavy considering it's mostly made of padded cloth, leather, and bamboo honestly, not to mention stuffing them with like iron or sand instead of cloth would do the exact opposite of what i wanted to happen. so i have an alternative sort of sabotage. heavier shinai sticks do actually exist, though! but so far i've only seen listings for like, 1.8 kg at the heaviest, which comes out to about 4 lbs, probably shaped out of hardwood instead of bamboo. nothing like the 'requires two middle-schoolers to lift' variety in canon. they're meant for strengthening arms and not to be used in actual practice matches. standard shinai seem to be .45 kg / 1 lb at the most, for comparison. if you knew someone who makes shinai though you could probably feasibly get them to make one weighted down even heavier...

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Where is that damn- brat, how the hell did he even get up these stairs?"

"Stop calling Tsuna a brat, senpai, we're practically the same age."

"You're a brat too."

"I meant you and Tsuna."

"I'm one year older. That means more mature, more experienced, more responsible, and more common sense than to go to the roof in a wheelchair!"

"That's Tsuna for you! Nothing stops him." Yamamoto laughs. The damn idiot laughs. "Well, except himself. But he's been getting better! I mean, just in the last few weeks he's gotten into at least three fights, he's bowling people over, and now he climbed stairs somehow in a wheelchair —"

"That's not stuff to be proud of! ..Okay, maybe a little proud, but-no! He can't just- just— ugh."

"Can't what?" Yamamoto looks at him from the top of the steps. Athletes, sheesh. Oh, wait. Kensuke is one too. What the hell is up with Yamamoto then? "Can't change? Can't get better? Can't be anything more than a loser?"

Kensuke stops, leaning against the railway and trying to catch his breath. It's only 3 stories worth of stairs. Feels like an eternity.

"Tsuna told me what you said at the docks. You're a breach of uniform code. ..And I think you're right."

He looks up. Yamamoto has his head turned towards the top of the stairs.

"But.. I don't think Tsuna knows how to be anything other than a Sky. He's been a Sky all his life. Except when he, y'know, wasn't. For a few years. But still was. He's always going to be a Sky and he's not going to be anything else. If you have a problem with Skies, senpai—"

"I don't. Not with Skies. It's just—"

Sawada reminds him too much of himself, when he was... a lot younger. A lot more gullible. A lot more willing to brush himself off with it can't be helped, I'm a Storm, of course I'll be angry a lot. A lot more willing to use it as an excuse, when others found him abrasive and off-putting. Because I'm a Storm.

But Kensuke grew out of it. Lan helped. Supported him with a steadfastness that only a Lightning could provide, while he gave her the temper to face her own problems.

Sawada?

Sawada says I'm a Sky like a mantra. Chants it like a sutra, like it would grant him salvation. Like it would grant others salvation. Wears it like a fucking mantle.

I'm a Sky. I'm a Sky.
Maybe this is why all the Sawadas live down south, away from everyone else. Anyone who thinks of themselves the way he does is probably better off staying together. Less chance of them dying for some random person or whatever.

It's such bullshit.

...Yamamoto hasn't said anything for a while. Kensuke raises his head again and- woah. Uh.

"You're, uh-" Kensuke gestures. Tries not to point directly at him but it's kind of hard not to when he's- "-glowing. You're glowing? Hey, Yamamoto?"

Yamamoto breathes out and suddenly Kensuke feels... very nice. Cool. Calm. He hasn't felt this calm since he was a kid. Before his flames activated when he was 6, because he watched Hibari Kyoya lay the smackdown on some kid trying to kick him off the throne and then get praised for it. Because he wanted to do the same. [1]

It's. Weird.

"Tsuna," Yamamoto says. He looks down just briefly, just long enough for Kensuke to notice his eyes are blue and shimmering like- like water under the sun. Under the sky.

"..What about him?"

"We have to go."

That's the only warning he has before Yamamoto starts bounding up the stairs 2 at a time like a— he hates to sound like Kurokawa but, like a monkey. Kensuke curses and starts climbing after him. How can he still have that much leg strength left? Gods above.

Yamamoto reaches the top of the stairwell first, of course, and stands in the open doorway for a while. When he shows no sign of moving, Kensuke tries to ask what he sees, but there's no answer.

"Tsuna, please don't fall," Yamamoto says, and he walks out onto the roof just as Kensuke reaches the bottom of the last flight, muttering something about tall gangly aliens.

What Kensuke sees is almost enough to make him fall back down the stairs.

"Sawada-" He starts forward, then stops when Sawada looks at him. Those eyes again. The same ones he had not weeks ago, the ones he had when he first grabbed Kensuke's wrist. Sharp. Clear. Bright. "..Sawada, what are you doing up there?"

"I'm... standing?" Sawada blinks slowly, looking down at his feet and then back up. "See? I'm fine. I can stand up now."

"You are not fine, you're supposed to stay in the wheelchair for a few more days. You're not even supposed to be in school for weeks yet, how the hell did you even get into the building? How did you even get up the stairs?"

"I used the ramps behind the school, obviously. You worry too much. I'm fine, Kensuke."

"Of course I'm fucking worried you're standing on the damn— what did you just call me?"

"Uh, Kensuke. That's your name. Right?" Sawada blinks. The.. glowing thing doesn't go away. He's- orange? That's— "..Should I not call you that?"
Kensuke blinks too. Because, what? This is weird.

"...Obviously not. I'm your senior, you should stick in an honorific somewhere. No, forget that—don't call me so familiarly to begin with!" Kensuke stomps a few steps closer, and stops again.

What the hell is Yamamoto doing standing so close? And not doing anything? "Yamamoto! Don't just stand there, get him down—"

He's still blue. Still glowing. The air around him is so bright, even brighter than it had been in the stairwell, and it almost makes Kensuke stop breathing because what the hell.

Sawada is, too. Bright. Glowing. This is the Aura thing. A visible, physical manifestation of fiamma energy dispersing into the atmosphere. Measureable, in lumens. And the very reason why the coasts of Niigata and Ishikawa called them candele. [21]

How much is Sawada giving off right now? Why hasn't anyone noticed?

"...Sawada are you insane?" Kensuke hisses, shaking himself out of whatever Sawada's—Aura is doing to his head. "You just had a heart attack from flame exhaustion, you're not—"

"No I didn't."

"Your heart stopped!"

"Yeah." Sawada waves a hand like it's nothing. "That's different from a heart attack."

"Who cares?! It still stopped!"

"You're being very high-strung today, Kensuke." Sawada's head tips to the side.

Yamamoto's does the same. "I think he's just worried, Tsuna."

"Worried? About me? Perish the thought."

"Why am I the only one who seems to think that your clumsy idiot ass is going to fall and die if you don't get down from the fence, Sawada?!"

Then he laughs. He laughs. Laughs in a way that does, actually, sound genuine. Doesn't sound forced, doesn't sound practiced, doesn't sound like rote memorization and repetition, like it did in grade school. It's not just to be polite. It's not just a sound.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kensuke. I'm not going to die." Sawada smiles, just as wide and just as real as Kensuke remembers from the playground in daycare. 9 years ago. The last time he ever saw Sawada when he wasn't bumbling into everything and tripping over nothing.

It's real.

..So is the flame on his forehead. He's definitely not imagining it this time. Flickering like a candle, like a candela, sparking and spreading out far and wide. It hits Kensuke like a heat wave, but not like walking out of an air-conditioned room and into the desert. No, it's..

It's like coming home out of a blizzard. A warm fire. Cozy.

Welcoming.
Sawada stands on the fence, balanced and unerring. Tall. Sunlight gilds his hair in gold and his eyes are a shade of amber that seems to gleam for forever. Eyes that look at no one but him.

He smiles, and he says, "I'm going to live."

Who was the idiot that said Sawada had no flame? Who was it that said Sawada had no Resolve? That he wasn't a Sky, he wasn't actually a Sawada, that he wasn't anything at all? Just a No Good kid with no flame, no father, no ambition, no talent, no nothing.

Who missed all of this?

"This is such bullshit," Kensuke says in a rush of breath. Because he can't help but come closer, when Sawada holds out his hand. Nothing else. Just holds out a damn hand and Kensuke's trotting over like a lapdog. "You shouldn't even... You are such—bullshit, Sawada."

"You could call me Tsuna, Kensuke."

"Tsuna," he says almost immediately. And then- "Wait- shit, no, what the hell?"

Kensuke jerks back and scowls, pulling his hand away with painful reluctance. He can practically hear the rubatosic beat of that flickering flame, humming out a steady current of I'm here, I'm here, come home, come home in his head and it is so wrong because he barely even knows Tsuna—Sawada.

The mere thought of it reminds him of all the sandcastles they had made in daycare together. When he'd dump a bucket on the books Sawada was reading, because what 4 year old reads books, especially books as big as that one? Weird. Lame. Reminds him of the damn sandmansions Sawada was capable of. Reminds him of when parents wanted their kids to be like Sawada. Except Kensuke's mom. She never said it. He knew she thought about it, but she never actually said it.

So young and so clever. So well-behaved.

Reminds him of the first time Sawada came to daycare without a book. The first time he refused to play, until Kensuke shoved the bucket of sand into his arms. The first time he couldn't figure out where to upturn it to build up the wall and ended up spilling it on himself instead.

Reminds him that he laughed. No Good Tsuna. No Good Tsuna.

Now no one wants their kid to be like him. Now they don't call him clever, now don't call him well-behaved.

Now he's 14 and everyone says he's still No Good. No one remembers when he wasn't No Good, it was so long ago.

Now—

Sawada swats at Yamamoto's hand creeping up to grab his own outstretched one. Says something like you had your turn already when Yamamoto whines, aaww, c'mon, Tsuna.

"...What's that for," Kensuke asks as flatly as he can. Wishes he could burn a hole through Sawada's hand with his eyes.

"For you to take, obviously."
"Why."

"Well, how else are you going to get me down from here?"

Honestly, the number of times this kid leaves him at a loss for words is racking up, and fast. Never mind the fact that Yamamoto is looking back and forth between Sawada's hand and Kensuke with the sort of smile that says if you're not going to do it then I will.

"Come on, Kensuke. I don't have loser cooties, geez."

"Stop saying my name so familiarly!"

Even though it's been near half a year now. Even though they've probably hung out enough to be considered friends, except for the fact that no one but Yamamoto and Sasagawa and Kyouko and Kurokawa want to be Sawada's friend, and Kurokawa denies even that.

Even though they tossed sand at each other in day care. Even though Kensuke thought that Sawada had been a bit of a know-it-all show-off for being able to read and make awesome sandmansions. Even though he felt like that Sawada could do just about anything back then.

Even though it made Kensuke want to do the same. Do anything.

Do everything.

He reaches out and yanks on Sawada's hand, pulling him down from the fence maybe a little too roughly, a little too hard. A little too eager to get him on solid ground. He's at least half a foot taller, so it's easy to use the bulk of his own mass to keep Sawada from actually crashing down.

He's heard about Sky flames in class. Everyone has. When they explained each attribute and energy wavelength, what it meant for those of each type, they had pictures and diagrams and everything. He doubts anyone in Namimori has seen a Sky before, honestly, since the only Sky here is Sawada and everyone is so willing to believe that Sawada doesn't have flames except he does.

Oh, man, he does.

"..I don't know how to be more than a Sky," Sawada says into his shirt, impossibly soft and gentle, like his flames. Kensuke blinks, and Sawada's hand tightens its grip around his own. "Or how to be anything other than a Sky. But you.. you're more than a Storm. You are. You said so yourself."

Where is Sawada going with this and why is Kensuke still holding him? Why hasn't Sawada let go of his hand? Why hasn't Kensuke let go of his hand?

Why does it feel so nice and warm and—

"You could be mine."

...What.

"What the hell are you talking about?" He jerks back again- tries to. Except Sawada still isn't letting go.

Tsuna. Tsuna isn't letting go.
“Um, my friend. You could be my friend?” Sawada, Tsuna, props his chin up against Kensuke's chest, looking way too comfortable. Hasn’t he heard of personal space? Isn’t this the kid who jerks away if anyone so much as grazes him? "You could be my friend."

"..Who would want to be your friend?" An icy dread crawls up his throat like inverse bile, even as the words come out. Before they even come out.

“That’s rude!” Yamamoto chirps from somewhere nearby. Somewhere. Where are they again? Oh, right, the roof. "I would want to be his friend. I am his friend!"

“You don’t count,” Kensuke hisses, glancing over. He’s still glowing. Dammit, why is he glowing and why does it make Kensuke feel so calm?

Right. Rain. Right as rain. Right as Rain.

...Why isn’t he getting tired? He's always getting tired when Tsuna grabs his hand. What the hell is this, then?

Yamamoto's frowning, too. Why's he frowning? "Well, fine, if you're not going to be his friend then you can let him go, senpai."

Kensuke stares at Yamamoto for a long, long moment. Thinks, why would I let him go? And then-

And then he jumps back as though he's been scalded, the warmth suddenly too unbearable, too hot, too suffocating. Shoves Tsu- Sawada away. He feels like a fish with a hook in his skin, feels like he's being reeled in and didn't even notice it was happening. Didn’t even notice it was hurting. Didn't notice that he wasn't even struggling. A hook in his skin. Colored, orange.

He tears it out.

Hears more than feels the metaphorical line snapping, hears it in the form of Sawada's pitiful yelp, sees it in his wince, in the way the flame on his forehead flickers. Still pulsing, earnest and yearning. Still sending out that staccato message, like an SOS in Morse code. I’m here. I’m here.

Come home, come home.

Kensuke turns and runs. Leaves. Ignores the way his heart pounds like it's beating for two, the way his lungs burn for air as though he were drowning.

Ignores the trail of red he leaves behind. It leaks out of him and into the air like blood in water and it won't stop. It won't stop, it-

It won’t—
river. There's a lot of them in Namimori.

Yamamoto always pulled him away, pointing out something further down the street, and that would be the end of it.

Someone closes their garbage can a little too loudly, and that's the end of that, too. Sawada jumps and spins around, bumping into Kensuke in his surprise. Or because he was expecting Yamamoto to be there to pull him away.

Kensuke does. Steers him down the street with a slight shove in his side, rather than a hand on his back. Because it isn't last year anymore and he knows Sawada still doesn't like being touched, for the most part. On skin, at least. Sawada sends him a furtive glance anyway and scoots along, knuckles white around the handle of his book bag.

It's ridiculous how he wants to be a Sky with shoulders so small.

"Why do you want to know, anyway?" That startles the kid out of whatever thoughts he was lost in. Staring at some children squabbling on the other side of the street. "Why I left kendo. What are you so hung up on?"

"I—"

"And don't say because you're a Sky, I told you I'd throttle you if you said that again."

"I- hey! It's a- it's a valid reason."

Kensuke just looks at him blandly. "Not for every single thing."

"This isn't every single thing! This is one! One thing!"

"Stop squeaking, holy hell, you really are a mouse."

Sawada hisses. "What is with you people and your small animal metaphors?!"

"You're TINY," Kensuke hisses back. "In case you haven't noticed."

"Oh, thank you for pointing out the obvious to me. I never knew I was so small!"

"You're welcome."

The silence that follows is not companionable, per se.. but it isn't uncomfortable either. It never is, with Sawada. Whether Kensuke has just helped him keep his balance and not topple down the stairs, or whether he'd been the one to make some passing remark about one of Sawada's various failing performances. Like his grades. Or... everything else.

Sawada just. Doesn't care.

Which makes him wonder why he does care about the things he says he cares about. If he does actually care about them. He says he does. Sawada says a lot of things. He doesn't mean all of them.

".I'm just enjoying my last year of junior high, alright?" Kensuke says finally. Because unlike Sawada, Kensuke is really bad with silence. Kendo had been good for him, in that sense. "Kicking back and relaxing. There, happy?"

"You're not relaxing though," Sawada notes, not meeting his eyes. Strangely enough. "You're not
kicking back. You're still... doing your patrols and stuff and helping out the Committee but you're not..."

He makes a weird gesture with his hands, probably something he learned from Yamamoto, who is capable of general conversation but can only seem to describe things with hand movements and the sort of sound effects you would read about in shounen manga. Considering the amount of time he spends in Sawada's room and the number of Shounen Jump issues and whatever else Sawada has on his bookshelves, Kensuke isn't surprised.

Doesn't make him any better at translating it to Normal Human Language, though. That's usually what Sawada's for. Was for.

"..You don't hang out with them anymore."

"How the hell would you know who I do or don't hang out with? Are you stalking me now?"

"Like it's hard?" Sawada huffs, very pointedly looking away. "It's impossible not to know where you are all the time. Well, not all the time, because that would be creepy, but- at school! You leave your angriness on everything."

"I don't know what dictionary you're reading but angriness isn't a word, idiot."

"Yes it is!"

Kensuke rolls his eyes. "Are you seriously going to get worked up about something like that?"

"You do!"

His mouth snaps shut and he turns away just as Sawada turns to him. Knows he won't be able to stay quiet if he looks the kid dead in the eye. Knows that if he does, it's either Fight or Talk and, honestly, Kensuke has chosen Fight far too many times for it to keep happening again and again. You'd think Sawada would learn by now, but he keeps trying to make eye contact. It's damn annoying.

"And what d'you mean anyway, enjoying your last year of junior high? The high school isn't that far off. And now if you stick to the Committee you can always come back. Hibari-san always does." Sawada elbows him in the side. Kensuke would find it joking and jesting if he didn't feel like there was a sort of hesitance to it. "..You are going to high school, right? You're not doing the whole full on drop-out delinquent routine?"

"You wanna know why I quit kendo? You wanna know? Does everything that happened last year ring any bells? It damn well should, seeing as most of it was your fault!"

"Wha- what does that have anything to do with—"

And he hates that Sawada doesn't say no it wasn't, how was any of that my fault. He hates that the Sawada doesn't say you're the one who started all of it. Hates that Sawada doesn't try to deny it being his fault. Whether it was or it wasn't. He's always been like that and Kensuke just—

cannot stand it—

"I'm LEAVING," he yells, ignoring the looks he gets from the sparse few people on the streets. Club activities mostly haven't finished yet, so all the students are still in school. Meaning parents are still at home, or at work, or at the markets. Not many people just walking around. Good. Good.
"Come high school it's **sayonara** Namimori, and all that. Alright?!"

"..Wait what do you **mean** you're leaving— Mochida **stop**!"

He knows without even looking back that Sawada won’t follow him across the next bridge that Kensuke reroutes himself across. His own house is **right there** and he's sick and tired of taking the long way around just to get to Sawada's place and having to backtrack after. He's done it something like a million times by now. Kensuke just wants to go **home**.

"Get back here—!"

"I'm going **home**, Sawada, you can get to your house from here by *yourself*. I know you're not *that* useless."

"YOU'RE A DAMN COWARD, YOU KNOW THAT?"

It makes his blood boil and run cold at the same time. He's not a coward. He's *not*— Sawada doesn't know anything, he has *no right*—

"Says the one who can't even **CROSS A DAMN BRIDGE,**" Kensuke shouts over his shoulder. He's already halfway and Sawada is still at the other end, brimming and fidgeting and glancing back and forth between Kensuke and the trickling creek. It can't be heights, so it's gotta be water, and there's barely any, and didn't he sit at the docks just fine, too? This **damn kid.**

Just when he thinks he’s finally lost Sawada, the moment he finishes crossing the bridge he hears the telltale rapid tapping of school loafers sprinting over wood.

"Don't you **ever** give up—" He turns around just in time for Sawada to barrel into him, seeing as he was running with his head down and eyes shut. And given that Sawada is little more than an oversized mouse with a megaphone for his squeaking, all he really manages to do is make Kensuke stumble back a few steps before he shoves the kid off him.

"I **fell off this bridge when I was 5!**" It comes out in a rush, all breathless and wheezy because Sawada can't even handle running across a bridge without being exhausted. Being angry and apparently terrified of crossing bridges probably doesn't help either.

Sawada takes a moment to steady himself, still clutching the bookbag slung over his shoulder. He's leaning against one of the wooden posts, trying not to look behind him or to the side where the ravine is visible.

"..This- this is. Probably the first time I've- **ever**.. walked over that thing."

"You had your eyes shut, you moron."

Sawada looks up. They're bright, his eyes. Not as clear and shining as they were before, *that time* last year, but **bright**. Focused. Like he's tuning out everything else and all he cares about right now is **Kensuke** and that just- *that just pisses him off*—

"I still crossed it," he says, like it's some grand accomplishment. "It was in Oct-October. It was **cold**. The water, it was *so cold* and I—"

*I still crossed it.* That's probably what he was going to say. Before he started wobbling and falling over, and Kensuke lets out a curse and reaches out to catch him, **damn this kid.**

"I thought we agreed on **no more heart attacks.**" Sawada swats him on the arm. He figures that
means the kid is still kicking and breathing. "Jeez, can't even get home by yourself. You're worse than a drunkard. I knew we should've brought the wheelchair along- come on, how can you be so heavy? You weigh practically nothing—"

Sawada whines into his arm. The very same one he just smacked. Kensuke rolls his eyes and situates himself on Sawada's left side, slinging the arm over his shoulder to keep him upright. Luckily he's not as tall as Yamamoto is. Yamamoto probably just slings Sawada over his shoulder. Or carries him. Princess style. He seems the type to do that.

"What are you running away from?" The question is slurred, tired, in the way Sawada usually is after doing practically anything that involves physical movement. Has to be adrenaline rush. Some very Extreme adrenaline rush and crash. Awful. How can he get an adrenaline rush from everything? What the hell?

"Who says I'm running away from anything."

"You won that duel last year."

"..Yeah. So what?"

"You.. won. And then you tossed it away."

"Do I have to keep reminding you that I broke your ribs in that duel? I was showing you some pity, you ungrateful little—"

"I never asked for your pity," Sawada hisses. Maybe Kensuke's just imagining it, but he's huddling closer too. It's not that cold, is it? "Also, you just fractured them, and how many times do I have to tell you that I don't blame you for that?"

"Of course you don't, why would you? The great and magnanimous Sawada Tsunayoshi forgives the Captain of the Kendo Club for beating him black and blue in an unfair duel. That sure is a great way to throw yourself at the top of the food chain." Kensuke remembers suddenly that he's not actually wearing the carrybag for his shinai anymore and readjusts his hold on Sawada's arm to better keep hold of him. Damn kid. Damn kid. He lets out a harsh scoff under his breath, all but dragging Sawada along.

As usual, Sawada doesn't ask where they're going. He never asks. Trusts too much.

"I didn't blame you for it," Sawada says again, and this time he does actually push himself away. Stumbles a bit and ends up leaning against a street sign, but it's about the first time Kensuke has ever seen him actually.. refuse help. "..So stop blaming yourself for it."

"I'm not blaming myself. That's just stupid, I don't do stupid things like you do, Sawada."

"No, you just are stupid."

"I'm telling on you," Kensuke growls, pulling Sawada up by his arm instead. If he can stand, he can walk. "I'm gonna tell your houseguest tutor that you called an upperclassman stupid and let him deal with you."

"Reborn? Are you kidding me? He'll just tell me to call you stupid some more."

"..What the hell kind of home tutor did your mom get you?"

"Dad sent him," Sawada says, and his grin is, in fact, the stuff of nightmares. Kensuke's

*Just happy enough—* wait what *what*

"What the *fuck*, Sawada."

"What the *hell*, Kensuke?"

He blinks. Shakes his head, because the red haze has been filtering in way too often now and it's making him dizzy every time. Dizzy and giddy and just *uppitity*. Up.

When he looks again, Sawada is staring at him, eyes wide and focused and just *bright*. Yamamoto's frowning, again. Kyouko- god, Kyoko looks so *disappointed* and scared and disapproving and Kurokawa *always looks disapproving*, and Lan-

Oh, shit.

"..Oh. Shit, Lan, I-

"You *what*?"

"I didn't mean to!"

Lan flicks a cluster of rice off her chest and pins him with a stare. "You're saying you didn't mean to take your bento, the bento you specifically asked me to make for you, and throw it at someone?"

Kensuke groans and sinks back down onto the bench, head in his hands, as scandalized gasps rise up around them.

"She made that for you and you just- you just *chucked it*? You- you absolute *monkey!*"

"That's not cool, senpai. That's not cool at all."

"How would you, Kensuke? Lan must have spent so long on it, too."

*He can feel Sasaki's stare burning into the side of his head, intense and glaring. She's quiet but man does she have a temper. She's like Sawada in that sense."

Sawada, who is laughing. And still eating. He blinks at them and holds up a piece of fish that Kensuke very much recognizes from his own lunch. "What? It's good! It's almost as good as my mom's cooking."

"..I'm flattered, seeing as I've tasted your mother's cooking and it's more or less sent from the Heavens," Lan says slowly, directing a gesture of prayer to the bento in Sawada's lap, "but where did you get that?"

"It.. bounced into my lunch?" Sawada moves his hand like an airplane and mimes what must have been Kensuke's bento box hitting the far wall behind their lunch spot, exploding like fireworks, and
landing pieces in just about everyone's lunches. And hair. And shoulders. Kyouko's picking rice out of Sawada's hairpuffs.

Kensuke is so glad he was almost done eating before he decided it would be a good idea to throw his lunch at the wall. Why the hell did he even do that?

"..This is going to sound stupid, but- why did I even do that?"

"Please don't tell me you don't remember why you threw my hard work away. Granted, that was last night's food so it's not like I woke up early to make it or anything, but still!"

"Obviously I don't remember or I wouldn't be asking— wait you fed me your leftovers?!

"Are you complaining?"

Kensuke snaps his mouth shut. He's not even going to bother trying to refute that, because anything he says would be a dirty, dirty lie. He loves his best friend's cooking. Even before she worked up the courage last year to feed him the results of her Home Economics class.

"You threw it at those monkeys over there," Kurokawa quips, pointing her chopsticks rudely at a pair of third years glaring in their direction. When he looks over they seem to let out some kind of squawk and duck around the corner, out of sight.

"..I did?"

"They just came by to call me Dame Tsuna like they always do," Sawada says evenly, still eating. "First time you've thrown anything at them though. Usually it's Takeshi and his beans."

Kensuke's arm twitches. So does Yamamoto's. Their eyes meet and Yamamoto grins conspiratorially, and then he steals a piece of fried chicken from Sawada's lunch.

Lan waves a hand in front of his face. "You sure you're okay, Ken-chan?"

"Stop calling me that, Lan," Kensuke grumbles back, getting up to retrieve his now-empty bento box. He still has his fruit juice, at least. "We're not 8 anymore."

She squints at him like she has words to say, but Sawada beats her to it.

"You call him Ken-chan, Touno-san?"

"Yeah. Ever since we were like, 8." Lan stares at him for another moment when he sits back down, then grins and shrugs. "8-year-old me thought his name was too long."

* * *

He should've known better than to think Lan would let him off easily. Even if it was just leftovers that he had more or less finished eating before he used the rest as a projectile.

She drags him to the nurse's ward after school when he blew up at one of the first years loitering around instead of going to kendo practice. Even Sawada had been.. well. Surprised didn't sound right. Affected? Yeah. Affected.

"Tsuna said Kensuke was.. Red. Like, really red. Is that bad, nurse?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with him physically." Nurse Shiomi takes off the stethoscope and sets
it aside. "Of course, I'm not a Dr.. His vitals are a bit elevated though. Did you come here straight from class, Kensuke?"

"Um, sort of. Lan just.. dragged me out. We even brought the kids along."

Sawada and Sasaki jump and share a sheepish look with each other. Pair of mice, they are.

"No physical activity then? Other than the possible flight of stairs."

"I. I threw my bento at some third years during lunch, but other than that.." He shakes his head.

"Haven't even gone to the dojo yet. I do feel a bit, uh... jittery?"

"Your heart rate is elevated, like I said. That might be causing the jittery feeling. Like nerves. How long have you been feeling this?"

"Yeah. About... almost two weeks now. It wasn't that bad at first."

"And you say he looks.. red, Tsunayoshi?"

Sawada looks between him and the nurse. Lingers on him a little too long for Kensuke's liking. "A lot redder than before. Before it was just kind of, um.. pink? Like, thin and hazy. Now it's just... really red and-"

He mimes something like juggling while making buku buku sounds.

"Oh, hey," Kensuke snaps his fingers. "I know this one. It's.. bubbles. Bubbling?"

"Yeah! Yeah. It's, it's sort of.. bubbling out. Like too much soap in a bathtub."

Hah! He guessed it. Wait- "Are you calling me a bathtub?"

"I don't think he's calling you a bathtub, Kensuke, but." Nurse Shiomi rolls past them and over to a cabinet that Kensuke knows is usually only for emergencies. She takes out something that looks like the heater his mom uses for their tiger oscar's fish tank, though a bit smaller, and thinner. "He might be onto something. Tsunayoshi, would you?"

Sawada turns around without a word, tipping his head forward and moving his hair away from the nape of his neck. The nurse shakes the rod a few times after turning it on, raps it against the palm of her hand in the very patented method of Making Electronics Work (Properly). Then she presses the end of it against the base of Sawada's skull, holding it there until it beeps. She does the same to his arm, taking another reading from the crook of his elbow, and jots down both numbers on piece of paper that she leaves on her desk.

"Alright. Now, let's see.."

Kensuke's brow furrows. "..What was that all about?"

"Oh, just checking to make sure it still worked. And Tsunayoshi hasn't come in for his internal fiamma response reading this week yet. I thought I might as well get that while he's here." Sawada blinks, looking shocked and betrayed for all of a moment as he sinks back into his chair. Lan snorts, delicately. Somehow. "Kensuke, I'm going to measure your external fiamma response. You know what that is, right?"

"Yeah. It's the.." He waves a hand back and forth in front of his face. "That one, right? Had it done when I was.. 10."
“Mm-hm. I just need you to stay still and relax for a seconds. You can close your eyes if you need to.”

He does. Hears the humming of the measuring prong as it goes back and forth in front of his face, like his hand at done, but a lot slower.

“Um.. what’s the internal fiamma reading?”

Is that Sasaki? Huh. She sounds...


"It's.. uh- it measures the fiamma response from the- from some part in your head, where they come out, right here. It's usually in the 300s in, I think it's Fiamma Voltage, right? Which is.. pretty good? And then it puts that against the Fiamma Response from one of your limbs. Usually the elbow, but sometimes the knee is used too. That one's normally in the 40-60.. range. In the end you get something like a 5-to-1 ratio, or close to it. Kind of like a blood pressure reading, except no squeeze-y arm thing."

"Oh.. how come you know so much about this kind of thing?"

"I, eh, I have to get my readings done every week, so I've heard it a lot of times before. My normal reading’s ratio is... really off— I have a really weird sort of fiamma exhaustion, so we- um, we have to.. kind of monitor it really closely. To make sure it doesn't drop.. too low. Especially ever since that- since that incident. Ah—"

Kensuke's heart jumps, racing, like it did when he fled the rooftop two weeks ago. He feels it fluttering in his chest for a moment, tremulous and shaking, like it's trying to beat for two again, and Nurse Shiomi clucks her tongue.

"Tsunayoshi?"

"Yeah- it just, it just bubbled up some more."

"You can open your eyes, Kensuke."

He does. Sawada is still staring at him, and Sasaki is looking between Kensuke and trying to peer at reading on the measuring prong over the nurse's shoulder. She looks..

Concerned. Very.

Very concerned.

The last time someone looked at him like that, it was when Dr. Ueda told his mother that Kensuke was, like most Storms, at risk for severe hyperincaendia. He gave her a pamphlet that he later found out had a hotline printed inside, for individuals troubled by Storm relatives, and a separate line for troubled Storms themselves. He told her the Sawada compound always had openings.

He was 10. They're always 10.

God, he hates it. Knew this was coming.

"You know what the normal reading is for external fiamma response, don’t you, Kensuke?" She asks quietly, showing him the little LCD screen on the handle. He sucks in a breath and feels a chill in his bones. From his bones. Curls his hands over his knees and slumps forward, gritting his
teeth.

