When Uzumaki Naruto breathed his last, he didn’t expect to wake up in the world of the living again. He was old, and tired, and so, so ready to move on. And, well...he wanted to see his wife again, dammit.
But, of course, that wasn't what happened.

Why? Naruto screamed at the powers-that-loved-to-fuck-with-his-life-and-now-his-afterlife-too, with tears streaking down his cheeks, feeling cold, weak, hungry, and utterly disgusted.

Because you're everybody's bitch, Kurama, helpfully, supplied.

Notes

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Except boredom. And lots of coffee.
Chapter 1

When Uzumaki Naruto breathed his last, he didn’t expect to wake up in the world of the living again. He was old, and tired, and so, so ready to move on. And, well...he wanted to see his wife again, dammit. His beautiful, kind, loving, gentle, understanding wife. The only person in his life who never gave him shit about anything and always had his back when crazy came knocking on his door at three in the goddamn morning because, apparently, he was the motherfucking Hokage and it was his job to be responsible for other people’s messes. He had earned retirement and peace and the right to tell people not my fucking problem, asshole.

Naruto could just picture his afterlife… No more evil paperwork, no more cranky chakra beasts with egos the size of Konoha and opinions in his stomach, no more psychos with plans of world domination and stupid, overpowered bloodline limits. Why the hell had he wanted to become Hokage in the first place? Nobody told him it was going to be like this. He didn’t even know that collateral damage was a thing before he took the hat. So many forms, why, Lee, why? There’s a *reason for sub-clause three that clearly states no alcohol during missions!* Never before had Naruto suffered from migraines and carpal syndrome. So much for Kurama’s vaunted healing factor.

In other words, he was just so done with everything and everyone. Old Man Sarutobi was in for a hell of a beating for feeding his young, impressionable mind such bullshit when Naruto met him again. Ero-sennin and Itachi, the clever bastards, had the right idea all along. They still did their duty to the village, got a badass S-rank reputation, and no one expected spies to file reports.

Naruto couldn’t escape the horrors of paperwork even after he passed the hat to Sasuke’s kid because then he got stuck with the advisory position. Like, what the fuck? He felt dirty just holding the same position as Danzō of all people. His only consolation was seeing Danzō’s face when he told the slimeball his beloved village was now in the hands of an Uchiha. Naruto was really looking forward to that.

But, of course, that wasn’t what happened. Being present for the delivery of two babies, having a medic-nin as a teammate, and being on Ino’s shit list when the blonde just happened to need a test subject for her new jutsu had given him an...intimate understanding of the birthing process. Naruto had learned that lesson well. Giving birth was *traumatizing,* and the Yamanaka were some vindictive mindfuckers. So it wasn’t hard to connect the dots when he found himself being pushed out of the dark, warm, wet place he had previously thought was the in-between. Realizing it was, instead, the uterus of his new mother was a much bigger shock.

*Why?* Naruto screamed at the powers-that-loved-to-fuck-with-his-life-and-now-his-afterlife-too, with tears streaking down his cheeks, feeling cold, weak, hungry, and utterly disgusted.

*Because you’re everybody’s bitch,* Kurama, *helpfully,* supplied.

*Oh, you’re here, too.* Naruto paused in the midst of crying, much uncoordinated flailing, and his new parents’ joyous exclamations about *tuna fish* and cuteness. That’s...great.

Arms wrapped around him, and something soft was shoved in his face. *I’m being...breastfed,* his cognitive abilities deduced, mouth latching onto the nipple on instinct because he was still half-blind and disoriented as hell. Weren’t babies supposed to be incapable of higher thought processes or something, he then lamented.

*Yeah, but you’ve got me. While you were drowning in denial and dreaming of your wife, I’ve*
been fixing up your new body, including your tiny human brain. Be grateful, brat. Kurama huffed in that oh-so-smug tone of his.

Naruto choked as he burst into fresh tears.
By the time Naruto had managed to take control of his mental faculties, get used to his tiny, fragile, infant body, and overcome the novelty of having parents who actually catered to his every need twenty-four seven, he had come to some startling realizations.

One, this was not the world he’d originally been born in. Two, his new parents had terrible taste in food. Three, there was something strange about his chakra, but he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly because Kurama cautioned him against messing with it yet. Hence, Naruto focused on the things he could safely ascertain. He’d long since outgrown the twelve-year-old reckless brat he’d once been, and had more self-preservation instincts than Sai, thank-you-very-much.

His first clue had been the language. All that baby nonsense his parents kept crooning—papa wuvess you, my widdle tuna fishie—and many, many nauseatingly playful arguments about what he got from whom—so strong and manly, just like papa, Tsu-kun—brought the long-forgotten memory of his meeting with the Sage of the Six Paths to the surface. Because it was kind of similar to his mother tongue, like another dialect that had evolved into something different in order to fit in with the times.

Except, Naruto was now Old Man Rikudō, and trying to upgrade his vernacular was a bitch and a half. Sakura was the academically-inclined in their team. Naruto just had lots and lots of crazy firepower and a you-aren’t-taking-me-alive-bastards mentality. In retrospect, Sasuke was the more balanced out of the three of them when it came to putting theory into practice. And the asshole never once let him forget it. Neither did Kurama.

_Do not compare yourself or that detestable Uchiha to Father. You’ll never measure up._ Kurama grinned, all teeth and contempt and schadenfreude, and with one flick of his tails sent Naruto sprawling across the cold, hard floor of his mindscape. _Father would have been fluent in mere seconds. Just like when he was kind enough to dumb himself down to speak with you back then. I wouldn’t have bothered if I were him._

_Don’t I know it._ Naruto tsk’ed under his breath, rubbing his abused scalp, but tellingly didn’t get up or contradict the giant fuzzball. _Now shut up. I’m trying to understand what kind of people my new parents are. And what the hell is this weird obsession with tuna? It’d better not be my new name._

Because ramen, he could understand, even if Ero-sennin had later explained that no, you hopeless moron, you were named after the hero in your father’s favorite book, which I, the gallant Jiraiya wrote, for your information. Oh, and in honor of your mother’s clan, too. Not that it did any good. What kind of Uzumaki are you, brat? I told you to make a simple grade one storage seal. Storage! Why did it explode in Gamariki-san’s face? Wait, where did the orange paint come from? Naruto...you know I was kidding, right? Haha, no, wait! Don’t thro—

Still, the point stood. Ramen was the food of the gods, and if his parents had chosen his name based on their love for heavenly noodles…well, Naruto would have been a-okay with it. If these people had named him after stupid seafood, on the other hand… Naruto would shove a bijūdama up the stupid blond’s ass.

Fortunately, his mother wasn’t as prone to fish-y endearments, and after two long, embarrassing months of too-much breast-milk, Kurama’s mocking laughter, and perfecting the art of strategically aiming at his father’s forehead when the man was on diaper duty, Naruto had a name and then some.
Tsunayoshi. Tsuna for short; or, his mother’s preference, Tsu-kun. His parents were Iemitsu and Nana, and there was also the rare mention of a grandfather named Timoteo and a many-times ancestor named Ieyasu. Iemitsu might have believed Naruto was oblivious like, y’know, normal babies, all those times he was being lulled to sleep in the man’s arms, but the joke was on him. Even if Naruto tended to tune him out when Iemitsu went on one of his tuna fish deliriums, Kurama didn’t.

Now, the image of his stupid father, with his stupid grin, calling him Tsuna in his stupid voice had triggered another memory. Of a brown-haired man, technically undead at the time, hugging a half-exasperated, half-wistful Granny Tsunade, sobbing apologies in her hair and pleading for the village’s survival and something about gambling debts, with an equally undead white-haired man whose default expression seemed to be scowling next to them.

Sawada Iemitsu might have only shared an obnoxious shade of blond hair with Namikaze Minato, but his personality was all Senju Hashirama. Coupled with his barely hidden anxiety and nightly ramblings about Naruto being the spitting image of Ieyasu and don’t worry, my tuna fishie, papa will protect you and you’ll have a nice, long, civilian life, I promise, it didn’t bode well for Naruto’s future aspirations of a paperwork-free nirvana.

Naruto could only pray there was a Senju Tobirama in this secret family business he’d undoubtedly get dragged into, kicking and screaming if he had anything to say about it, preferably in administration. The Nidaime might have been a humorless bastard without an ounce of compassion, and a stone-cold killer with zero tolerance for people who sometimes made the wrong choices, but he was efficient.

He wasn’t that bad. There was a subtle conflict of emotions inside that statement, if Naruto strained his ears, before the fox’s voice adopted his usual condescending drawl. Certainly better than the likes of Madara and Hashirama. For a human, he was almost tolerable.

Scoffing, Naruto stared at him with knowing eyes. And I suppose your glowing endorsement of his character has nothing to do with the fact you both wanted to dance over Madara’s corpse.

As predicted, Kurama snapped, sullen and growling and with the countenance of someone who’d been terribly cheated. Bah! He was dead. Who cared if we stepped on his corpse just a little?

Instead of replying, Naruto lowered his gaze to Kurama’s little feet. Right. The fox shuffled his feet, unrepentant and still looking petulant, and yeah, Naruto could more than empathize with Old Man Rikudō right now.
His mother was a filthy liar.

Naruto gazed into the mirror, betrayal churning deep in his gut, and despaired over what the reflection spelled out for his physical development. Strong and manly were not adjectives he’d attach to his new body type. It wasn’t something that could be fixed with nutrition and exercise either. This…this was the body and the face of...a bishōnen. Sweet, soft features, thick brown hair, large doe eyes, smooth skin, delicate bone structure and all that pretty shit. His future was set in stone. He’d be stalked, mobbed, molested, and subjected to all manner of depraved acts by rabid fangirls. And fanboys, and creepy pedos, and mad scientists, oh, gods, why me? This was Sasuke’s bane—

An Uchiha-exclusive curse bestowed upon that despicable clan for the sins of their forefathers. Serves the bastards right, Kurama whisper-cackled, never one to miss an opportunity to deride anything Uchiha.

—not mine! What did I ever do to deserve this fate? The fox’s snickering was disturbing enough to pierce through Naruto’s moment of totally justifiable hysteria. His left eye developed a slight twitch. Not amused, but starting to become suspicious, he glared at the oversized pain-in-his-ass. Stop laughing, Kurama, and do something about it! Didn’t you say you fixed my body? If this is the result of your meddling, so help me gods, I will—

Kurama’s laughter ceased abruptly, as if offended Naruto would reach that conclusion. Yeah, right. Pot meet kettle. Shikamaru had never forgiven Naruto when he—on a whim of generosity he later came to regret—had gone to sleep and allowed Kurama full use of his body for a night. A Nara’s passive-aggressive approach to retribution was the stuff of legends, he also later came to know and dread. It had culminated in four weeks of misfiled paperwork, an ungodly amount of low fat tofu, and collective mental breakdowns when the phrase ‘there will be a reckoning’ came out of the Nara’s mouth. Naruto had never forgiven Shikamaru either. His precious ramen… Why, Shika? Just... Why.