Distantly he's aware of Nurse Shiomi shooing the others away and drawing the curtain around the bed he's sitting on, even Lan, though she doesn't protest. She probably knew this was coming, too. He did tell her what Dr. Ueda had said. First one he did tell.

...Actually, the only one, seeing as he didn't and still doesn't really have anyone else close enough to tell besides her.

"..Now, now, there's no need to look like the world's ending."

**Isn't it, though?** He knows she's just trying to be.. **comforting** but Kensuke's- god, he's only 15. He was supposed to have **way more years** before hyperincaendia set in fully. His old man didn't even get it until he was, what, 40? That's what his mother said.

She also said **they're getting younger every year,** when Dr. Ueda told him he might make 25 before it happened. 30, if he was lucky.

**Hah.**

"You know what your options are, Kensuke." Nurse Shiomi sets the measuring prong down on the bed next to him, and he eyes it with distaste. "The normal reading shouldn't read more than 10 or 20. Anything above that is pre-hyperincaendiac.."

"..And anything above 60 is pushing the hyperincaendia zone. I know." He sighs and rubs at his face. His skin feels a little numb. "Dr. Ueda told me before."

"86 isn't too bad. It's still low enough to manage with the occasional treatment, which we can do at the school, if you're comfortable having it done here. The Committee can have adjustments made to your school schedule, like they have for Tsunayoshi."

That **does** make Kensuke look up. "Wha- him too?"

Nurse Shiomi nods, though she looks a bit.. rueful. "Mostly he just comes in here to sleep."

"Oh, speaking of Sawada-"

"I'm **not going to move down to the compound,**" Kensuke hisses before she can even finish. Then he twitches and ducks his head, dizzy again. "Sorry- sorry, nurse, I.. I just don't want to.."

**I don't want to leave.**

"..Your other option is to have a Sawada attendant come up periodically," she continues after a pause. If it were Sawada, he wouldn't even have batted an eye. Damn Sawada. "There's an incaendia clinic in Azayakatani, as well. Most of them are being staffed with an attendant now that the Sawadas are working with the Tran Foundation."

"Don't need one." Kensuke jerks his head towards Sawada's seat— or where it probably is, now that he's hidden by the curtain. "Got one right there."

"He's.. not a proper attendant, Kensuke. Tsunayoshi has never been to the Compound. He wouldn't **know** what to do." Nurse Shiomi folds her hands in her lap. She has a ring, he notices, but it's on her right index finger. He doesn't recognize the crest. "I may not be your primary doctor, but I
know Dr. Ueda wouldn't authorizing letting Tsunayoshi act as your attendant."

"Then I don't need one." He tries not to sound too sulky, or morose. It's just- it's just a decision. Temporary choice. For now. ".I don't want to go to the Compound. I'll.. I'll just do the treatments for now and- I'll figure something out. Meditation or something, I don't know."

86 isn't bad, as she says. If it hits 100, they'll probably start having his mother make decisions if they think he isn't capable of making them himself. Depends on the individual, Dr. Ueda had said. Some are more susceptible. Some are very resistant. I heard your father held out for quite a while.

And his mother would definitely want to move them down to the Sawada Compound. Because it's the best place for Storms, after the Colony, depending on your philosophy. And probably because his father and older.. brother? Sister? Was there too.

"I can recommend you to a Storm specialist, if you'd like another opinion. Dr. Ueda is a good doctor, but I know it.. always feels better to talk to someone who understands."

He nods. "Yeah. Thanks, nurse. Shiomi-san."

"Now now, I've told you not to call me that. Just Shiomi is fine. It's just my family name, anyway."

The elderly nurse takes a notepad from her pocket and jots down something. Makes a few marks on clipboard that holds his current medical chart, and then tears the note off to hand over.

Kensuke takes it. He stares at the lines and curves until they register as a name, a phone number, an e-mail address.

He wonders if Sawada has anyone he talks to. Someone who understands.

The door opens with bored, drawling okaeri being yawned at them. Kensuke balks for a moment, just long enough for Sawada to slip off his shoulder and land face-first against the torso of... his houseguest? Sawada mumbles a muffled tadaima but doesn't otherwise move.

The man looks down. Then he looks up again and raises an eyebrow. Kensuke's finger twitches. ".What happened to him?

"He, uh. Crossed a bridge." Kensuke scratches the back of his neck. ".Well, more like he ran across it really fast, but he still crossed it? And then this— happened."

He gestures to, basically, all of Sawada. Just. That.

"Ah. He does this every morning, too." Reborn looks mildly understanding. "I am both glad and worried to hear it's not an isolated thing."

"It's exercise in general. I.. think, anyway."

"Hm." The man lifts a hand up and looks.. kind of not sure where to put it at first. Then he just pats Sawada on the shoulder a few times and sort of- maneuvers himself and Sawada aside. Turns his
head back indoors. "Sawada-san, Tsunayoshi is home. He's asleep on his feet again."

Sawada's mom flutters out in a fussy fit and herds all of them indoors, despite Kensuke's insistence on heading home right away. He's got no reason to be here anymore, not after that.. shouting match on the streets. God, that was embarrassing. They're just lucky no one called the Committee on them for disturbing the peace.

Sawada sometimes manages to stay in that exact position, face squashed against Reborn's chest, until his mother moves him onto the living room couch. Then he just... lays down across all three seats.

Nana sighs and shakes her head. Reborn does the same, just as.. fond? As Sawada's mother.

"..Uhm, Sawada-san- I really should go." Kensuke makes an aborted motion towards the front door, since he hasn't gone further than the entranceway to the living room. "I'm- sure Sawada doesn't need me around for his nap."

"Oh, if you're sure, Kensuke-kun." Sawada's mother looks a little dejected. She likes having company around way too much. Kensuke can't blame her though, since Sawada's never been talkative about family. Or around family. "Let me pack you some of the cookies I made this afternoon. For your mother. Is she okay with pumpkin?"

"Yeah- I mean, yes. I mean- you don't have to, Sawada-san—!"

She pats him on the cheek and bustles away, leaving Kensuke just more or less speechless. It would be a little more warming and endearing if she didn't look so much like Sawada, but with.. longer hair. They're even the same height, god, it's mind-boggling.

..Actually, Sawada did look a bit like his mother back before his hair started going all Super Saiyan on them. And even when it rains now—

"Reborn- er, Reborn-san," Kensuke says instead, shoving the thought of rain out of his head.

"Yes, Mochida?" The man doesn't even look up from his paperwork. Whatever it is that he's doing. He's not even a citizen, what kind of paperwork is he doing?

Unless he's like... actually a tutor. That's probably Sawada's classwork. What a nightmare.

"The other day, what you said.. About us, uh. What was it- with the Harmonizing—"

"You could let the process complete itself, I believe is what I said."

"Right, that." Kensuke shifts at the doorway. Kind of wishes he still had the familiar weight of a shinai against his back, pulling down on his shoulder. It feels like he's holding it too high now. ".Is that really possible? And.. what exactly did you mean that everything would be fine?"

"I thought you were leaving?" Kensuke makes a face at that. He hears Nana humming in the kitchen, taking way too long to bag up a few cookies. She's probably waiting for him. This.. damn, polite family. She's not even a Sky. "Well, if you have a moment.."

Reborn sets down the papers and pats the other cushion of the loveseat he's currently sitting at. Kensuke's grimace deepens but he scoots on in and drops into the spot next to the man, pointedly slotting his bookbag into the space between them and slouching back.

"You'll ruin your back sitting like that, Mochida."
"Yeah yeah. And Sawada's going to ruin his back if he keeps sleeping on couches like that, but no one's telling him he can't."

Sawada gives him a sleepy, floppy swat on the knee for that.

"Are you awake, Tsunayoshi? Did you want to join our lovely little talk?"

"Mrrfgh," Sawada says.

"I think that was a 'no'," Reborn observes sagely. Then he turns to Kensuke, the epitome of smooth, suave clarity. Even though he's wearing a polo-shirt with a duck printed on the front and baggy, plaid-patterned pajama pants. It's, like, 4 in the evening, and he's still in pajamas. "So, Mochida-kun. What exactly do you know about Harmonization?"

"Honestly? Like, jack shit. Zilch. Nada." He waves his hand dismissively. "I know it's weird as hell."

"Well you're not wrong." Reborn scratches at his chin, even though he hasn't got any stubble. "It's a little easier to understand these days than it was in the past, but Skies are still notoriously difficult to observe. Always have been."

"Weird, seeing as you can ask them to do anything else and they'll probably do it." Kensuke squints at Sawada's prone form on the couch next to them. Wonders if he's actually sleeping or not. Sawada's inability to refuse a request probably comes from his mom though. It's practically impossible to refuse her requests.

"The process itself is.. a bit of a mystery. I have the pleasure of considering one Sky a friend, but even he won't tell me what Harmonization is like. It's a private thing, I suppose, between the Sky and whomever they Harmonize with. What I do know, and from what he has told me, is that it can be done improperly. The connection might be faulty, might be temporary, might be volatile. The exchange of Flames skews towards one or the other, rather than shared evenly. One-sided Loyalty Bonds towards the Sky aren't uncommon, especially among older generations. It's a lot rarer for it to go the other way, from Sky to a non-Sky."

"..Which- which one do we.. uh. Have?"

"Why are you asking me?" Reborn blinks. "Tsunayoshi is the one you should be asking. He's your sky, after all."

"He's not my—" Kensuke bites the inside of his cheek, because, yeah, it does physically hurt to even say it. Like bile in his throat, or like he's trying to throw up acid instead of words. "..How do you know it's incomplete, then? Ours, I mean. Mine and.. Sawada's."

"First of all, you are reeking of Storm Flames, I don't know how he can even stand to be near you."

Reborn waves a hand like Kensuke did, only he looks a lot more like he's waving away someone's odious fart. Or a fly. Or both. "Though being even partially Harmonized probably makes it more bearable. If he even notices it, anyway."

"..You can smell my Aura?" Kensuke gapes at him.

"Like steak on a shichirin. It's very distracting. That's... that's a little disturbing. "Second, a proper, complete bond, Loyalty or otherwise, stretches over miles. Something about flames and energy wavelengths lets them communicate across distances. Yours, on the other hand, only seems to activate when you're around him. Which, actually, brings me to another matter—"
The man looks over and Kensuke almost freezes, the way his eyes narrow and focus themselves on him like a sniper on a target. Almost, because there's a part of him that also thinks at least he's not looking at Sawada like that. A part of him that tells him to be ready to move just in case the attention shifts.

"—How did you even manage to, as you say, break two of his ribs in that state? I can only imagine it happened after the failed Harmonization. Then again... he's still willing to go through with the Bond, so I suppose it could have happened before. Tsunayoshi seems the type to forgive something like that. Well, he is the type to forgive something like that, seeing as he already has—"

"He's a fucking idiot," Kensuke hisses, clenching and unclenching his hands. He does not look at Sawada. "Who in their right minds forgives something like.. like that? He's- he's crazy. He's crazy, he hates me, and I hate him. There's no reason...

"He's a Sky," Reborn says, and, boy, doesn't that just make it all worse. Because Sawada has been saying the same thing and Kensuke has just been dismissing it as pointless drivel from a kid trying too hard to fit in. "It's more or less ingrained in their Flames to be kind and forgiving. That's what Harmony is all about, isn't it? Not as though it's right, or that it should happen, but that it has happened. To accept it and to move forward with it."

"You've.. been watching way too much Yorifusa."

"I've only read the one article. And he's right, anyway. Skies are somewhat compulsively forgiving to those they've extended a Bond to."

"Well, then, how do you- how do you know if it's actually forgiven? If it's real and not just some.. just some Sky nonsense."

"What are you talking about?" Reborn raises an eyebrow. Kensuke blinks. "Of course it's real. He's a Sky, he's not on drugs. Flames are made of one's thoughts and emotions. They don't just appear out of thin air, Mochida. They come from the person. Anger begets anger, hate begets hate. Peace begets peace. Forgiveness begets forgiveness. Skies don't forgive if they don't feel forgiveness. Tsunayoshi wouldn't forgive if he didn't feel forgiveness."

"..Isn't that quote from Martin Luther King? Jr?"

"No, it's from an ancient Chinese philosopher who first wrote about Dying Will Flames."

"Where did you even read about something like that?"

"It's quoted in one of your textbooks. Haven't you read it yet?"

Kensuke.... doesn't. Just. He doesn't. He can't-

"....How long did you say you'd been on the island again?"

"Just about a month." The man smiles, like he knows exactly what Kensuke's thinking about. It's creepy. "Why do you ask?"

Soooo damn creepy. Kensuke slouches even lower and avoids as much eye-contact as possible.

"...And besides, I don't think he actually hates you. And I don't think you hate him either. Otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here," he says, pointing to Kensuke's seat, "and he wouldn't be thinking about using you as a pillow."
Kensuke has a what the fuck are you talking about of course we hate each other I am NOT a pillow on the tip of his tongue when Sawada wraps a hand around his wrist and tries to drag him out of his seat. He's still lying down though, so there's no real strength in it and Kensuke just.. stays put.

Reborn hums. "But I think you already know that."

Sawada makes a sound like a dog looking for attention, except more muffled and not quite as cute or annoying. Tugs again.

Small animal, supplies a very Hibari-like voice in the back of his head. Learn to deal with each other.

Shit, Kensuke thinks in response, suppressing a shiver at the heat that spreads from his wrist. Shit. Dammit.

---

Jealousy is a weird, vicious thing. Kensuke does not wear it well. Lan even tells him as much.

Jealousy isn't the problem.

The problem is that Kensuke doesn't know why he's jealous. Or even who he's jealous of. What he's jealous about. It's just.

It's this giant bundle of snakes sitting in his room and he's not sure if he wants to poke at it to find out whether he's more worried about being bitten or being poisoned.

Honesty, he feels more or less the same way about them both.

So he's really, really, really confused about why he's been so prickly to Sawada and Kyouko. Because as far as he knows, he doesn't feel the same way about them both. He really, really doesn't, he's—

Yamamoto's been giving him worried looks the past few days. Lan has been pestering him about it the past few days, ever since he went and got an official checkup with Dr. Ueda, heard basically the same as what Nurse Shiomi had said, but with longer words and longer tests. More conclusive tests. More conclusive words.

He's gotten into at least 2 arguments with Sawada in about as many weeks- not disagreements because they've always had those, especially in a group of, what, 6 people? 7 people. They always have disagreements.

These weren't disagreements.

They were full on shouting matches, once in the school courtyard and once as they were heading out into town, and Hana had gotten involved in the last one when Kensuke, for reasons unknown to any of them, turned on Kyouko.

He apologized. He apologized so much.

Lan helped him to the nurse's for another extraction treatment and asked if he wanted to talk about
it while waiting for the fatigue to go away. Kensuke is so bad at feelings, though.

Which doesn't really explain why he ended up challenging Sawada to a mixed kendo [3] match, but at this point, it's too late to change his mind. They've already put it off until the doctor gave Sawada a clean bill of health and finally said he could do normal, light exercise again.

He's pretty sure 'kendo match' isn't normal or light, though. Mixed or otherwise.

But, again. Too late.

He doesn't know why he's doing this. He doesn't know why Sawada agreed to this, even after all the protesting he did. Or why Kyouko isn't saying anything, even though Kensuke had set such a stupid prize for his win. Stupid. Stupid.

Sawada looks like he's struggling a little under the kendo gear, even though he's been fine in it before. Then again, stress might just make it feel heavier. Kyouko probably would have been fine. Kensuke should've challenged Kyouko— no! That. That would be bad. He likes Kyouko, he doesn't want to- challenge her for any reason at all!

Not to mention she would destroy him. Probably. Emotionally.

No. Kensuke doesn't want to fight Kyouko. Well, he does. But he also doesn't.

...He doesn't want to fight Sawada either. And it doesn't look like Sawada doesn't want to fight him, either. He's not serious at all. Not sharp. Not.. not bright. Not like he was when he fought off Morita and Saitou.

He's not serious about this.

He should be. They. Both should be.

Sawada is slow, but he doesn't say anything now. Eyes dull behind the grille of his helmet, brow furrowed whenever Kensuke is close enough to see. He's slow, his strikes are weak, his footwork is sloppy. He's such an amateur. Such a beginner. All he has to do is score just one point.

Which is, of course, easier said than done, because Kensuke is not Captain for nothing. Doesn't seem to mean anything to Sawada though, now that he's suited up and has a shinai in hand.

He's surprisingly difficult to hit. If this were a true kendo match, Kensuke probably would win easily. Sawada is bad at standing still and defending, but he flits away and stays out of range easily enough. Just like he does during their kata practices that always devolve into something more freeform than kendo-standard.

But unlike their practice sessions, Sawada's a lot more.. sluggish, now. Wobbly. He's still quicker than Kensuke, but it's enough to make Kensuke think maybe he was just imagining the past 3 months. That maybe No Good Tsuna has just always been No Good Tsuna, and Kensuke has been pretending that he's gotten better. For his own ego. Aside from talking back more, he hasn't actually seen Sawada do anything beyond the usual.

(Well. He did break a shinai over Saitou's head.)

Kensuke wonders if Sawada's just tired. If that's why he keeps overstepping and faltering and nearly tripping at some points, only to get his shitty balance back in time to slip away from another of Kensuke's strikes. He won't even stay still long enough to defend himself and Kensuke is going to
look like a fool if he doesn't land at least few points.

Sawada had tried to get out of it by saying it wouldn't even be a fair fight. Kensuke called him a coward.

So stupid.

"Attack already," he says. Shouts, as they circle each other. Shoves his shinai against Sawada's, taunts him, goads him. Weak. "You can't get a point if you don't attack. Come on, Sawada! Attack!"

He doesn't. Kensuke comes in again, deliberately putting himself within striking distance, but still nothing. Sawada just keeps defending.

"Coward," someone in the crowd says. "No Good Tsuna's a coward!"

No Good Tsuna doesn't even flinch, and that's when Kensuke notices. He's not ignoring the jeering, because Kensuke ignores it and even he spares a glance towards where that call came from. Sawada doesn't do anything like that.

Kensuke moves, circles to the right. Sawada mirrors it, circles to the left, just the right amount of steps to cover the same amount of distance. His eyes don't even shift.

It sends chills up Kensuke’s arms. Right. He didn't want to fight Sawada, not really. He didn’t want a fight.

He wanted this. This. This moment. That moment, on the roof, and those rare moments during after-club practice. When Sawada went neck and neck against those third years, that- that unwavering intensity.

Skies accept everyone more or less equally, says Sawada Yorifusa. Aside from familial relations, love interests, and Harmony Bonds, it's rare that they ever focus solely on one person. To have the attention of a Sky is... definitely something else. I'm a Sky myself, but I still get goosebumps whenever we have our annual meetings.

For the barest moment, he sees a flicker of bright, glinting amber behind Sawada's faceguard.

Yeah. Goosebumps.

...But it's not enough. Sawada was more than this. So much more. So much, and this, this-

"What happened to you?" Kensuke snarls, even though he doesn't mean to. The haze is shining red. Anger begets anger. "What happened to you, Sawada?"

They're close enough to each other that no one else can hear them. Circling around, like vultures, except that they are their own carrion. Just waiting for the other to show an opening. Waiting for the other to die.

Sawada is surprisingly good when his eyes are like that. Good eyes.

Good eyes.

He slips in closer. "You weren't this lame before."
It's... almost like solving a puzzle, but in the beginning, without some sort of reference picture. Pieces clicking blindly into place and no idea what will come of it. That's what it's like.

Sawada's eyes widen.

If they weren't suited up in armor, if they weren't trying to bash each others' heads open, if they were alone... he might have stopped. Kensuke might have stopped, might have asked again. Quieter. Might have talked. About those days.

Those days.

Might have. But they are suited up, and they are trying to bash each others' heads open (...well, Kensuke's trying), and there is a crowd chanting fight, fight, FIGHT, so they don't talk. Instead Kensuke reacts to the sudden slackening of Sawada's grip to twist his shinai out of his hands and disarm him. It thuds noisily off to the side (what an odd sound) and he backs up, shoves Sawada away and aims for the top of his head.

He definitely doesn't expect Sawada to know how to do bare-handed disarming, and instead of ippon, his own shinai is falling away somewhere. It's mixed kendo, though, so whatever gasps of shock are rippling through the crowd don't reach Kensuke. He'd be a pretty poor sport otherwise.

Sawada lashes out for the first time in the entire match and Kensuke backpedals to put distance between them, aims a chop at his side. Sawada side-steps it and just keeps plowing forward and his eyes are burning so bright and his brow so furrowed, so worried. He's still not striking, still not taking advantage of the fact that his reach is smaller and therefore he can actually probably land a hit this close in, while Kensuke has to keep backing up or he won't have room to move his arms.

Kensuke makes it three steps, just barely still inside the boundary line, and lunges a jab at Sawada's throat with his hand. He hears a roaring cheer somewhere- ah, right. They're being observed.

The next thing he knows the room is spinning and he's rolling on the floor, his arm is twinging like it's been wrenched on. Thrown, probably. Not an attack, but it's close, he's getting there. And when he sits up, one hand groping for the nearest shinai, Sawada is just out of striking distance, staring at the one in his own hands. Looking between it and the one Kensuke is getting ready to pick up.

Sawada steps forward. The tip of his shinai drops and his mouth opens. Kensuke does not notice.

Kensuke does not notice because he is swinging a shinai too heavy for anything but practice katas, and he's swinging it a little too hard to make up for the extra weight. This is not mine, he thinks, just briefly. This is prohibited for use in matches.

Kensuke does not notice because Sawada's eyes flash a brilliant amber, right before Kensuke's shinai slams into the side of his breastplate. Harmless, he thinks, just as it makes contact. Expects it to bounce right off again, because both are more or less made of bamboo and a shinai can't possibly do any damage to it. One point. Harmless.

Kensuke doesn't notice because Sawada has been protecting his middle up until now, partial to his right side, just like always. Just like always.

There is a dull, thudding crunch. The kind that's made from chewing ice, or biting into a hard lollipop, or breaking a dog biscuit in half on the edge of a table. Crunch. The breastplate crumples
under the force of Kensuke's swing (it's not supposed to do that) and Sawada does the same (he's not supposed to do that either). Someone yells his name, their names, the referee is a fucking idiot who decides to call a point for Kensuke instead of doing something useful like—

The shinai slips from his hands and lands with a sound that only hardwood can make. Kensuke pulls off his helmet and crawls over to where Sawada is still laying, gritting his teeth and pale and smelling of copper and tang. He barely touches the breastplate next to Sawada's hand and it's brittle, so brittle, bamboo slatting splintered inward and oh god how hard had he swung—

There is blood, and it is on his hands.

"..Who prepped the gear," Kensuke demands, cold and hollow. He gets to his feet and swats the referee's flags down with his helmet. Kyouko darts in and he leaves Sawada to her, somehow unable to hear her barking demands for an ambulance and Committee assistance over the pounding in his ears as he sweeps the crowd. "I don't recall asking anyone to fucking sabotage his armor and shinai- who prepped it?!"

The referee is a second year member with a backbone made of boiled tendons. He babbles, and he points.

Kensuke looks.

Kensuke sees red.

Kensuke flings his helmet at Morita and really hopes it hits him or Saitou both.

* * *

He remembers a small hand, cold and slick and tight around his bare ankle. He bans the third years from club activities instead, until Sawada is wheeled off into an ambulance by the Committee's Emergency Response Division. Then he goes and beats them black and blue. Tries to, anyway.

He remembers throwing the match, because it was rigged to begin with. Because kendo may not be about honor but it is about discipline, and there is no discipline in handicapping an already handicapped competitor. There is no discipline in flaunting a victory against such a competitor.

He remembers realizing, once they pinned him down and wrestled the shinai away before he could do anything serious like breaking bones, that if he did somehow manage to get Sawada and Kyouko from hanging out with each other ever again, Sawada would probably never look at him with those eyes again.

Ever again.

..The fact that he's more concerned about that than he is about the emotional destruction Kyouko would inflict on him in the form of way disappointed looks and teary eyes and slaps on the wrist? Told him exactly who he was jealous of, and what he was jealous about.
He's not sure if he feels any better, knowing.

Either way it's too bad. Too little. Too late.

* * *

Recovery for broken ribs is surprisingly more lenient than recovery for cardiac arrest. Probably.

Kensuke didn't stick around to watch that part.

"..How's the house-hunt going?"

"It's... eh. Mom's been looking up properties since the New Year. She keeps bugging me to go down and check out some of them with her."

In the end Nana had swept into the living room and dropped a bag of cookies in Kensuke's lap. Sent him off with smiles and a kiss on his cheek that turned his face red.

His mom loves the cookies.

"Hey, are you sure it's called Sawada town? I thought that was just a joke up here."

"Everyone around here is calling it Sawada town too. Either that or Sawatta, which honestly sounds weirder, so I'm going to assume it really is Sawada town."

"That's... yeah. So damn weird."

"Yeah. So, hurry up and come down here already, we haven't seen each other in, like, forever."

"I'm too busy, Lan. Hibari got on my case about everything again and now I'm stuck with Sawada. Again."

"Wow, Kensuke, your luck is just- I dunno, horrible? Great?"

Kensuke frowns and peers at his schoolwork. Shitty instructions. "It's awful, obviously. I don't have time to babysit him again. Hell, Hibari's not even supposed to be around anymore! He's in high school already!"

"You really think that's going to stop him?" Lan snorts on the other end of the line. "And why don't you have time? It's not like you're doing anything else, I mean, you've dropped basically everything."

Kensuke stops writing. "...How do you even know that?"

"One, Sasaki gives me updates when she's not trying to convince me to sponsor her moving into the community housing down here. Namimori is honestly way better. Two, I still have access to Namimori's forum boards. They never shut up. And three, that's just something you would do, Kensuke, you think I wouldn't know that by now? I've known you 8 years, buddy."

"8 years and you still talk like a guy. Why are you using boku again anyway?" [4]
"It's a new trend, Ken-chan. Everyone's doing it down here, especially the girls. Builds confidence, you know? Plus it helps scare the boys away, haha." He can just imagine her grinning triumphantly, because boys had honestly been the most annoying thing about her coming out in their first year of junior high. Kensuke is a boy, and even he thinks they were annoying. "Well, except you."

"Apparently I have some sort of a crush on a boy, so there's no way you talking like a boy is going to scare me off. If anything I'd blame you for i—"

He stops and slaps a hand over his face in delayed abject horror at the exact same time Lan laughs, sharp and loud in his ear. "I knew it! Oh my god, Kensuke, finally! Haven't I been telling you for years?"

She doesn't sound mocking at all. She never has, never does.

He's horrified anyway. This is not the change in topic he was looking for and knowing Lan, she definitely isn't going to let this go.

"Fuck, no, shut up Lan—"

"Oh come on, Ken-chan. You admit to having some Sun-infused infatuation with Kyouko within, like, 10 minutes of meeting her, but you refuse to accept you might possibly like guys too? After you practically admit you're crushing on one? You've been pining for years."

"Sort of crushy—I've been pining for Kyouko!"

"So? Who says you can't sort of crush on and pine for two people at the same time? Two different genders at the same time?"

Kensuke groans like the Yamato on its last legs. He's doomed. His fate is sealed.

"The important question, my dear fledgling double-decker bus—"

"What do busses have to do with this?!"

"—is whether you intend to tell them or not. Well, him, because Kyouko already knows you like her. Are you going to confess?"

"I- I can't confess!"

"Why not? I'm sure this boy would be be thrilled to have an admirer."

"That's not- I just can't, okay! He's not going to be thrilled he'll just- it'll just make things worse. Like, way worse."

"..Why not? Don't tell me it's because you're shy, Ken-chan. You had the guts to try confessing to Kyouko and she turned you down and that's why you got in that huge fight last year, so you definitely have the guts to—"

"It's Sawada," Kensuke hisses, and then startles back from a creak at his door. His heart's pounding again, god. "You know, that guy I had that huge fight with last year? ...Don't laugh, alright?"

"I'm- I'm not laughing, but- wow. Wow, Ken-chan. Wow. That's..." She trails off into a chortle and Kensuke groans again. "So..? What's wrong with that? Sure, he'll probably punch you because you bruised his ribs and all—"
"Broke them. I broke them, Lan. Two of them. And if he punches me he's going to break his hand again."

"Yeah, whatever, okay, you did a doozy on him and you hate yourself for it. You told me. Have you.. you know, apologized yet?"

"Uh... no-"

"Then go apologize! Clear up the bad air. Grovel. Bake him some brownies, whatever. And then when it's all good, you can confess."

"I- No! ".I can't confess, he- he's not going to want brownies for an apology. He's not a girl, Lan."

"Do you know that for a fact?"

Kensuke stares out the window above his desk. ". Which... part?"

"Any of it. Do you know any of that for a fact?"

"I- ..No?"

"Then it's settled. Brownies. I'm sure guys like brownies too. You're a guy and you like brownies. I was, and I still do. Tsuna likes sweets anyway, fudge brownies will be perfect."

Kensuke sputters a bit, trying and failing to come up with some retort or logical reasoning to reject this logical idea. Lan hums at him. Hums. At him.

He wilts and slumps over his homework in defeat. "I can't bake."

"I know, you're kind of hopeless without me."

Mmrphrg. "Just a little."

"It's okay. That's what best friends are for. So it's, what, Wednesday? I'm coming by on Saturday after class. We're going to bake. You are going to apologize to him, preferably that day or the day after so you don't lose your nerve like I know you will, and then if you don't chicken out after that, you can confess too."

"Uh. That's kind of really soon?" Too soon too soon Kensuke is Not prepared- "Also can we not with the whole confessing thing? I really don't think-"

"What? He's not seeing anyone, right? I mean, besides Yamamoto maybe... but Yamamoto's probably cool with it."

"Why would you even think that, Lan."

"You hugged Sawada on the roof last year, remember? Hugged him for like an eternity, and then you came crying to me about it after school. Yamamoto didn't even give you a single bruise for that."

"But I was bruised." He pauses. "..In my heart. Spiritually. I was emotionally wasted."

"...You're such a softy, Ken-chan." She's giggling though. It sounds more like a fond cackle and, wow, he misses talking to her a lot. It's only been a few months, too. He's never going to survive the year without her. "So, really, what's the problem?"
"Eh." Kensuke clears his throat awkwardly. "Apparently Sawada and I are, uh.... SortofHarmonized."

"Come again? Because I think I just heard you say—"

"We're. Sssssort of.... Harmonized."

"..." Lan coughs on the other end. "That's... well. That is. A bit of a problem, yeah..."

"Yeah. I know. I did say it was some sort of a crush. I- I don't even know if it is a crush at all, ugh."

"And you said sort of Harmonized, too? How do you even—? God, Kensuke, you just get into all this weird shit the moment I turn around, don't you?"

"Wha- I- it's not like I do it on purpose!"

"I think you do! —Sorry dad!" Lan sounds a little distant here. Probably leaning away from the phone. "I was, um. Just. Kensuke's— being weird."

"Rude. Oh, uh, tell your dad I said sorry too."

"Kensuke says he's sorry! Wait- what are you sorry about?"

"Everything?"

"Kensuke says he's sorry about everything? ...Yeah. I will. Oh, I'm going to visit Namimori after school this Saturday. No, I'm not asking, I'm telling, Ken-chan has problems and he needs my help!"

That.. makes him sound as lame as he feels right now. Lame and confused and so very Not Ready for the weekend.

Kensuke drops his head onto his arms and groans into them until Lan is done negotiating weekend terms with her dad. Kensuke's the whole reason she even had to move down there, so he's not going to risk making it worse.

"Kensuke? Hey, you still there?"

"No," he says, muffled. "I'm dead."

"Oh. Well.. that's a bummer..... So, Saturday?"

Kensuke gurgles nonsense back in response. It sounds a bit like rrghrlrhgl.