Tch. I didn’t alter your genes, brat. A smirk full of sadistic glee spread over Kurama’s mouth, and Naruto knew the furball’s next words would piss him off something fierce. You can thank your new parents for that oh-so-pretty face.

His eye-twitch became spastic. I will shave off your whiskers and put pink bows on your tails. The fox didn’t believe him, judging by his careless shrug and the challenge in his smirk. Well, if that was how he wanted to play it…

You have to sleep sometime, Naruto’s lips curled into that same vulpine smirk, and I know where you live.

The sole sign of Kurama’s apprehension was one of his tails matching the tempo of Naruto’s eye-twitch. Naruto kept smirking, content to wait. Running a shinobi village and raising two kids had taught him patience, if nothing else.

You wouldn’t dare, the fox snarled, but considerably less sure of his invincibility, before he gave up pretense altogether. I may be able to improve some things, but not now. It will be detrimental to your growth and probably do more harm than good. Remind me again once you hit puberty, and don’t expect any miracles. A couple of inches taller, denser bones, sharper senses, yeah, I
can do those, but not much else. You have to work out for the rest.

Satisfied, Naruto nodded and let the matter drop. He had more important things to contemplate, like the fact his mother lied. He should have remembered that adults had lied to him all the time throughout his childhood, with him being none the wiser, because the seal had been airtight back then; but Naruto had almost forgotten what that felt like. Nobody had the balls to lie to his face in a long, long time. After all, it was impossible to lie to a person with a chakra monster capable of sensing negative emotions and Yamanaka mindfuckers on his payroll.

Except, Sawada Nana didn’t fit the stereotypical profile of a liar—quite the opposite, in fact—which was weird and, more importantly, worrying. Because she seemed to live in a perpetual state of lying to herself.

Naruto knew all about masks and deception and fake smiles that hurt so fucking bad—some days he just wanted to die and take everyone with him—but Nana’s smiles weren’t like that. Nobody could be this absentminded, placid, gullible, optimistic, and so fucking zen, that it put natural sages like Ōgama-jiji to shame.

(Naruto chose to forget Ōgama-jiji was also a senile old toad, with narcoleptic tendencies and an annoying habit of spouting prophesies in his sleep, and thus not a good candidate for the sage archetype.)

More than that, though, she had gotten worse ever since his father skedaddled. It had been a grand affair, admittedly, filled with tears, declarations of undying love, and over-the-top tuna fishie bullshit. The only thing that marred Iemitsu’s emotional departure was the guilt-ridden glance he shot Naruto before he tried to smother him in his lumberjack embrace. Still, Nana had waved him farewell, smile etched on her lips and stars in her eyes, and went on living her life like an earthbound Bodhisattva. It was eerie, unnatural, and rang some alarming bells in Naruto’s mind.

You thinking what I’m thinking? And by that, he meant a female version of a reverse-mindfucked Yagura, conditioned to ignore reality and do good instead of evil.

Kurama’s lips peeled back for a vicious snarl, teeth bared and fur bristling, because that was some serious shit and mental manipulation always rubbed him the wrong way.

Could be, but how are you going to check if it is? And because he was a major dick, he drawled out, You suck at genjutsu, but because he was also a big softie—deep, deep inside his black shriveled heart—he couldn’t help but add, her emotions are genuine, if you were worrying about that.

Naruto snorted, shaking his head, though his worry didn’t abate. Thanks, but that doesn’t reassure me, ya know. If it’s something like Kotoamatsukami, then it would fool even you.

As Kurama embarked on another tirade about accursed eyes and the arrogance of humans and Father should have stayed celibate, Naruto silently bemoaned his nonexistent talent for genjutsu and vowed to fix his mother’s condition once he accessed his chakra.
Chapter 4

It took Naruto five years to fully grasp just how different this new world was. If he suspected his mother’s mind had been tampered with before, he was now one hundred percent certain. No normal person would exclaim oh my, Tsu-kun, mama is so proud of you, my little genius, when her four-year-old son learned how to read and write in mere months, then proceeded to devour the local library. Or preferred to watch documentaries and the world news over cartoons with his morning milk on the television.

(On an unrelated note, the librarian was deeply unnerved by the whole Sawada family. A goddess of the hearth in human skin? A changeling child come to learn the ways of humans and subjugate the world? A construction worker in the South Pole? Yeti, her mind fearfully whispered. She brushed up on her knowledge of mythology, and stocked up on protection talismans, just in case.)

What Naruto learned astounded him. His birth country alone dwarfed the Elemental Nations in terms of population, and Japan was only a tiny dot on the world map he made sure to memorize.

If you know the terrain, Kakashi-sensei had once told him, gaze dark and haunted, two weeks into their newly formed team, in one of his rare moods where he offered valuable advice instead of waxing lyrical about Icha Icha, you’ve already won half the battle. Your trap-making skills are top-notch, your tactics are innovative and unpredictable, and you’ve got an active imagination. Use it, Naruto. You’d make a damn fine ambush specialist. Naruto appreciated these little nuggets of wisdom as much as he hated seeing the shadows in the man’s eyes, the pain, the grief, the self-loathing steeped into his soul.

When he moved on from geography to history, though… The people of this land had seen war on a scale Naruto could barely wrap his mind around. It was horrifying. The bloodline purges of the Bloody Mist had nothing on the genocides Hitler committed in his mad crusade for the Aryan race’s superiority. There was just so much prejudice and discrimination and what the fuck for? Race, religion, gender, skin color? It was meaningless. Very few wars were waged for territory, the really old ones, when people still fought with swords and couldn’t wipe out cities in the blink of an eye.

They had mostly entered an era of peace in recent years, but Naruto wasn’t fooled. Thanks to Granny Tsunade’s lessons, countless Council meetings, and decades of dealing with the Fire Daimyō’s bullshit, he knew political warfare too damn well not to read between the lines. This peace reeked of politicians—backstabbing, manipulative, lying sons of bitches, the lot of them. Who had the gall to consider Konoha’s system of a military dictatorship barbaric nonetheless.

Shinobi raised child soldiers, yes, but they were honest about their profession and what it entailed. They gave them purpose and bonds and a place to belong. Hell, after Sasuke offed that asshole Danzō and kinda-sorta-maybe reformed Orochimaru, children were given the choice to stay civilians instead of being kidnapped and brainwashed into emotionless, dead-faced soldiers and fanatical, creepy experiments.

(Ironically, nobody acknowledged Sasuke’s contribution to the end of child slavery. Except Sai and Yamato-taichō, and they didn’t even like the bastard. Not that Naruto blamed them. Few people did; like Sasuke, that was.)

In light of these discoveries, Naruto couldn’t just forget his roots and start over in a world run by politicians, chock-full of lies and rampant prejudice. It would be an insult to his family, his teachers, his friends, his predecessors, the ideals he’d promised to uphold when he took the hat,
More than that, Naruto was a possessive bastard. Growing up alone, despised and shunned by the masses, had left scars in his psyche—scars that had cultivated some ingrained habits, that made him cling and fuss and be an overbearing mother hen as Sai often joked. Hugging his wife to sleep, assigning Kage Bunshin to watch over his kids, dragging Kakashi-sensei and Sakura-chan to Ichiraku for ramen every week, sending summon toads to Sasuke when the bastard took too long to touch base, visiting the Academy just to chat with Iruka-sensei, sneaking into the clan compounds to prank his friends, needling Kurama until the fox snapped and kicked him out, strolling through the village when the nightmares kept him up—all to reassure himself they were there.

He wasn’t about to let reincarnation, of all the ridiculous things that had befallen him, change him as a person. He was Uzumaki Naruto, Nanadaime Hokage of Konohagakure, Jinchūriki of Kurama, Toad Sage of Myōbokuzan, son of Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina, husband to Hyūga Hinata, father to Boruto and Himawari, teammate of Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura, pupil of Umino Iruka and Hatake Kakashi and Jiraiya. He had bled and fought and sacrificed for all of them—they were his.

He would become Sawada Tsunayoshi, because Iemitsu and Nana were his now, too, but in his core, in the deep places of his soul, he’d always be Uzumaki Naruto.

_Glad your angst-fest is now over. I almost mistook you for an Uchiha with all this damn introspection and woe-is-me drama._

_Of course you di—wait a minute… Naruto rewound Kurama’s words in his mind. Was that… modern slang? You’ve been watching late-night talk shows again, he then deadpanned. This is the last time I’m giving you control of the TV remote when I’m thinking._

The fox scoffed, irreverent as ever. _So sue me. You humans are entertaining creatures._

Sighing, Naruto eyed him with the long-suffering patience of an owner whose pet had been misbehaving when out of their sight, but had long since given up on correcting their bad behavior.

_Yes, you would find entertainment in TV shows that encourage people to share their feelings and life stories, but whose true purpose is to air their dirty laundry and publicly ridicule them for their poor life decisions. He rolled his eyes, utterly fed up. Why did I ever expect otherwise?_

_The invention of trash TV is one of humanity’s greatest achievements._ Kurama grinned, and as if to add insult to injury, gleefully purred, _Best. Thing. Ever._

Naruto buried his face in his hands, lamenting his poor life decisions. Why had he thought it a brilliant idea to unlock the furball’s cage during the Fourth Shinobi World War? Surely, the Infinite Tsukuyomi couldn’t have been worse than this.
During Iemitsu’s five-year-long absence, Naruto had managed to adjust well to civilian life in his new, quaint hometown, if he did say so himself.

There had been many snow-themed postcards and photos of Iemitsu posing in his bright orange overalls, grinning stupidly at the camera in front of a roadblock, complete with peace-sign and pickaxe slung over his shoulders. And phone calls. Full of lovey-dovey, tuna fishie mushiness, while Nana swooned and giggled, and Naruto boggled at the man's excuses. Gods, the excuses... In a contest between Kakashi-sensei and Iemitsu for the most absurd, outlandish, I-can’t-believe-you-expect-me-to-believe-this excuses, Iemitsu would win hands down, and that said it all. Honestly, at this point, the man’s only redeeming quality was the orange. Naruto filed it all under ‘unaware civilian family, on a need-to-know basis, undercover long-term mission, weird-as-hell-but-thank-god-not-self-destructive coping mechanisms’, and let the matter be. There were worse things than a well-meaning-but-idiot father trying to protect his family from the darker aspects of his job. Hell, who knows, if Naruto hadn’t been reincarnated as his son, the man might have even succeeded in keeping this charade up for years. Still doubtful, but stranger things have happened. Iemitsu would have to come clean when Naruto was, inevitably, recruited into this shady family business.

Problem was, for Naruto, who was born and raised to be a shinobi and a weapon of mass destruction, Namimori was akin to suburban hell. He’d like to think that, even with all his past experiences, he had never managed to reach the epic paranoia levels half his ANBU Corps possessed. It was, therefore, more than a little unsettling when something kept warning him off at every corner during his mother’s weekly supermarket runs. From dark alleys, to construction sites, to red lights, to overly aggressive strays, to delinquent teenagers, to tattooed men who sported the classic yakuza look.

Don’t get him wrong, he could understand how all these things might be dangerous for small defenseless kids, but. It. Never. Stopped. This couldn’t be him, right?

It’s not you, brat. I think this might actually be a kekkei genkai.

Huh. That would have never even crossed his mind.

What, like super intuition or something? It made sense, though. Still, out of all the cool kekkei genkai, why did it have to be this one? It’s useless and distracting.

Of course, it is. The fox shrugged, unsympathetic to his plight. It’s newly awakened, so untrained. Could be a great asset if you managed to control it, though.

True, but there was an important detail missing. And how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?

I don’t know. Why don’t you ask that stupid father of yours? Chances are you got it from his side of the family.

Kurama and Naruto stared at each other, letting that thought stew, before they opened their mouth at the same time.

Meditation might help.
Meditation it is.

Before Naruto could implement his new kekkei genkai training though, Nana got another tooth-rottingly sweet phone call that heralded Iemitsu’s much awaited return. His intuition screamed. Well, then. However annoying his super intuition was, it had never, technically, been wrong. Case in point: two days later, Iemitsu arrived on their doorstep with an old man who exuded the same aura as the Sandaime.

Naruto hid behind Nana’s legs, playing the part of the ignorant civilian child he was supposed to be, seeming uncomfortable with strangers on the outside, while he analyzed the old man before him. He was foreign and dressed to the nines, carried a jewel-adorned, polished scepter that looked more like a family heirloom than a walking stick, held the self-assured posture of an aged leader and the loose poise of an experienced fighter, and had kind, weary eyes that, in turn, subtly scrutinized Naruto as if searching for something.

He’s my clan head, ain’t he? He concluded, pinching the bridge of his nose. This is like the heir presentation ceremony old clans like the Hyūga do because it’s traditional, only more informal since Nana isn’t in the know about clan affairs and Iemitsu wants to keep his family hidden.

Which, so unfair. Naruto thought he had at least escaped this whole clan bullshit. His wife was awesome, yeah, but her clan was a bunch of self-entitled pricks who insisted on strict decorum and proper manners and had a stick up their ass the size of Gamabunta. They branded their kids with the Caged Bird Seal before Hinata abolished that practice, for fuck’s sake.

Then it struck him why Sawada ‘I’m totally civilian, honest, honey’ Iemitsu would bring the clan head to meet his family. Old man’s here to check if I have the kekkei genkai. Looks like it so far.

Kurama hummed, blood-red eyes gleaming with an unholy light that Naruto didn’t like one bit. If he slaps a seal on you, it’s going to be exactly like the good old days.

Goddammit, Kurama! Don’t jinx it. Super intuition is nothing like the Byakugan. Why would one need to seal it? It’s not like it can be stolen... Even as he said that, Naruto resigned himself to the possibility of it happening. He had a history with seals and fathers who thought they knew best, after all. A bad one.

“Papa is home, Tsu-kun! Come give papa a hug, my cute tuna fishie!”

Not in the mood for Iemitsu’s antics after his conclusions, Naruto’s cute, innocent mask slipped off his face. He stared at Iemitsu’s stupid, grinning mug, and said with as much venom as his childish voice could produce, “Kuso oyaji.”

If he was going to end up with another seal on his body because of his father, he’d make damn sure to voice his displeasure.

Iemitsu’s stupid grin, too, slipped off his face, the fact his son called him shitty old man not computing in his brain. He blinked once, twice, then turned to his wife with tears shining in his eyes. “Nana, my tuna fish hates me!”

Giggling, Nana patted his arm. “Ara, he doesn’t hate you, honey. Silly anata, he just hasn’t seen you in a while.”

Huh, well what do you know? Bullshit excuses must run in both sides of the family. Amused, Naruto barely suppressed a snort. Five minutes later, he was much less amused when his parents abandoned him to the clan head’s company out in the garden.
“Hello, Tsunayoshi-kun.” The old man smiled at him, and wow, that was the Sandaime’s smile right there, from the soft crinkling of skin around his eyes to the indulgent tilt of his lips down to the warm feeling it gave Naruto every time he saw it. “My name is Timoteo di Vongola, but you can call me Nonno. It means grandfather in my language.”

Trying to ignore the warm fuzzies in his stomach, Naruto smiled back at him, his cute kid act back in place. “Nonno Timo is papa’s papa?”

Timoteo laughed. “Yes. We are all family.”

The way he intoned that word—family—invoked trust and safety and protection. It put Naruto on edge even as it drew him closer.

This isn’t normal, right? Gritting his teeth through his smile, Naruto grew more agitated the stronger the feeling became. I was way too wary of him to start trusting him just ‘cause he smiled at me like the Sandaime used to. He’s doing something.

Kurama sat up, brows furrowed, as a wave of heat slammed into them. The fox shrugged it off with the kind of contemptuous ease Naruto greatly envied right now. It wasn’t half as easy for him to do so.

Hmm…oh. I think he’s coaxing your chakra? Don’t know why, but he’s trying to see if he gets a response?

The temperature rose, and he was burning, burning, burning. Naruto panicked—then he was on fire. From the expression of utter stupefaction on Timoteo’s face, that wasn’t the sort of response he was expecting either. The old man gazed at him with a mixture of emotions—while Naruto kept burning—until he settled on one Naruto recognized. Determination. Namikaze Minato had worn the same expression once upon a time. It didn’t end well for everyone involved until many, many years later.

Naruto could only bang his head against Kurama’s paw while the fox howled with laughter. Timoteo’s finger was on fire now, too. And creeping towards Naruto’s forehead. Which, what the fuck?

Oh, well, he sighed, surrendering to his fate, because fighting against it would cause more trouble than it was worth, here comes the seal.

And, indeed, it came. Only—

Naruto poked at the fiery orange chakra that burrowed under his skin and kinda…caged his own? This was like—

A chakra suppression seal? he murmured, torn between being ecstatic it wasn’t the Caged Bird Seal and horrified at how…shoddy it was.

First of all, Kurama could burn it off in three seconds flat, but since Timoteo wasn’t aware of the bijū stuck in Naruto’s gut, he could be excused for not taking that into account and only aiming for Naruto’s chakra. Not that he had a chance in hell of suppressing the fox’s chakra with this kind of seal. And second, this seal was so unbalanced it was guaranteed to bleed off and mess up other stuff besides chakra. Hell, the nervous system would be the first thing it would royally fuck up.

All Naruto could say was even Orochimaru would be appalled by the old man’s sheer ineptitude at fūinjutsu, and that guy was all for cursed seals.
A seal that turned a perfectly functioning vessel into a pathetic, uncoordinated mess with an inability to retain information would have been an anathema to him. Being stuck in one would have probably driven him to suicide. And why had Naruto never thought of that? It would have been the prank of the century. Maybe Timoteo wasn’t such a lost cause, in terms of prank seals at least.

*He probably read about the seal somewhere, but never had cause to use it.* Kurama yawned, as if this sealing fuck-up was beneath him, and he had absolutely no fear of seals.

(He *so had.*)

One of his tails bitch-slapped Naruto; it didn’t stop his laughter.

*In any case,* he growled out, ignoring the laughing, twitching body at his feet, *the old man meant no harm. I can sense no negative emotions besides regret and sorrow, and—huh, self-blame. Still don’t know why he was trying to coax your chakra, but he does regret it now.*

*So he meant well, but is just crap at seals.* Mind made up, Naruto cracked his knuckles, breaking out in a grin so wide it made Kurama take two steps back. *I’m still gonna prank the everloving shit outta him.*

(Timoteo di Vongola returned to Italy with a new-found fear of orange, skin red and blotchy, and an adult-onset allergy to tuna.)
Naruto was... brooding.

His mother had announced one sunny morning that, since he’d now reached the ripe age of six, she had signed him up for formal schooling at the local elementary, and nothing could change her mind. He had argued in favor of home-schooling or private tutoring; he had tried reasoning, pleading, pouting, sulking, even calling his useless father to advocate his case—only for Iemitsu to feed him some bullshit about how school is an important formative experience, Tsu-kun and listen to your mama, tuna fishie, she knows best and you need to make some friends, it’ll be good for you, son.

That Kurama actually agreed with his stupid father on the last part shocked him enough for the fox’s words to register in his stubborn mind.

You’ll always have me, Naruto, Kurama began, voice soft but wrapped in steel, staring at him, staring through him, but you need to connect with people in this world. You’ve never been a solitary creature, brat. You need people in your life.

Naruto knew the situation was critical then, because Kurama didn’t do this sentimental crap on principle.

School is full of little kids, he tried to argue, sounding rather petulant even to his own ears. I have nothing in common with them. Which was true, but not the real issue, and they both knew it.

Sighing like an exasperated parent who had to have this conversation with their kid at least once in their lifetime, Kurama shook his head. Try it out for a couple of months, and if you can’t deal with kids, then send a shadow clone to school and henge to an adult form to mingle with people closer to your mental age. That should be enough of an incentive to start your chakra control training.

Embarrassment colored his face when Kurama slashed him with a wry, knowing gaze, made him avert his eyes to the floor and curse the fox’s empathetic mastery. Just because Kurama didn’t do emotions often didn’t mean he was blind and deaf to Naruto’s inner turmoil. For the fox to intervene this time, instead of letting him sort through his issues alone, meant Naruto had been doing a fine impersonation of an ostrich and burying his problems so deep he’d need an earth jutsu to excavate them. Or a meddlesome bijū.

Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve been slacking off. The old man’s shitty seal has been gone for months, yet all you do is taijutsu training and meditation for your kekkei genkai. You keep thinking: what’s the point? You’ve been doing well so far, but you’re not really adjusting, brat—just fooling yourself that you have. You miss your family, your friends, your village, your old life... And that’s fine. You’re allowed to miss them. But that’s not really living, is it?