"I'll take that as a yes."

It's.. honestly really, really weird spending this much time with Sawada. Kensuke can't remember the last time he actually spent this much time with any one person.
It's not like they do it every day. Sawada takes a break every few days, and Kensuke lets the rest of the club take a break every few days too. Sometimes the whole gang is taking a 'break' from club activities, whether coach-enforced or not. Sawada's not even in a club, what the hell. Kensuke thought it was mandatory.

Unless the Committee counts as a club activity. Sawada's only an Honorary Member though. So it's like.. an Honorary club activity, what the hell. That's.. kind of dumb, but whatever. If the Chairman hasn't said anything about it, it's probably fine.

Yamamoto has baseball obviously, Kyouko's on the student council, Kurokawa does... archery? Sharpshooting? She's, like, trying to combine them into one, but not very successfully, because bows plus guns equals bowguns, which is basically like a crossbow and everyone seems to hate crossbows. Kensuke thinks they're kind of cool.

Lan and Sasaki both have permission to hop around until they find something they both like. A lot of the first years and their Buddies are doing that. Kensuke doesn't, because he's Captain and he's Not Giving That Up.

Except Sawada doesn't really want to join the Kendo Club either. He seems violently adverse to joining any club at all.

But if nothing else, he has no problems with coming to the dojo on the off-days for supplementary practice. Kensuke himself is usually too busy watching over the rest of the members to do much practicing himself, so it works out.

Honestly, there's not much of a reason to get good at any sport. Kakishima being what it was, they couldn't really enter any national competitions, though they could consider the Olympics if they really, really wanted to. Sports scholarships are almost nonexistent.

If not for the fact that only the best and brightest nominees had a chance to participate in the annual Hibari-Kokuyo Cops and Robbers game, no one would even bother.

As it is, Kurokawa trying to unite two of the most absurdly huge and similar but otherwise unrelated clubs in every school district is a lost cause. A valiant effort, given that she's already been in one of the Games once, but a lost cause.

One of these days Kensuke's going to join a Game too. After 'join the Committee', 'play in a Game' is just about anyone's childhood dreams.

Well, that and 'watch a Game up close', but only people with Nerves of Steel and Iron Hearts could survive front row seats like that. It's terrifying enough on screen. Awesome, yeah, but terrifying too.

"..You've what?"

"What?" Sawada blinks at him, wiping sweat from his brow. He hasn't even been doing kata practice for half an hour. But it's.. better than the 10 minutes he lasted the first time Kensuke brought him around. "What are you so surprised about, Mochida?"

"...You've been to a Game before?"

"Yes? I watched from one of the dugouts. Twice. Um, last year and the year before. Takeshi's only gone to last year's."

"Who even let you in."
It was Kurokawa's debut Game! She had some extra tickets for seats because her parents couldn't watch from the bunker, so I went with Kyouko-san and Sawasaga-senpai instead. They thought it was great. We even saw Kurokawa running around a few times.

Kensuke shrieks, but only in his mind. "Kyouko liked it?"

"Well, yeah? Kurokawa's her best friend?"

But it's violent. It's brutal, it's bloody, it's- it's dangerous! Kyouko can't like watching stuff like that. She doesn't even like it when her brother fights.

..Okay, so maybe she only doesn't like it when her brother fights. Kensuke can kind of understand that. Ryouhei tries to fight a lot. Ryouhei tries to fight everything.

Still.

He barely manages to get his wooden sword up in time to block the otherwise feeble attempt on his head. Sawada frowns and mutters something under his breath.

"Don't attack out of turn," Kensuke says, sliding Sawada's bokuto away from him. "No sneak attacks. It's undisciplined."

"I thought that was Hibari-san's thing." Sawada backs up and takes a stance again. "What does it matter when I attack? Isn't it all the same anyway?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? The kata isn't a match, Sawada. It's for practicing the basic forms and techniques. There's no point in doing any surprise attacks."

"You wouldn't survive a Game without surprise attacks."

Kensuke will... concede that point. But only for a moment, because Sawada's trying to do a tsuki jab at his throat, so he sidesteps it and swats the tip of the bokuto away.

"No throat jabs either!"

"Oh come on, Mochida, you've been having me do the same 3 stances for weeks."

"Because you still suck at them! And tsuki jabs are dangerous, I don't want you learning how to put a hole in someone's neck."

"Like I couldn't already do anything worse." Sawada actually rolls his eyes. If nothing else, letting him join in the kata practices gave him something of a backbone outside of the cluster of people they call friends. And a cheekier mouth.

Sure, most of the second and third years are even more hostile now because Sawada backs down even less than he did before, but Kensuke's always around to make sure nothing gets out of hand. It's fun to watch. Plus, third years can be such dicks, seriously. It's nice, knowing and seeing that he's not the only one with a grudge against them.

(They were jerks to Lan last year, so there's that too.)

"I'm sure you can. You're just a demonic hell-cat, aren't you. Hell-kitten."

".Did you just call me kitten?"
"Not- not like that! God, Sawada, what's wrong with—" Kensuke falters just long enough for Sawada to land a tap on his wrist. "—That's cheating."

Sawada grins and starts trying to poke him in the chest. He gets to three before Kensuke swats that away too.

"Stop it, Sawada. Your form's all wrong and you're not even trying. That's why I'm not showing you any of the attack form kata."

"But we're not wearing all the armor." Sawada frowns again. "If I actually swung it properly you'd get hurt."

"Yeah, right. Defense for you again. The better you get at blocking hits, the harder I can swing."

"Why don't you just whack at straw dummies then?"

"Straw dummies don't defend themselves, obviously. Actually, neither do you, geez. We've been at this how long and your stances are still awful!"

"I can't help it!" Sawada fumes, though he doesn't stomp like a child throwing a tantrum. "You're taller and all your strikes are higher up- I can't defend that high!"

"I'm 6 inches taller, not 6 feet, it's not my fault you're a pipsqueak." Sawada pokes him in the gut. Sneaky bastard. "I showed you how to block a higher strike, didn't I?"

"I can't lift my arms that high, you giant."

"It's not even that high."

Sawada jabs at him again. Kensuke knocks it away and they get into a jabbing match. More like fencing than anything, and at first Kensuke thinks Sawada's actually getting angry, but then he dances away from another one of Kensuke's jabs with a giggle. He looks so much like a kid and this is not a game, and yet Kensuke can't help joining in.

Sawada's eyes haven't left him the entire time, clear and bright as Kensuke remembers from those years ago in the daycare's sandbox. Darting back and forth and never letting Kensuke out of sight in a way that's almost unnerving, if it weren't the nth time he's done it by now. He's better at evading the jabs, better at deflecting them than he is at blocking direct strikes. Maybe it's just because he's moving and not standing still, which is honestly kind of the reverse of most people. Most of the kendo members don't bother with footwork beyond the basics.

The only reason Kensuke's keeping up is because he is Captain and therefore better than the other members, and also because Sawada has been doing this ever since he learned there were jabs, ever since he found out that Kensuke didn't really mind the two of them hopping around on the dojo floor after activities were over. It wasn't like Sawada joined in during actual club practice; at least one every few days after seemed enough for him. He hasn't collapsed again since.

It's. Well. It's fun.

"Captain!"

Kensuke stumbles just a bit. Sawada freezes, all deer-in-headlights again. He doesn't look like he's
going to take advantage of it though, so Kensuke drops his stance and turns to see those same two accursed upperclassmen sauntering in, bundled up in thick coats.

"Didn't you tell us to take a break today, Captain?" Morita says.

"Being Captain means extra practice." Kensuke rolls the tension from his shoulders and taps the end of the bokuto on the ground. "Plus, it's warmer. What are you two doing here?"

"Well.. we heard you'd been using the dojo on the off-hours and we wanted to see if we could get a few practice matches in with the Captain. You're always busy during club hours."

"Too busy looking after my troublesome members." He lets out a huff of laughter and shoulders the wooden sword good-naturedly. "Sure, let's go a few rounds. Sawada and I both need some fresh blood."

"Him too?" Saitou snickers, elbowing Morita in the side.

"Well, he needs someone shorter, so I guess you'll have to do, Saitou." The third year scowls and his companion claps him on the shoulder. Kensuke jerks his head towards the changing rooms. "Go get changed. Is mixed kendo okay with the both of you?"

They look at each other, then at Sawada. Morita grins. "Just fine, captain."

Sawada pulls on his sleeve the moment the two third years are out of sight. Pulls a little too sharply for Kensuke to consider it some kind of silly, shy gesture.

When he looks down, Sawada lets out a gurgled sound like cross between a squeak and a growl and startles back, eyes wide. All that playful confidence he had a few minutes ago is just- gone. Wiped clean off his face.

"What? Scared?" Kensuke rolls his eyes when Sawada shakes his head. "Honestly, between you and me, Saitou only joined this year and I think you can handle him."

"I'm 5 feet tall and my arms are twigs," Sawada intones flatly.

Kensuke hip-bumps him over to where they've set down the rest of their armor. "Just swing at him as hard as you can."

"...Are you sure I should-"

"Yes, Sawada, just do it. It's an unofficial practice match. I know you stuck at kendo so just make up for it with whatever else you know. I told you before didn't I? If he sucks enough that you can hit him, it's his fault."

"Wow, gee. Thanks. That really makes me feel better about my twig arms."

Kensuke bops him on the back of the head just once more and puts the bokuto away, grabbing a shinai from his carry-case instead. He helps Sawada fasten his breastplate and helmet and Sawada does the same for him, though Kensuke can't help but snicker because he has to kneel down just so Sawada can comfortably reach the back of his head. Sawada grumbles and shoves him when he's done tying the cord off.

Sawada's just about got his mood and rhythm back from a few practice swings of the borrowed shinai when Morita and Saitou come stomping back in, laughing about something.
"Relax," he says. "I'll go first."

They agree on 5-minute rounds, swapping out after each one. At first everything is spiffy; the first round or two is mostly for **feeling each other out**, so to speak. Kensuke lets Morita score a few hits to get a feel for his skill, then lands a few of his own. He has power and intensity, for sure. In a real fight, Morita would probably win through sheer strength, even if he isn't bulky. Sun or Lightning, most likely. Or Cloud. Clouds are always absurdly strong.

Saitou is quick, like Sawada. Kensuke has to remind them several times that it's **mixed** kendo, stop standing like ducks and dance already. But they're both beginners, more or less, so it's not until their third round, half an hour in, that Saitou starts moving in for points. The first few seem almost experimental. A rap on his helmet, a tap on the wrist.

"You're too stiff, Saitou," Kensuke says when their 5 minutes are over. "Relax your arms more, it'll be easier to land a hit. And you, Sawada, **land some hits**. Do some attacking. Haven't you been bugging me to let you attack some more?"

"He probably wouldn't dare hit an upperclassman," Morita confides with a snicker as they head onto the floor. "Sawada's just a coward in the end."

"Keep talking like that and I'll give him permission to poke a few holes in you, Morita."

"With what? He ain't got balls or nothing."

Morita is still grinning to himself when they take their stances. Kensuke gives him 2 minutes to land 2 points and spends the last 3 rapping Morita on the glove of his wrist as many times as possible. He's **not Captain for nothing** and, sure, it's petty of him to do that to a beginner.

But, y'know. Whatever.

"He's got more than you do, **senpai**," Kensuke says idly after they bow and start heading off to the side. Morita huffs and glowers at Sawada instead.

Sawada stares back.

"The hell are you looking at, No Good?" Morita snarls and shoulder-checks him on his way to the benches. He's pulling off the gloves to check on his wrists. Kensuke hadn't even hit them **that** hard. Baby.

"..I've actually only got the one," Sawada mutters, just loud enough for Kensuke to hear. Saitou too, from the way he's pausing on his way up. "But one's all I need."

"One what?"

But Sawada doesn't answer. For some reason Kensuke feels like he's gone cold and hard, and as Sawada moves the shinai into starting position, Kensuke thinks he sees the kid's hand trembling.

When Sawada dips into the initial kneel and draws his shinai like a sword, Kensuke can't help but think **how graceful**.

"..You got a problem, Sawada?" Saito says, clipped. He's already advancing forward and pushing Sawada back towards the boundary line. "What, you think you're **better** now that you can dance a little?"
"No talking, Saitou."

"He's giving attitude, Captain. We don't stand for that shit."

Kensuke rolls his eyes against his better judgment. "You're in a match. He's not giving you attitude; he's just focused."

Saitou lets out a *tch!* and raises the shinai to snap it down on Sawada's helmet.

Sawada lunges and jabs Saitou in the throat, tipping him back. But the third year doesn't stop like he's supposed to and instead swings down as hard as he can. Sawada's already back and out of reach.

Kensuke doesn't even have a chance to tell Saitou off for showing such a terrible form, because Sawada's jumping in again the moment Saitou gets his balance back. He sweeps Saitou's shinai off-form and raps him on the head. Leaps back. Does it again.

Saitou's face looks a little red under the helmet. He's stomping too loudly and is moving way too much. Even—well, even *No Good Tsuna* would be able to read what he's going to do next.

Morita's shouting and trying to cheer his friend on.

Kensuke's too busy watching Sawada's eyes. Watching the way he watches Saitou with the same sort of focus and intensity that until now has been something only Kensuke had the pleasure of seeing. And here is their upperclassman treating it like the bane of his existence.

Saitou swings, hard and fast, always aiming at Sawada's head. Sometimes for his side. Kensuke is mildly worried. Would be more worried if Saitou could actually *hit* him. But even with all the misses, Kensuke feels trepidation rising in his gut, a cold sweat on his brow.

There's about a minute left when Saitou stops, fuming.

"That was a fucking point! I got you in the side right there, Sawada!"

For a moment Kensuke thinks Sawada's going to back down. Concede the point and let it go, because he already has so many points of his own. And it's a practice match, besides. Sawada's usually a good sport. Snippy, but passive.

Until lately, anyway.

"The hell you did, Saitou," Sawada snipes back. "Stop getting pissy just because you can't land a hit."

"*Fuck you*, Sawada, you snotty little—"

Kensuke leaps between them with a shout and Morita is already there, pulling Saitou back before he can throw himself at Sawada. All Kensuke needs to do is stick an arm out to keep Sawada from trying anything, even though he's still watching Saitou. Like a hawk watching its prey.

"Saitou, I think that's enough. This is a practice match. You riled him up to get him serious and now you're complaining because you can't handle it?"

"You on his fucking side, Captain?" Saitou strains against the arm holding him back. Vicious. "The traitor's your bitch now, is he?"
“Excuse me, Saitou?”

Morita yanking on Saitou's arm and Saitou's snarling are the last things Kensuke hears or sees before he's shoved aside by what feels like a veritable bulldozer, and both of the third years aren't looking at him anymore.

Sawada breaks his shinai over the top of Saitou's helmet and suddenly Kensuke's not looking at them, either. Literally snaps it clean in half, and if they hadn't all been wearing their helmets they probably would have gotten faces full of splinters too.

What happens after is loud. Chaotic. **Fast.** He never knew Sawada could move like that.

Saitou stumbles back and Morita is the one who charges, outraged, yelling something that Kensuke doesn't quite hear because the moment he lunges, Sawada grabs his arm and throws him over his shoulder where he lands with a loud thump and a cry. It's about that point that Kensuke notices something a little different. Something besides too-bright eyes and a strength too great for that small frame.

There's fire pouring out the top of Sawada's helmet. Like flames licking out the window of a building, curling outwards and flowing up like a waterfall against gravity. He's gotta be imagining it but he can hear it.

Sawada pulls of his gloves and tosses them aside. Pulls off his helmet and tosses that aside, and then he's unbuckling the breastplate, shrugging out of it like a butterfly leaving its cocoon.

**Kensuke** is too busy watching that calm, calm look on Sawada's face to notice Saitou getting up again. He swings at Sawada's ankles, only to be stopped by Sawada's bare foot stomping down on his hand hard enough to pin it to the floor with a yell. In a fit of clarity, Kensuke grabs the shinai and pulls it away.

It's heavy as hell.

He looks up just in time to see Sawada kick Morita's slumped over body aside. There's a dent in his breastplate and he's wheezing and coughing. Sawada has blood on the knuckles of his right hand, the one with the fingers that doesn't close properly. Red. Maybe white.

The heavy shinai in his hand slips away, and it's not until he sees Sawada standing over Saitou with it raised far too high above his head that Kensuke registers just what exactly it is that Sawada intends to do and—

"Are you fucking nuts—?!” He leaps up and reaches for the shinai with one hand, wraps an arm around Sawada with the other to drag him away. "That's enough, Sawada! Are you trying to kill him?!”

Sawada doesn't struggle, but Kensuke gets a faceful of hair and calm, gentle, flickering warmth and homehomehome for his troubles anyway. It makes him stumble back, blinking light and stars from his vision, and something loud sends him the rest of the way to the ground.

He sees, just a little bit, between the darkness weaving in and out behind his eyelids.

Hibari throws open the door.

Hibari sees Sawada. Sawada sees Hibari.
The flame on his forehead grows bigger, flares out like wildfire consuming everything in its path and Kensuke is practically choking on the smell of it, so strong and clear and indescribably kind.

They lunge at each other.

Then Kensuke blinks and suddenly Sawada's on the ground, Hibari's on the radio, there is no more warmth, no more flames, just cold cold empty cold down to the tips of his fingers and toes.

He blinks again. Kurokawa (when did she even get here?) is crouching next to Sawada and she has her damn revolver pointed down at him, right at his chest—

Lan's face blurs into view, and her voice sounds like it's coming in from far away. "Ken- Ken, are you okay?"

Why is Lan here? She should be with- with the Archery Club today- oh, right. Kurokawa's here too. Meaning Lan must have followed her. And there's Kyouko, and Yamamoto. Why are they were? Why is Hibari here?

"No idea," Lan says, which means Kensuke probably asked that last part out loud, "but if I had to guess, he can probably smell a battle from a mile away. Kensuke? Ken-chan, look at me. Ken—"

Kurokawa shouts CLEAR. Lime green erupts from the mouth of the revolver. Sawada's body jolts.

Kensuke's heart jumps in his chest—

—like it's beating for two.

The school roof is.. very high up. Three stories, at least. Plus. Fenced in.

He's been up here before, with Takeshi, just a few weeks after school started. When Takeshi somehow climbed the fence and stood close to the ledge, and Tsuna stood even closer.

Held his hand and refused to let go.

"Don't jump," he said, quietly, like he didn't want to scare him. "Don't jump."

Takeshi looked at him. Confused. Pleading. "I wasn't going to," he started saying, but he didn't get past the first two words, because Tsuna wouldn't let him. Because Tsuna didn't care whether he would or wouldn't.

"Don't jump alone," Tsuna said again. "...I'll jump with you."

Takeshi never stepped off that ledge. Stepped back instead. Pulled Tsuna back with him, pulled them both back over the fence and tried not to hold him too close.

"All I know is how to play baseball," Takeshi said. The cast around his arm kept him from doing
much else. "I- I love baseball, I love it, and I want to keep- but—"

It wasn’t the first and it wouldn’t be the last time. Takeshi was fragile. Takeshi is. Always fragile.

Human beings generally are.

"What do I do if I can’t do even that much? I keep getting hurt, I keep- it’s been like this since.. since forever. I’m just going to drag the team down like this, every time it’s something, and now.. What if- what if one day I can’t play anymore? What if I lose the one thing I love the most? What if... what am I without baseball?"

But they get up again, and Takeshi did. Again. And again. And again.

And now-

"You could love something else," Tsuna said, looking up at the boy whose life he probably saved 4 years ago, whose very presence made everything just that much easier to deal with. Looked up and saw no one else, nothing else but Takeshi. "You could love anything else."

And Takeshi looked down at him, who saved his life, who needed him beyond the fact that he could pitch and bat harder and further than any other student their age. Beyond the fact that he did those things to prove that he could, despite it all. Who did not need him for what he could do, but for what he was. Is.

Who he is. Whatever he is, or wants to be.

Everything that he is.

"..You can be mine, Takeshi."

On the field below, the baseball club played a practice game without him. The batter struck deep into the right-field with a resounding crack, and Tsuna leaned against Takeshi’s good arm. Twined their fingers together. Gave, instead of took. Let the heat swirl between their palms like a maelstrom, mixing together, until they were both the same. Inseparable.

Takeshi’s eyes glowed the next time he looked up, and Tsuna saw a smile in them. He smiled back. Felt Takeshi’s heartbeat answer his own.

The tolling of the school bell sounded the hour, and it sounded to him like an early morning death knell.

But for someone else. Not for them.

Not this time.

He has been here before. He knows it.

Knows how to balance his weight now, against the breeze. How to look at the sky without falling over. Knows where the fence is weakest and how to avoid it, keep it from breaking entirely. He hasn’t told anyone about that part yet. The weak link. Even though he has known about it for months.

The roof is a very quiet place to be.
Kensuke tells him to get down. Tells him he's going to fall because he's a clumsy idiot and he's going to fall and die.

He calculates it. Distance to drop. Falling speed against mass. Wind speed against possible landing points. How long it would take to reach the ground, what his total force would be when he hits it. How much energy he would need to release to negate that damage to his body, even with the tentative fluttering of his heart that had given out not days earlier. He can do it.

He can do it.

Students mill about inside. He hears their chatter through the concrete, through the glass panes under his feet. What did you get for lunch? Where did Yamamoto go? To the roof. Probably to stop Sawada from jumping, the idiot.

Tsuna laughs, because he can do it. Jump. Survive the fall. He can, he knows this as a fact, and it's wonderful. It feels wonderful.

Don't be ridiculous, he says. He isn't going to die.

He's going to —

[1] refers to a scene in Takeshi's chapter of (we think) we're invincible, completely unbreakable; where Kyouya is alleged to have knocked a kid off the stage for challenging his title of chairman. Kyouya was 7.

[2] candela: (Italian) candle. Plural candele. Candela is also a base unit for measurement of luminous intensity.

[3] mixed kendo: fictional. Based on the idea of mixed martial arts. Kendo that allows physical strikes too, like the chop Tsuna was supposedly trying to do in canon during his duel with Mochida.

[4] in Japanese, there are many ways to say 'i'. 'Boku' is an informal form that generally boys use (as opposed to 'atashi' for 'cutesy girls', and formal 'watashi' for both), but girls have started using it too. Basically Lan speaks more on the masculine side, because she can.


Chapter End Notes

and thus Tsuna was No Longer Allowed To Fight.

Technically this is the end of the mini-arc, as in no more flashbacks beyond this, but Mochida and Tsuna still have to figure their thing out. There's another mini-arc to segue into and they can work out their issues during that. I could also throw them in a room and lock the door, but that's a last resort haha

I know I'm being.. a bit really vague with all this flame stuff, but I'm really just exploring the idea of harmonization from a very, very utterly civilian point of view. As mentioned by Reborn in this chapter, few people who are harmonized are willing to talk about it, meaning there wouldn't be like a guidebook that says 'How To Know You're On The Way To Harmonizing With Your Sky!' Skies talk about it with each other, at least on Kakishima, because it's kind of something only skies/other
harmonized individuals would understand, but otherwise it's just weird. It's very hush hush.

nagi keeps disappearing. I wonder where to. hMMmmMmmMmm
[oyster fortunes daily] i wanted to tell you that i loved you.

Chapter Summary

better to have loved and lost, or never to have loved at all?
better to chase and lose track of, or never to have chased at all?
better to try and fail, or to never try at all?

Chapter Notes

i lied. this started out as a brief and fluffy baking scene and then it just. i'm so not done with all this mochida/tsuna gayness. i am also not done with sicily. never done with sicily. part of reborn's backstory was hinted at in the way we fall (apart); and this is the rest of it i guess.

some slightly confusing character development?? this is what i get for having so many things affect flames and then having flames affect people. harmonization makes everything more complicated and is probably the reason why all the skies stay in one place. less confusing after all of it is done and over with. maybe.

**WARNINGS**: some physical closeness but nothing sexual. dorks in love. well, A dork in love. just the one. probably. casual murder in reborn's half of the chapter. violent children. language, as usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**but i wasn't sure** if it was real, so instead we fought. we fought and we bled. is there no love like that?

Lan live-texts him the progress of her current 'adventure', so Kensuke has a rough estimate of how fast the Hibari escort's car is going.

That means finding out they don't have enough eggs or chocolate in the house when she's less than half an hour. And then panicking, because his mother had left the house to him and Lan for the rest of the day (dinner's stewing, don't touch anything on the stove, clean up after yourselves, and here's some money if you need to buy anything from the market!) and yeah, there's money he could use to go and buy what they're missing, but Kensuke knows jack shit about grocery shopping.

There's also the fact that he has only the bare minimum level of self-control. It helps that he isn't impulsive, of course. Usually.

*Usually.*

"..Kensuke. What's all this?"

"I. Thought it'd be a good idea to have back-up. In case the brownies don't work out."
"Ken-chan, there's back up, and then there's—" Lan gestures to all the groceries piled on the kitchen counters that Kensuke hadn't found a place to put away yet. "—all of this! How many apples did you even buy?!"

"I like apples," he whispers, and then thunks his forehead onto the dining room table. "Fuck, I bought so many apples."

"You bought two whole bags of apples. That's probably, like, a whole tree."  

"Probably." It hadn't felt like a whole tree when he was biking it home.  

"...Well," she adds, after peering at barely used bag of flour on the counter, "we would make turnovers. Pies. Tarts. Haha, tarts. That's perfect for you, Ken-chan."

"You're a tart," Kensuke grumbles into the wood.  

"You're the one going after a boy with nothing but brownies and apples." 

Kensuke grunts. Then he actually processes that and lifts his head, frowning at Lan as she goes about putting away whatever unnecessary shit he had managed to buy on impulse. "..How does that even make me a tart?"

"..I dunno. I mean, you're kinda good looking, but not really enough to be a tart. You're not exactly wearing spandex either."

He shudders. "I will be the best-looking third-year man-tart in Namimori if I have to, but I am not wearing spandex."

"Skinny jeans? Muscle tees? Ryouhei-senpai is still doing his Sun's Out, Guns Out thing, isn't he? Except he is a Sun so his guns are always out."

"Not so much now that he's taking the Committee a little more seriously. But he's been trying to petition to get his uniform altered." Which. Isn't going too bad. It helps that Ryouhei is a Sun with nice guns. Kensuke will admit that much. "Also, no, none of those, I can't move in skinny jeans."

"Meaning you've tried them before? Waah, I want to see Ken-chan in skinny jeans..."

"I thought you were super gay for Sasaki?"

She winks at him. "Doesn't mean I can't appreciate the appeal of a kendo-toned ass in tight pan—"

"Oh my god please stop talking! Lan!"

Lan laughs and squeezes his shoulders briefly, shaking him out of his brief moment of mortification. "Your mother's out today, right? She'll be back by dinner time?"

"I guess? She didn't say. But dinner is stewing, or something, so I guess if she's not home by then I can.. wait for her. Wait, how long are you staying?"

"I might sleep over. Dad said it was okay if I had to. Your mom's cool with that, right? I have decent pajamas. They're frilly."

"Lan, my mom is cool with—" He finishes by gesturing at her from head to toe. "All of you. Frilly skirts or cargo shorts or whatever you decide to wear. Just.. as long as you wear something."

She lets out a snorting laugh that makes him laugh because wow that was a very ridiculous sound.
she just made. Eventually he manages to haul himself to his feet and help out with putting things away that they don't need just yet. Like all the apples.

"At least I didn't buy a cartload of chocolates and eggs," Kensuke muses as he stuffs the bags away.

"We could always just make more brownies if you did." Lan shrugs. ".And if we're going to turn all those apples into baked goods, we'll need all the flour and eggs and we can get."

"Or we could let my mom make soup with it."

"Oh. Yeah. That too. I like that idea."

One problem down. He feels a little less guilty about impulse-buying so many of them now. Just a little.

"Soooo," Lan hums at him while they're pulling out mixing bowls and getting all the ingredients prepped in between fighting over the recipe sheet she'd printed out. "How's the boy?"

Kensuke freezes. "Uh. What.. what do you mean? Sawada? He's-"

"Have you talked to him at all? Or are you still, like, doing that being mean is how I show I like someone? Because I know your mother taught you better than that. I taught you better than that, Ken-chan."

"I have talked to him! I'm not-!" .... ".Not on purpose!"

"..Kensuke." He can feel her eyes boring holes into the side of his head. "I thought you liked him."

"I. I." Kensuke lets out a frustrated noise. Mostly because he's trying not to get angry and break the eggs. "It's the- the damned Harmonization thing. Like- it's so fucking weird, okay? I don't like it, it feels— weird."

It feels comfortable and nice and kind and gentle. It's like hanging around Sawada, except more. And all the time.

"I don't know if it's because it's- incomplete or whatever, or if it's because I.. like him? If I even like him at all?"

"That confusing enough to hear about, geez."

"Yeah? I'm tearing my hair out over here. I hate this, I hate- him. I just—" He trails off, staring at the eggs in the mixing bowl like they've done something to personally offend him. Better he blame the eggs than Sawada, anyway. He's already done enough cracking on Sawada to last a lifetime. ".I dunno anymore."

Kensuke lets her take the recipe sheet to measure out the flour while he checks the butter. It's softened enough. Just like his heart.

Eugh.

"What about.. you said sort of Harmonized, or- incomplete? Why not complete it? If you want to, I mean. Or even if you don't want to? Can you even break a Harmony Bond?"

"Reborn says it should be possible. Uh, that's- Sawada's houseguest. He knows things about Harmonization apparently. Says we can finish it and it'll either.. go through or it'll, like, break or something."
"Oh, wow, you already talked to Tsuna about it? You move fast."

Kensuke sputters. "I just- I want to get this over with! Whatever it is! It's annoying as hell!"

Lan sighs. "Only you would find Harmonization and having a crush on someone annoying, Ken-chan."

He doesn't even grace that with a reply.

The recipe instructions are easy enough to follow; Kensuke helps his mom sometimes, when the fiamma imbalance wasn't making him tempted to trash his surroundings. He helped a little less often in the recent months, since he'd quit kendo and kendo was one of the few things that helped. It was either that or get into fights and take his anger out on other people.

And of course, if he did that, he could say goodbye to the Committee for good.

..Actually, he's surprised Hibari hadn't banned him from the Committee for what happened last year. Even if officially Sawada hadn't said anything against him, Kensuke had figured the Chairman would still consider that kendo match a valid reasoning to keep Kensuke out of the Committee on top of his being a Storm.

They're not supposed to play favorites. And yet it seems like Hibari is a bit partial to Sawada.

Or.. maybe that's just because everyone else seems to hate him.

"What do you hate about him?" Lan asks while beating the ingredients together. It's already starting to smell nice, especially the melted butter-chocolate mixture that she's mixing in.

"..Why are you asking that?"

"Well, you're not sure if you actually hate him or if you like him, so..." She gives a shrug. "Let's start with why you would hate him."

That's a surprisingly difficult thing to do. Kensuke stares at her for a few moments, and then stares at the wall above the counter where he's supposed to be greasing the baking pan.

"...He's too nice," he says eventually in a mutter. Man, that sounds even more stupid out loud.

Lan doesn't think so, though.

"Kyouko's nice, too," she says.

"Kyouko's— Sunny. Suns aren't meant to be nice, so hers is.." Real. "I mean, she even admitted to the Sun-infusion thing. She's been trying to control her fiamma imbalance and I guess it's working because I'm, well, not as crazy about her as I was in grade school. Or last year. But I still like her all the more for that, you know?"

"But Tsuna...?"

"He never fought back. I.. I used to think he was just a coward, too wimpy, too weak. You remember someone shoved him down the stairs in grade school? And then he got hit by a soccer ball."

She nods. "He kept saying it was his fault and no one else's. I thought it was bullshit too.. someone threatening him to keep quiet or something."
"Yeah, yeah. The adults starting giving a lot of speeches about bullying and shit but it kept happening. Mori kept calling him a coward and spineless and I thought it was true for the longest time."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Heard he kicked Takehiko in the nuts."