That was the heart of the matter, wasn’t it? Sheepishly, Naruto rubbed the back of his neck, peering at the fox from the corner of his eye like a chastised child, unaccustomed to being in this position. Ninety percent of the time, he was the voice of reason and maturity in their partnership. It was mortifying for both of them that they had to have this kind of conversation.

Kurama’s eyes narrowed, as if blaming him for having to point this out, then the fox said, sharp and flinty and final. Go out there, make some friends, start training seriously, and get out of your
And that was the end of it.

So here he was, his first day at Namimori Elementary, sitting under a tree in the school yard during lunch break, eating his bento while little kids were being little kids all over the place. It was…boring as all get-out; or at least it was until one black-haired runt, maybe a year older than him, made a beeline for him with recognition in his cloud gray eyes.

“Carnivore,” the brat breathed out when he reached Naruto, reverent as fuck, eyes wide and full of wonder, keeping a respectable—read: safe, out of weapons’ reach—distance from him.

Naruto was certain he’d never met the kid before, so with that thought in mind, he turned to the other source who might know what was going on but vainly hoping otherwise. He’d given him control for one night in order to burn off that seal, for sage’s sake. How much trouble could he have caused in one night? A whole fucking lot, he then amended. Naruto should have learned from the Nara Tofu Incident.

What did you do?

Silence.

Kurama.

Jittery shifting of feet.

Explain.

Guilty swishing of tails.

Now.

The fox broke his suspicious silence, only to launch into a quick, mumbled sequence of words, almost too low for Naruto to hear. Unfortunately, he did hear, then wished he hadn’t.

I might have gone to check out the bad parts of town we avoided last time ‘cause your kekkei genkai is more of a pussy than Matatabi, and I might have run across the brat trying to be some kind of mini-KMPF officer, and I might have saved him from some low-life scum about to stab him in the kidney.

Wow, all of that in one breath. Wait, what did the Konoha Military Police Force have to do with anything? Last he checked, seven-year-old kiddies weren’t allowed to join unless they were Uchiha motherfucking Itachi.

Okay, that doesn’t sound so bad. You saved a kid’s life, good job. Positive thinking, he reminded himself, was the key to success in life. He had promised to try living, hadn’t he? So Naruto tried to focus on the good parts lest he choke the fox to death. Murder wasn’t the answer to life’s problems, nope. He wouldn’t go down the Sasuke route no matter how much he wanted to right now. Still not much of an explanation for the carnivore part. What. Did. You. Do?

Kurama bared his teeth, refusing to be cowed under Naruto’s deadly calm. Tch. Look at the brat! If he hasn’t got some damn Uchiha blood in him, I’ll eat my tails.

He chanced another glance at the brat. Huh. Well, damn. Could be an Uchiha with those pretty genes, except for the light-colored eyes. Not the immediate issue, though.
Oh. Naruto had a bad feeling.

Growing more irate by the second, the fox kept going, pacing back and forth as he narrated his tale of the events that resulted in this new clusterfuck.

But what clinched it was when the little hellion denied ever needing help, told me not to get in his way again, and worst of all … He gave me that fucking Uchiha-grunt. He grunted. At me!

Oh, boy. His feeling grew stronger, as did his conviction of the brat’s heritage.

I might have then cursed his ancestors, claimed even the insane tanuki, for all his gender confusion and thirst for blood, was better at child rearing than his human parents, not that Shukaku could ever hold a candle to me, ’cause I’m better at everything and have more tails obviously, and I made sure the brat knew it, too, then dumped the ki d’s body outside the police station and finally came home.

So, to summarize. Naruto exhaled one long, deep breath, clinging to his mellow by the skin of his teeth. You dissed his ancestors, you dissed his parents, you dissed your siblings, then you declared yourself the supreme lord of everything, and the kid mistook your references for animal metaphors and converted to the law of the jungle. Just out of curiosity, why was the kid unconscious at the end?

An awkward chuckle spilled out of the fox’s throat; half-smug, half-penitent. I might have…overreacted just a tiny bit…and might have overdone it with the killing intent?

Naruto closed his eyes and prayed for patience. It wasn’t even noon yet, and he felt exhausted.

Just, just shut up.

When he lifted his lids, the maybe-Uchiha boy was still there, waiting quietly, stormy eyes alight with an intensity he rarely saw in children, and yeah, Naruto could see Itachi in this brat.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Hibari Kyōya,” was the prompt reply.

“Alright, then. Sit down, Kyō-chan.” Placing his half-eaten bento down, he patted the ground next to him, adopting a relaxed ‘I mean you no harm, come closer little animal’ posture, mouth quirking at the cute frown that pulled on the boy’s brows at his new nickname. “You and I are going to have a talk about acceptable speech patterns and role models.”

“Hn.”

Naruto choked back a laugh at the familiar sound.

“That right there—that’s what I’m talking about. If you don’t cut that crap out, I’m gonna beat you up so bad, you’ll lose half your baby teeth at once.” An exhilarated glint entered the brat’s gaze—oh, great, he’s a battle maniac, probably a fighting prodigy, too—and Naruto modified his approach to, “I’m gonna regularly beat you up ’til you lose all your baby teeth and grow some fangs, but only if…you let go of the—” He forced himself to make the dreaded sound. It was for the good of the kid. He had to. “—hn.”

The boy seemed to ruminate on his not-really-an-offer, then slowly, if reluctantly, nodded.
Naruto huffed out the laugh he’d been holding in ever since the brat sat down. “Words, Kyō-chan. I need words.”

As though pained, Kyōya ground out, “I understand, carnivore.”

Ah, well, kid would learn. He wasn’t old enough for the Uchiha-grunt to have become an intrinsic reflex yet. Naruto would stake his love of orange on ridding the kid of it. Now, time to correct Kurama’s stupid blunder.

*An animal kingdom obsession? Really?*

Kurama did bashful as well as he did feelings, but at least he had the sense to stay silent.

“And that’s another thing. You and I may know that the laws of nature eat the laws of humans for breakfast, but we live in human society and so we must adapt to their lifestyle, which includes human interaction and using the appropriate forms of address. Got it?”

Kyōya appeared mutinous at that, as if accepting this type of worldview would negate Naruto’s dominance over him, and thus ruin his chances of ever taking his place among the true carnivores of the world.

A trickle of killing intent. A flash of red-slit eyes.

The boy went rigid, a strangled *hai* wrenched from his mouth on pure instinct, then peered at Naruto with undisguised awe. Curiously, eagerly, he asked, “What should I call you?”

Well, there was only one response he could now give. “How about sensei?”

Kurama chuckled, too pleased to even feign annoyance at Naruto’s choice of a maybe-Uchiha pupil. *So, you’re going to take the runt as a student?*

Naruto flipped him off. *Weren’t you the one who told me I needed to make connections?*
Chapter 7

Naruto had a problem—and his name was Hibari Kyōya.

Taking on the brat was all well and good, but Naruto knew that giving him individual training without laying the groundwork for teamwork was a recipe for disaster. His own son had driven that point home. It took a chakra-sucking alien, a power-hungry scientist, and some ol’ Rasengan-style god slaying to cure Boruto of his one-man show mentality.

Kyōya needed teammates, which meant Naruto had to find him some, never mind how difficult it would be to convince two little kids to take up shinobi training from another six-year-old in this day and age. He’d lucked out with Kyōya, in part because of Kurama’s idiotic stunt and in part because, as the brat had later informed him, there was apparently some kind of killer-baby in Kyōya’s family tree. Hence, his easy acceptance of Naruto’s superiority in all things carnivore.

In retrospect, he should’ve been less concerned about how to introduce little kids to the shinobi world, and more worried about how well they took to it.

The solution practically fell into his lap—and her name was Sasagawa Kyōko.

Naruto had been halfway home after school had ended on a normal Tuesday afternoon, taking a shortcut through the local park, when he spied an alarming sight. A tied-up little slip of a girl, surrounded by a bunch of rough-looking, baseball bat-waving middle-schoolers. Now that shit wasn’t alright in Naruto’s book; so he beat the living tar out of the morons who thought kidnapping little girls was the upstanding thing to do, and he enjoyed every second of it.

Although, he might have enjoyed it a little too much, if the way the girl flinched when he untied her was any indication. Naruto eyed the rope burns around the girl’s small wrists and ankles with distaste, the desire to destroy those assholes seething anew in his blood, then took out some bandages and antiseptic cream—he always carried half the pharmacy with him thanks to Kyōya’s...overeagerness, brat just wouldn’t stay down—and gently applied them to the wounds. By the time he finished, the girl had stopped flinching, though she still winced in between sniffles and pitiful hiccups.

He pasted a bright smile on his face, as if he hadn’t just performed a one-sided, non-lethal massacre followed by emergency treatment like a pro, and nudged her shoulder to take her attention away from the unconscious bodies all around them.

“Hey, are you alright?”

A smile curved her lips, thin and tremulous, but she was no longer afraid of him. Naruto counted it as a win.

“Unn. Th-thank you for...for saving me.”

Well, that wouldn’t do. He leafed through his memories until he found one that fit—Team Seven rooftop introduction it was.

“I’m Sawada Tsunayoshi, but you can call me Naruto. I really, really like ramen! My favorite color is orange!”

The ramen tidbit also explained his nickname, and miracle of miracles, it worked like a charm.
The girl’s smile broadened until it covered half her face. She dried her teary eyes with the back of her hand, then half-tittered, half-announced, “I’m Sasagawa Kyōko. I like cake and the color yellow. Nice to meet you, Naruto-kun!”

Awesome. Now that the tears were over, he could extract some information out of her. His gaze swept over the bodies in a casual, dismissive manner, to remind her there was no danger and she was free to speak of her ordeal. “These guys said something about your brother, Kyōko-chan?”

A scowl wedged itself between her brows, and she bit the flesh of her lip violently. At the mention of her brother perhaps? Well, whatever. Anger was better than self-pity. Naruto gave her an encouraging tilt of his chin.

“Ohī-chan likes to fight a lot. They wanted to beat him up, so they took me to get him to come save me. I just wish onī-chan would stop fighting before he gets hurt, but he never listens to me!”

She was breathing hard, all angry gestures and red-tinged cheeks, and wow, this girl was a real spitfire when she got passionate. Very young-Sakura-like—oh. It required a delicate touch, but this might just work.

“You know, Kyōko-chan, fighting isn’t so bad.” He smiled warmly, his old Hokage voice bleeding through, the tone he used in the speech he had to give for the Academy entrance ceremony every year. “Police officers fight the bad guys, army soldiers fight for their country, and there are the firefighters, too. As long as your brother knows what he’s fighting for, then he’s gonna be okay.”

Kyōko went quiet as she gazed at him, chewing on her bottom lip, caramel eyes peeking through her lashes. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely.” Naruto nodded once, sure and unyielding, because if there was one thing he believed in, it was fighting for your dreams and your precious people.

What he hadn’t accounted for was Kyōko giggling as she beamed at him. “You’re really smart, ne, Naruto-kun?”

“Eh, I guess?” Naruto coughed, the tips of his ears flushed, fingers fumbling with the short, spiky tufts of hair on the nape of his neck. Even if it came from a little girl he had just saved, it felt damn good to be called smart for a change.

That settled it. He wasn’t only doing this for Kyoya’s sake anymore, but for hers. Kyōko deserved a chance to stand on her own two feet, and by the gods, Naruto was going to make sure no one would be able to take advantage of her kind nature ever again.

Clearing his throat, he pushed all of his sincerity and I’ll-make-you-a-badass-kunoichi feels into his gaze and met the girl’s big, liquid eyes. “Listen, me and my friend train together. If you want to help your brother, why don’t you also learn how to fight? That way, you’ll never get caught again, and your brother won’t worry about you. You can even beat him up when he’s being stubborn and not listening to you!”

Instead of the clichéd fighting is for boys and I don’t want to beat onī-chan he half-expected to hear, Kyōko’s eyes grew bigger if that was even possible, lower lip trembling, as a stutter of words sprang from her mouth. “Bu-but onī-chan is so strong, and, and I—I’m…me!”

And damn, if that wasn’t Hinata’s brand of stutter and inferiority complex before Neji got all that fate crap beaten out of him by Naruto, started treating her like family, and gave it his best to build some confidence back into her. Naruto might have been her source of inspiration, but Neji was the
one who did the heavy lifting on project Future Heiress of the Hyūga Clan. It was one of his few regrets, that he hadn’t realized how much his wife needed his support sooner in life.

Resolve firmed, Naruto took her tiny hands in his and vowed to become Kyōko’s Neji. In honor of Neji’s efforts, for his wife’s memory, and because Kyōya would be a right terror without teammates to reel him in when he got…excited. “I’ll teach you how to beat him. You can definitely do it.”

Kyōko stared at him as if he hung the moon and the stars, insecurity leaching out of her mien to be replaced by a new sense of purpose, golden fire burning in the depths of her eyes.

A feral grin split the seam of her mouth, showing rows of white teeth and the wild side of joy. “Okay,” she happily chirped, then kicked the nearest unconscious asshole in the nuts.

Caught aback by her new-found ferocity, Naruto could only blink, and did she just…channel chakra to her eyes?

_for a second there, yes. Might be something worth looking into._

Oh. It wasn’t my imagination. Good to know.

Now, how to break the news to Kyōya?

“This is Sasagawa Kyōko, Kyō-chan. She’ll be your teammate from now on. Treat her well.”

Kyōya stared at Naruto. Naruto stared back.

“Hibari Kyōya,” the brat deigned to bite out after a tense, heavy silence, sparking with _why-are-you-doing-this-to-me-sensei and you’d-better-not-make-her-cry-brat_ static in the air.

Still, Kyōko smiled at the sullen boy, sparkles and rainbows and fucking unicorns frolicking in the background. “Nice to meet you, Kyōya-kun! Let’s be friends, ne?”

Naruto had the Sunset of Youth genjutsu flashbacks. Kyōya seemed to be experiencing something similar—wait, what the hell was the brat mumbling about? Something about small animals, and was he…? Oh. Ohoho.

Our little Kyō-chan has a weakness for cute things, huh?

Kurama didn’t reply; he was too busy busting a gut, all but rolling on the floor.

“Show her how to warm up, Kyō-chan. Only half the set of each for Kyōko-chan, though, ‘cause she’s just starting out.”

The goal was to test his theory, not torture the poor girl. The brat grabbed her by the hand without so much as a by-your-leave, dragging her to the exercise mats, but Naruto could tell he was being very, very careful with his strength. And, indeed, every time Kyōko messed up, he would dutifully correct her, only for the girl to smile that fairy-smile and thank him and Kyōya to pretend he wasn’t totally entranced by it.

Naruto was never going to let the little brat live this down. _Man, I so need to buy a camera._

Yes, the fox choked out, still laughing madly, _yes, you do._
Naruto was on the hunt for the last member of his team, gaze scanning the school yard—next to him, Kyōko was winning against Kyōya’s meat obsession by smiling and slipping vegetables into his bento while the brat was dazzled, it was hilarious to watch—when he spotted the kid.

*It’s like the second coming of Sai*… The way he naturally missed social cues, the way he held himself apart from the crowd but desperately wanted to fit in, that emptiness in his eyes, that stilted quirking of lips. His super intuition hummed a mournful note. *What’s he really feeling, Kurama?*

*That…is one sad little brat.* The fox slanted his head to the side, thoughtful and solemn for once. *I’m talking real deep pain and grief here. He’s crying inside, probably lost someone close to him recently.*

That was all Naruto needed to hear. Leaving the kids to their food fight, he made his way to the boy all stealth-like to fuck with the kid’s situational awareness. He had a good feeling about this one; it was in the eyes.

“Yo.”

Instead of jumping at the jarring sound, like normal kids would, the boy stilled, then laughed the most fake laugh in the history of fake laughs. Sai would have been proud.

“Eh, where did you come from?”

“From over there.” Naruto pointed out the spot the kids were sitting at. “See ‘em? Those are my friends, Kyō-chan and Kyōko-chan. We’re a team. Wanna join us?”

Interest shone through those dark, glassy eyes. A faint, flickering light, but it was enough for now. There we go. Little kids shouldn’t have such empty eyes. Or the Danzōs of this world would exploit the fuck out of it—and Naruto would die before he let that happen to this kid.

“Like a game? What kind of team?”

Eh, why not, for some people, life was a game. Naruto puffed out his chest, a manic grin bisecting his cheeks, and did a little Jiraiya jig. Laughter was good for the soul, and this kid needed it like crazy. “Yup, we’re shinobi, the most kickass team you’ve ever seen. So, what say you? Will you join the awesome that is us?”

The boy’s laughter lost its grating pitch, became softer, more genuine. His stare moved from Naruto’s grinning face to the kids’ lunch spot and back again. He inhaled deeply, squared his shoulders and nodded once. “Sure, sounds like fun! I’m Yamamoto Takeshi.”

“Sawada Tsunayoshi, but my friends call me Naruto. Nice to meet you, Take-chan. You’ve got good instincts for a civvie kid.”

Takeshi snorted with laughter, but he seemed pleased at Naruto’s words, as he should. Coming from him, that was a grade A compliment.

“You’re a funny guy, Naruto, but I like you.”

“Like I said, good instincts. You’ll go far in life, Take-chan.”

Kyōko welcomed the new addition to the team with brilliant smiles, and she was all for celebrating with dinner at Takeshi’s father’s sushi restaurant when the kid suggested it. Kyōya, who had long since lost the food fight, not so much. Naruto gave him a week before he caved under the cute factor. Kurama bet he wouldn’t last three days.
Naruto had assumed since his team was now full, he’d be done with recruitment. He was sadly mistaken.

It was the morning after team formation, and Naruto had taken maybe two steps out of his home, when a hurricane nearly swept him off his feet. What the hell? He blinked, and it was coming back. Like, the hurricane made a U-turn and came straight at him. Then it turned into a kid. He caught one glimpse at the boy’s silvery-white hair and coal-grey eyes and all that fucking energy before he suffered something far worse than the Sunset of Youth genjutsu flashbacks.

He would not make the connection. Would not make. Not—

_Illegitimate love-child of the porn addict and the green beast._

_Fuck you, Kurama._

(Ironically enough, Kurama was the only being in Konoha who ever acknowledged Gai’s self-proclaimed moniker.)

Steeling himself, since the fox had made it fucking legit, Naruto looked at the kid, who was now bent at the waist, the perfect ninety-degree bow just like—nope, no way, can’t do this.

“Thank you for saving my sister and for being Kyōko’s friend! Please take care of her to the extreme!”

“Maa, no problem, kid.” Shit, did he just pull a Kakashi-sensei on reflex? Next thing he knew, they’d be having rock-paper-scissors contests. This kid was messing with his head big time. “You’re Kyōko-chan’s brother then?”

Straightening up, the brat shot him a huge grin, and Naruto braced himself for the coming horror. It…never…came…? Huh. Guess only Kyōko inherited the genjutsu-inducing smiles in the family. Which now made perfect—nope, not going there again.

Kid’s volume, on the other hand…

“Sasagawa Ryōhei! Since you’re Kyōko’s friend, you’re family now, Sawada! Call me onī-san!”

Like hell. “Yeah, no. You can be Ryō-chan.”

And Naruto really wanted to leave it at that, but then he had to take a long, good look at the kid. Because he knew Gai, and he knew Lee, and there was no way this kid wasn’t pushing himself past his limits, and there was no teacher to tell him off, and holy shit, kid, you’re running on willpower and chakra boosts, the hurricane makes sense now.

“Come with Kyōko-chan to practice this afternoon,” was out of his mouth before he could stop it. Eh, might as well go on. “Your…extreme…training is stressing your body so much, that your chakra is compensating by enhancing your muscles and tendons and what-have-you. Not only is that dangerous for a novice, but unless you’re a taijutsu master or a medic-nin with good control who knows anatomy inside out, it’s counterproductive and does more damage in the long run. I’m gonna set you up with a new training schedule, alright?”

Ryōhei’s expression said he understood maybe one and a half sentences in all that, but his emphatic nodding compensated for the rest. “I’ll extremely be there!”
Chapter 8

Ryōhei’s inclusion to the chibi-shinobi-in-training brigade wasn’t as smooth as Takeshi’s, but Kyōya hadn’t made much of a fuss about it because, in truth, the boy was more of an…extreme extra…than an integral part of the team. Naruto had put together a reasonable training plan for the kid, forced him to rest for a few days to undo the stress on his chakra system, then let him loose to terrorize Namimori’s population and wildlife alike from dawn to dusk. He’d have been Lee’s dream student (and everyone else’s nightmare).

Takeshi might’ve been too cheerful for Kyōya’s tastes—and too fake, too hurt inside, though they were all working on fixing that, it was an uphill battle every day—but the boy never turned a spar down and always gave as good as he got. There was a vast well of potential in this kid, a fascination with sharp, shiny objects, an ungodly hand-eye coordination, and a hell of a competitive spirit. He’d have made a terrifying Kiri-nin. All Naruto had to do was to put a bokken in his hand and have him learn his family kenjutsu style from his dad once he whipped the kid into shape.