Lan lets out a wincing, strangled giggle. "Oh. Ouch."

"He was a dick, honest. Pun intended. Uh." Kensuke cracks a smile. "I remember everyone asking when Yamamoto came to school with his arm all wrapped up. I even asked him too. I think I asked him something like, did you break Yamamoto's arm, No Good Tsuna? You shouldn't hang out with people if you're just going to get them hurt. I was such a jerk."

"You were 8, Ken-chan. 9?"

"So were you! And you weren't half the jerk I was!"

She sniffs indignantly. "Of course not. I've always been a kind and gentle soul."

"My shins say otherwise," he grumbles back, then hops aside as she aims a playful kick at his leg. "Anyway, Yamamoto said Sawada helped him beat up an upperclassman. Someone asked if Sawada kicked him in the nuts- probably as a joke, everyone knows Sawada wouldn't do anything like that. But then he just kind of smiled and said yeah, I kicked Shinobu-senpai in the nuts."

"Kinda sounds like something he'd do. Did he actually though?"

"Man, I.. I don't even know. Takehiko kept saying it didn't happen. Sawada just gut-punched him or whatever, but Yamamoto just laughed and agreed with whatever Sawada said. And then he kept saying they were.. I dunno, reverse-crowding because Takehiko was giving him a hard time? Whatever it was, Hibari bought it and never tried to get on their case for it."

He'd honestly thought it had been a joke. No way someone like Sawada could or would punch anyone. Sawada looked like he'd fall apart if he even tried raising a hand to fight back- which, if it had been true, was probably why he never did.

Until he did.

From the moment he'd seen Sawada smiling in the courtyard, probably lying through his teeth about his feats of violence, Kensuke thought hey, I know that kid.

Kensuke knew a boy who read too much. A boy who was too calm and smiled too much and could build sand castles taller than he was. He knew a boy who could speak Italian, or seemed to be able to, which wasn't much of a surprise since the boy was a Sawada, but it was surprising because the kid was, like, 4. Barely 4. 4 years old and way too cool to be real.

Cool enough to make Kensuke jealous, even though he was a year older and stronger and probably smarter, taller, faster, better. Even though the boy agreed with Kensuke when he boasted about it.

"...Kyouko's nice because she's just nice. She's a nice person. Kind of scary when she's mad, but she's.. nice."

"You just said Tsuna was too nice." Lan raises an eyebrow. "Is he or isn't he?"
"Well, yeah, but it's- okay, you know how people always say all Skies are the same? Like, all the Sawadas are practically the same? They've got that whole hivemind thing going on."

"Sorta. *I do* live in their town now, remember?"

"That's exactly it! If- if *all* the Sawadas are like that- how is that even possible, first of all? There's no way an entire clan can just- be the same. It's weird! It's creepy! It's, it's *so* freaky—"

"You do realize the Hibaris are like that too, right?"

Kensuke's face scrunches up. "They're different. The Hibari Cloud hivemind is strictly  *behavioral*. I looked into it. But the Skies!"

Lan rolls her eyes and shuts the oven, then pushes on Kensuke's shoulders to usher him out of the kitchen. When did she even finish getting the batter into the baking pan? He still has butter on his hands.

"Uh, Lan, I still have butter on my— I think we should clean up first."

"Yeah, I was gonna sit you down in a chair to contemplate your issue with Skies first."

"I don't have an issue with—"

"Oh my god, Kensuke, you just admitted that you did! You can't deny it right after!"

"But I- I don't have an issue, I just- I can't tell if they're real or not!" He waffles for a moment, then stops. "..That came out wrong."

"..Okay. Cleanup later. Sit down now. Couch, Ken-chan. You have issues to work out and I have a story to tell." She shoos him off. Kensuke scowls at his feet and slumps into one of the couches in the living room with a towel to wipe his hands off. He hears some silverware being shuffled around, and then Lan drops in next to him with a carton of—

"Is that the last of my pistachio ice cream?"

Lan looks at him with wide eyes, spoon still in her mouth. "...I'll buy you more. Anyway, you were saying?"

"Uh." He blinks. "Right. Skies. Skies! They're not real. They.. *can't be real.*"

"You mean like... they're too good to be true? Too nice to be real?"

"Yeah! Yeah. Exactly that."

"As someone who, again, *lives in Sawada town,* Lan says, taking the spoon out of her mouth and pointing at him rudely, "I'm going to let you in on a little secret."

"O..kay?"

She leans in close and he does the same, because it looks like she's about to whisper something to him, except

"..They *ARE* REAL."
she screeches instead, and it makes him yelp and jump and scramble to the other end of the couch while rubbing his ear.

"What the hell was that—?!

"What the hell are you, Kensuke! Too nice to be real? Seriously?" Lan tucks her legs up on the cushions and turns so she can frown and scowl at and scold him properly. "Look. You have problems accepting this Storm thing. I know that. You don't like all this anger and being.. what, restless? Tetchy? And the fiamma imbalance just kicks everything up and makes it worse, I get that. But you can't just- you can't just brush it all aside and pretend it's not real! It is real! It's you! If you don't want to be just another angry Storm, then— then don't. Don't be one."

Kensuke doesn't look at her. He's looking at a stray thread on one of their floor rugs instead, wondering why he never noticed it before. He's listening, though, and Lan isn't a schoolteacher demanding that they all face forward and pay attention.

So when she says look at me, he does.

"Ken-chan, look at me." Lan has her arms spread out, ice cream forgotten in her lap. She's wearing a loose blouse and a puffy skirt over a pair of dark leggings. Kensuke doesn't remember helping her pick those out, so they're either new ones she bought herself, or she went shopping with her dad. He likes both of those thoughts. "Two years ago, I told you I couldn't stand being a boy anymore. Remember? It didn't feel right, it didn't feel real. It wasn't me. So you know what I did? I changed what was real. I told my dad, I told you, and then dad and I told the school. We swapped my uniform out for the girl's uniform, and that was that."

She drops her arms. He remembers that day. Remembers when she'd told him just that, that she didn't like the way she was and felt more like something else. Someone else. Wanted to be someone else.

He remembers thinking I wish I could do the same.

"I did something about it, Ken-chan. I didn't let it eat me up inside, I didn't let it- fester. And I'm glad I was able to, because you know there's a lot of people, a lot of kids who can't, and I could, I — I was going somewhere with this but I don't remember anymore. I— um."

Kensuke lets out a muffled bit of laughter. Lan looks insulted for a moment before her face twists into something like a laugh too and she hides behind her hands, even though she's never been prone to blushing like Kensuke is. He understands, though.

She isn't like the other girls at school. But that doesn't mean she isn't one.

"...Any- anyway, my point was- you can't just.. think they're not real, Ken-chan. That's.. that's really rude. And awful to hear. You know?" She hugs the tub of ice cream closer, uncaring of how cold it must be. "I know there's shitty people out there who pretend to be nice when they're actually jerks and bitchass folks, but- the Sawadas really are like that. I live there. I've met them. They're all like that."

"That's- that's not what I mean, I know they're like that, but-" Kensuke runs a hand through his hair and groans. It's getting a bit long.. he's probably overdue for a trim. "..I.. think I like.. Sawada. But I don't know if I actually like him or if it's just- if it's just because he's trying to Harmonize. We're. Trying to Harmonize. He's- too nice. I mean- he keeps saying it's because he's a Sky, but what about him? If he.. if he says he likes me too, does that mean he does like me or is that just the Sky in him being nice and saying he likes me when he.. really doesn't?"
Because no one can agree whether the person makes the flame, or the flame makes the person. Because everyone has all 5 types of Wave Energies inside them, but one or two are usually more prominent for reasons that no one knows. Because if it was just chance, then there wouldn't be the hivemind, where all the Sawada Skies had that same weird, insistent acceptance, and all the Hibari Clouds wouldn't be protective as hell, and all the Kokuyo Mists wouldn't have these delusions of grandeur about protecting the island and they'd also stop trying to make each other walk into walls for fun.

Because if it was coincidence, all the past Hibari Leaders wouldn't have been raised alongside a loyal Lightning. The Skies wouldn't be living with the Storms, the Mists wouldn't flock together, the Asaris wouldn't be everywhere.

And Kensuke wouldn't feel like he's getting gray hairs worrying about stuff like this. He hates the idea that their roles and fates are pretty much pre-determined just because of some unseen energy in their veins.

"..You don't want to tell him because you're afraid of rejection?"

"No." Although that's part of it. Kensuke pulls his legs up and presses his forehead against his knees. "I just.. what if he says he felt the same way just because he's a Sky and he's supposed to.. accept stuff like that? Like he accepts everything else."

Because he remembers that Sawada felt the same. About the Mist, about the Shroud, and what effect it had on them. If it changed them, if it made them feel things they didn't really feel.

"I guess that's.. just something you'll have to ask Tsuna." Lan scoots over until she's next to him, side to side. They used to watch TV like this for hours when they were kids. Huddled up in blankets, hot chocolate, popcorn. Cheesy horror movies. "Talk to him about it."

"Right. Because that's worked out so well before." Practically every time they've traded words it devolved into shouting matches and close to punches being thrown. They even got into a fight in Sawada's house, god, that was the most embarrassing thing ever.

Speaking of Sawada's house—

"Oh. Uhm. Can you stay overnight actually, Lan?"

"..Yeah, sure. Why?"

"I was going to tell you earlier but- we're, uh, finishing the Harmonization thing."

"You did mention that. Or, that you were planning to, anyway."

"Yeah. Reborn, that houseguest, he says sooner is better, so... can you uh. Come by Sawada's house with me tomorrow?"

He sneaks a peek from behind the fringe of his hair. Lan is staring at him and a grin is spreading slowly across her face. Just like the first time he thought it was necessary to protect her feminine virtues by being a hero, and then nearly fell into an open manhole for his efforts. Not her doing, by the way.

"Of course I can," she snickers. "You sly dog, you."

"—Lan!"
The brownies come out just fine. They made a separate tiny batch for themselves just to make sure the rest was edible. Wouldn't want to bring something underbaked or gross-tasting as an apology.

His mom comes home around dinner time. He and Lan are trying to figure out how many bowls and utensils to put out because they're not sure who else will be around for the meal.

Just them three, in the end. It's nice, and his mom seems happy that they're all chatting amicably. He knows she'd been worried when Lan moved away after school let out earlier in the year. They'd been friends for as long as either of them could remember, after all.

"Mom? Can I, um.. talk to you about something?"

"Hm? Of course, Kensuke." She finishes drying her hands and sets her apron aside. Lan scuttles out of the kitchen after putting the last of the washed dishes away and mouths good luck at him. "Is something wrong? Is it school? Oh, are the treatments not working again? I keep telling them they have to upgrade their equipment—"

"N-no! No, it's not about school- well, it's. Sort of. Not really. Uh." Kensuke drops the towel he'd been using to wipe the table down with. "It's.. Can we maybe hold off on moving right now?"

"I thought you wanted to move, Kensuke?"

"That's..." He takes a deep breath. Lets it out. Meditation, or some shit like that. It's not a lot, but it helps. "I've, um. Been talking to Sawada. We're.. going to try to fix this. Thing. Problem. Apparently we.. accidentally almost Harmonized a few months back, and—"

"Oh." His mother puts a hand to her mouth, eyes wide. "Oh my."

"Yeah. His, his houseguest says that because it was an accident and we never really.. finished it? It's kind of making us.. weird... so Sawada-san invited me over for tomorrow so we could see there's, y'know, anything we can do about it."

"You're going to finish Harmonizing?"

"Well- we're going to try—"

"I'll come with you."

Kensuke balks. "What? No, mom, you don't- Sawada-san will be there and their house is fine, you don't—"

"I've been talking to your father, Kensuke," his mother says, taking his hands in hers, and before he knows it he's sinking into a chair next to her at the table. "And he's been talking to the Sawadas down there. He says the Harmonization process can be pretty stressful and I don't want you going through something like that without me there."

"Mom!!"

He just wants to curl up and hide away. Forever.

Instead they are at the Sawada house at half past 10 on a Sunday morning. Sawada still looks kind of sleepy, even though Kensuke's pretty sure the kid wakes up at, like, 5 every Sunday for the
Fiamma Broadcasts.

..That's.. probably why he looks sleepy, actually.

Kensuke shoves the tin of brownies at him. Sawada wraps his arms around it and stumbles back a little, blinking down at the tin in confusion, and then back up at Kensuke again right as he's dropping into a bow.

"Um- that's- I wanted to apologize, Sawada!" He says a little too forcefully. God he hopes his face isn't red. It feels red. It feels really red. "For last year. For- for getting you hurt and everything. And, well, all the shitty stuff I've ever said and done before, I'm- sorry. For being an ass to you. I know I kept saying it was your fault but it wasn't and- I.. just...."

Kensuke trails off as he straightens up again. Because Sawada is just staring at him and that is definitely making his face heat up enough. There might even be steam coming out of his ears.

"Good one," Lan whispers behind him. He's not sure if she's being sarcastic or not.

Luckily, his mother comes to his rescue.

"Tsuna-kun, is that you?"

"Ah- Mochida-san!"

Kensuke gurgles in his throat and Lan snorts against his back. He steps aside a little bit to let his mom through. She sweeps in throws her arms around Sawada, careful not to crush the baking tin.

"My, you've grown since I last saw you! Has it really been almost a year now?"

"I haven't- really grown. Just my hair got bigger."

His mom laughs. Then Sawada's mom shows up and Kensuke really wants to bury himself in a closet somewhere.

"There you are, Nana-chan. Please excuse my intrusion!"

"Oh, Koto-san! I've said it before, you and Kensuke-kun are always welcome here."

They half-hug and Sawada is still caught in one of Kensuke's mother's arms, looking a little miffed and uncomfortable. Kensuke shuffles inside with Lan close behind. She giggles and waves over Kensuke's shoulder. Sawada seems to brighten a little when he sees her, and he waves back.

Cute.

—Urgh.

"And you must be...?"

"Reborn. I'm the houseguest." The man introduces himself smoothly and with a respectful bow, despite having a toothbrush in his mouth and toothpaste foam everywhere. Also his hair. Everywhere. Must have just walked out of the bathroom. "Pleasure to meet you, Mochida-san."

Wait.

"..Did you two just wake up?"
"Yes we did," Reborn and Sawada say at the same time. Although Reborn's sounds more like yeth we thith.

"I thought you guys did morning exercise or.. something?"

"Lazy Broadcast day," Sawada says with a yawn. "Weren't we meeting up at noon?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. I- my mom wanted to drop by early."

"Are those chocolates?" Reborn leans over Sawada's shoulder to peer at the tin in his arms. "It's not Valentine's today, is it?"

Sawada frowns up at the man. "No. Why would you think they were Valentine's chocolates? Why would Mochida give me Valentine's chocolates anyway?"

Kensuke wants to die. He wants the ground to open up and swallow him right now. Right this instant.

"Because he likes you," Lan stage-whispers over Kensuke's shoulder. Kensuke freezes and turns his head to look at her like a broken animatronic. "What? You were going to tell him anyway, right? Eventually?"

He doesn't say anything.

"..No? Oh. Well, um." Lan flashes a tiny, nervous smile at Sawada. That's kind of how Kensuke feels right now. Small and terrified. "He.. sort of likes you. I mean he's not sure. Kind of? He thinks he does. He's confused. The whole Harmonization thing and all. You know?"

She claps both hands on his shoulder and squeezes reassuringly. He does not feel reassured.

"Take care of him, yeah?"

Oh god it sounds like she's giving him away at the altar no why.

"I will!" Sawada beams. For a moment, Kensuke feels like it was all worth it. "Mom, can you put these in the fridge and make sure no one else eats any? Especially Reborn and Takeshi."

"I don't even like sweets," Reborn mutters around the toothbrush. "And I wouldn't touch your Valentine's brownies anyway."

"Of course, Tsu-kun." She takes the tin from him, and he takes— "Are you two going somewhere?"

He takes Kensuke's arm.

"My room." And he tugs, gentle but insistent. Kensuke's face can't get any hotter anyway so he just.. stumbles along. "Mochida-senpai and I need to have a talk. About stuff. We'll be down in time for the ceremony."

_Ceremony—_

"Oh, alright then. Reborn and I will get the living room set up in the meantime, then."

"I'll help too!" Lan chirps. She throws him a devious grin and a thumbs up.

Sawada starts leading them up the stairs and every step makes Kensuke want to become a puddle
even more.

* * *

"..Your face is really red."

"Shut up!" Kensuke groans, dropping his head onto low table in the middle of Sawada's room. Sawada himself is sunken into a beanbag chair that Kensuke refused to sit in because that would make him way too comfortable.

Surprisingly enough, Sawada does shut up. And for a few, blissful minutes, there's only silence and the muffled chattering and thumping of furniture being rearranged downstairs. Reborn did mention some.. sort of ceremony the other day when Kensuke asked about how they would complete the Harmonization. Hadn't gone into detail about it, so Kensuke still doesn't know what exactly it's supposed to entail. Sawada's never heard of it, for one.

Maybe it's a mafia thing. Eugh.

"...So. Ceremony," he grumbles into the table. Maybe a change of topic will help.

"Oh, yeah. Well, Reborn calls it a ceremony, but from what I hear it's just people hanging around while we do the actual Harmonization. He probably just wants to embarrass us."

Kensuke groans pathetically. He's not sure he wants a whole group of people to be there for it. Granted, there isn't anyone he wouldn't want to be there, because they'd already gone over that together, but, the point still stands. Embarrassing.

"You know if you don't want to, we can just tell them to call it off..."

"No, I—" His head shoots up and he whirls around, nearly biting his tongue at the same time. Ow. "I do—...."

He.. was going to say more. Except when he turns around, he finds himself face-to-face with a very dejected looking Sawada Tsunayoshi, curled up in his flubsy beanbag chair like he could make it swallow him up at will.

Kensuke relates with that feeling on a deeply visceral level. He needs a beanbag chair of his own.

...Wait—

"You're not just making that face to trick me into agreeing to this, are you?"

Sawada looks up. Sticks out his lower lip, and pouts. "Is it working?"

Kensuke screams internally and throws himself back onto the table in what feels like confused, silent, smitten despair.

"Wait- sorry!" Sawada yelps, but he's half-laughing as he says it, and while that makes Kensuke feel a little better, it also makes him feel a little worse, too. "I mean, um. Sorry. I.. really do want to."

A touch on his shoulder has him lifting his head again, and his stomach does flips like that Miura girl from the interschool athletics rally.

"..Why?" Sawada flinches back. Kensuke is quick to- try to do something to stop that because he really didn't mean it like that— "I mean-! Why- why would you want to.. Harmonize.. with
someone like me? Don't- don't get me wrong, I'm pretty amazing, I know that."

Wait no-

"And it's natural for a kouhai to look up to their senpai, even though I've been kind of a shitty one and- did I mention was sorry? Like, really, really sorry. Especially for, uh, the whole duel and breaking your ribs incident. And the thing with Saitou and Morita. And basically everything?"

He's making such a fool of himself but Sawada isn't on the beanbag anymore, he's just- he's right there and why doesn't the school teach you how to talk to crushes? He should have asked Lan. Lan would know what to do.

"Um." Kensuke stops there, because Sawada is leaning in and his eyes are.. really. Nice. Just, nice? Kensuke can practically see the individual veins in his irises— "What are you doing?"

"Hyperincandia has a bad habit of making your emotions stronger than they actually are," Sawada says. He drops his gaze down and Kensuke feels his body temperature do the same thing. "Harmony Bonds can also do the same thing. Depending on the person."

"What- what's your point?"

"That it could be either. I mean, what you're.. feeling. For me? Uh." Sawada averts his eyes and there is just the slightest bit of pink that crawls up his face. Kensuke can't help but think it's like sugar dusting on a cake. Or doughnut. In more ways than one. "That is- It might be real! It probably is real. Just not as strong as it... seems to be. If that makes sense?"

It.. does. It's disconcerting.

Because it means that Kensuke really does like Sawada, at least a little bit. Has probably liked him for... god knows how long, but it's only recently gotten this bad and- yeah. It probably is his fiamma imbalance acting up and blowing it out of proportion, like... like hormones uughh."

"That makes it sound like hormones," Kensuke says, mouth twisted into something like distaste.

"A little." Sawada laughs, just a little. Just softly. Fluffy laughter. "I mean, the brain runs on chemicals and hormones and.. other weird stuff. Nao-san told me about it a few years ago. Um, anyway- the best way to find out whether your.. feelings.. are really that strong or not, is to.. finish the Harmonization. Or-"

Here Sawada swallows. Kensuke thinks he's trembling, but he's too far too engrossed in the twining of their fingers. When did that happen? "-..Or we can break it off completely. If- if that is what you're more comfortable with. Since we- we did it accidentally anyway, so you can.. um. Consider it. Seriously. We can always Harmonize again if you decide you want to. It's fine. It's-"

"What happens to you then?" Kensuke blurts out, and almost immediately afterwards wants to swallow his own tongue. "I mean.. If the Bond is broken. What happens?"

"Nothing I can't handle," Sawada says too quickly. But he looks so sure of it, so confident, if terrified. "Look, Mochida— senpai. I.. I want this. I've.. probably wanted this Bond long before all that stuff you did, and even after it. I don't- care, okay? I don't mind. Anything you did. I'm... I've already made my choice. It won't change. But I cannot and will not force a Harmony Bond on you."

That's.
Exactly what Kensuke does not want to hear. Because no one talks about breaking Harmony Bonds, it's just.. not done. Harmony Bonds are always seen as a gift. There are so few Skies, more than there ever were before Sawada Ieyasu arrived on the island (or so they say), but not nearly enough for the entire island. It's a gift and Kensuke understands that. No one looks a gift horse in the mouth.

He's heard of Resonance Bonds being broken, though. Regular bonds between regular people. Friends, couples, families. They don't break easily, but when they do, it's.. it's supposed to be like heartbreak. Twisting, tearing. He's heard tell that it like trying not to cry when you really, really want to. It's suffocating.

And that's just for Resonance. Harmonization is supposed to be deeper than that, it's supposed to be more meaningful, more...


He can't imagine what it's like to break that sort of Bond.

(Kensuke remembers. The rooftop, when Sawada shimmered and glowed, sun-lit like a halo. The flames that reached out for him, his flames that reached back. Remembers running away. A line snapping, Sawada's yelp, even though the metaphorical hook was in his skin and not Sawada's. The red that leaked was not blood.

It was his own flames.

And there was a heartbeat next to his own.)

And there is a heartbeat next to his own.

He can't feel Sawada's pulse from his wrist so he reaches out. Pauses, because he may have moved too quickly and Sawada flinches back just enough for the roiling in his stomach to turn into a boil, into a flash of fury. It's probably been years since anyone threw a fist at Sawada, but maybe once was one time too many. Maybe Kensuke had thrown a few, too.

Honestly, he can't remember. And that's kind of scary.

Kensuke presses the palm of his hand against the side of Sawada's neck. Feels the pulse under the heel of his thumb, and moves down until he can feel it with his fingers. One beat, two beats. He counts a dozen and a half in time with his own before Sawada turns his hand away.

"..What was that?" He remembers to breathe. When did he stop? "And why did you--"

"Harmony." Sawada breathes out. A rush of breath that sounds like laughter, like flickering flames. Kensuke hears the crackling of a fireplace, safe and contained. Tastes like- "If you kept that up we would have Harmonized for sure. Weren't you paying attention when Reborn and I explained it the other day?"

"I was too busy staring at you to really listen to him," Kensuke says without thinking. And then claps a hand over his mouth because he did not mean it that way. "I- I meant—"

"Wow. Either you do like me or- or that is a very intense Harmony Bond." Sawada's eyes are wide. Kensuke can't tell if it sounds like he prefers one over the other or not. Or both.

Maybe both. Kensuke likes the sound of both.
"Why can't it be both? Isn't that what you're always saying anyway?" Kensuke looks away for a moment, and then back at Sawada, only to see him doing the same thing except a little more pink in the face. More pink than red. Does Sawada ever go red? "Why not?"

"Uhm- senpai what are you doing—!

Sawada trails off into a squeak because he lands on his back on the beanbag when Kensuke sort of falls on him and shoves his face into the side of Sawada's neck, following the pull of his own flames. He's pretty sure every inch of him is burning and flushed red but- Sawada smells so nice. Like fire.

Not propane fire, but wood fire. Not even any wood in particular, just... fresh. Fresh, clean. Destruction of the old to usher in the new.

"..Are- are you okay?" Sawada asks in a pitch too high. Kensuke whuffs out a breath in reply and Sawada shivers. "Geez. I thought sorting out some of your fiamma imbalance would help, but—"

"It is. Helping," he mumbles into Sawada's shoulder, his head clearer than it's ever been since that day on the roof. "It's helping."

"But you're- you're a lot more clingier." Sawada's hand is on his back, not in a comforting gesture or anything, but Kensuke just. Lets out a hum and settles even more heavily on him, earning another squeak in response. "Okay- maybe it is both. Fiamma imbalance plus- intense Harmony Bond plus slight crush on me."

"Mmm." Sounds about right. That's definitely how Kensuke feels right now. probably. "...You're okay with that?"

Sawada doesn't answer for the longest moment. For some reason, Kensuke can't even find it in himself to be afraid of his answer, whatever it is. Whatever it will be.

"..Kensuke," he says finally, and Kensuke reacts by pushing himself up, one hand braced against the cushiony surface next to Sawada's head. "Kensuke."

He expects more stomach flops. Some kind of bubbly feeling in his belly, some.. rush of heat. Some exhilaration, exultation. Everyone makes such a big deal about using first names. Nicknames. Friend-names. But he doesn't feel any of that. It.. doesn't even feel any different, to hear Sawada call him by his given name. Not the first time it happened, last year, nor this time. Now.

It feels normal. Sounds.. normal. Sounds right.

"...Tsuna," he says back, trying it on his tongue again. Feels about the same as when he first said it, last year. Sawada- Tsuna. Smiles. Makes him feel warm.

And a bit like being dunked in water so cold he can practically feel every strand of hair on his arms standing up.

"I'm.. okay with a lot of things." Yeah, he'd figured as much. Seeing as Sawa- Tsuna isn't even really trying to shove Kensuke off him. "So... yeah. If you did actually.. y'know. Like me.. I- I'm okay with that."

Kensuke nods. Not that he was particularly afraid of anyone thinking it's revolting or anything.

"Do you... do you feel the same, though?" he asks in a mumble, this time hesitant and cautious. But
he asks, because if he doesn't do it now while he has the chance, he'll never manage to work up the guts to ask it in the future. "Do you feel the same about me? I mean- or about anyone else, not just me. I mean if there's someone else then I—"

"I'm- um, I'm going to leave that for after the... after the ceremony." The nudge on his shoulders is gentle, but Kensuke backs up anyway, and Tsuna sits up. "Right now all I really want to do is Harmonize, so I'm not sure if there's anything.. else. Beyond that."

That's.. reasonable. And a little more bearable than the thought that Tsuna might actually hate him. Not that that wouldn't be understandable, because Kensuke has done and said some objectively mean and awful things to him over the past.. 10 or so years.

"How can you tell? That it's the Bond, and not... How are you so sure of it?"

"Well, for one, I get this overwhelming urge to make and mark you as mine," Tsuna grumbles, and grimaces while Kensuke's mouth goes completely dry as a desert and his face turns red enough to match. "And seeing as I'm not otherwise that possessive or sexually inclined at all, I'm pretty sure it's a Harmony Bond trying to rear its ugly head."

"Oh," Kensuke wheezes.

"..I guess I could give you two some matching hairclips. Takeshi suggested friendship bracelets once. Maybe we could do that instead."

The thought of Tsuna putting a fancily colored bracelet around his wrist or, god help him, touching his hair makes Kensuke feel like screaming and keeling over. He's almost ashamed to acknowledge the butterflies in his stomach.

"..Senpai?" Tsuna's hand waves in front of his face. Kensuke jolts up and oh, dear lord, Tsuna is way too close. "Are you okay? You're.. really red—"

He does the only thing his quickly-shutting-down brain is capable of doing.

Kensuke grabs Tsuna by the shoulders and kisses him.

Tsuna tastes exactly like his flames do. Like the air around a roaring fireplace. Like cinders on his tongue. That kind of intense, familiar feeling of being home again. And now they're definitely too close. Close enough that Kensuke can pick out every band of color in the irises of Tsuna's eyes, close enough that he can see them contracting, see his pupils dilating, see the way that now-thin band of brown becomes a ring of bright copper orange.

There's a nudge at his shoulder again and Tsuna is.. saying something? Something. But all Kensuke hears is the pounding of blood in his ears, the low thrum of a deafening silence in a world of one, the shifting of flames making a sound like I'm here, I'm here. Come home. Come home.

He kisses Tsuna again, and now Tsuna tastes like a punch in the jaw—

Oh, wait.

---

Rinaldo Salucci's introduction to the Sicilian criminal Underground goes something like this:
He is 11 when his father falls down. Sick, his mother says.

His name was Vico. Hers was Tina. Simple, she says her parents were. There's lots of women named Tina in their little town. Mamma Tina is probably the only Tina who is a witch.

Vico is sick, and that is simple too. Sick means they can tell the local healer to come be and see what's wrong with him. The healer is also a witch, but a better witch. Mamma Tina can only cure his warts, and she cleans his bruises with a poultice of radishes.

The healer is named Ziu. Everyone calls him Ziu, but he is no one's ziu. Rinaldo is not even sure if Ziu is from their settlement at all, or if he wandered in from another town, a bigger town. A better town.

Ziu boils leaves for Rinaldo's papà to drink. He tells them to feed him the fruit of a prickly pear, and waves a smoking bundle of herbs over his body to banish the fever.

Rinaldo fetches the prickly pear. They grow abundantly on Sicilian soil outside their town, and nobody owns those lands now. Not even the Guild of Thieves wanted it, barren and desolate as they are. But their town grew enough in those soils to survive, so maybe it wasn't as barren and desolate as the Guild thought it was.

Maybe their Ziu was just too scary. Rinaldo likes that thought, too.

Ziu leaves the settlement and comes back months later. He says that the closest city to them is a few days walk and has new medicines. Medicines reserved for the worst of cases, when Ziu's spells do not work, and they are not working now. More adults are getting sick and Ziu cannot cure them.

Mamma Tina grinds another poultice for Rinaldo's bruises (the children play rough, and they are always fighting over something or another) and wonders if they can ever afford medicine that expensive.

So Rinaldo leaves. He leaves with half a dozen other children, 11, 12, and 13. They're not sure how old one of the girls is. Two are 14 and promise to look after the others. The city has medicine and it has work, it has money. They will bring money back, and they will bring medicine back.

They find work through separate handlers, because it is safer. Rinaldo's handler likes to take most of his money, even when he says it's for medicine. Says a kid like him doesn't need that much.

Rinaldo swears he'll kill the Rat one day. Take all his money back from that cold dead corpse.

They hide their earnings at the edge of the city, in the loose bricks of a building that no one lives in. They steal food, they steal money, and they work. They buy medicine. It isn't actually that expensive; their town, their village, is just poor. They spend little on themselves, because Rinaldo knows how to cure warts and banishes bruises and mend their scrapes and their bones, and they call him a witch, too. He might even be better than Ziu.

Rinaldo doesn't care about being a better witch than Ziu. He just wants to be good enough that he doesn't get sick.

The first time, they all go back home. They split up the medicine and Rinaldo is glad to see his father's fever die down, to see his coughs no longer so earth-shattering and red. But the medicine does not last so they go again, and again, and again.

The 12 year old turns 13, tries to take the money and run. They kill him. It was an accident, but he is dead now, and the francs are red, so they have to clean it off before they can use it. They tell his
father that an adult struck his head. He dies soon, too.