(His father had taken Naruto aside after introductions were made, looked him dead in the eye, gaze keen and assessing, judging, then bowed his head and entrusted his son to Naruto’s care. Age means nothing for you and me, like knows like, he had said, lips curled wryly, dark circles under his eyes, jaded by a profession that left things behind, still mourning the loss of his wife. Naruto had dipped his chin in respect—from one killer to another—because what Tsuyoshi had truly tested for was Naruto’s resolve, if he was prepared to kill for his son’s safety, if he was willing to value Takeshi’s life over someone else’s. There was always a price to pay for people like them.)

Kyōko…well, Kyōko was in a league of her own. She had a real future in infiltration, what with her misleading appearance, natural affinity for genjutsu, and budding spy network among the kiddies in their school and the grandmas in her neighborhood. Naruto hadn’t yet settled on what taijutsu style would suit her, and her stamina was shit for the time being, but give her a few years and she’d become the kind of kunoichi the ANBU Corps would have fought tooth and nail to recruit. Genjutsu was scary as fuck when mastered. Not to mention, Naruto suspected she might have the chakra control for medical training, too.

Now, Kyōya…the less said about Kyōya, the better. Naruto was half-convinced he could have thrown him at the Jūbi and the little brat would have survived longer than seasoned Iwa-nin. That brat was a monster. Speed, power, precision, control—he had it all. In spades. The sole thing he lacked was self-restraint, which was also why Naruto hadn’t started him on ninjutsu training just yet, focusing on weapons’ handling instead. Arming that little hellion was overkill. If he added Katon jutsu to his repertoire? Sage save them all, he’d burn the whole world down. That little beast was slated to be the next Itachi.

How had Iruka-sensei ever managed a whole class of ninja kids? Naruto had his hands full with training this crazy bunch, and there were only four of them. Or, that was how it was supposed to be. Problem was, the kids didn’t get the memo.

Kyōko, the little angel, started the Doom of Vongola as Naruto would later dub it—and what Kyōko started, Kyōya, the little hellspawn, always finished. Because they were an inseparable pair, these two. Best goddamn teamwork Naruto had ever witnessed in a male-female shinobi partnership. Where she was subtle, he was blunt. Where she hit with illusions, he hit with steel. Where she fucked up the brain, he fucked up the body. Together, as mid-level genin, they could take on a B-rank nuke-nin and win. Worse, they would trash the poor fool—break their mind, break their body, ruin their reputation, and rob them blind.
(If they didn’t end up happily married with two adorable, homicidal, genjutsu-smiling kids, Naruto would give up his love of ramen.)

To make a long story short, Kyōko showed up in practice one day, a dark-haired girl in tow, and bade them to gather around for introductions, fingers haltingly signing in the code Naruto had been teaching them behind her back. Civilian. Friendly. Smart. Join. Team.

“This is Hana-chan. She wanted to know what we do after school and meet my friends.” And wouldn’t take no for an answer, was implied, because Naruto had hammered discretion into Kyōko’s clever little mind.

As Kyōko introduced the boys, Hana studied them, one by one, gaze intent, lingering first on Naruto, then on Kyōya. Good observational and threat assessment skills, Naruto would give her that.

“Kurokawa Hana. Nice to meet you. I hear you’re playing ninja.” Dubious, flatly intoned, and a little accusing.

Interesting. Girl must have realized they were not playing the ninja game as the teachers and half the parents were inclined to believe. Adults usually let them be with nary a word, thinking they’d grow out of that phase sooner or later. But not this girl. So Naruto gave it to her straight. And Hana stayed.

She was the sensible sort, too—that there was a despairing lack of those in this group might have swayed Naruto’s decision just a little in her favor—like a bizarre mix of Shizune and Ino. Great with adults, terrible with kids. Her tongue was sharper than a kunai, and she used it often, with deadly accuracy. Pity that her mission in life was to be Kyōko’s self-appointed guardian, because the Kyō duo was already a thing when she joined. Hana didn’t have a chance in hell of stopping the unstoppable Kyō duo, but boy, did she try.

Then, not to be outdone by his better half, Kyōya showed up in practice one day, a dark-haired boy in tow, and didn’t even have the decency to make the introductions himself.

“My name is Kusakabe Tetsuya. Pleased to meet you.” The boy bowed from the waist with quiet dignity, the transition fluid and well-practiced, then fixed his gaze on Naruto and executed an even deeper, more respectful bow. “I would very much like to join Kyō-san’s team, sensei.”

Wow, polite... Where in the world did Kyō-chan find this kid? They’re like, polar opposites, was Naruto’s first thought, then, he even knows the chain of command. If he’s as good at organizing stuff as he is at following protocol, I’m set for life. No more fuckin’ paperwork. Tetsuya, Naruto decided right there and then, was a kami-given gift.

He grinned at the boy, a vicious curl of lips, all blood on teeth, the kind of mad grin one wore as he stood victorious over the corpse of his enemy.

“Welcome to the team, Tetsu-chan!”

If his decision was more based on his future paperwork-free utopia than the kid’s future mental health... Well, no one had to know. (Kyōya knew. He wore the same grin when he met Tetsu.)

Tetsuya stumbled out of his picture-perfect bow, blinking slowly, as if he recognized that grin but had no idea of its importance. Hana, quicker on the uptake, seemed to put two and two together and come to the right conclusion. She patted Tetsuya’s back in mute understanding and comradeship. That girl was one smart cookie.
Ah, teamwork, brings a tear to my eye. Naruto gave them a thumbs up.

Tetsuya cautiously returned it, whereas Hana made a very rude gesture little girls should not really know.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My…relative…wants to meet you, sensei. To inquire about your qualifications.”

Naruto was aware of Kyōya’s mini shadow long before the brat opened his mouth to confirm it, but all the little details hidden in these two sentences told him a lot about their relationship. How he paused before admitting kinship, the way the syllables rolled off his tongue when he spoke his title, that low, raspy inflection, writhing with violent, possessive undertones. Kyōya was displeased that his relative was intruding on their training time, and incensed that he was questioning Naruto’s eligibility as his teacher.

Ruffling the boy’s hair, Naruto cast his gaze on the third tree to his left and chuckled. “Then he can come down from that tree and introduce himself.”

A small, red-clad form detached itself from the tree to land in front of them with one graceful leap. Naruto lowered his gaze to meet dark eyes and a face so similar to Kyōya’s, that it was bloody uncanny. The resemblance was freaking him out more than the stranger’s age, because that kind of serene expression had never graced Kyōya’s features, and ooh, this must be the famous killer-baby of the Hibari clan.

Damn, he had the best poker face Naruto had ever seen on a toddler. That took some real skill to pull off. He inwardly whistled in appreciation, then nudged Kurama for help.

He feels curious, kind of impressed, maybe a little grateful? Kurama grumbled rather than spoke, seeming to share Kyōya’s irritation with this human, and nothing annoyed the fox more than taking the side of the Uchiha-spawn as he had taken to calling the boy.

Oh, this was hilarious. Whatever this sneaky killer-baby was, Naruto already liked him just for that. He also couldn’t help but add oil to the fire. Aw, is the big, bad fox stumped by the teeny-tiny human? Gigantic jaws clamped down on empty air as Naruto danced away laughing. Trying to eat me? Really?

I don’t deal with positive emotions, you know, and he’s damn hard to read—no, wait, there’s something else underneath I can’t quite… Oh, I got it. Tired, like, bone-deep weary, some traces of old-festering resentment with a side of betrayal. He hides it well though, similar to the porn addict, the classic ANBU feel after years of emotional disconnect.

Only Kurama could deliver such depressing facts with elation to his voice. Human suffering was, apparently, too insignificant in comparison with his triumph at solving the puzzle this human presented.

I’d say this human is a lot older than his appearance would have you believe, and someone screwed him over to make him look like that.

Naruto sighed, unsurprised. Yeah, I was hoping it was some sort of henge or seal-based disguise, but it’s really not. Damn, now I feel sorry for the guy.

“Hello.” The voice that spilled from the toddler’s throat didn’t match the age of the body. It was mature, silk-soft and soothing to the ears. “My name is Fon, Kyōya’s great-uncle. I apologize for
my actions. I did not mean to deceive, merely observe. Kyōya has told me much about you, Naruto-san.” His eyes wandered over to the spot where the kids were going through their daily kata, glinting with approval and hints of mirth as he appraised Kyōko’s panting form. “And Kyōko-san.”

“I bet he has.” Naruto laughed, ruffling the brat’s hair again. “Eh, don’t sweat it. I’m not offended or anything, probably would’ve done the same in your place. Nice to meet you, Fon-san.”

Kyōya stoically bore his sensei’s affection while glaring daggers at Fon, as if to say only he gets to do that and try it and I’ll end you and leave already, but his animosity was like water sliding off a duck’s back. Naruto was amazed at the palpable aura of I-don’t-give-a-fuck-what-you-think as Fon inclined his head at him, smiled and said, cool as a fucking cucumber, “Likewise.”

Yup, he liked this guy and…his…monkey? Woah, back up. What the hell? Where did the baby monkey come from? How? When? Naruto didn’t even see it coming, for fuck’s sake. It was Kyōya’s struggle under his grip that alerted him to the fact he hadn’t yet released the boy’s hair due to his shock. Coughing into his fist, Naruto shot the brat an apologetic glance under Fon’s amused stare, and yeah, that calm bastard had done this on purpose. He was definitely Naruto’s kind of guy. They’d be bros in no time, he could see it (and all the pranks that would follow; nobody would suspect a toddler).

“Oh, sorry ‘bout that. It’s just…it’s been a while since I’ve seen a nin-animal, and it took me by surprise. Plus, your monkey’s a dead ringer for my first student’s baby summon.”

“He name is Lichi,” Fon said at the same time as Kyōya’s head snapped up, an excited, demented gleam that promised trouble in his eye, and he all but crowed with delight, “Nin-animal? Summon?”

“Shit.” Why, oh why, had he said that? Naruto knew it was bad when even the monkey seemed to be laughing at his misfortune. How was this his life? Kyōya’d never let this go. Still, he could maybe postpone it? Yeah, stalling, great tactic, let’s go with that. “Look, Kyō-chan, can we maybe talk about this later?”

Eyes fever-bright, Kyōya gave him a curt nod, then marched off to practice with the other brats—to share the news and cement his doom, his super intuition evilly purred, or maybe that was Kurama fucking with his head—but not before he threw over his shoulder, “I will hold you to that, sensei.”

“Awesome.” Naruto groaned as he watched him go, eighty percent sure this would end in tears. His or the kids’ was the real question.

Fon hummed softly, wistfully. “He listens to you.”

There were many things Naruto could have riposted to that—

Really? What gave you that idea? Weren’t you here just now? Or did I imagine the whole thing? Please tell me that I did.