The girl with no age disappears. None of the cityfolk will speak of her, or what happened to her.

One adult says she probably deserved to die, so they kill him too. There are many loose bricks and they are children but not so small anymore, not so weak. Rinaldo knows how to talk, how to lure people elsewhere, into empty quiet places where the eldest of them holds rocks above their heads. The man has a lot of money in his pockets, so they buy a lot of medicine and they put some of it aside for the girl's grandmother who is waiting for her back home.

They don't go back to town for a long time. Years. Rinaldo does not learn to become a witch.

Instead he stops fighting with the other children. Instead, he helps.

* * *

*Mamma* Tina is sick now, too. It's the first time she's gotten sick that she can ever remember and they are all surprised. Then *papà* is sick again, and this time no amount of medicine helps. Ziu can do nothing.

Rinaldo takes the gun from a closet in the house and goes to the city for more medicine, better medicine. The 14 year old girl that looked after them before goes with him too, because her family is dead and no one in town will marry a plain girl with no money and skin too dark. He's 14 now, bigger, stronger. Works harder. She's 17 and works just as hard.

His old handler, Tonino the Rat, welcomes him back.

'My padre was military,' Rinaldo tells the Rat. Lies. 'I can use a gun. Send me some trash to clean up.'

Tonino says he'll think about it, and gives Rinaldo other things to do. Then he meets the girl who helps Rinaldo on his jobs and he thinks about *her*.

'She's a good catch,' Tonino tells Rinaldo, leering and lecherous. 'Plain-faced, but some men like that in a girl. How about it, ciuri? Tonino knows where you can make a lot of money.'

She says she doesn't want to, but the Rat tries to take her away anyway. It's surprisingly easy to use a gun. Just point and shoot. Shoot him three times.

Once in the belly, and again until he lets go of her. She tries to strangle him, she's big enough now, spits in his face and calls him filth and pig and dirty words that make Rinaldo grin like a madman. She holds him down and Rinaldo shoots him in the head. He leaves flowers on the corpse and takes all the money the Rat had in his pockets.

They bring back medicine and food, and for a while it's good. The girl moves in to help around the house, because she has no home of her own now, and because *mamma* Tina is sick and cannot do everything herself anymore, not even with Rinaldo's help.

It takes two years for Vico to die. Rinaldo buys more medicine, this time for *mamma* Tina, but she dies before he can make it back. He can't remember anymore what it was she died of, she and Vico.

Ziu offers to take him in, make him a proper witch. He could cure plagues. He could save lives. He could make sure this never happens again, the sick people of their sick little town.
Instead Rinaldo and the girl go back to the city and they do the same thing they did before.

They look for the rich ones, the ones with money. They ask around. Some people want others dead, and that is how they change their names to Renato and Hedda and go around taking money from dead folks and folks who want other folks dead. Not because they need it, because they have an abandoned house they live in and only their own mouths to feed, but because they're not quite sure what else to do.

..They could get married.

They have a laugh about that. They laugh long and hard, they laugh until there's tears in their eyes. They laugh until they cry, and then they cry until they fall sleep, holding onto each other.

In the end they don't get married, but they do go to church again. Ziu used to read to them from the Bible but neither of them can read themselves.

* * *

When two men in suits come by to ask about the death of Tonino the Rat, 3 years after they kill him, Renato shoots them too.

But instead of dying, they live. They live behind a flash of green, thin and crackling and smelling like the butcher's house after a thunder storm.

'What are your names?' they ask.

'Renato,' he says, 17 and too small for his age.

'Hedda,' says the girl, now a woman, 20 and too tall for hers.

'Which family do you represent?' they ask.

'A dead one,' says Renato.

Hedda says, too, 'a dead one.'

'We are Vongola,' they say, and Renato's blood runs cold. 'Tonino was one of our own and the people say that you have killed him.'

'Tonino the Rat tried to sell me to a whorehouse,' Hedda spits before Renato can tell her not to. Vongola is too big and too strong for them to face alone. That's what the Rat says, anyway. Used to say. 'He's a fucking cazzu and we put him in the ground for it.' [21]

'Which house? What proof do you have?'

Hedda does not know, and they will probably die for it. But Renato knows.

'The Roman Flower,' he says. Tonino talks about it all the time. U ciuri rumanu.

Used to talk about it.

They are brought to a large house on the other side of town in a car that is too black and too clean and smells too nice. The house itself is also too large, too clean, too nice.

There is a woman who asks why they killed Tonino. Hedda says the same thing to her as she did to the men with the bright green shields. The ladies at her sides look dangerous, dressed in silks and
gown. Gloves to hide their hands and fans to hide their faces.

She apologizes for Tonino's actions and steps down from the chair that may well be a throne. The ladies leave with her, taking their suffocating airs with them. Only emptiness replaces them.

A man comes forward. Renato thinks he smells of fresh bread, of home and of dry wheat fields.

'Why are you here, in my territory?' the man asks. He's young. Not much older than Renato.

'work,' says Renato. 'We're here to work.'

'What sort of work?'

'I am a witch,' he says. Hedda looks at him sideways, but she doesn't say anything. 'I curse and I kill.'

'A witch?'

'Yes. Like your men who do not die from bullets.' He waves to the ones with the shields, though they have none now.

'You are like them?'

'I am a witch, like them. Shoot me, and you will see.'

'Nonsense,' the man says. 'There are no such things as witches.'

Someone shoots Renato anyway. The bullet tears through his thigh and he grabs onto Hedda's arm to stay upright. She swears. Loudly. At everyone.

The smell of bread becomes a stench, becomes burning egg pudding and drowning in orange blossoms. Becomes the smell of copper and iron, dirt roads and wet soil. Prickly pears and radish poultices.

The man kneels down despite the scandalized gasps erupting around them and tears open the hole in the leg of Renato's trousers. There is blood but no wound, and only a glimmer of yellow to show where the bullet hole might have been.

'See?' Renato says through gritted teeth, grinning wildly. His grip on Hedda's arm is deathly. 'I'm a witch.'

The man looks up at him in wonder.

'You're not a witch,' he says, and Renato wants to laugh. Because he is, he is, he is.

The man stands up. He's close enough now that Renato should smell his cologne, he looks rich enough to wear it. He does smell it, a little. But more than that he smells food; washed vegetables, stew, and roast. He hears. Sizzling, steaming, the crackling of flames in an oven. He hears a mother's lullaby, and the voice is not mamma Tina's.

'You're a Sun, Renato.'

It's the voice of the woman who just walked out of the room, with her ladies in tow.

'My name is Timoteo di Vongola,' the man says. He sounds as though he has just found the love of his life. 'I would like to be your Sky.'
Hedda is gripping his arm now, too. She hasn't trimmed her nails in a few weeks so the broken edges are digging into his skin even through the sleeve of his shirt.

Renato winces and tries to pull his arm away. The lingering pain and shock of being shot takes the edge off of any polite, luring speech he might have been using.

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

Reborn stares into the bathroom mirror, feeling far older than he looks. Is, actually, older than he looks. It had taken him a while to accept that he wasn't going to age much beyond what he had been before that damnable light shone on them and turned them into toddlers.

It'd taken them all a while to accept it, honestly. Especially those of them that were stronger, physically. They were still strong, of course, but not in the same way. Not quite as much.

It sucked, for lack of better term.

Now he inspects his still-smooth chin and figures he just isn't going to grow any hair there. Which is all well and good, now. At least his hair isn't going gray yet and he isn't balding like his father. Or what he remembers of his father, anyway.

Really, all he remembers is the fit of his first gun in his hand. The one he'd found in the closet, not sure who it belonged to, but the handler believed him when he said it was his dad's. Had to be. Everyone loves irony, after all. A military man's kid gone rogue and freelance is the best sort of irony in Sicily.

He'd wanted that, though. Wanted the thrill of a kill, and Timoteo was good at providing things like that. Distractions, that's all they were. Hedda would have agreed. Reborn has gotten pretty good at knowing when someone really wants something or if they're just lying. To others, or to themselves.

It's hardest to do that with Skies, though, given their nature and the fact that they themselves are rather naturals in the art of detecting lies. Timoteo was one of those. Dino was, too, though less inclined to do it. Xanxus didn't even care, he just threw shots until someone caved and spouted the truth.

*Tsunayoshi*, though. Tsunayoshi continues to baffle Reborn. Maybe it's because he's civilian. Maybe it's because he didn't grow up *Cosa Nostra*, didn't get the same lectures about power versus loyalty, didn't have the pressure of needing a perfect Septet on his back. Maybe it's because Tsunayoshi is not a Sky that everyone defers to out of habit, on a whim. He is not an heir to anything, he is not looked up to, he is not made into a role model. He is not revered.

Timoteo chose Nie Brow's kid because Reborn had a questionable background. Because there were too many women named Tina and too many men named Vico. Because on the list of Vongola's deserters and traitors, the names Tina and Vico were among them, and Timoteo's advisors would not let him take any chances. Because Reborn was too attached to a ludicrously vicious Cloud already, and too difficult to control.

Because Sicily stopped hunting witches in the 18th century, but some old cows still chewed the same old cud.
He preferred being just a hitman anyway. Even if he missed the smell of fresh bread and wheat fields and ripe persimmons. Misses. He still misses it. He wonders if he'll ever smell those things in another Sky's Flames again.

The front door opens and he sticks his head out of the hallway bathroom to see who it is.

"Welcome back, Nagi-kun!"

"Thanks, Nana-san. I'm not late, am I? I got the text from Tsuna but time is all weird in the Artificial Resonance Fields."

"No, no, you're just in time. Oh, we still have to finish moving the furniture! Do you mind helping out a little?"

Nagi grins and lifts one arm in a flex that could make most teenage boys jealous, even when hidden behind the sleeve of her uniform. "That's what I'm here for."

Reborn finishes washing up and rolls up his pajama sleeves to help out, too. Ever since he'd heard about Tsunayoshi's apparent Harmony Bond with both Yamamoto and Mochida (even if that one was only partial), he's been trying to figure out more about the process here on Kakishima.

There is a dismal, _dismal_ lack of information and documentation. For an island so entrenched in Flames, they have almost nothing on Skies or Harmonization at all. Actually, aside from the articles and interviews with Sawada Yorifusa, there _is_ pretty much nothing.

He understands that Skies are rare, of course. Even in Sicily the matter of Skies was a guarded secret, but there were so many Sky bosses that just about every _famigghia_ knew one thing or another about them. The laypeople knew almost nothing, but groups like Vongola had _traditions_. They had rites, rituals, ceremonies. Harmonization is perhaps the greatest thing that can happen to a Sky and another element.

Which is why, even though Reborn is still skeptical about Tsunayoshi's choice in Storms (even going so far as to give Mochida the Harmonization equivalent of a _shovel talk_), he'll give them a fair send-off. If nothing else, it will get Tsunayoshi more accustomed to Vongola affairs in the future. Start teaching him that, yes, it's great he's picking his own Harmonization partners, but he can't just go around Harmonizing with people willy-nilly. Even a Sky can only handle so much.

He needs to be more ruthless. Cut off the unnecessary and pick only those worthy of him and his, because Vongola will accept nothing less than perfection.

"So.. how was Kokuyo?"

"Hm?" Nagi glances up from vase of herbs she's rearranging. "It was fine. Business matters, regarding an... international interest."

"What about?"

That gets a quirk of a smile from her. "Classified."

"Ooh," Reborn hums, as if he didn't already know that. "What level?"

"Personal information."

"Damn." He clucks his tongue and tosses one of the throw pillows to the side.
It lands one of the rugs he'd managed to find in a thrift store, not quite Italian, but close enough. It's more the colors that matter. Mochida and Tsunayoshi are Storm and Sky, so they're filling the room with things that contrast with red and orange. Dark greens and blues, mostly, and the occasional earthy brown. He handpicked several herbs and plants from the backyard garden Nana has been trying to cultivate and got the rest from the market.

There's a dozen other things he'd like to get, but this isn't Sicily and they're on short notice. Nana does suggest a few good luck items that are appropriate for the occasion. Reborn likes the Daruma doll the most, to replace the more ritual burning of an icon. They'd used one of Saint Nicholas of Myra for his and Timoteo's blood oath.

Tsunayoshi did mention an entire archive kept by the Sawada line, probably started by Giotto himself. Who knew what was in there about Harmonization? Yoshinao had been surreptitiously cagey about it when he asked her not two days ago, after Mochida expressed an interest in completing the Harmonization process.

"Is this what they do in Italy?" Nagi sidles up to him, fluffing up a dark brown seat cushion that will occupy the center of the room the two dearly beloveds will be sitting. Or kneeling. Whichever. "You have this kind of celebration every time someone Harmonizes?"

"It doesn't happen as often as you'd think," he says, and wonders if he can convince Tsunayoshi to bring the cimaruta from his room down to play centerpiece. "But, yes. Every time someone is in line to take over the family business, we hold at least 4 or 5 of these ceremonies whenever they find a new Element for bonding. I don't suppose Tsunayoshi explained it to you at all?"

Nagi gives a little chuckle. "No. He sent me a text that just said Reborn is holding a Harmonization party for us. The Boy says he doesn't mind if you attend."

How very succinct.

"Well.. that's more or less it, these days. From what my dear brother tells me, it used to be a much more homely and private ceremony, like this one will be. It started as little more than a safe, secluded place for two people to go through the forging of a Harmony Bond. Supposedly it can be quite tiring, which is what the food and water is for." He gestures to the side table where Nana had set the covered platter of food and a jug of some beverage. "Now it's used mostly as a show of power. A show of wealth, to see who can bring the best food, the best entertainment, the best security to defend two erstwhile lovers— I mean, two soon-to-be Harmonized Individuals."

Nagi is snickering. That's good.

Where an invitation was once strictly exclusive to friends and family members, now it was a luxurious extravagance. A display of ability. Of loyalty. Just like any Vongola-style celebration, really.

Better to get Tsunayoshi acquainted to them now with small, baby steps, rather than later when they demand some massive and exorbitant Inheritance Ceremony out of him fit to give any down-to-earth civilian a heart attack.

"I've attended quite a few of these ceremonies myself, on behalf of that same brother and two students of mine. One of them preferred to keep his private, though. There was a lot of grumbling and groaning, but given that he's about my height and built like a brick, no one really tried to argue his choice, either."

"Really? I can't imagine a Sky like that... besides Iemitsu, anyway. All we have are.. mostly just
nuns and priests. And then there's Nao-san and Tsuna, of course."

Reborn's eyebrows go up. "Yoshinao-san isn't a nun?"

"What's that face for? Don't even think about it," Nagi says with a *tsk* and a shake of her head. "Her brother will have your hide."

"I think I can handle a Sky or two," Reborn hums again.

Nagi grins in a way that does little more than bare her teeth, a mockery of a threat. "We have at *least* 20."

Oh-ho. That *definitely* does not help in keeping the look of unholy glee from lighting up Reborn's eyes.

Now he *really* wants to visit this Sawada family.

* * *

When Kyouko and Hana show up half an hour to noon, they greet both Nana and Mochida's friend with cheer and hugs. Her given name is Kim Lan, but she only goes by Lan.

Hana's father and Kyouko's mother are also here. Reborn doesn't remember Tsunayoshi and Mochida agreeing for the parents to be there, but it turns out they aren't here for the ceremony itself. Just to supervise their children. Yamamoto's father also pops in with Yamamoto himself.

Apparently Harmonization is a big deal on the island, especially since these two *are*... still just kids. It doesn't usually happen this young, not even in the *Cosa Nostra*, where the average age for awakening Flames is at least 10 or older. Generally speaking, it took another decade before anyone ever started feeling the pull of Harmonization.

Here it seems to be around 6, or 7, right around the age when school starts. Funny, seeing as Sicily is more dangerous than this island appears to be.

And given that Tsunayoshi actually awakened this flames *far* sooner than he likely should have.. Reborn supposes the only reason he hasn't tried Harmonizing earlier was because Timoteo had so helpfully intervened. Which, sure.

Better to start at 15 than at 10, if the pattern holds to be universal.

Yamamoto yelps from what is probably a rap on his wrist in the kitchen, where all the rest of the adults are convening. "Those brownies are for Tsu-kun, Takeshi-kun."

"They're his early Valentine's chocolates," Reborn adds.

Yamamoto sticks his head into the living room. ".From who?"

He sees Lan waving at him with a grin from where she's putting up blackout curtains around the windows.

"From— Really? *Him*? ...Well, now I have to have one."

The boy goes back to plying with Tsunayoshi's mother for a fudge brownie just as Tsunayoshi and Mochida come down the stairs. Reborn goes out into the hall to make sure they're ready.

"...Why is your cheek red? I'm assuming you're not blushing right now, Mochida."
Mochida sputters in an attempt to reply. He does that a lot, apparently. "He- Tsuna- punched me."

"Why would he do that?" Reborn is not even touching the whole why are you calling him by his given name all of a sudden, what happened in the hour you two spent up there?

"He kept kissing me after I told him to stop," Tsunayoshi says flatly, avoiding any and all eye-contact. Mochida is doing the same thing, though he's also looking pointedly at Tsunayoshi too. "So I punched him."

Yamamoto pops back in, holding a half-eaten brownie and a dangerous tilt to his stuffed mouth. "He what."

"Well, in his defense, he has fiamma imbalance and some really intense Harmony Bond affecting him right now." Tsunayoshi hums, snatching the remainder of the brownie out of Yamamoto's hand. "Either way, I think he'll stop calling me Tsuna and wanting to make out once the Bond is done."

"Maybe I won't," Mochida mutters, still touching his cheek gingerly.

Tsunayoshi surprisingly goes pink. Yamamoto's smile takes on a steely edge.

Reborn leans over him. Looms. "Do we need to talk about this again, Mochida Kensuke?"

"I- I wasn't planning anything! Like, I would never— nothing indecent, fuck, do you guys take me for a pervert or something?!!"

"Uh-huh." Reborn mutters something in Sicilian about entrails and necklaces. Tsunayoshi chokes on his brownie and sends a startled look in Reborn's direction. He jerks his head towards the living room. "Everyone's here, so let's get started. I'll explain everything again and we'll make sure one last time whether you two want to go through with it or not."

He squints at them, and then points at Mochida.

"No kissing or touching unless he lets you. Or else."

Mochida goes pale and nods.

Really. This is why they don't let kids Harmonize in Sicily until they're done with puberty. Damn hormones making everything more confusing.

...Well. At least it's just kissing. Could be worse. Could be Levi.

[1] ziu: (sicilian) uncle
[2] cazzu: (sicilian) vulgar form of 'penis', so basically a dick.

Chapter End Notes

if you thought i wasn't going to do some backstory-ing for as many characters as i could manage you're gravely mistaken. there's going to be a lot. where relevant, anyway.

as always, if anything is super confusing, land a question in the comments and i'll see
if i can help clarify!
[oyster fortunes daily] the grass is always greener.

Chapter Summary

desperate times call for desperate measures. also, bored hitmen call for desperate measures. reborn happens to be both.

also also also, the lancia group meets with hokuto. it does not go as planned.

Chapter Notes

heads up before going into this chapter: the general Underworld and Kakishima have different views and philosophies regarding Flames and what terms to use. might get a little confusing when they're mixed up, but reborn is usually referring to sicilian/underground traditions and perceptions while the kids refer to kakishima's. they're not SUPER different, but they are different. for the curious, you can read more about it here. (yes i set up a wiki for the au. leave me alone.)

flames also have a different original purposes in this au, so there's a lot of stuff that will probably be confusing and out of place if you think about it as 'mafia only'.

WARNINGs: implied (major??) character death. oops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

______________________________

on the other side, in another life, in another time. in memories past.

"The phenomenon was termed as a Dying Will Flame by Iosephus Laurentius, now more commonly known as Geppetto Lorenzini—"

* * *

"No it wasn't. It's Dying Breath, that's probably a translation error."

"...Iosephus was Roman. Italian is derived from Latin. There is less of a translation error there than there is going into Japanese."

"Well that's not what we learned in school."

"Really, Hana? You ask what I know and you're going to keep interrupting? I've barely even started."

* * *

"It was named such when his colleague showed signs of this phenomenon, and after observing its effects and the way in which his colleague harnessed it, he documented it in his papers as—"
"Dying Breath."

"Hana..."

"While Geppetto’s research was surprisingly accurate for his time, recent science has proved some things contrary to his findings. For one, the Flame phenomenon is an energy that is derived from your life-force. Using it depletes your stamina, and it is recovered much in the same way stamina is, with food and rest. Practice and use refines control of it, while things such as exercise increase the amount you are able to use."

"Is that why you keep making me go on walks and morning runs around town?"

"Et tu, Tsunayoshi?"

"There are 7 core Elements—"

"Attributes."

"—known to us as the following: Storm, bringer of violence and destruction, renowned for their aggression and unyielding assault; Sun, the historical Witch, the Healer, known to work miracles and bring curses upon the people; Lightning, vanguard of defense, who must persevere against the harms that befall upon him in the name of those precious to him;—"

"Or her!"

"—Rain, who washes clean the slate with his own hands and finishes that which is left unfinished, who calms and pacifies when things are at their worst; Mist, most reliable yet also the most untrustworthy, shielding him and his from sight and leading his foes astray;—"

Nagi waves her hand, giggling, before Hana can make another comment about the apparent gender bias.

"—Cloud, defender, protector, attacker, who is efficient and deadly whether he works alone or with others. And finally, we have the Sky, like the young master. The Sky is Harmony, unity, the backbone that supports his people and who is in turn supported and served by those loyal to him."
"Hana I swear if you say another word - Diu dammi la pacenza—!

-Okay! Okay, not talking anymore!

These are the basics for understanding the concept of Harmonization. To put it simply, it is an exchange of Flames between a Sky and an Element, though it can be far more intimate than it sounds. In most common cases, the exchange goes from the Element to the Sky; rarely the Bond may go both ways, but it is not a major concern if it does not.

Now, while the Flame is a form of energy, it has also been shown to contain bits and pieces of whomever it came from. Usually, this takes the form of thoughts, memories, emotions, and values. Every Element is different in nature and role, but every person will have something in them that they share with another. It may be a favorite food, a favorite smell, a favorite location. It can be an emotion. It can be a shared memory, a similar goal, or it can be even more abstract. The Strongest Seven of the Arcobaleno have historically Harmonized purely on the fact that they were all strong. For Vongola, we protect the Family, and that has been what many of the Guardians shared with their Sky since our founding. This is what we call our Will.

There are three kinds of Flame Bonds, Renato. Remember it like this: Resonance is the matching of your Will with someone other than a Sky; Synchronization is matching your Will with someone who is Harmonized with the same Sky as you. Harmonization, then, is the matching of your Will with a Sky. Never mind the fact that Skies are rather rare outside of a given bloodline, it is always a blessing and an honor to be chosen by a Sky. The Elements and the Guardians exist for the Sky; and once Bonded, they cannot live without him.

"Why not?" Renato frowns. He gave up on taking notes a while ago, though he's made quite a bit of progress on learning how to write. Hedda hasn't had any such luck, so she's listening just as intently as he is. "The Bond's only going one way, right? Element to Sky. If anything it should the Sky who can't live without the Elements."

Creating a bond is like.. turning on the faucet at full blast. Whether it is from Element to Sky or from Sky to Element, the flow of water is also the flow of the Flames from one to another. It will usually never exceed the Element or the Sky's individual absorption capacity, but it is constant and unseen. If the Bond should be broken for any reason other than mutual agreement, such as death, the faucet does not turn off. It breaks off. The flow does not stop, but without something to absorb these Flames, they linger and they Fester. They affect those around them, they affect their own owner. Many a man has unknowingly broken a Bond, only to find himself lit on fire immediately after.

"Be very careful with your Bonds, Renato, Hedda. No Sky is a bad choice, so long as your Wills align. But you should not attempt a Harmonization with Will that you disagree with, nor one in which you have nothing in common. If you find yourself in a Bond you no longer wish to be in, talk to the Sky. So long as both sides acknowledge the end of a Bond, the Breaking will proceed smoothly."

"What if it doesn't?" Hedda this time. "What if one won't let the other leave? What if it's only one-sided?"

The elder strokes the wisp of a goatee on his chin. It reminds Renato of the last trails of smoke from a dying wood fire.
"Blood. Guts. Death. If you're lucky." Reborn smiles at the group blandly. "If you're not lucky, you live and you suffer. Fun, isn't it?"

Of the 7 of them, Tsunayoshi is the only one who doesn't look remotely bothered. Yamamoto is a close second, and Kyouko and Hana are doing good impressions of it.

Lan and Mochida, though...

She's side-eying Mochida like she wants lightning to strike him in the head. Mochida himself looks a combination of nervous, constipated, terrified, and furious. He also looks ready to get up and leave, which is honestly fine with Reborn. Weeding out the weak is his job. Sort of.

Better to let them know what to expect out of it now than for them to dive in with some weird, fantastical expectations and never know what sort of jagged rocks lurked beneath the surface of an otherwise crystalline reef.

..Okay, that was a little too romantic. But that was the metaphor the elder had used, so Reborn finds it apt for the situation. He is the elder, here.

And these are the children who might grow up to rule the world.

(Or Sicily, at the very least. Maybe all of Italy too. That would be nice. Reunification of Italy.)

Mochida does get up- or tries to, an action thwarted by Tsunayoshi's grip on the back of his shirt.

"Second thoughts, Mochida?" Reborn tips his head at the boy.

"I'm—" He tries to pull away, but Tsunayoshi has proved to have an inordinate amount of strength at the oddest of times. "—I'm just not sure if this is such a good idea."

"Is it the Bond breaking that scares you? Not a surprise. It unnerves even the best of men, in my experience. But in this, Tsunayoshi is the one who extended the Bond to you first. If it ever broke, he would be the one to take the brunt of it."

"That's exactly why! Dammit, Tsuna- let go already!"

"You can't deny me this! I've been wanting it for years!" Tsunayoshi says in a probably false simpering pout. He switches over to grabbing Mochida's arm instead. "You broke my ribs. You have to take responsibility!"

"You said you wouldn't force a Bond!"

"I- I wouldn't!" Oh, that one's genuine. Now Tsunayoshi really is trying to pull Mochida down. "But— are you really going to give this up on the chance that I might get hurt by it in the future? Are you planning to do something like that?"

"Wha- no! Of course not! But—" Mochida falters, just enough for Lan to get up and shove him down by his shoulders.

"Tsuna's right, Ken-chan. You said it yourself— this could fix whatever's gone wrong. Isn't that good? Besides, it's not like you have to make the Bond."

"But I don't want to—"
"I can handle it, Damesuke," Tsunayoshi huffs, wrapping both arms around Mochida's to keep him in place. Takeshi in the background looks torn between beaming in a way that screams yes, finally! and also ready to hit something with that baton of his. "I'm not that weak."

And then before Mochida can argue anything else, Tsunayoshi surges up and kisses him and Reborn is sighing while Nagi wolf-whistles and Takeshi just lets out a single, eerie bark of laughter. It seems to be only for shock value though, because it lasts barely more than a few seconds and Tsunayoshi and Lan are quick to start maneuvering a frozen Mochida into place on one of the cushions in the middle of the room. By the time everyone else is in their positions, Mochida is only barely beginning to move again.

"..What-"

"Mochida Kensuke." Reborn crouches down beside them, lowers his voice so only the two of them can hear. Both boys seated across from each other look up, one more nervous than the other. "The fact that the Bond is incomplete means that you did, at some point, desire for it to be made. Something happened to cut it off, but that doesn't matter. What matters is what you want to do now. Make it, or break it? There's only one way this can end. Well, you could forgo it altogether and continue on with your lives as it is, but nothing will change. You will keep arguing. You will keep fighting, you will both keep trying to avoid and seek each other out and making trouble for those around you. Both of you will stay as you are now, but maybe with time it'll get less painful. Maybe you'll come to terms with it and it won't leave you bitter and lonely and resentful."

Tsunayoshi's eyes widen just enough that Reborn narrows his in turn. Just enough.

"Maybe you'll eventually be friends again. Maybe you'll put it behind you and it'll all turn out for the better." Maybe it will, and maybe it won't. "You're both still young. Everyone tells you to learn from your mistakes and it's okay to make them. This is not one of those mistakes you want to make, it's one that can and will drag itself out over the remainder of your life. If you doubt your decision for even a second, your best bet is to Break it. There is no we'll make it work, or we'll talk it over and smooth things out. This is not the same as a relationship. Break it. Think it over. Go at it again later. Are we clear?"

Tsunayoshi nods, idly, like he's not even listening. Mochida nods, but only because he's getting a little unnerved by Tsunayoshi's unwavering stare.

"Good." Reborn leans over more towards Mochida now, as though to insinuate something. ..From what I've seen of you these past few days, I recommend you break it off."

And with that he stands up, leaving the boy to his thoughts and Tsunayoshi's brief sound of protest.

He surveys the room. The windows and screen doors have been blacked out as much as possible, leaving only a dim light from the kitchen across the hallway to stream in through the doorway. Everything else is lit only by the candles placed strategically throughout the room, sending all their faces into sharp, flickering relief.

It's not quite the same as holding the ceremony within the stone walls of Vongola's grand church. Drowning in a halo of candles and braziers, wind blowing across the windows like a howling hymn. Not as impressive. But not as oppressive, either. There's no pressure to perform, no expectations of a fancy lightshow. No need to leave a lasting impression on anyone.

This is probably how the ceremonies were meant to be. Before each successive generation of Vongola happened to them. Repeatedly.
"Alright. Honestly, I'm not even sure if this ceremony will work with you kids since you're not Sicilian—"

"That's prejudiced and racist and I object to that."

"—but it might help with the little problem these two have, so we can give it a try. Also, I miss Sicily, so thanks for indulging me in this."

"Haha, it's a really nice atmosphere! Kind of like..." Yamamoto makes ghost nosies until Hana shoves at his shoulder.

"Normally we would have an elder reciting passages from the ritual tome, some lecture about Faith and Christianity, morals, loyalty, etcetera, but I haven't the patience to do that myself and I don't think there's any Christians among you guys anyway— Oh." Lan raises her hand enthusiastically. "Fellow God-fearer. I salute you. Anyway, it's not going to be that formal, so I'll jump right into explaining what's going to happen, what you two should do, and what the rest of you shouldn't do.

Then we'll go from there. No interruptions. *Capisci*?"

They all nod, though Hana looks like she wants to say something again until Reborn fixes her with the Squinty Hitman Eyes and mutters some flowery Sicilian words in her direction. Her willpower crumbles easily. Reborn could probably recite the Bible in accent and she'd swoon. He does have a nice voice, he'll admit.

"You should visit Sawada town sometime if you like Italian, Hana-chan," Lan suggests innocently. "They use it a lot down the—"

Hana screams 'no' in a quiet, pitched, wheezy voice, completely red in the face and hiding in Kyouko's arm. Lan pats her on the back comfortingly.

"Harmonization is, in essence, a sharing of Flame energy. As I've already said, and as you may already know, Flame energy is more than just energy; it carries thoughts and emotions with it, though not always. To Harmonize, a Resonance Bond must be established first. Everyone's Resonance bonds will be different depending on who they Resonate with, meaning their Harmony Bonds will also be unique. This also means it's almost impossible to describe it specifically to another person, never mind the fact that most people consider it too private to speak of... Just out of curiosity, does anyone here have any experience with Harmony Bonds? Besides you, Tsunayoshi."

Only Takeshi and Lan raise their hands. Mochida kind of half-raises, then jolts when he sees Lan's. Tsunayoshi drops his arm with an exaggerated pout.

"And, out of curiosity, is anyone willing to talk about it? Not you, Mochida, you have to talk about yours with Tsunayoshi."

Mochida looks relieved, and then simultaneously terrified. Reborn really likes kids who wear their emotions honestly. Tsunyaoshi seems to be the outlier in that sense.

Yamamoto decides to go first.