You didn’t. It happened. It will happen again, and it will be glorious, Kurama, the sadistic asshole, purred. He knew it. The fox was so fucking with him.

—but he understood what Fon meant, so he went with, “‘Course, he does. Kyō-chan might be a little monster on the battlefield, but he’s a good kid and knows to listen when it matters.” Plopping himself down beside the man-toddler, Naruto tilted his head in the kids’ direction. Kyōya was
showing Kyōko how to improve their kick combo where she went low and he went high and gods help the poor soul who took that head-on. “See that? He’s got his head screwed on straight and his heart’s in the right place. You won’t find a little brat more protective of his precious people than our Kyō-chan.”

“You taught him that.” Fon smiled at him, something bittersweet to the set of his mouth, but pleased all the same. “You gave him people to care for.”

He then stood, only to bow before him, long and deep, the kind of formal bow Hyūga Hiashi had once given him, right before he beat him half to death for getting his daughter pregnant two weeks before the wedding. Hinata had told him it was supposed to show the utmost gratitude; Naruto had sure felt the jyūken strikes more than the gratitude.

“On behalf of my family, and as Kyōya’s previous instructor, please allow me to thank you for what you have done for my great-nephew. You have my gratitude, Naruto-san.”

“Hey, now, no need to be so formal.” Still kind of leery of this particular bow, Naruto tried to get the man out of it as fast as possible. “Like you said, you’re Kyō-chan’s family. No matter what that brat says, if he didn’t feel you were family, he wouldn’t have brought you along. Or even talked to you about us at all. We’re all friends here.” It was also why he hadn’t censored his words and personality from the get-go.

Fon hid his mouth behind his sleeve, chuckling wryly, that subtle tension beneath his skin dissipationating at last. “Yes, Kyōya tends to be like that. He takes after my sister.”

“That must be one scary old lady.”

“I would not call her that to her face.”

“She gets even scarier when you do, right? Man, my old granny was like that, too. Scariest woman you’d ever meet on a bad day, but all warm goo inside.”

“She must have been an interesting woman.”

“Interesting is one word for it.” Now that he’d gotten the man loose and relaxed, Naruto decided it was time to tackle the issue he’d been mulling over since Kurama’s psych-eval. “Speaking of her, she was also one of the best healers in the world. I don’t have an ounce of her talent, but I can at least manage a basic diagnostic scan and go from there. I ain’t one to beat about the bush, so I’ll just come out and say it. Would you like me to perform one?”

Noting the slight stiffening of Fon’s spine, he let the man see the truth in his eyes, the remnants of a seal gone right and so, so wrong, the I’ve-been-where-you-are-and-it-sucks empathy, but spoke with cold, hard facts. “There might not even be a solution to your condition if you haven’t found one yet, but it doesn’t hurt to let me try. Plus, I’ve got a consultant who knows chakra inside out. Together, we might be able to do something about your condition, but I won’t give you empty promises.”

Fon stared at him quietly, intently. Then, “Please do.”

“Allright.” Directing the man to lie down, he placed his hands on Fon’s chest, right below the red pacifier he was suspecting to be the true issue. “It’ll feel a little intrusive at first, so please don’t fight me.”

Fon nodded, silently observing the fiery orange chakra that erupted from Naruto’s hands, gaze widening when it morphed into a fiery cheery yellow with only traces of orange in it.
Naruto had no idea why the color change occurred—or why chakra had a color scheme at all—but he’d come to some conclusions after unlocking the kids’ chakra. Despite the different colors, they were all fire-natured, so he gave up and dubbed it fire-chakra. Strangely enough though, each color had its own specialty.

Red was so potent, that it didn’t just burn things, it actually disintegrated. Hell, it even burned pure chakra. Hana was having real fun with it, the little pyromaniac.

Yellow was better suited for medical ninjutsu and physical enhancement. Ryōhei had been constantly emitting it before Naruto got involved in his training. He didn’t have the control for medical stuff yet—the little brat could not, for the life of him, sit still to learn—but he was a pro at buffing himself up.

Blue was some dangerous shit, in Naruto’s opinion, because it fucking drained chakra and put people into comas if they were hit with a large dose of the stuff. The thief that broke into TakeSushi one fateful night could attest to that. Takeshi would be one scary motherfucker in the future.

Green was the most befuddling color since it was awesome for lightning and earth jutsu. Naruto couldn’t understand it—they were supposed to be opposing elements—but it fit Tetsuya’s personality to a tee. That boy was a steady rock and quick as lightning when it came to the Kyō duo fucking things up. The police had him on speed dial by now.

Indigo was perfect for genjutsu, which was ironic because, after red, it was the second most straightforward of the bunch. It had one function, and that was illusions. Kyōko kicked ass with it. Sometimes, Naruto swore she even wove real illusions. Then again, he sucked at genjutsu. If Kurama wasn’t his partner, he’d have been in deep shit during spars with her in a few years.

Purple was just...bizarre, because it was really, and Naruto meant really, diverse. It could do clones, it could do the Akimichi specials, it could do barriers, it was insane, and thus it was perfect for Kyōya. Because that brat was insane, too.

Orange might not have specific uses like the others, but it made everything better. Like, seriously, every jutsu performed was guaranteed to be flawless if there was orange in it. Naruto always had to defend his love for orange as an awesome ninja color to all the non-believers in Konoha, but he was now vindicated. Take that, suckers.

All the kids could do two colors, though they usually stuck to their primary, and Naruto could manage most, except indigo and blue. Kurama was in love with red, it was a match made in hell; also hilarious, since it was the most Uchiha of them all, and Naruto told him so every single time, only for Kurama to cite spoils of war as his justification for loving it to death.

Fon was red, Naruto discovered once he slipped into his chakra system, and powerful, potent red at that. He’d burn Hana's red to ashes in seconds along with the girl herself. Problem was, his chakra seemed to be paying alimony to the pacifier every second of every hour. The toddler body was the most visible consequence of that.

What do you think, Kurama?

That red pacifier is an abomination, but it probably serves an important function we currently know nothing about. If we destroy it, things could get ugly. The fact that it sucks chakra is a bad sign. Kurama's face twisted into a murderous scowl. Remember last time we dealt with something like that?
As if he could ever forget. Fucking Ōtsutsuki, he spat. No offense to your old man, but his family was full of delusional psychos. So we need to…what, find another source of chakra for the damn thing?

**That would be the safest solution.** The fox nodded, settling back down lest his riled-up chakra affect the scan. A self-regenerating chakra source, to be exact.

Easier said than done. *Do we know any seals that do that?*

Naruto rifled through his memories—he’d taken up fūinjutsu after the war, but he wasn’t an expert by any means. Identifying seals was child’s play, sure, and he could do a surprising variety of them, but designing original seals? Yeah, no. Kurama was leagues above him in that field.

*All I’m coming up with is Shukaku’s teakettle and Gyūki’s pot, but those things just contained an ungodly amount of chakra. It would be a temporary solution, though. If we filled it up with enough chakra, it would hold for years before it needed to be recharged.*

**It could work.** Kurama shrugged, then returned to murderous scowling so fast, he almost gave Naruto whiplash. *Still, you should…find…the creator to learn more about this thing before you try anything.*

And by ‘find’, he meant slow-roast him with red fire-chakra, cut him into tiny little pieces, and feed him to the fox. Naruto was totally on board with that.

*Yeah, I’ve got a bijūdama with that asshole’s name on it.*

Wrapping up his scan, he prepared to slip out of the man’s chakra, only for his orange to flare up, overpower his yellow, and start clinging. Naruto cursed. Orange fire-chakra was awesome, yeah, but it always pulled this needy bullshit. The kids didn’t mind—they actually liked the feeling—but Naruto was getting tired of this reaction.

“Oh, don’t mind that, s’nothing harmful, happens all the time with the kids. My chakra kinda likes your chakra,” he quickly blurted out, in case Fon got the wrong impression he was messing with his chakra, only to blanch as he realized how his choice of words could also give the wrong impression. “Shit, that came out wrong. What I meant—” Wait, why did he cover half his face with his sleeve again? Was that…snickering? His horrified expression turned deadpan faster than Kurama’s two minutes ago. “You’re laughing at me.”

Fon didn’t even have the decency to deny it. Naruto could now see the family resemblance all too clearly.

“Yes, but do forgive me. Your…terminology…greatly amused me.”

“You have a better one?”

“As a matter of fact—”

Okay, that was it, the bastard was now asking for it. Naruto opened his mouth and bellowed, “Oi, brats, gather ‘round! Fon-san’s gonna explain chakra theory to us. Isn’t it kind of him? Give him a round of applause!” He even demonstrated by clapping, all the while giving Fon a shit-eating grin. “Not so amused now, huh?”

If deadpan could mimic calm as far as expressions went, then Fon had perfected it. “You are a terrible person.”
“And don’t you forget it.” Before the kids reached them, he leaned in to whisper, “We'll talk about your condition later, yeah? Come over for dinner, I’ve got things to discuss.”

And that was how they learned about Flames and Harmony.

Naruto still liked his terminology better. Fire-chakra sounded less lame than the Dying Will Flames of the Sky, less of a mouthful, too. His dad, with his atrocious naming sense, would’ve fucking loved it.

Kyōya, of course, followed his example, if only to spite his great-uncle.

Chapter End Notes

Current ages:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya: 11-12  
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 10-11
Chapter 10

D-ranks, Naruto realized as he watched Granny Mikoto pinch and squeeze Kyōya’s cheeks for the fifth time, were the real reason jōnin-sensei volunteered to take the thankless job of teaching a pack of moody preteens.

Perched upon a tree, he lazily turned another page of his Italian coursebook—Iemitsu’s phone calls were full of foreign-sounding noise, plus he was in desperate need of a sane hobby—soaking up the grunts of young labor and misery below. Distracting the little brats from his stupid nin-animal-slash-baby-summon slip of the tongue by dangling the idea of shinobi missions in front of their cute, eager faces had been a stroke of genius.

Nanimori’s sweet grandmas were delighted to have help with their gardens—and grandbabies, and lost pets, and grocery shopping—his cheeky brats suffered a daily dose of their own medicine, and Naruto was getting the entertainment he’d been sorely missing. No, it was all for a good cause, really. What had his useless father called it again? Ah, yes, an important formative experience.

He had even split them into two official teams. Team A (for Awesome) consisted of the Kyō duo plus Takeshi, and were heavy assault front-liners with a touch of espionage. Team B for (Brains&Brawn) was made up of the anti-Kyō duo plus Ryōhei, and specialized in tactics, intelligence, and sabotage.