"I, um, don't really remember how Tsuna and I harmonized! It was a lot of..." And off he goes with the sound effects, hands miming something that Reborn supposes like a mini nuclear explosion, complete with a pantomimed mushroom cloud and a towering bear? He knows enough Japanese to recognize the sound effects for fire, at least. "And then we went home and slept for hours."

He looks so proud of his own explanation. Tsunayoshi gives him a thumbs up, which he returns with fervor.
"Okay," Reborn says flatly, "but can you describe how it.. felt?"

"I just did?"

Hana shoves him again, this time with a pillow. Probably a lessen the blow. "Do you have nothing on your mind except baseball and manga?"

"I have Tsuna!"

Tsunayoshi raises his hand. "Can I throw my cushion at him on grounds of him being an embarrassment to the very concept of subtlety?"

"No. Hana's got it," he replies. Hana is blushing even though it wasn't directed at her, and she shoves Yamamoto again. "Also, you need your cushion."

Yes. These kids will rule the world. Reborn can already see it falling wonderfully to pieces.

"Anyone else, then?"

"Oh, me!" Lan waves her hand frantically and beams. "I asked a Sky about it after Ken-chan told me on Wednesday. The Bonds can really vary! Some of them are nice feelings, like happiness or admiration or respect. Some are kind of sad and depressing.. She said there's been people who Harmonized because of supposedly mutual rejection or.. despondency, loneliness, stuff like that. Oh, but sometimes.. sometimes it's just a sensation? Like, with Tsuna and Takeshi, they hold hands a lot. Unless you two are secretly dating or something, I think that's a sign of their Bond? The skin-to-skin contact."

"I do like touching Tsuna," Yamamoto says, nodding sagely.

"I, too, enjoy the holy palmer's kiss." Tsunayoshi nods, too. "His callouses get itchy after a while though."

Yamamoto gasps as though offended. Hana shoves him again and throws the pillow at Tsunayoshi and nails him in the side. Reborn doesn't think she's stopped blushing at all since the beginning.

"Lan is right. The Bond can take the form of anything from a memory, a sensation, or some other sort of urge. Physical closeness is common. Among Sicilians-" Among the Cosa Nostra, anyway. "- you would normally see old fashioned things like pledging loyalty on one's knees, kissing the back of the hand, things like that."

Yamamoto hums far too loudly and curiously. Tsunayoshi throws the pillow at him. It lands in Hana's lap instead.

"The problem with you two, however, is that one of you seems to have some hormone-addled urges screwing everything up. Teenagers, I swear." Mochida makes a muffled sound like he wants to argue, but doesn't really know what to say. "So here is what you are going to do. You are going to ignore them. Rationalize them away, compartmentalize, meditate to lower your extraneously libidinous desires, I don't care and it doesn't matter. Ignore them, and when they keep coming back, you will talk about those ones with each other. With any luck you'll figure out which one matches up before you both die of mortification and emotional overload. One of you, anyway. I have the utmost confidence that Tsunayoshi will probably survive."

Mochida swallows nervously.
"The reason for this is two-fold. For you two especially, it will help you separate the Bond urges from.. other urges. The other reason is that by focusing on the Bond, it acts as your.. well, I suppose you call it Resolve here. We call it a Will. It's essentially the same thing. It will help the process along that much more." Reborn turns his eyes to the one lone hand being raised. ".Yes, Mochida?"

"Uh. How.. how can you tell them apart? Like, Bond urges from.. whatever other urges. What if neither of them go away?"

"For one, the Bond urge is going to hurt like hell when you try to ignore it. That's usually the first clue... Actually, that's all we go by. I don't know if Kakishima does it differently. Or-" Here he finds himself looking at Tsunayoshi, even if unintentionally. "-if it's any different for Skies."

Tsunayoshi doesn't say anything. Doesn't even look at Reborn, actually.

"..He's been staring at me for, like, 10 minutes." Mochida shifts, not so much uncomfortable but flustered. "What gives?"

"Maybe he wasn't exaggerating about wanting the Bond for the past few years." Reborn tips his head, looking at the boy from a slightly different angle. Different enough to see a slight sheen of orange in his eyes. "...Once you've talked about it and narrowed these urges down, you will make skin-contact. That is usually the easiest way to initiate the process of exchanging Flames, until you learn how to do it without touching. The Bond will help with that. Which leads me to what you other guys and gals and everything in between or otherwise should not be doing: you will not interrupt the process. You will not try to help in any way. Yamamoto, you're in charge of keeping them from doing anything unnecessary."

"Wait, why him? Isn't he the first one whose going to try to do anything?"

"Because he's Harmonized, Hana. That's why he won't do anything unnecessary."

Yamamoto's entire being goes steely and his eyes glimmer in a shade of blue not usually seen among Japanese folk. Or any folk, really. Not naturally.

"Does everyone understand now? Any other questions?"

"Yes! Um. What about this thing we laid down?" Lan lifts the length of stiff yarn drawing a 3-branched plant on the floor, encased by a circle and other symbols as well as a number of cheap pillows and seat cushions.

"Cimaruta. A sprig of rue. It's a plant used in protection spells in Sicily. For this, it's to keep the Flames from being contaminated by envious onlookers. Not that that's going to be much of a problem here, but it never hurts to be careful. The cimaruta and the circle also helps keep the energy from getting out of control."

"How's that work?"

"By all of you sitting on the pillows, of course."

"Wait- wait!" Mochida jolts upright, breaking whatever staring contest he'd been in with Tsunayoshi. "If that's supposed to be the boundary then isn't sitting on it defeating the whole purpose?"

"Of course not. If they're sitting on it, you'll try all the more not to let the Flames go out of control, right? It's very effective in Sicily.."
..Then again, the *Cosa Nostra* is probably more used to the idea of being injured by exposure to intense Flame energy.

"Don't forget the Daruma. Our custom dictates that the two of you would normally make an oath to each other and burn something holy to bless the ceremony, but this isn't Sicily and I'm not an ordained priest. My blessings would be emptier than those cream puffs from that one bakery in Azayakatani. Kyouko knows which one I'm talking about."

"*I do,*" Kyouko whispers vengefully.

"I think you two would believe in the Daruma more anyway."

He gives Mochida a nudge on the back, seeing as Tsunayoshi is way too enraptured with something on Mochida's face. Mochida grumbles but picks up the marker and draws an eye onto the Daruma.

Lan raises her hand again. "Where'd you learn all this from? I didn't know Italy had anything like this."

"It's a sect of *Sicilian* magic. We're a rather secretive sort, so you wouldn't hear about it normally."

"Oooh! So, you're.. a witch? Like, Wiccan?"

"*Maghi di Ciammi,*" Reborn says, just to see Hana jump and scowl at him. "Old World, Flame-based witchery. [2] None of that British nonsense."

She makes a face but doesn't say anything else. Reborn checks the candles again, just to make sure there's nothing flammable near them. More than one way to burn a house down, after all.

"Maybe you should say a few words before you run off on us?" Nagi quips from where she's sitting nearby.

"I don't usually start the vows. And I don't think they or Hana would appreciate any vowing here."

"I think they're too far gone to care, honestly."

She's right. Reborn hasn't even said *start* yet and Mochida is already blindly reaching for Tsunayoshi's hand as they murmur inaudibly to each other, frowning in concentration. They're a little ways apart though, so it'll take them a while to remember that they're going to have to scoot closer.

Leon changes into a blank Bible. Reborn flips to a random page and recites, in crisp English, the beginning of every stereotypically Western wedding script. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..."

Hana chokes on a laugh, curled over to hide her face. Lan and Nagi both let out startled, muffled giggles that they cut off quickly enough. Kyouko giggles openly, but Yamamoto doesn't even so much as twitch. Neither do Mochida or Tsunayoshi.

At some point Tsunayoshi reaches his own hand out, meeting Mochida's half-way. The moment they make contact, a pulse of Flames sweeps out and comes up against the edges of the circle like smoke against an invisible barrier. The air shimmers, hot and heady like a summer fireplace.

Reborn does not generally see Auras beyond the color of their Flames. He hears and smells them instead, as most people do. And right now the room smells of peppercorn and charcoal, white
charcoal. Salt brine and lemons. He smells an open campfire surrounded by pine needles, he smells Nana's cooking, smells the sweets that Tsunayoshi likes to eat so much. Smells his toothpaste. Strawberries and mints.

An open field of—

He blinks. Tsunayoshi's forehead is on fire and his eyes are a brilliant Sky orange. Reborn hears that, the staccato flickering of fire and Flame, the hum of energy that accompanies it. Mochida's is a violent, vibrant shade of red, almost a glowing neon shade. No doubt his eyes are the same.

But Reborn isn't looking at them, though their sudden slip into what appears to be Dying Will Mode does surprise him a little. He isn't looking at Yamamoto either, whose state matches theirs with a lazily flickering bright blue Flame.

He's looking at the others. Their eyes are unchanged but each one of their foreheads bears that same Dying Will Flame, bright and glimmering and gleaming. Even Nagi. Mist Flames are almost impossible to manifest physically in their natural state.

Hana and Lan are sitting across from each other and their respective Lightning Flames seem to be trying to leap across the space between them in an attempt to reach the other. Like calls to like, and where they were both watching Tsunayoshi and Mochida at first, now they can't seem to look away from each other.

Huh. This is probably why the officiators always said never to let non-Septet members on the circle. But surprise Resonance Bonding is probably more of a problem in the Cosa Nostra than it should be on the island. It's not like the two girls hate each other, anyway.

He circles around them twice, looking for any signs of Flame energy leakage. The yarn was a crackshot, honestly. He hadn't actually thought it would work. Vongola's church has a Harmonization circle carved into the stone floor and gilded with compressed charcoal, and Xanxus had his done in the circle already set up in the Varia compound's courtyard, though he painted over it whenever he used it. With blood.

Neither of those had any problems with Flames going out of control, but the tales are abundant in the Underworld of failed Harmonizations due to hastily made circles that couldn't contain the Flames.

Salt-crusted yarn is crude, but it seems to work. Probably because they're still kids with lower Flame outputs, and probably because there's 5 other Flames to help contain the energy. He can't imagine what their first attempt at Harmonization would have been like if their Flames are already this wild, even with restraints.

Mochida's hand comes up to palm against the side of Tsunayoshi's neck, fingers against his pulse. Tsunayoshi seems to sit up straighter and the Flames grow larger, brighter, colors and scents and sounds melting together. Laughter, soft and breathless. Beeps and pings of a video game. Bamboo sticks knocking against each other.

Reborn takes that chance to duck out of the room for a moment. He feels his heart fluttering too quickly and wonders if it's about time he started getting old.

* * *

"How are they doing?"

"Wonderful, actually." Reborn leans against the kitchen doorway, unwilling to sit down just yet.
Nana is seated at the far end of the dining table. Kurokawa Sougen and Sasagawa Chihei are on one side, Yamamoto Tsuyoshi and Mochida Kotonomi on the other. Feels a little like a *cupola.* "They're all lit up like Christmas lights."

"All of them?"

He dips his head. "Every last one."

"Is that... common?" Kotonomi asks, worried.

"It can be, Mochida-sann" he reassures her. Granted, it usually only happens to those who are already Harmonized. "I don't know if it's common here, but it's certainly common back in Sicily. It's a good sign, in any case. It tends to mean that the process will be finished quicker than usual."

"How long is that?"

"Oh, anywhere between a few minutes to a few hours. If they're particularly stubborn out each other, it could take *days.* your son and Tsunayoshi seem to have made up, though."

"Oh, that's a relief." Kotonomi sighs heavily, like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. "I've been so worried since he told me about it last night."

"You had a whole night to think it over," Tsuyoshi says humorously. "Takeshi didn't tell me until he was heading out the door, little rascal."

Chihei's laughter is soft, just like her daughter's. "That does sound like something he would do."

"I admit, I'm a little worried about them Harmonizing so young.. Takeshi's never been happier, but isn't it.. detrimental to their development to be forming these kinds of attachments so early on?"

"In.. certain societies, perhaps." Reborn concedes with a nod. "But I haven't heard anything about it from Sawada-san or anyone else."

"I don't know much about it," Nana admits. "I do know that they at around the right age to start forming the Bonds. Almost all the Bonds that have happened on the island were done in the Sawada compound, though, so I am a little worried about us doing it right in the living room."

"I'll check in on them if I feel anything weird happening. The circle will keep them from damaging anything, at least."

"Oh, I'm more worried about *them* getting hurt. Sky flames are harmless enough, usually, but Storm... Oh- I don't mean it like that, Koto-san."

"Not at all, Nana-chan. Kensuke doesn't have many chances to practice his flames. I hope they both come out of this no worse for wear."

"I'll make sure that they do, Sawada-san."

She smiles at him, grateful. Reborn excuses himself for a moment to check in on the children, having felt a slight shiver in the Aura pouring out of the living room.

Most of them have their eyes closed now, or nearly shut, mimicking Tsunayoshi and Mochida's state. Or so Reborn assumes, anyway, since they're now forehead-to-forehead, close enough that he'd like to pull them apart. Especially given both of Mochida's hands holding him close by his neck.
But there's nothing more than that. Just that.. closeness. Reborn remembers it well. If that is their Bonding inclination, it's probably not a wonder they've been at each other's throats.

(Haha. Is it worth his image and reputation to say that out loud?)

(Probably.)

(But maybe someone else will say it first.)

Nana's presence slips up behind him, a gentle touch on his arm to let him know she's here. Not that he needs it, but she probably doesn't know that.

"I've never seen Tsu-kun give off that much flame energy," she says quietly. "Not since..."

"What was he like? When he was younger." What happened, he wants to ask. But he doesn't. There may not have been any Sealings done since Don Ricardo's death, but Reborn's imagination is enough to know it likely isn't a pleasant experience. To go through or to watch someone else go through.

"Oh," she sighs, and a flicker of a smile graces her lips. Soft, nostalgic. Wistful. "He was so beautiful. I know, most mothers will tell you the same thing, but.. he was wonderful, Reborn-san. He was..."

Nana covers her mouth, twisted and near tears. Her eyes close, and when they open again there's a shimmer of wetness behind them.

"..He still is. Beautiful. He- ... he always will be." She shakes her head, brushes a stray lock of hair behind her ear and wipes at the corner of her eye. "I wish you could have seen him, Reborn-san. I wish... I wish 'Mitsu could have, too. I wish he could've seen Tsuna when he was.. younger."

"Yeah," Reborn says. He does not specify what he's agreeing too. Nana doesn't ask him to. "That would have been nice."

Tsunayoshi's vibrant orange and Mochida's bright ruby red swirl around like liquids in a glass. Reborn is reminded of those colored oil-in-water toys; no matter how much you shake them they never mix together, because oil and water do not mix.

This is not like that. They are not oil and water, and if they were, they would still mix. Because that is the whole point of a Sky. To become oil or water at will, to do what otherwise cannot be done.

To accept. To accept so fully that some saw it as a weakness. To accept so strongly that it changed them, for better or for worse. To accept so openly that they had to be taught, as children, what they should or should not to. Who they should or should not accept. Because to accept everything and to forgive everything was to be a Saint.

The *Cosa Nostra* does not need Saints. They need *bosses*, not caregivers. They need leaders, not martyrs. They *burn* Saints, they *burn martyrs*.

Tsunayoshi won't last a day in the Underworld if he doesn't toughen u—

"Oh, they're kissing again."

Reborn is pumping the barrel of a Leon-shotgun before Nana even finishes that sentence.

"Ah, Tsu-kun pushed him away. That's my boy! I taught him that, I did." Nana hums and Leon
turns back into a chameleon. Reborn huffs. Tsunayoshi shoves with the hand he has over Mochida's face again, muttering something. "It took him a while to understand the concept, but he's quite taken to it now."

"The concept?"

"That there are things he does and doesn't like.. that there's a difference between them, and that it's okay to avoid what he doesn't like."

"He'll have to learn to deal with them sooner or later, though. He can't go around avoiding everything forever. Like people, or foods, or.. duties. Responsibilities. It all catches up eventually."

"Reborn-san," Nana says, tipping her head just enough to look at him. "At this point, I don't think there's anything Tsunayoshi's doing that he doesn't already want to do. And, frankly, I don't think you should try to convince him otherwise."

"..Has anyone ever mentioned how much like a Sky you are, Sawada-san?"

"Maybe Tsu-kun is finally rubbing off on me after all these years." She giggles. "Well. We all have a little bit of Sky in us, too, don't we?"

"Maybe we do."

She gives him another pat on the shoulder. Reborn pushes off from the doorway and approaches the kids, now that the swirl of Flames has died down. Yamamoto and Mochida are trying to help Tsunayoshi stand, but it isn't doing much good.

"M'tired," he grumbles, somehow managing to lean heavily on the both of them at the same time. Reborn's never seen anyone quite so exhausted from a Harmonization ceremony... but most people don't release as many Flames as Tsunayoshi did. Another thing they'll have to work on. Fine-tuning that control of his.

Yamamoto lets go and immediately starts collecting all the pillows into a pile, even going so far as to yank them out from under the ones who haven't snapped out of it yet, like Lan and Hana, or hadn't moved off of theirs quickly enough. He does apologize first, though.

In no time at all he has a nest going and Tsunayoshi is the first to fall into it, followed closely by Mochida because Tsunayoshi hasn't let go of his arm. Nagi looks dazed, but she gets to her feet and drops right into the pillow pile next to the other two with a hum. Kyouko slots in next to her. Lan huddles up to the other side where Mochida is, and Hana joins her there. And Yamamoto...

...tries to lay right on top of Tsunayoshi.

"Get off, you're damn heavy!" Mochida grouses, because Tsunayoshi is half on top of him and thus Yamamoto is laying on both of them. "Let go of my legs! Don't laugh at my suffering, Lan!"

Reborn shakes his head and pulls up the salt-stiffened yarn, crumpling it into a ball to toss out later. "You haven't finished the Daruma yet."

Mochida reaches for it with floppy arms and a pinched look on his face. Reborn tries not to laugh at him.

He picks up the Daruma and the marker and drops them on the back of Tsunayoshi's head. Mochida scowls and tries to maneuver his arms around to grab them.
"We'll burn it after," he says once Mochida has managed to scribble the other eye onto the Daruma. They would have made Tsunayoshi do it but the boy is out like a light. "Once everyone's awake. I'm going to assume this is a spontaneous Collective Resting Hour for all of you?"

Tsunayoshi answers that with a self-satisfied hum into Mochida's collarbone that makes him shiver. "In that case— congratulations, Tsunayoshi. Mochida. I now pronounce you Sky and Storm. Enjoy your newly Harmonized life."

"I still think he should've picked a different Storm," Mochida grumbles, but he doesn't try to wiggle out of the pile of bodies. Or he can't. Yamamoto's pretty heavy. "Like.. a better Storm."

"Bullsh't," Tsunayoshi counters, muffled, sleepy, and thick with the local dialect. "You're good. I'll get another. Both. Two. I want two."

Mochida stares at Reborn. Reborn shrugs. He's never heard of anyone having more than one of any Element.

"..Are you trying to say I'm not good enough for you?" Mochida stares down into Tsunayoshi's hair.

Tsunayoshi props his chin up on the other boy's chest, eyes sleepy and half-lidded. "You tryn'a say ye can sat'sfy me alone, Ken-chan?"

Reborn's eyebrows go up. Mochida's mouth opens and closes a few times before he settles for shoving a pillow over his own bright red face and screaming into it. Lan giggles at his side and Tsunayoshi just cozies back down again.

He leaves the candles burning and heads back into the kitchen with a cheery Nana.

* * *

"That has to have been the fastest Harmonization I've ever seen," he says, slipping into a seat at the other end of the table from Nana. "..I suppose it helped that they were already partly Bonded beforehand. Usually it last at least an hour or two."

"Everything's okay?"

"Everything is fine, Mochida-san. No backlash, no discomfort. They just dropped off straight to sleep."

Kotonomi breathes another sigh of relief, no doubt wringing her hands under the table. She reminds him of Timoteo's old nursemaid who had somehow managed to outlive Ottavu herself.

"I hope this is not a tasteless time to bring it up, but I have been considering other candidates to fill out the rest of Tsunayoshi's Harmonization set. Skies in Sicily are generally not meant to remain Unharmonized for very long after their Flames go active. We've had cases of lone Skies that have ended.. badly, to say the least. I'm aware that on the island, it is circumvented by having all viable Skies living together to balance out the lack of Bonds, but.. Tsunayoshi is not there, obviously."

Reborn meets Nana's gaze across the table. "..I worry for him."

"If Tsu-kun wants to complete his set," she says, wavering, "then I will help him."

He wishes he were just a few seats closer. Even a seeming gesture of sympathy might help. "The reason I am bringing this up now is because it would be safest if his set was chosen out of those he
is closest to... and from what I've seen, that seems to be the ones gathered here right now. To start
with, in any case. I haven't been here long enough to know who else he frequently interacts with.
All of you seemed amenable to the idea of harmonization, given that you've stayed behind either as
support or supervision."

"Well.." Kurokawa Sougen rubs the back of his hand in thought. "I could bring it up with Hana-
chan. I think that's the most we could do. We do have rather strong-minded children."

The others nod or make remarks in agreement. Reborn offers a smile that borders on friendly. "All
the better."

"Is there a certain pattern he should be going in? Nao-san didn't mention anything like one
whenever I asked her of it."

"Not so much a pattern as doing it in pair to balance the new influx of Flames. Rain and Storm
often go together. Sun and Cloud, and then Mist and Lightning. The order in which each pair is
brought in is more of a personal preference."

"Well., given the ones around him, Lightning and Sun are probably next. I don't know that Kyouko
has ever thought about it, though," Sasagawa Chihei notes. Reborn finds it a little.. surprising.

Not Kyouko having never thought about it. But rather, how little her mother has to say for or
against it.

"Mm, Hana's a little rough with him, but I think Hana's rough with everyone," Sougen says of his
daughter, chuckling. "Honestly I think she just worries about the choices he makes. No offense,
Kotonomi-san."

"After what happened last year? I'm not surprised." She brushes it aside with a wave of her hand.
"Not that I could find any one person to pin the blame on for what happened. The fact that
Tsunayoshi insisted that it was an accident.. Well. What's done is done."

"Oh, if we're talking about Suns, doesn't Nagi know a good one? The one who worked on the
particle cannon. Irie, wasn't it?"

"Ah, he did come by a few times. I don't know that Tsu-kun is much acquainted with him, though...
But I wouldn't discount him as an option."

"For Lightning, there's the Kusakabes too. Takeshi says that Tetsuya boy comes up pretty often.
Mostly because the Chairman always pops up whenever Tsuna or Takeshi get in trouble. Which
still happens more than they like to admit."

"Oh, Tsuna should definitely get a Hibari for his Cloud. I think Hibari Kyouya is the only one
young enough that Tsuna knows."

Nana hums happily. "Hibari-kun does seem to like Tsu-kun. Maybe he's willing to Harmonize, too.
I don't think I've ever heard of a Hibari Harmonizing before, though."

"First time for everything." Sougen nods, thoughtful. "But does he really need a Cloud
specifically? Most of our kids are Secondary Cloud or Mist. Isn't that good enough?"

Ah, yes. It certainly has been a while since Reborn was last this much blindsided by anything
related to the island. He has missed this feeling dearly.

Confusion, his old friend.
"Nagi-kun would be a good Mist choice. Weren't they already Harmonized?"

"Hm? No, not that I've heard of. Ah, but Tsu-kun is getting to that age where he doesn't want to talk to me about anything.."

They turn to look at Reborn. He's still thinking about how they all seem to know Nagi, who is supposedly not even from this side of the island.

"..He hasn't told me anything about it either. Is there a reason why they should be?"

Now that they mention it, it was a little curious how friendly they had been with each other when he arrived on the island. Well, when he woke up from his coma after arriving on the island. Still can't forget that part.

"Kokuyo Leader and Hibari Leader assigned them to a few tasks together before.. Takeshi-kun, too." Nana taps on her chin. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were already Harmonized."

"Hana-chan thinks Tsuna tries to Harmonize with practically everyone he touches, so there's a good chance they are."

"Considering he doesn't actually like touching that many people, I think she may be on to something," Nana giggles. "We would have to ask Kokuyo Leader for permission if Tsu-kun wanted to Harmonize with Nagi, though, wouldn't we? I hear she's one of the candidates to be the next Leader."

"Ah, that's right. Well.. maybe it's okay if he doesn't have a dedicated Mist Bond? Tsuna is a Secondary Mist, after all. Isn't he?"

Tsunayoshi's mother makes a noise of agreement.

* * *

"You look a little confused, Reborn-san," Nana says once the children have woken up and parted ways after the Daruma burning.

All except for Yamamoto and Mochida, who insisted on staying put. No amount of plying or you have school tomorrow! could convince them to go home for the night. It probably didn't help that Tsunayoshi wouldn't let go of either of them. Something about hairclips and friendship bracelets. Newly established Bonds could be so clingy. and was partly why the Cosa Nostra only allowed them after a certain age. Or maturity, rather. Clinginess is not encouraged among their kind.

"I'd just forgotten how strange this island can be."

Not least of all the way the three children are trying to figure out where to bunk for the night. Tsunayoshi's room is too small but the living room wouldn't be comfortable and there aren't enough futons. (Yamamoto suggests Sharing. Insistently.)

"Oh?"

"I noticed before that Tsunayoshi's eyes.. glowed, I suppose. Nagi-kun said it was a fiamma response. It's a common thing?"
"Oh, yes. That happens quite often here! All children are tested around the time they enter school to see if they show any evidence of fiamma response. That way, the medical staff and better help them adapt to the flames themselves."

It can't have been more than a century since Giotto arrived on his island, and yet they've done so much, it seems. To go from nothing to this. Where Flame testing sounds about as normal as routine autism screening.

"Is it normal for people here to physically manifest Flames as well? Somewhat like what happened during the ceremony."

"Mm-hm!" Nana hands him a wet plate to dry off. "Everyone who participates in the Cops and Robbers games must be physically fiamma active. The island does make it easier to manifest them, but usually it's enough if they can channel the energy into a weapon of sorts. We don't actually have that many people who can manifest them the way it happened in the ceremony... Well, Tsu-kun did it all the time when he was small, but— I haven't seen it happen since then. Some of the other Sawadas can, and I know 'Mitsu can."

"Hmm." Reborn nods idly. "It's rare enough in Sicily as well. There are a lot of us who can use them, but that amount of Flames usually only occurs during the Harmonization ceremony for us. Only a handful of people can make the Flame appear on their foreheads."

"Something about intensity and energy concentration, right?" Nana chirps, and the words themselves are enough for him to do a double-take. Right. Nana works at the Flame Research Facility. "Most people aren't able to focus that energy enough to reach visible density spectrum on that part of the body.. Maa, I guess Tsu-kun really was something special back then. I wonder if he'll be able to do it again one day..."

"..Pardon?"

"Hm? He used to do it all the time. Didn't I say that already?"

"I.. thought you were referring to him using Flames, Sawada-san."

"Oh, oh no!" Nana laughs, waving her hand in front of her face. "Tsu-kun doesn't use his flames at all! But, when he was young, his forehead would light up like a candela at any given moment. Scared me half to death every time, he did."

Of course he did, Reborn thinks again, quietly. Of course he did.

He's got a lot more planning to do.

Lancia curses quietly. Only because the Sassi di Matera is crawling with tourists and impressionable children. He may look the way he does but Lancia does happen to enjoy the company of their younger generation. A rarity among some camorristi, it seems. But the Italian government doesn't do shit for the youth in Campania; the Camorra are usually the only ones left they can turn to. Lacia, for one, wants them to be more than just muscle or thieves.

If his cute little blockheaded cousin can become a top assassin in one of the Cosa Nostra's most
widely known assassination groups, then these kids here can grow up to do more than just die at the hands of another *camorrista*. Or to choke on their own cancer in the Triangle of Death.

"Kane. Hey, kid." Lancia mutters something again and reluctantly snaps his fingers twice. The blond teen immediately whips around like he's been trained to respond that sound pattern. Lancia hates it. "What happened to Gina?"

"What?" Kane turns to Cachi, who stares back at him blankly. "What happened to Gina?"

Cachi shrugs. "I wasn't on watch duty."

"Aw, dammit Cachipi, we're always supposed to be on watch duty!"

"It was your turn."

"Oh. Uh.. Oops." Kane scratches the back of his neck. "The sandwiches smelled really good!"

"Well, go sniff him out and you can have one while I have our *very important meeting* Excuse me." Lancia catches the attention of a passerby, trying not to look disgruntled by how startled and frightened he looks. "Have you seen a boy about this tall with a dark facemask over his mouth?"

The man shakes his head and scurries off. Lancia sighs. *Kids.*

He buys a few sandwiches from a nearby street stall anyway. It's a little after a lunch and the train ride had taken far too long for any of them. Gina had an especially difficult time sitting still for more than a few minutes. So did Kane, but Kane was just *like that*. Too much energy, not enough outlets. He's good at keeping Gina from getting cabin fever, anyway.

"Maybe he thought Kane was taking too long and went on ahead of us," Cachi says quietly. "Gina doesn't like wandering when he's awake."

"Did you hear that, kid? It's still your fault."

Kane fires back some Albanian nonsense, probably picked up from that Estraneo boss. Cachi murmurs something back that Lancia *assumes* was meant to be placating and Kane is just taking it the wrong way, because he can't imagine the possibility that both of them are just spewing profanities at each other.

"Yeah, yeah, I still have no idea what you're sayin- hey, don't call me a shithead. I know that one. Come on, we're going to the church. Keep an eye out for Gina on the way. Otherwise we're just going to have to look for him after the meeting."

"Aren't you supposed to say we have to spend the rest of the day looking for his sorry ass?"

"Look, I like you kids. You're adorable and you're vicious, and Gina probably has psychic fiery magic powers. But I am *not* going to skip a meeting with *Vongola,* civilian or otherwise, just to look for his spikey head."

"He says he likes us," Cachi says to the distracted blond, holding his hand out. "I win."

"Feh!" Kane smacks Cachi's palm with his hand. "I didn't bring money with me. You get it later. Cheater."

"Then I'll take your sandwich as interest."

"What!"
"Did you bet on whether I liked you guys or not? After all these years?" Lancia raises both eyebrows at them and hands over both shares of sandwiches to Cachi's outstretched hand. "That's a dumb move. You really think I didn't like any of you? I love you. I think you're the best. You're great. Creepy, really weird, stop trying to kill Don Cleto, I'm serious, but great."

Cachi's face makes the slightest twitch. Kane reaches over to take one of the sandwiches. "Now he's being weird and gross about it so I'll just have this since you don't have any money on you either."

"I changed my mind, you guys are awful."

Kane takes a monstrous bite out of his sandwich. "No take-backs!"

"I can't believe I'm trying to get you kids halfway across the world and into Japan just because Gina wants to see his twin." Lancia watches them squabble over sandwiches with a shake of his head. "..Or sister. Who is Nagi, anyway?"

"No idea."

"Gina enjoys her company," Cachi says, pushing his glasses up, "so we just put up with her."

"Meaning she scares the living daylights out of you and you've never had the courage to ask her."

"Pretty much."

"She works for some government-type place!"

"She what."

"What? It's in Japan someplace, ain't nothing to do with us here in Italy."

"Lancia must be one of those old-fashioned authority is authority folks."

"You keep that up and I'm not taking any of you out for dessert after dinner."

That quiets them down pretty quickly. Don Cleto's place doesn't stock many sweets, aside from what the kids bring in, and gelato tastes best fresh, besides. He keeps telling them they can always go buy it from the carts themselves, but he figures they're just not used to confronting others. Still not used to it.

Also probably the fact that he always buys them the largest size of whatever mix of flavors they want.

Yeah, they're creepy. But they're still kids.

It takes a bit of meandering and trying to navigate the streets with nothing but the faulty GPS app on Lancia's throwaway phone, but they manage to arrive at the church a few minutes early for the meeting. Gina is already there, sitting on a bench next to an Asian man and...

..eating gelato.

Huh.

"Gina? Have you been here the whole time? We've been looking all over for you."

"No you haven't." The retort is somewhat muffled by the spoon in his mouth. His companion looks surprised.
"..You can talk after all?"

Lancia snorts. "You didn't know until now? That's weird. Usually Gina's a chatterbox."

"Only because none of you can read minds like Nagi can."

"Right. You and she have some super secret special bond that reaches the other side of the globe that you two play telephone with."

The other man looks between the two of them curiously. "You don't know about flames? Or Resonance?"

Lancia... just blinks. Those were not the sort of words he was expecting to be among a civilian's vocabulary.

"Of course I do. Was just teasin' him. I mean, he doesn't even get atmospheric interference or time lag like you get over the phone. It's ridiculously convenient and unfair to the rest of us."

"I could dig around in your head for an entire day if you want to know what it feels like," Gina offers idly.

"No thanks, kid. It itches when you do that." The teen shrugs. Lancia glances at his latest companion. "I take it you're Hokuto?"

"And you must be signor Lancia." The man stands up and extends a hand. Lancia shakes it, though he was half expecting some other kind of greeting, given Hokuto's.. very clearly Asian features and accent. "My apologies for delaying our meeting until today."

"No big problem. You let us know ahead of time."

He also expected someone a bit more.. timid, considering the fact that he's a civilian and Lancia, at least, is a camorrista. He's pretty sure his scars aren't there just for show.

"I didn't know Gina could talk... he just came up to me out of the blue and sat down. I think he might have said something but I didn't catch it, and he wouldn't say anything else after that."

"Didn't say anything," Gina says, paling turning pink at the same time.

Hokuto smiles. "I can more or less guess what baba means, but I didn't want to jump to conclusions."

Gina goes mostly pink now as Kane leaps at him with some choice, excited words in that picked up mixed-language of theirs. Cachi does too, but more quietly.

"..Seeing as he doesn't go around randomly calling people dad, I assume there's something else going on here?"

"Well.. Nagi is my daughter."

Oh. Well then. "Is that why we're meeting with you instead of Vongola? Because you're a relative?"

"Yes and no. I'm one of the few liaisons Vongola has with Kakishima— ah, I think the mafia calls it the Madreperla. The fact that I'm related to her is just something of a coincidence."

"Madreperla.. that's the Vongola island, isn't it? Where their first Boss was buried or something."
"More or less. I'm not sure why the Sicilian mafia is so interested in it, but everyone has their vices... anyway, you needed to consult with me about something? I take it someone wants to visit the island."

Lancia tips his head in Gina's direction. "Your 'son' has been wanting to see Nagi for the past few weeks. It's driving the rest of us nuts so our Boss said we could try to take him there. Assuming the Vongola allowed it."

"Signor Lancia," Hokuto says pleasantly, but so coldly. "The Vongola Famiglia has no jurisdiction over my daughter, nor over the Madreperla. That is why you are speaking with me, and not one of Don Timoteo's people."

The kids have gone quiet. Lancia nods, slowly. The man is a civilian but seems to have enough of a bearing to be a low-ranking captain in any Underground group. Maybe he actually is one.

"Well, luckily, Nagi heard from Gina that you might be trying to get to the island, so she took the liberty of asking our government Authorities for permission and they've granted it. That was also why we had to delay the meeting."

"How did she— oh, right. Psychic fiery magic powers... definitely convenient and cheating."

"Have you had lunch yet? There's a good cafe nearby where we can discuss this further."

Lancia nods. Kane and Cachi stick close to Gina who seems to want nothing more than to hide behind Hokuto. Lancia would almost be offended by this sudden shift in attention if he actually cared to have it for himself. Regardless, it's a bit humorous to see. Gina is just about Hokuto's height but they look nothing alike. You couldn't even try to pass them off as father and son.

A civilian dad probably would do Gina some good, though. Especially if the kid keeps up with this trying-to-kill-Don-Cleto thing.

".. You feeling alright, Gina?"

He nods. "Had chocolate."

"Oh, that reminds me. " Hokuto sets a bag onto the table after clearing away some napkins. "Gina informed me that you weren't going to get them dessert, so I bought gelato for the boys. Still cold."

"I was too going to buy them dessert," Lancia counters even as the other two teens dig into the bag, both trying to be the first one to pick which one they want. "I spoil these shits rotten and they know it."

"Thanks, dad! Not you Lancia."

"You're walking home, Kane."

"Boss Cleto won't let you do that!"

"It's not letting if I tell him you wanted to stay behind but didn't let me know had no money for a ticket later."

The blond sputters something about abuse and neglect, which are completely unfounded and untrue, and also meaningless among the Camorra. Lancia does have a soft spot for them, but seeing as Kane is always ordering the most expensive flavor of gelato he can get his hands on wherever they go just because he can, he's willing to put that soft spot aside every now and then.
"..Wait, you said he didn't say anything to you. How'd you know..?"

Hokuto's head tilts, as though indicating the obvious. "I didn't say he _spoke_."

"What's that mean? Did he do some.. weird magic psychic? Gina, what's he talking abo— Gina?"

The teen jerks upright. Looks like he'd almost fallen asleep in his seat. "—M'Fine."

"Tired?" Hokuto's hand makes an aborted movement. It's only through experience that Lancia doesn't react, hostile intentions or otherwise. That and he'd rather not risk messing up one of their only options for getting to the island.

"Haven't been sleeping well, that's all." Gina leans back in his seat and pulls the mask down just enough to drink his coffee. He's been chugging mugs of the stuff all week but it doesn't seem to have helped any. He hadn't started nodding off until just now, though. "Just the usual nightmares."

"It's never just nightmares where Mists are concerned," Hokuto says. He sets his own coffee down and turns just enough to show that Gina has his attention. "What do you dream about?"

Kane and Cachi have stopped in the middle of their sandwiches. Even Lancia has to admit he's been curious, and yet too cautious to ask outright, with them at the age that they are. And besides, he's not their parent. He hasn't any right to pry. Could demand, if it got to the point that it was affecting everyone in the clan. It isn't, yet.

"He says they keep telling him to kill the Boss," Kane jokes. There's an edge to his tone that suggests he might just actually believe it.

Gina doesn't say anything for a while. Doesn't even do anything, staring at his coffee until he realizes everyone else is staring at him.

Then he looks up, the way a lost child looks at the world.

"What do you dream about, Gina?" Hokuto repeats, hushed, with all the seriousness of the Vindice themselves. Not like a father with a responsibility to his son. Not like a stranger, entertaining a child or pitying a man. But like a person, regarding another person as no more, no less, than that. As a specimen of a human being. "What do you hear in the Mist?"

It's hideously cold and distant, even for a camorrista.

And it seems to be just the thing to get Gina talking, where all of Kane's careful plying and wheedling have failed.

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By the time the end of September rolls around, Tsunayoshi hasn't gotten to Harmonizing with anyone else. Most of the month has been spent getting him and Mochida acclimated to each other again. Mochida is still calling him _Tsuna_ and tripping over his words every time.

Reborn was really hoping it was just the Bond messing around with his hormones and not an actual infatuation. Infatuations are always so difficult to deal with within Septets. Or however many it is that Tsunayoshi intends to gather by the end of it all. He doubts it'll be more than 7. Skies just aren't meant to Bond with any more than that.
He's been going over his notes on everything in the past month, too. Nothing much to do while the Bond settles and the shift of Flames equalizes itself between the two of them. He tries to think of any other instances of a Sky Harmonizing with either more than the usual Septet, or with more than one of any particular Element. None in Italy or Sicily that he could recall.

(Though, there had been rumors of Daemon Spade's lover, Elena, and whether she was ever meant to be included in their number.)

They say the First Emperor of China had more than a thousand Storms at his beck and call. One could only speculate if he Harmonized with them all, if any. And the Egyptians didn't even have Skies, they worshipped Suns, of all things. Not that Reborn is complaining.

The average person can make Resonance Bonds with as many people as they like. Theoretically speaking, a Sky can Harmonize with as many as they like. Maybe there is no hard upper limit; maybe it's just something the Cosa Nostra decided on for themselves.

Also theoretically speaking you could Bond with practically anything that carried Flames, but no one tries Bonding with rocks or Australian monstrosities, so Reborn's going to take those theories with a lot of salt.

Besides, he has other, more pressing matters to deal with at the moment. More pressing than the fact that Tsunayoshi has about 2 months left to gather up at least 4 more Elements, Harmonized or otherwise.

"Yes, Leon, I'm sure this is going to work." The chameleon side-eyes him the way only a chameleon can. ".Well, I'd be more sure if you'd let me test it out on myself first."

Leon shakes his head.

"I know, I'm not exactly eager to die, either. But that won't happen, sei? It's the same concept, just in a different skin and a lot easier to use. Trust me, picciulu. It's going to work."

Leon finally concedes with a lizardly huff and crawls up Reborn's arm and onto his shoulder. Reborn sets his sprawl of papers aside and leans out the window, overlooking the back yard where Tsunayoshi and his gaggle of loosely-termed 'friends' are throwing each other around in a demonstration of self-defense and damage mitigation. Kyouko's evidently quite good at aikido, and they've nothing better to do on the last Sunday of the month, apparently.

"Tsunayoshi," he calls down.

The boy looks up from where he's sitting on the back porch, apparently benched after twinging his previously injured ribs from throwing Yamamoto too hard. His form for the throw had been otherwise perfect, though, considering the height difference.

"I have a theory I want to try out," Reborn says. Leon's tongue flicks out and jostles the curl of his sideburn. Reborn rubs a finger over his head. "I might need your help with it."

Tsunayoshi looks at the others, then back up at Reborn.

"Um.. sure?"

"Good. I'll be right down."

He's still sitting in the same spot by the time Reborn opens the door to the back porch, knees hugged to his chest, hair all askew and bits of grass stuck in it.
"This isn't going to be something weird like... going for a run at midnight, is it?" Tsunayoshi asks as he stands up at Reborn's prompting and hops down onto the grassy lawn. Perfect angle. "Because I can tell you now that's a very bad idea. It'll be dark and I'll trip over everything."

Reborn presses a hand to his chest in mock surprise. "Oh, come now, Tsunayoshi. Don't you trust me?"

He means it in jest. Because his very job description demands trust. Requires that his targets believe in him wholehearted, enough to be shaped and trained or otherwise thoroughly destroyed. Sometimes remade. Sometimes not.

**Trust gets you killed.**

(But not if you're the one that's being trusted.)

"Yes..? I guess?" Tsunayoshi blinks. "Yeah. Okay. What's this theory about?"

(He's never been all that good at distinguishing a 'yes' that's influenced by the copious Aura of his Sun Flames from a 'yes' that isn't. A 'yes' that is true and honest, or a 'yes' that's more of a 'if you say so'.)

Reborn smiles. Leon scampers down his arm and becomes a gun in his hand, as he has a thousand times before, and will a thousand times after this.

"You'll find out when you die."

It takes exactly 0.05 seconds to aim the muzzle, as always, and even less time to pull the trigger and fire a beam of nothing but **bright shimmering yellow** right into Tsunayoshi's forehead. As always.

(It's all the same to him, in the end.)

(As always.)

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In retrospect, it was probably a bad idea to shoot him in front of his friends. But the end results were well worth an angry Leon and a broken nose.

[1] diu dammi la pacenzia:- (sicilian) 'god give me patience-' or so i hope anyway

[2] maghi di ciammi: lit. 'mages of the flames', though 'magia' is (i think) one of the many ways to say 'witch' or 'sorcery' in italian, depending on region and intention. will be loosely based on old world, pagan stregheria, and more current folk traditions. or what i can find of them, anyway.

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Oops.

So i'm thinking in this au, all forms of 'magic' utilize some sort of flame aura (healing
with sun, cursing with a mix of mist and sun, etc), but only certain groups focus on actively manifesting flames. The maghi are one of them. Not all of these aura-users are affiliated with the underworld like Reborn is. He could just say 'I'm mafia' but that probably doesn't explain a whole lot by itself.

On a different note, I've been contemplating Reborn's... everything, really. Low-empathy? Antisocial boredom? General jackassery? C'mon, Rebo, you adore the kid, why you gotta shoot him like that. (Things Reborn actually really cares about: himself, Leon, and Hedda, in that order. And maybe eventually Tsuna. Oh yeah and Timoteo's on that list somewhere, too.)

Anyway if we're lucky it's another 4-5 chapters before this arc ends uwoohh. If not, it'll be chapter 20 that it ends haha that's so many chapters /weep
[oyster fortunes daily] when the lights go out.

Chapter Summary

later, he'll wonder why they didn't seem more concerned than they were. considering he, well, shot one of their friends. it's been a while since the island has surprised him.

Chapter Notes

this is me reconciling both manga and anime adaptations of the dying will bullet. also, harmonization nonsense. /fingerguns

nnnooooot super satisfied with this chapter, but that's probably because i'm not too terribly fond of loose ends and cliffhangers to end chapters with. like all the recent chapters. haha.

i think i've... mostly recovered from that monster arc that was mochida's 3 chapters and almost 40k words of ridiculous flashbacks... wheezes.

**WARNINGS:** softcore violence. fighting against kids. reborn doesn't actually want to hurt them though so it's not super violent and exciting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**i'll dive in; pull you up, pull you out.**

Nagi shivers and checks her watch. It's only half-past noon. Far too early for it to start getting this cold. The sun's still high in the sky, too.

"Miss Nagi?" She looks up and over to the man occupying other side of the table in one of Kokuyo's quaint little cafes. "Is something wrong?"

It's been nearly a month since she was removed from Reborn's case and reassigned. Nagi still has to check in on him every week or so, but he'd been able to fill out the questionnaire on proper Island procedure in case of certain hypothetical events and proved himself capable of remaining on the Island alone. Or at least, with just his host family supervising.

Theoretically, anyway. He's been behaving well enough this past month, but she gives it a few more weeks before they have to call her back on permanently. Reborn just seems like that type of person.

In the meantime, she's playing tour guide and escort to a.. guest. From out of the country. She wonders if he knows who she is. Gina says they're both quite well known among the denizens of the Underground.

"Just a chill in the air, Mr. Masato," Nagi replies. Her English is about the same as his own,
accented and carefully spoken.

She's just not sure if she can or wants to accurately explain that it feels like something hollowed
itself out inside her chest and made itself at home. Except, instead of feeling some sort of other
presence there, she feels.. a lack. Just.

A distinct lack of something that should otherwise be there.

"Oh." He looks up at the sky. ".It is about autumn now, isn't it?"

"Mm. It'll prime travel season soon enough. Japan gets a lot of visitors around Christmas and New
Year's."

"You get them here too?" he asks. She nods. "Huh. I would have thought the Madreperla to be too
good for tourists."

"Tourism is a wonderful source of income, Mr. Masato, as evidenced by your own self."

"Odd that we don't hear much about it," he says, with a touch of sharp-edged humor. ".And I do
have other reasons for being here."

"We know." Nagi smiles. He had admitted as much when he arrived last week, during his entrance
interview with Kokuyo administrators. He probably doesn't remember any of it, though. Those
caught unawares or lacking high enough Mist resistance rarely remember their interviews. "Can
you manage the rest of the day by yourself? I have a report I need to turn in and a small matter to
attend to later."

"I think I should be able to. Go for stroll along the docks after I finish reading." He gestures to the
tablet in his hands, currently displaying an Italian news article. "How long will you be gone?"

"No more than a few hours, I hope. I can call in another guide if you need recommendations for
dinner in the evening."

"I think maybe I can handle at least that much, Miss Nagi."

"Then I'll see you again later today, Mr. Masato." Nagi finishes her tea and packs up her things.
'Masato' waves as she leaves.

It isn't his real name, of course. She's well aware of that. But whoever he is, his case is high
enough up that the Leaders are involving themselves personally in it. It's.. just a little unsettling.

It's also a little weird to see both Hibari Leader and Kokuyo Leader working together. Which, of
course, says just that much more about how important this man is. Supposedly, anyway. Could just
be that someone has finally brought up how annoying it was that they never seemed to do any real
work (which is only partly true, and only because Hibari Leader seems to be inordinately fond of
visiting his kid as often as possible).

Nagi arrives posthaste via Hibari escort at the old Kokuyo Headquarters, now converted into a
branch office specifically to handle and courier official governmental parcels. Nothing more secure
than their particular blend of illusory seals to ensure the correspondence wouldn't be opened by
anyone other than the target flame signature. Thus far, no one outside the branch office has been
able to duplicate it, though not without lack of trying. Mostly students at the Kokuyo Academies
trying to show off.

She'd be lying if she said she never tried it herself. But Nagi learned pretty quickly that those seals
take a veritable army of Mist users to make. That, and some very confidential, high-security equipment. The kind that people like Shouichi would love to get their hands on. Maybe one day.

For now, she uploads her report onto a pair of disposable memory sticks and passes them along to the couriers for sealing and delivery to both Hibari and Kokuyo Leader. This week's observations of 'Masato' and whatever information he has let slip so far. Technically she should be on the lookout for any attempts on his life, too, but considering he's dead to the rest of the world and Kakishima doesn't really care about Outsiders who behave themselves, there isn't much threat-watching to do. No one on the Island is stupid enough to try to kill someone under the observation of Kokuyo or Hibari, anyway.

She wonders who sponsored his arrival at the island. They wouldn't tell her when they gave her the assignment, and she hadn't really thought it important enough to press the matter. Still doesn't think it is, just.. finds it a little curious.

There's the obvious, glaring Black Sheep answer, of course. Nagi doesn't get how someone supposedly stricken from the Island's records can still have the authority to sponsor Outsiders coming to the Island, but that's a thing for Kokuyo and the Hibaris to figure out. If they say he's good to come onto the Island... well. She's not going to argue with that.

Her phone rings as she's leaving the building. It's the business line, the one that's constantly subjected to some manner of live buzzword monitoring and recording. She picks up and immediately holds the phone as far away from her ear as she can because the noise on the other end is tremendous, holy shit.

"NAGI? NAGI, ARE YOU THERE?"

"YES!" She shouts, hoping they can hear her. "WHO IS THIS?"

"AKANE, FROM HQ."

"OKAY, AKANE FROM HQ." Nagi makes an aborting gesture to someone who looks like they're coming out of the building to check up on why the hell she's screaming into her phone. "WHY IS IT SO LOUD OVER THERE?"

"KOKUYO LEADER IS, UH... HAVING A PROBLEM." Crashing. Smashing. Is that Kaede yelling? That sounds like Kaede yelling. "OKAY, SO KOKUYO GUARDIAN IS HAVING A PROBLEM. HE'S REALLY MAD. IT'S— shit, there goes the door— ANYWAY."

"DO YOU NEED ME THERE?"

"NO, HIBARI LEADER AND VICE-LEADER ARE BOTH ON THEIR WAY. WE'LL HOLD THE ROOF DOWN UNTIL THEY GET HERE— never mind there that goes too— CHECK UP ON THE BOY, NAGI."

"THE WHAT?"

"THE BOY! THE BOY. YOUR BOY."

"GINA?"

"NO THE OTHER BOY, THE FISHY BOY."
"...TSUNA?"

"SHHH! DON'T SAY IT SO LOUD OR THE GUARDIAN WILL HEAR—"

Nagi mutters something colorful and plugs one ear, still holding the phone away. Something—someone—screches like a banshee, and that might be a door slamming and dear god blissful silence.

..She's still not taking any chances, though.

"..AKANE?"

"Ow, yes, I'm still here. Why are you yelling?"

Nagi mouths noiselessly for a few moments.

"...You were saying about Tsuna?" she asks instead, still a little too loud.

"Oh! Yes. Please check in with Tsuna. Something happened—at least, we think something happened. Kaede is Misting everyone within reach and throwing a fit, the Guardian keeps screaming about everyone trying to kill his fish, it's all very unsettling. We've been trying to get some answers out of the Hibaris but their patrols haven't gotten back to them yet, so we're just sitting on here hands here, hoping the Guardian doesn't tear down the rest of the walls... Nagi? Hey, Nagi, are you still there?"

The feeling in her chest flares as Akane speaks, seeping out and reaching the very tips of her fingers. Chilly.

"Oh," she whispers. Presses a hand against her chest, feeling the flutter of a heartbeat that isn't her own. "Oh, god."

She is still cold. She is still so cold.

That's what was missing. That's what was lacking, that's what—

Yamamoto is the first to spring into action before Tsunayoshi's body even hits the grass. For someone whose Flames are meant to Tranquilize and be Tranquil, Yamamoto seems very aggressive. Kind of like Xanxus' little shark.

He's also pretty blatant about his path of attack and it's easy for Reborn to sidestep it, elbow him in the side of his neck just enough to send him sprawling in a way that he won't knock his head on the edge of the patio and probably die horribly. Reborn does hear a muted pop, which distracts him just for a moment as the baton slips out of Yamamoto's hand with a yelp. The blazing Rain Flames coating it fizzle out soon after.

A sizzle of bright green streaks the space between his nose and his shoulder, numbing any skin in the immediate vicinity. Somehow, somewhere, Hana has gotten her hands on a gun. Reborn wonders if it's her personal concealed carry one. Where does she even hide it?

He muses, idly, as he shoots it out of her hands. Just on the handle, enough to shock her into
dropping it but not close enough to damage or activate any part of her hands. He considers shooting
one more time to knock it away even further when there is a flash of red and gun-Leon is split in
half.

He'll give Mochida points for his discipline with the sword, at least. And for being resourceful. It
looks like he's using the straight end of Hana's cane as a shinai, and the length of it crackles with
Storm-lined-Lightning Flames, as sharp as any metal blade.

Unfortunately, battle cries aren't conducive to sneak attacks or catching enemies off guard. It's easy
to evade the next few swings, dancing around him while avoiding getting into Yamamoto's range,
and keeping an eye on Hana as well.

Soon enough, Leon is in one piece again and back in Reborn's hand.

"Careful," he says while pistol-whipping the pseudo-sword out of Mochida's grip, after narrowly
avoiding another slash at his chest. "Tsunayoshi picked this shirt out for me."

That gets him distracted for a fraction of a second. And in that fraction of a second, Mochida splits
off into two, one frozen still and the other rushing around the side with another cane-sword in hand.

That one smells of strawberries and cream, sickeningly sweet syrup. The sword goes right through
him. Obviously Mochida wasn't the one to make that Illusion, or else he wouldn't look so startled
by it.

Reborn takes that chance to yank him forward by the front of his shirt, spin him around until he can
hook his arm right around Mochida's throat in a more or less hostage position. Just in time for a
streak of yellow to sizzle past his ear.

Another surge of Sun Flames to activate the more Mist resistant parts of his brain dissolves the
lingering cloying scent, Mist dissolving to reveal who else but Kyouko, aiming Hana's gun in their
direction.

"My, my, you're all just full of surprises, aren't you?" Reborn snorts, grabbing one of Mochida's
hands trying to claw his arm off and reworking his hold to pin both hands in place. "You didn't
even give me a chance to explain myself."

"You could've done that before shooting him!" Mochida spits out, bucking and trying in vain to get
free. Unfortunately, Reborn is taller, older, and heavier. He is also powered by the Sun. Literally.

"Yes, but where's the fun in that?" He shakes his head and jerks his hold tighter, hissing. "Stay
still."

That doesn't work, so he presses the muzzle of the silencer to Mochida's temple. Leon's eyes stare
balefully at him from the chamber, but it does get the teen to settle down pretty quickly.

It stops Kyouko from firing another shot, too.

"Good to know you guys value each other so highly. I'd rather not have children shooting each
other for vengeance's sake."

Reborn, however, has no such qualms. He fires a shot to knock the gun out of Kyouko's hand this
time, and two more to send it even further away. Hana winces with every shot, even muffled by the
silencer, and cringes when she hears it hit the fence at the other end of the yard. She looks terrified.
Terrified and angry.
Mochida stomps on his shin and Reborn winces, ow. He shoves the boy onto Yamamoto, who is about halfway up and cradling one arm when he's knocked down again with another yelp. Reborn keeps them down by pointing the gun at them and firing just one warning shot, just close enough to sizzle their nose hairs.

Not what was he was looking to get out of this test, but it's nice to have a visual confirmation of the group's Harmonization states. It's not too bad.

"Will you all calm down now? Or do I actually have to shoot one of you?"

He's rather pleased to note that, despite their vying for Tsunayoshi's attention this past month (one in a completely friendly manner and the other in a.. decidedly more than friendly manner), Mochida is staunchly shielding Yamamoto with his own body, even though the younger boy is quite a bit taller than him. Probably has something to do with the fact that Yamamoto looks like he's injured, even though all he did was fall down. That sounds more like something that would happen to Tsunayoshi.

"He is fine," Reborn says, eyes flicking up to watch Hana and Kyouko. Aside from the initial firing from the gun, neither of the girls have activated their Flames anywhere else on their bodies. He thought he saw some in Yamamoto's eye, but that might have just been the light. "You're all lucky none of you stepped on him in your unnecessary thirst for revenge."

"Unnecessary?" Hana hisses. Kyouko grabs her arm and pulls her back when Reborn stares pointedly at them.

"You killed our friend, Reborn-san," Kyouko says lowly. He remembers her demonstrations earlier. She's certainly not as frail as she seems. "You'll have to excuse us for being upset about that."

He tries very hard not to roll his eyes. "He's not dead, I told you already. He's fine. He'll be perfectly fine once he wakes up. I'm just testing out a theory and he's agreed to help me with it."

"You didn't tell him you were going to shoot him!" Hana shrieks, high-pitched and shrill. She looks like she'll be bordering on hysteria soon, if Tsunayoshi takes his sweet time for any longer.

Reborn kneels down slowly, well aware that both Mochida and Yamamoto have been strangely quiet after the former's verbal outburst. He can practically taste the thrum of their Flames, though, and he'll definitely sense if they're planning to make any moves in that state. The gun is only pointed at them because they're closer to him than Hana and Kyouko are.

He reaches out with his free hand, breaking his watchful gaze just briefly to make sure of Tsunayoshi's position. He's still lying prone in the grass, head tipped over in the boys' direction, eyes open. Like a dead man.

A quick probe to the underside of his jaw comes up with slightly warm, but cooling flesh. No pulse. Of course. He did shoot to kill, after all.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Hana whispers as he retracts his arm. "You did kill him. You killed him, Tsuna's— you killed him—!"

She breaks off with a choked sound. Kyouko's face twists, a brief moment of disbelief and despair. Reborn knows those feelings well.

Yamamoto's face is strangely blank, and he seems to be muttering something under his breath. Praying, perhaps? Reborn knows that one, too.
"He'll wake up," he says, with something that might be reassurance, if he was ever inclined to do something like that regularly. "I would never intentionally kill him."

He forgets, of course, that the reason Tsunayoshi seems to disdain most physical contact is because of his ability (or need) to constantly absorb Flames from anything nearby. He forgets, or he does not realize the implications. The ramifications.

Reborn's entire arm goes numb for a moment, like all the blood has been drained out of it in a split second. Then it tingles and sizzles back to life as his own Flames rush to fill the emptiness. It's only a moment, but long enough that it takes his attention away from the other kids. And as the artery under his fingertips jumps back to life, so too do Mochida and Yamamoto. A sudden weight on his other arm tells him they're taking advantage of his brief distraction to try wrestling Leon out of his grip, despite Hana and Kyouko's alarmed shouts.

It's futile, because Reborn let his gun be knocked out of his hands exactly twice in his lifetime, and a pair of kids aren't about to be the reason why it happens the third time.

But even that in itself is a distraction. While he's busy clucking his tongue and trying to shake them off his arm, he takes his eyes off of Tsunayoshi and the girls for just a few seconds.

And a few seconds is all that someone needs to drag him back down by that very same arm, the weight of it fuzzy and heavy. Reborn whips back around, partly alarmed and partly expectant.

Tsunayoshi is beautiful. He really is. It's been years since Reborn saw a Sky so dazzling, so glowing and bright and haloed in his own Flames. And oh what a Flame it is, burning like a beacon on his forehead as it should be, in his eyes, where it belongs. A lovely Flame. A lovely sound. A lively, crackling fireplace that drowns out the din of Hana's shouting and Yamamoto's cries.

Tsunayoshi is also wearing nothing but his boxers, which is to be expected from someone in Dying Will Mode. Reborn has of course never seen Tsunayoshi without a shirt on before this, so the cluster of scarring on his right ribcage comes as something of a surprise. A very fascinating, curious surprise.

Also, that sure is his fist heading right for Reborn's—

"Kyou- Kyouya-san, where are we going?"

Kyouya doesn't answer, but judging by the way the Committee radio frequency is chattering, Kyouya has already heard what's going on. Tetsuya still has no idea, but judging from the way Kyouya is behaving, and the fact that he has a habit of doing this 'up-and-go' thing whenever a certain someone is involved, he has a gut feeling that a certain someone is involved.

Namely, Sawada Tsunayoshi. They call it a small animal radar, but Tetsuya is of the belief that Kyouya is simply well versed in keeping track of specific flame signatures, whether out of necessity or sheer desire to keep tabs on everyone in Namimori, or something close to it.

It's neat, though. Tetsuya wishes he could do the same for Kyouya.

"...shots."
He dials up the volume on his handheld radio and brings it up closer.

"—ports of gunfire in East Namimori. Sightings of Sun and Lightning flares. I repeat, we've received reports of gunfire in East Namimori. There have been sightings of Sun and Lightning flares in the area as well. Requesting any available units to look into the matter and report back. Do not attempt to engage unless in a group."

"Kyouya-san? Did you hear that? There's something happening, we should probably check that out first—"

"Tetsuya. Stop talking or you'll fall behind."

Heaving something that is absolutely not a sigh, Tetsuya shoulders himself and wonders why he's the one having trouble keeping up with Kyouya and not the other way around.

"This is Tatara Squad at the site of the gunfire reports. We're approaching the household to see what's going on. Please stand by—Oh, shit."

"What is it, Tatara?"

"It's- it's the Sawada household."

Oh shit indeed, Tetsuya muses.

"Uh. He's on fire. And naked? Boss—"

"Do not engage," Kyouya snarls into the radio. Tetsuya's radio. Tetsuya's radio that he snatched away. "This is Chairman Hibari Kyouya. I will deal with him myself. Do not engage Sawada Tsunayoshi."

"That's easier said than done! He's- he's behaving very aggressively—Chairman, I think he's just gone through a full-body fiamma phasing, we need to call—holy snail on a stick—!"

"Fools," Kyouya mutters. He returns the radio and Tetsuya does not say anything about it being taken away from him. "We need to hurry."

"..Not that I think Tatara's squad can't handle Sawada, but- why do we need to hurry?"

"Because they can't handle the little animal. Have you forgotten what happened last year, Tetsuya?"

"The incident with the Kendo Club?"

"He cracked both of my tonfa."

"..With a steel-core shinai."

"Precisely."

Tetsuya frowns. "But there's nothing shouldn't be anything like that where he is now. Even if we take into consideration his company, the only ones possessing anything even close to a steel-core anything are—"

And then it hits him.

Well, more precisely, Kyouya's tonfa hits him over the head. Not particularly hard, but enough to
sting and make his brain catch up with the conversation.

"Oh. The batons." Tetsuya reaches for his own subconsciously, fingers wrapping over the smooth wood handle of it. "I didn't think that new regulation would go into effect until next year."

"You were sick when the new ones were issued. Our division is testing the prototypes for now. Sawada Tsunayoshi is expressly not to touch them."

Tetsuya blinks. "Why not?"

A brilliant, massive pillar of Sky flames bursts into the air, like a gaudy 'YOU ARE HERE' marker for the Sawada residence that probably would have been visible from the Gendo-cho border, along with a muted, distant pop sound, like a tire blowing out. It goes out a few seconds later, and is followed by an announcement over the Committee radio warning everyone to, again, stay away from the Sawada residence.

"Right." Tetsuya's mouth forms a thin line. Kyouya clucks his tongue and picks up his pace. "Prototypes."

"Call Dr. Ueda," Kyouya mutters. And adds after a moment, "If no one got a fiamma reading for that outburst, I will bite them all to death."

"You're more invested in the new batons than I thought you'd be, Kyouya-san."

The Chairman's face scrunches. "I've destroyed two already in the same way trying to use them. My father cried."

"..Which one? Er, which father?"

Kyouya gives him a frown. "Both of them."

"Oh."

Probably tears of unadulterated happiness, then.

"..You just want new weapons, don't you, Kyouya-san?"

Kyouya lets out a snarling huff and breaks into a run. Tetsuya says a silent prayer for whomever is still conscious when Kyouya arrives at the Sawada residence, and proceeds to radio for any available fiamma physician to be ready to receive a potential patient.

---


He is dead. This is what death feels like. He thinks he has felt like this before.

He was small then. He is still small now. He grew quick before, and now he's paying the price for it. Or so he likes to think.

The mind and body develop quickest when young. Young and soft and malleable, easy to twist and form. Flames are good at twisting and forming and molding. Makes things stretch farther, stick
faster, build stronger.

(If he doesn't get a growth spurt soon he's going to be this height for forever. He can't have that. Takeshi would never let him live it down. Neither would Kensuke, actually. Or Hana. Jerks.)

Wait. Isn't he dying? Or even already dead? People don't think things when they're dead. Or dying. Well, maybe when they're dying, but he- Tsuna-

Tsuna doesn't feel like he's dead. Or even like he's dying.

He feels.. paralyzed. He feels like he can't move. Can't move, can't see, can't breathe can't smell can't-

Can't. He can't.

But he is. He still is.

There is a pressure on his throat, right under the rim of his jaw, where his pulse is. Or would be. Should be. He doesn't feel any pulse responding to that touch. He is not alive, after all. He is, quite literally, dead inside. And outside. And all-around-side?

Something warm and fluttering hot floods through him from that point at his neck. It soaks into him the way a damp sponge soaks up water, in a rush of bright tangy citrus and distinctly flavored sea salt. It's cliche as hell, but Tsuna imagines he hears an angel's choir beckoning to him from above, low and murmured and haunting. If he'd had any inkling towards Christianity like many of the Sawadas were, he'd have been a little worried. Worried, or tempted to follow the singing.

As it is, Tsuna just thinks it sounds like prayer days at the Founder's altar. Kinda nice?

He can see again. Just— just briefly. Just for a moment. A blinding flash of a moment, like a camera shutter, but in reverse. He sees—

He sees Takeshi. On the ground. Sees him angry, terrified. There is a gun pointed at him. There is a-

The heat flares inside him, writhing and angry and furious. Come home, it says to him. Bring him home.

What do you want to be? it asks him. What do you want to do?

Tsuna is angry. Tsuna is terrified.

What is your Resolve?

Fire burns on his right side, in the space between his last two ribs. He remembers that night. Remembers it clear as day, though it had been night. Remembers fire lancing through him, sucked in, leaping up and out and seeking vengeance against anything daring to threaten what is his.

What is his Resolve? The same as it has always been. To live. To live.

He wants to live, and the desire consumes him like wildfire, like flames, it burns through every atom of his being and restructures them all until everything has been reprogrammed to do exactly that.

Live.
The world comes into color again, from monochrome to sharp pastels, and then bright green grass tickling his nose. Hasn't been cut in a long, long while, not since the last time the man called father came to visit. It's getting tall, even though they haven't been watering it much. There is a spider in its web under the patio, wrapping up some unfortunate insect. He fancies the eyes are staring at him.

Takeshi isn't there anymore and the hand on his neck is leaving.

Tsuna reaches out without thinking. Grabs that hand, *yanks* on it, *you're not going anywhere* on the tip of his tongue. But he is small, still small, and only succeeds in using that arm to pull himself upright until he is sitting instead of laying prone and dead in the grass. He *breathes*, and he breathes in sunlight and chlorophyll, salty sweat, the air trembling with fizzling ozone and a whisper of peppercorn and the morning after rain.

This man smells of citruses. Smells like dusty plains and wheat fields and fresh, fresh bread. The choir sings to him, *from* him, and he sounds, he smells, of death and blood and *glory to Sicily*.

Something in his mind whispers, *this man is not a threat*.

But he has a gun. Takeshi and Kensuke are clearly trying to take it from him, he had it *pointed at them*.

*Not a threat.*

He shot Tsuna. Shot him in front of everyone, shot him without telling him what would happen, without letting him say goodbye to *maman* first. *Shot him. Why?*

*Not a threat.*

He is looking at Tsuna with an expression that Tsuna has seen before. A month ago, a few weeks before that. Wonder. Expectation. Some sickening, misplaced sense of pride. Did he always have that many wrinkles at the corner of his eyes?

Those are some damn curly sideburns. What the heck?

He moves like someone unused to his own body, but deliberately so. Tsuna has always known this, but he realizes it now with a strange sense of clarity and an understanding he would not normally have. The man moves with grace, with fluidity, long-limbed and confident. Also a dismissive awareness to just how ridiculous he looks in capri shorts.

He is not a threat.

Tsuna does not unleash the fury of a thousand Skies burning under his skin, in his veins, in his *blood*. It surges through him like a tidal wave, breaking and smothering and *drowning, drowning, drowning*. It screams at him, how dare you, *how dare you*. It says:

*He is not a threat.*

...So Tsuna rears back his right arm and decks Reborn square across the nose instead.
Whatever relief Kensuke had felt bursting in his chest the moment he saw Tsuna sitting up is immediately frozen by the sight of the flame flickering on Tsuna's forehead.

Tsuna's tutor doesn't seem to realize how bad it is. He looks, what, proud? What the hell? Doesn't he have any idea— what do they do to flame-actives in the mafia?

Kensuke grabs Tsuna from behind before Tsuna can do anything else. If he and Tsuna had willing to go at each other's throats a few months ago with just elevated fiamma levels... what's Tsuna going to do with that big ol' flame on his head? What would he be capable of doing?

What would he be willing to do?

(Kensuke remembers Morita and Saitou. Remembers Tsuna trying to bear down on them with that same fire, that same drive, remembers how it basically overexerted his heart and made it stop.)

"Tsuna- hey, Tsuna, calm down!" Kensuke grunts. While Tsuna isn't actively fighting him off, he's still trying to move forward. Trying to get closer to the man he just knocked back with a single lucky punch. Sure was a good punch though.

Yamamato's trying to help, but it doesn't do much good, what with his arm and all. It's like Tsuna can't even hear them.

He tries to twist them around so he can see what Kyouko and Kurokawa are doing instead. "Kyouko, Kurokawa! Get Yamamoto's radio and call for a doctor!"

But before any of them can even start searching for the radio that Yamamoto might have dropped in the grass at some point, the front gate swings open and a squad from the Disciplinary Committee senior high division waltzes in. For some reason, Kensuke feels more worried than relieved.

"What's going on here?" the squad-head demands, stalking forward. His baton is already out and at the ready.

"Do not engage," Hibari's voice says over the radio. It's coming from somewhere in the grass too and Kyouko is scrambling to find it. "This is Chairman Hibari Kyouya. I will deal with him myself. Do not engage Sawada Tsunayoshi."

Those are the wrong words to say, apparently. Tsuna jerks himself out of Kensuke's hold and more or less flies at the Committee squad, sending half of them shrieking away and the other half getting their batons out. Kensuke doesn't blame them. He's seen what Tsuna can do with that fire on his head.

"That's easier said than done!" says the one holding the radio, frantic and scrambling away. "He's- he's behaving very aggressively— Chairman, I think he's just gone through a full-body fiamma phasing, we need to call— holy snail on a stick—!"

Aaand that would be about when Tsuna lunges at him and knocks the radio from his hands. And then throws the older boy onto the ground hard enough to make him wheeze and not get up for a few minutes. Tsuna seems to be just going after anything that moves, which means basically the entirety of the Committee patrol squad. It takes barely any time for him to put nearly all of them on the ground, save one.

"Hello? This is, um, Sasagawa Kyouko." Kyouko seems to have found the Yamamoto's radio finally. Of course it would have been right around where Kensuke has just landed. They share a furtive, mutually attempted reassuring smile. "I- we need a doctor at the Sawada Residence. Sawada Tsunayoshi is experiencing unrestrained fiamma response of- what is that, Class A?"
Kurokawa makes a muted sound of agreement nearby, having crawled over to Kyouko's side and unwilling to leave it.

"Class A. Possibly higher. Please send medical hel—"

Tsuna gets his hand on one of the fallen batons. It makes the sound of a car backfiring, loud and heinous and explosive, and Kensuke cannot even begin to describe the rush of power and rightness that smashes into him. It's like cannonballing into a hot spring filled with bamboo leaves and ginger slices. It tingles.

He also can't even begin to describe what Tsuna looks like, surrounded by a pillar of light like some magical girl transformation sequence. Except he's still almost naked and that's not light and —

"Shit," he breathes out. That's not good.

"Class S," Kyouko whispers, and then repeats it, louder, over the near inaudible roar of firefightlivemine that Kensuke wonders if anyone else but him is hearing. "Class S! Double-S, maybe! Please tell me someone saw that- wait, Kensuke, don't—!"

He's pretty sure that if Yamamoto wasn't injured right now, he'd be the one doing exactly what Kensuke is about to do, because Yamamoto seems like that kind of guy. Being Tsuna's, what, best friend and all? Also really reckless. He's doesn't even really know what's driving him to do it.

All he knows is that if someone doesn't stop Tsuna from pouring out that much flame, he's going to end up the same way he did the last time he had that fire on his forehead. Dead. (Even if only temporarily.)

So Kensuke dives in. Dives in and reaches out and grabs Tsuna by the shoulder with clammy hands, drags him backwards, like he could pull Tsuna out of that pillar of fire. It doesn't work, since that pillar appears to be tethered to and revolves around Tsuna himself.

But it does startle Tsuna enough to make him drop the baton, which makes the fire goes out just as suddenly as it appeared.

It's only then that Kensuke realizes that Sky flames are supposed to be the closest to real fire and oh boy, Kensuke doesn't feel anything right now, but he is so dreading the moment that arms go un-numb.

Until then, he wraps both of them around Tsuna, forgetting for a moment that Tsuna is, well.. still naked, or something close to it. All that matters is that Kensuke can feel his skin; warm, breathing, living. Can feel the beat of Tsuna's heart against his chest, feel it in his chest, fluttering and frantic but there.

The sound of crackling flame starts dying down, dwindling to nothing but the sizzling and popping of a hearth's final embers. Kensuke feels the pit of his stomach dropping at the same time, cold and icy, and he hopes. It hasn't been that long. Tsuna hasn't exerted himself that much— yes, he punched Reborn and yes, he threw at least 3 Committee members around like ragdolls and probably knocked out at least one of them, but—

"Tsuna, hey," he says, oh so quietly. "You still alive?"

Tsuna sort of whimpers. It's a mousy kind of sound.
"Good." Kensuke breathes out in a rush. "Don't— don't go dying on us again."

"Aw, you actually care," Tsuna mutters into his shoulder. "I'm so touched."

"Shut up, loser."

"You're the loser."

But Tsuna is wrapping an arm around Kensuke's back too, and that is more than enough to convince Kensuke and the others that Tsuna is okay. He's okay. He's not going to... drop dead. Again.

"You're still breathing, Tsuna!" Yamamoto chirps, albeit stiffly.

"Thank god." That's gotta be Kurokawa. Kyouko doesn't do more than let out a heavy sigh, but Kensuke can tell she's relieved, too. He's kind of glad he's not the only one feeling this way.

Although it is still weird to feel this way, given the way they'd been regarding each other this past year.

"Can I sit now?" Tsuna whines. "I think I pulled a muscle when i threw that larger guy."

"Oh my god you're such a loser," Kensuke groans, but he still helps Tsuna over to the patio next to Yamamoto and as far away as can be from that home tutor of his. Reborn hasn't stopped watching Tsuna the entire time. Kensuke can practically feel that weird, creepy stare on the back of his head.

He still can't get that image of Tsuna out of his mind, on fire, covered in flame and burning up like a comet. Burning so high and bright, it must have been visible from miles away. Of the sheer amount of flames the other boy had put out, dangerous as it must have been.

He's never seen a Sky before. Actually, that's not true; they've all seen the Sawadas during New Years Festivals and during the annual Games, it's terribly hard to miss them. But he has never seen a Sky like this.

*His Sky*, something inside him purrs. *His.*

...Might also be the fact that Tsuna's still in nothing but his boxers, but he's trying not to think about that.

"Says the loser staring at my ass."

Kensuke sputters indignantly and probably turns at least a little bit red. "I- I was not— I would never!"

Tsuna sticks out his lower lip in a pout. "Never?"

"Stop that."

Yamamoto hauls himself up, laughing and dragging Tsuna's shirt with him while still cradling one arm to his chest. "Wish I could make you feel better, Tsuna, but I don't think about your ass much either."

"That's probably for the best, seeing as I barely even have an ass."

Kensuke attempts to cover both his ears and his entire face at the same time, and in doing so, he realizes that his hands don't hurt at all.
By the time Hibari shows up, most of the patrol squad is on their feet again. They're nursing blooming bruises and sores, and the one still unscathed is mourning the loss of his baton that had all but imploded the moment Tsunayoshi touched it, leaving it a mess of molten metal and charred wood fused together.

Reborn admits, seeing that thing blow up had been quite the sight. Whatever they'd done to those batons doesn't seem to have taken into account the supposed 'hyperincaendia' prevalent on this island, if that was even the reason why it backfired. While it channeled controlled, meagre amounts of Flames perfectly fine, as evidenced by Yamamoto's own use of it, it doesn't seem to be able to handle the sheer amount of Flame that Tsunayoshi puts out.

Even as advanced as this Island is, there's still some things that even they can't get right on the first try. He's surprised they managed the guns, then. But storing and releasing Flames is probably simpler than making something work as a conduit. Sicily hasn't managed anything beyond simple rings, and they've been at it for decades.

..Well. Vongola hasn't managed it, anyway.

Still, he wonders why Tsunayoshi is considered hypoincaendiac with that much fiamma voltage running through him. If it's not being released into the atmosphere like Mochida's Flames are, or were.. where is it all going?

"He- he went at us first, Chairman!" The supposed squad leader, Tatara, insists. "We only asked what was going on, and they didn't even tell us that much!"

Tsunayoshi is resolutely making eye-contact with only the grass between his toes and fiddling with the hem of his shirt. Mochida looks only slightly more remorseful. Yamamoto doesn't seem to be worried at all, which doesn't make sense, because isn't he in the Committee?

"Yamamoto Takeshi." Hibari's bark is all it takes to make Yamamoto yelp and sit up straight, expression schooled into something like order. "Explain."

"Uh.. maybe Tsuna should explain?" Tsunayoshi squeaks and snaps up to glare at Yamamoto. "You've always said how bad I am at explaining things, Chairman."

Hibari blinks. "..This is true."

And he turns to Tsunayoshi instead.

"Sawada Tsunayoshi. Explain."

Tsunayoshi gapes at both of them with a look of utter betrayal. Yamamoto rubs the back of his head sheepishly.

"Sorry, Tsuna."

"You terrible creature," Tsunayoshi whines. "I don't think we can be friends anymore."

To his surprise, Yamamoto laughs.
"Hibari-san, will you be witness to the breaking of our friendship bond?"

"No."

"Damn."

Hibari's eyes go narrow and flinty. "Sawada—"

"Okay, okay!" Tsunayoshi scoots back a few inches, hands held up in a placating gesture. "Um. We were just- we were just playing around! Kuro- I mean, Hana, she's got a gun, you know? She was showing Kyoko-san and I said it was fine. At least, I thought it'd be fine! I figured I would have gotten over it by now, and it was, um.. it was fine for a while. And then it.. wasn't.. we hit a little snag?"

How very descriptive. Reborn notes that Tsunayoshi is staunchly avoiding any mention of Reborn himself being involved in the incident.

Even more curious that no one is refuting his account of things, no matter how inaccurate it is. What a liar, this child. Truly, Iemitsu has no idea what kind of a boy his spawn has become.

..Then again, his ignorance may be less a lack of knowledge and simply a testament to Tsunayoshi's ability to pretend otherwise.

"Squad Leader Tatara says you went through a full-body fiamma phasing. That is not a little snag."

Tsunayoshi's shoulder twitches. "I panicked."

"And your house guest?" Hibari turns to Reborn suddenly, just as scrutinizing. "His nose is broken."

"Oh. Uh.Oops?" Tsunayoshi flashes a tiny grin, and then hisses at Reborn, who is still pinching his nose shut to stem the bleeding, "Could you heal your nose any slower?"

"Could you refrain from punching my nose ever again?" Reborn drawls back nasally.

"I panicked!"

"You break noses when you panic?"

"Yes! I punch things when I panic!"

"That's not a healthy habit to have, Tsunayoshi. Is that why your hand's all mangled?"

Off to the side, Mochida rubs his cheek with a sympathetic wince.

Hibari makes a sound, soft and quiet, but it's enough to send Tsunayoshi scuttling clumsily behind Reborn in that brief moment.

"You coward," Reborn says flatly over his shoulder.

"This is your fault," Tsunayoshi hisses again, but this time only loud enough for Reborn to hear. "Save me."

"If you were any smaller, I'd pick you up by the scruff of your shirt like a kitten and drop you at Hibari's feet."
"That would be a very bad idea—!"

Reborn does it anyway.

Tsunayoshi squeaks, just like a kitten, dangling impossibly by the very scruff of his shirt just a foot or two above the ground. He's not even flailing. Reborn expected him to flail at least a little bit.

In any case, it must have elicited some reaction from Hibari, because a single twitch from the other boy has Tsunayoshi's limbs curling up slightly, as though he were trying to make himself more ball-like to escape notice.

"Stand," says Hibari Kyouya. Not quite as harshly as Reborn might have expected.

Tsunayoshi gives Reborn a baleful look over his shoulder and mouths, "Hibari-san likes kittens."

"Duly noted," Reborn says, and lets go.

Tsunayoshi drops onto his tail-bone with a squawk. Then he scrambles to his feet, sending another glare at Reborn. "What was that for?!

"I figured you would land on your feet. As kittens do."

"I'm not a—!" Hibari makes another noise and Tsunayoshi spins around, snaps up straight and stiff, though not as stiff as the other Committee members usually are when Reborn sees them leading the morning pledge in the schoolyard.

Tsunayoshi does not regard Hibari the way a follower regards a leader. Not as someone superior, or inferior, or even as an equal. He's not quite sure what to call it, actually.

"..Is that your official account?" Hibari queries.

"Yes," Tsunayoshi replies. "It was an accident. Nothing more."

He regards Hibari... simply. Simple as that. Nothing more. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Hibari takes a step forward. Tsunayoshi takes one back, shoulders drawing up. Reborn is tempted to plant a foot in his behind, but Tsunayoshi doesn't back up any further than that.

He'll admit, it's a little odd to see two such people standing so close to each other. Hibari apparently doesn't enjoy crowding, whatever that means, and Tsunayoshi is obstinately picky about who he stands next to.

Even more odd to see Hibari being the one to initiate touching their foreheads together.

Mochida makes a noise of protest, trying but unwilling to use too much strength to wrench his arm away from Yamamoto. A quick glance tells him that Kyouko and Hana are as tense as they were before, tense and confused, just as much as the Committee squad members in the background are.

Reborn watches. The flare of their Flames is tell-tale, filling the air around them almost oppressively. There's no other point of contact and no other movement from either of the boys. He's seen all sorts of Harmonizations and Synchronizations in Vongola by now.

Resonance, though, is rare, even between two individuals of the same elements. And especially rare between two different elements. But rare or not, that's exactly what is happening right now.
It's suffocating.

Then it cuts off like weight lifting from his shoulders so suddenly that Reborn almost feels unbalanced. He rights himself easily enough, though the kids show more visible signs of being unsettled. One of the Committee members actually topples over and that's hilarious to watch.

"We'll take your report to HQ," Hibari says after a beat, taking a few steps back. His attention snap over to where the girls are still crouched in the grass. "Kurokawa Hana. Your license for that firearm will be suspended while the Committee investigates the matter."

Hana makes a face, but she hands the gun over to the nearest Committee member who had come over to collect it. She and Kyouko move over to settle down on the patio with the rest of them once Hibari leaves. The others are taking longer to stagger out, even with the Vice-Chairman helping them along.

"You okay, Tsuna?" Mochida asks once the last of them are out the gate.

"..Yeah? Yeah." Tsunayoshi blinks. "I'm.. fine. Why do you ask?"

"You're kinda.. deflated."

Reborn is amused to find that Tsunayoshi's first reaction to that is to reach up and pat his hair down, as though to make sure it was still in place.

"Not your hair, idiot. I meant you."

"He could be in shock," Reborn suggests. Tsunayoshi's pupils and breathing seem to be normal, though, so he doesn't seem to be in any physical distress. Aside from the obvious being almost naked in front of his friends, and also strangers.

"I just beat up a whole squad of Committee members twice my size," Tsunayoshi says slowly. "Why would I be in shock?"

"Well," Reborn shrugs, "I did shoot you."

"Oh." The boy reaches up again, this time to rub at his forehead. Reborn glimpses what he thinks is a scar under the fringe of hair. "That did happen, didn't it? I thought I was just.. imagining it."

Yamamoto pipes up. "Imagining what?"

"Uh. Being dead."

"You can't remember hyperbolic formulas but you remember being dead?"

"That's because you and your hyperbolic formulas suck ass—"

"Shot you, Tsuna!" Mochida yelps and throws both arms around Tsunayoshi, one hand clapping over his mouth. "Don't make him shoot you again!"

Yamamoto is laughing his head off.

"I won't shoot him again." But Reborn does reach out, if only to flatten down Tsunayoshi's hair. He really does look deflated like that. Then he grabs the scruff of the boy's shirt again and hauls him up and out of Mochida's grasp. "I will, however, insist on looking over any of your injuries to make sure you didn't hurt yourself too badly playing with the big kids. You should probably also get dressed properly. There are females in our company."
Tsunayoshi belatedly tugs down the hem of his shirt in a failed attempt to hide his remarkably dull polka-dotted boxer shorts. Yamamoto tosses his pants over. They helpfully fall on his head and cover his face.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm used to it," Kyouko hums, utterly unperturbed. "I have a brother."

That makes sense. Hana, though?

Hana jerks her head in Kyouko's direction. "She has a brother."

"Ah." Well then. "Yamamoto, you're injured, aren't you?"

"Uh- I think? I'm not sure." Yamamoto flexes his arm a few times without issue, but seems to have trouble lifting it above his shoulders. ".I'll get my dad to schedule something with a doctor later."

"You're awfully worried about us," Hana snipes after Reborn is done giving all of them a critical once-over. "Considering most of it is your fault."

"Hana—"

"Don't you start Hana-ing me, Sawada. Go back to calling me Kurokawa."

"Kurokawa," Tsunayoshi stresses with a roll of his eyes. Then stops and cranes his neck around to look at Reborn. ".Wait, she's right. It is your fault. I take it back, you not not so bad at all. You're way bad. You shot me. In the head! You're awful!"

"If I recall, your exact words were 'evil stepmother'," Reborn all but purrs, satisfied and preening, even as Mochida makes fervent 'NO' motions with his arms. "Playtime is over, kiddos. One of you is injured, one is in shock, you tried to cut my shirt open, I'm far too old for you— and you two, you did good. Very strategic. Unlike these.. what do you call them, Hana? Monkeys?"

"I'm leaning towards baboon right now."

"Primitives." He shakes his head. "Besides, it's getting late."

"..It's Saturday," Tsunayoshi says.

"Yes, and you have math homework."

"No I don't."

"I'm sorry, who's the adult in charge of your home learning? Oh, that's right. Me." Reborn shakes the hold he still has on Tsunayoshi's shirt. "You have math homework."

"But- but it's Saturday!" Tsunayoshi whines and tries to get away. He turns to the others with what Reborn assumes is a pleading look. "I got shot. You shot me!"

Reborn squints. "Anyone who stays will also have math homework."

He doesn't even finish before Hana drags a protesting Kyouko away, waving the remainder of her cane at them and throwing farewells and well-wishes over her shoulder.

"Ahaha I'm gonna go see dad about my shoulder, bye Tsuna!" Yamamoto gets up and starts on his way out.

Mochida raises an eyebrow when Reborn looks at him expectantly. "What? I'm not leaving him
alone with you after what you did."

"Changed my mind!" Yamamoto crows as he sidles back towards them, grinning sharply. "I'm staying."

"Go see a doctor, Takeshi."

Mochida smirks. "Yeah. Go see a doctor, Takeshi."

This time it's Yamamoto's turn to scrunch up his face. "...Fine. But no touching!"

Tsunayoshi and Mochida immediately reach out to grab each other's hands at the same time.

"Okay fine, be that way, you two. Then no kissing! Especially you, senpai."

Tsunayoshi has his hand up in just the right position to slap over Mochida's mouth the moment he turns around to defiantly demonstrate his disregard of Yamamoto's mother-henning attempts.

"You are absolutely shameless," Reborn says flatly, but also appraisingly. "I like that. But you're still going home. Yamamoto, I know you're injured, but if you could."

"Aye, sir!" Yamamoto salutes, and then wraps his uninjured arm around Mochida's torso to drag him away. Being tall is such a blessing.

"..Will you let go of my shirt now?" Tsunayoshi huffs once Mochida's fingers are plied off of the edge of the wall. He's kicking up quite the fuss. Reborn supposes he should take that as a measure of how threatening he's proved himself to be. Feels good.

...Then again, he did shoot Tsunayoshi in the head.

"If I do, you'll run away."

"Like you couldn't catch me and drag me back right away."

"I could, but that's a waste of effort." Reborn does let him go though, and only because the others left a mess behind. "Don't forget to clean up."

"All by myself?!"

Reborn saunters indoors and says over his shoulder, "It's your mess."

"Is not!" Tsunayoshi shouts after him.

But he's pleased to see that the boy is cleaning up by the time he gets to his room upstairs, though grumbling all the while. Reborn jots down a few observations about the results of testing his 'theory', as well as an entry for a new 'theory' to test, and leans out the window.

"Come up when you're done," he calls down. "And if you leave even one crumb behind, I will shoot you again."

"You wouldn't!"

Reborn was going to fire a warning shot just by his feet, but sometimes Leon doesn't like to cooperate, and this is one of those times. The result is Tsunayoshi whining about being soaked by a vibrantly-colored toy water-pistol.
"Now I see why everyone keeps calling you a mouse," he says when the boy walks in with fluffed up hair and a towel around his neck. "Though you look more like a dandelion, honestly."

Tsunayoshi make a face. but doesn't say anything else.

The next few minutes are spent bending and stretching and prodding Tsunayoshi's limbs to see if he really did pull any muscles or break any bones. Reborn has seen full-grown adults injure themselves just from throwing someone around like Tsunayoshi did. Especially since it doesn't sound like Tsunayoshi does this kind of thing regularly.

Dying Will Mode is supposed to strengthen the body, so if Tsunayoshi really is injured somewhere, it means there's been a slight, slight miscalculation. On Reborn's part.

And Reborn hates miscalculating.

"Mochida seemed rather worried about you," Reborn says idly. "..So were the others. Yamamoto, too."

"You've been touting yourself to them as the World's Greatest Hitman and then you shot me in the head! I'd be pissed off at you too!"

"Normal kids don't usually try to gut the man who kills their friend in front of them. Although I didn't actually kill you, and I did try to tell them you weren't dead—"

"But I did die."

Reborn flicks his forehead. For some reason, Tsunayoshi yelps and falls onto his back, clutching his forehead. He doesn't seem to be in pain though, so Reborn ignores the whining.

"Baby. You could take after your Guardians a little."

"You mean I should be impulsively protective and possessive and murderous at the drop of a hat?"

"I didn't say that." Reborn tips him over with a finger on his forehead again. This is kind of fun. "What I shot you with wasn't even a bullet. Just condensed Sun Flames. Fired right into your brainstem."

"...You activated the subconscious fiamma response center? What- you can't just do that!"

"You go Herculean for about five minutes and then it fizzles out. Which is exactly what you did."

"That's not what—!" Tsunayoshi stops reaching for his toes and stares at the wall for a moment. Then he stares at his hands. "...That is what happened. How.??"

"I know what I'm doing, Tsunayoshi."

"You said you were testing out a theory!"

"I know approximately what I'm doing and I'm very smart. And look, you're still alive. My theory worked out just fine."
Tsunayoshi throws his hands in the air. "And what if it hadn't?"

"I am the World's Greatest Hitman for a reason." Reborn gives him a look that hopefully screams 'obviously'. And then, after a moment when Tsunayoshi looks incredibly distressed, "I'm going to repeat the fact that you are alive, Tsunayoshi. No harm done."


"That implies I have a reason to regularly shoot you in the head to make you beat up people."

Tsunayoshi scowls at him so hard. He looks more like a grumpy cat, though, so Reborn just tries not to coo at him.

* * *

"I'm home!" Nana sings as she comes through the front door.

"Welcome home, maman," Tsunayoshi says from the kitchen table, just barely getting started on the math worksheets spread out before him. Nearby, Reborn hums a greeting.

"You two haven't eaten yet, have you?"

Tsunayoshi shakes his head.

"How about.. takeout from TakeSushi?" Nana's smile widens when Tsunayoshi stiffens with a squeak. Reborn pauses in the middle of turning the newspaper in his hands. "I've already called for platter- but I was in such a rush, I haven't had the chance to drop by and pick it up yet. Tsu-kun, did you know? The Hibaris called just a few minutes ago. There's Committee members still outside our house, too!"

"I-I didn't do anything!" The boy mutters, pitched.

"Oh, honey, I know that. They said it wasn't your fault. Reborn-san?"

Reborn's mouth twitches. "Sawada-san."

"Some of what they told me was a little confusing..." She taps at her chin thoughtfully, still bright and smiling. "You wouldn't by any chance know what happened, would you? I heard there were guns involved. Guns! Can you imagine that? Guns in Namimori.. well, Hana-chan has hers, but I haven't ever heard of her using anything except the stunning function. And her and Kyouko-chan! I don't think they'd ever do such a thing. Do you, Tsu-kun?"

Tsunayoshi squeaks again and shakes his head. Again. And then stares at Reborn.

Which makes Nana stare at Reborn, too. He blinks at them both and tries to look a little contrite and maybe a bit offended that they'd even consider blaming him for any of this!

It's true though. It is quite entirely his fault.

The knock at the door greatly ruins the tense atmosphere, which is a pity, because Reborn had been quite enjoying it.

Chapter End Notes
mr masato is not an oc... 8) not technically. and no footnotes! what a miracle. just some ending clarifications.

'full body fiamma phasing' is being used to refer to the whole 'jump naked out of your clothes, except for underwear' thing that everyone seems to do in dying will mode. there's no partial-body phasing.

the implication is that the once wooden batons have now been upgraded to something like 'metal-core' batons with the ability to channel and emit flames. currently in prototype stage and prone to imploding if too much flame is shoved in at once. why are kids being given these dangerous prototypes to use?! what a shady authorities kakishima has. shady as fuq.

if anything else needs to be clarified lemme know....

anyway, if you haven't joined the rest of us on tumblr for arts and IIB meta, please do! i am vongolastic@tumblr and am currently drawing funnies and cutes and sketching scenes as i reread this monster and consider editing previous chapters. rip scarlet 2k16

next chapter: nagi, nonsensical violence between ocs (hibari-kokuyo throwdown?! it's not a cops&robbers game but it's close enough), background history nonsense, just a lot of nonsense.

End Notes

currently on semi-hiatus! edit / update status: done up to chapter 5.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!