Kids had eaten it all up…until the true nature of D-rank missions cruelly revealed itself. His camera had been working overtime since that glorious morning. Naruto had so far filled up half an album, a fact he never failed to remind them. Their attempts at stealing it were adorable; good practice, too. Hana’s and Tetsuya’s combined efforts, especially. These two had a knack for devious, convoluted plans that ranged from plying him with ramen to divert his attention, to henge-ing into his camera and substituting with it, to breaking into his home in the dead of night. It was hella nostalgic…and, like Team Seven before them, doomed to fail in hilariously embarrassing ways.

He knew, though, something’s gotta give. D-ranks were fine for building bonds and cohesion in genin teams, but his brats had that in excess, not to mention half of them were edging towards chūnin-level competency and battle prowess. If he didn’t move them up to C-ranks soon, there would be spectacular explosions all around, starting with Kyōya’s temper.

What kind of C-ranks was Naruto’s issue. He’d have unleashed them on the local yakuza, if he hadn’t…used them as a means of venting for years. Nowadays, the scum of Namimori took one look at him and ran in the other direction screaming for mommy. No way would the fucking cowards sit still for the kids to play with them. Maybe they could be good for tracking experience, but once caught it would be game over and pleas for mercy again. Where was the challenge in that?

(On a brighter note, crime was at an all-time low in peaceful Namimori, but nobody could explain why. The police were too terrified of the Kyō duo to put a mark on their record. All reports were read once, given performance ratings—which Tetsuya collected after damage control—then destroyed with extreme prejudice.)

Naruto had been thinking of consulting Fon when the man inadvertently solved his issue by sending two mafiosi to his doorstep.
The last thing Naruto expected to find when he returned home after Granny Mikoto’s roses had been pruned and watered was two foreigners in classy Italian suits just chilling on his front porch.

Silently, he appraised the pair, taking note of everything that stood out about them. *You think they’re Vongola?* A smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. *Maybe Nonno Timo came back for more?*

Kurama snorted. **Could be. I detect no ill intent at least.**

“Hello, Naruto-kun. I am Aria of the Giglio Nero famiglia,” the dark-haired woman with the *orange pacifier* cheerfully said, standing up and smoothing down her skirt, as if she hadn’t been waiting for him to come home for who knew how long. Then, without missing a beat, she shoulder checked the man beside her. Hard. “And this is Gamma, my subordinate.”

The man with the slicked-back blond hair, now identified as Gamma, made an aborted move to rub his abused arm, a hushed litany of *basta, violent woman* and *why do you always go for the arm* and *you’re gonna cripple me one of these days* escaping his lips.

**So, not Vongola.** And if they weren’t Timoteo’s associates, and were aware of his ‘nickname’, they could only be, “Fon’s acquaintances, I presume?”

She snapped her fingers, winking at him. “Got it in one! May we come in?”

“That depends.” Naruto hummed low in his throat, dredging up what little information Fon had shared regarding his fellow Arcobaleno. “You’re the one with the foresight, right?”

Aria’s smile widened. “Fon told you about that, huh?”

In response to the confirmation of her abilities, Naruto’s face blanked. “I will let you into my home on one condition.” Eyes boring into hers, he said, grave and one hundred percent serious, “Promise to never ask me to father your children.”

Because Naruto remembered Shion, and the brainless promise his teenaged self had made her, and Hinata’s saccharine smile when the priestess showed up one day to demand he fulfill it, and the nasty catfight and two months of blue balls that ensued, and that had been a clusterfuck of epic proportions. So he ignored the pair’s gaping jaws and carried on as if the sky was blue, the sea was wet, and Naruto was a prime candidate to be her baby daddy.

“You need a daughter to inherit the gift and continue the line, right? Well, this guy ain’t gonna be it, nuh-uh. No fucking way.”

It took two whole minutes for Aria to gather her wits. “Cute, but you’re not really my type,” she drawled out, tone thick with sarcasm, but not before sneaking a loaded glance at Gamma.

“Heh, I see how it is.” It was Naruto's turn to wink at her, sly and insinuating all kinds of things. “Come on in. Kā-san would love some female company. You’ll stay for lunch, right?”

“We’d love to.” Aria laughed, following him inside, a sputtering, red-faced Gamma on her heels.

After introducing them to Nana, who was indeed ecstatic to host them for lunch—with no questions asked, the poor, mindfucked woman; he’d get to the bottom of this if it was the last thing he did—Naruto led them to his room.

“So.” Setting the tray down, he poured three cups of green tea and sat cross-legged on the cushion opposite from them. “I’m guessing you’re here ‘bout that thing around your neck. What can you
tell me about its creator?"

Aria blew on her cup, taking a slow sip. “Not much, I’m afraid. Unlike the other Arcobaleno, I inherited the pacifier directly from my mother, so I never even met the guy. But what I can tell you about is the history of the Trinisette.”

She then launched into a ridiculous story about the foundation of the world and the balance that must be maintained and the rings of power that made Naruto want to facepalm at the stupidity of it all. Like, who the fuck goes Imma make me some rings and enslave some humans, yes, that is the answer.

*Sauron, that’s who.* Kurama quipped with the air of someone who had read that story before and rooted for the villain.

Naruto gave in and facepalmed. *I’m glad you’ve been expanding your literary horizons, really, I am. It’s a great improvement from the dark days of late-night talk shows. But now’s not the time, Kurama.*

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing is going to work. It’s why we’re here, actually,” Aria was saying, eyes too blue and vast like the ocean and gazing beyond the present. “I’ve seen it, the future, and it’s beautiful.”

A sigh filled with longing slipped past her lips. “Don’t know when it’ll happen, but it will, that much I can tell you.” Then she smiled an unbearably tender smile and locked those deep-blue eyes with his. “I wanted to be the first to thank you for giving me the chance to spare my future daughter from this curse.”

“Yeah, sure, you’re welcome, I guess.” Naruto drew his gaze away, uncomfortable as hell, because he hadn’t even done anything yet. The moment was way too emotional for him; he had to break it somehow, and all his mind could come up with was, “But just to be clear here, that would be the daughter I’m not going to father, yeah? ’Cause I’ve got enough kids as it is, and I didn’t even get to enjoy making them.”

The sound of porcelain hitting the floor echoed dully in the long-ass silence that followed. Gamma turned to Aria, radiating disbelief and a sort of futile hope. “Are you absolutely sure this kid is our only chance of breaking the curse, boss?”

“Excuse me?” Naruto hissed, mock-offended and playing it up because this guy had please tease me written all over his face and who was he to deny him. “I’ll have you know I’ve been pulling miracles outta my ass, ending wars, rescuing princesses, saving worlds, beating gods, and kicking ass long before you were even a twinkle in your daddy’s eye, kid.”

Flabbergasted, Gamma stared at him while the seconds dragged on, as if unable to reconcile what he was hearing with what he was seeing, then must have realized he’d never win against Naruto’s brand of insanity and it was better to just agree with the crazy kid. “If you say so,” he muttered.

“I do say so.” Naruto raised his chin, magnanimous like a king indulging a simple-minded commoner, which sent Gamma into another round of sputtering. Man, this guy made it so easy. “Now, about this…famiglia thing. What can you tell me about Vongola? It is a famiglia, yeah?”

Funnily enough, that served to resurrect Gamma’s fighting spirit. “Your daddy didn’t tell you?”

It was one part smug, one part bemused, and yeah, Naruto would be feeling the same in his place.
Still didn’t mean he’d let him get away with it.

“Hit a nerve there, huh?” He chuckled and—for maximum effect—gave them an inside joke they’d never get in a million years. “But to answer your question, Iemitsu lives in an ideal world of polar bears and tuna fish where the answer to life’s problems is mindfuckery and shitty seals.”

Gamma just gazed at him, speechless. Huh, maybe he broke him? Aria was the one to articulate what they were both thinking.

“What.”

“Eh, it’ll take too long to explain, but let’s just say he ain’t too keen on talkin’ family business when he’s home.”

A different kind of incomprehension entered her gaze. Naruto knew it well—he, he had patented that look. It was his default you-are-shitting-me look, reserved for all things Iemitsu.

“Well, Vongola’s down three heirs by now, so he might have to soon.” Brows knitted together, she licked her lips, probably debating where to start. “Enrico was shot to death a couple of years ago, Massimo was drowned last month, and nobody really knows what happened to Xanxus five years ago, but rumors are flying about a coup that ended badly. Federico is the only one left, and he was Nono’s favored to begin with. With Iemitsu in CEDEF and out of the running, you’re next in line if Federico bites the dust, and with the way heirs keep dying one after another…”

Naruto’s eyes narrowed at the implications. “You think it’s an inside job.”

Gamma, who seemed to have recovered both his voice box and nerve, scoffed. “Vongola’s security can’t be that bad.”

Aria simply nodded. “The Varia were pretty pissed when their boss mysteriously vanished—those guys worshiped the ground Xanxus walked on, you know. Plus, Nono’s been gutting them these past few years, like…cutting their budget, restricting their missions, barring them from attending official functions and petty stuff like that. They’re supposed to be Vongola’s elite independent assassination squad, but there hasn’t been much independence lately…”

Well, when she put it like that… The Uchiha might have been a clan of high-handed assholes—don’t even start, Kurama—but there was a reason they were planning to revolt. “So, they’re more like leashed and muzzled attack dogs now. Smart move, that.”

Gamma snorted. “You said it, kid.” For the first time though, he smiled at him, a wry twist of lips. “Welcome to the mafia.”

Lunch proceeded naturally after that—Nana made lasagna once she heard Italians, that woman was a five-star chef—and it was a total riot, too, with Nana overfilling their plates and chirping about how you’re such a cute couple and so when’s the wedding and you’ll make beautiful babies, Gamma’s face being redder than the bolognese sauce, Aria’s winks behind his back, and Naruto singing the praises of D-ranks.

“Are your kids any good?” Aria asked out of the blue in the middle of dessert.

It was the reflective gleam in her eyes that alerted Naruto to the coming opportunity. He’d seen that gleam in potential clients for half his life, after all. “You’re welcome to come and see them in action. Why?”

“Well…” she began haltingly, as if choosing her words after careful consideration. “Giglio Nero is
an old name in our world, so we get the respect we’re due, but we’re actually a pretty small famiglia. If I hadn’t been the Sky Arcobaleno, we’d have been dragged into territory disputes ages ago. It always pays to keep your ear to the ground, though. Just in case, you know.”

“I hear you.” Naruto raised his glass in agreement, aware of where she was going with this and willing to be the first to say it. “Nobody suspects eleven-year-old kids of espionage.”

“Exactly.” A grin lit up her face at his quick deduction. “So, I might be interested in hiring your services for the summer months. Nothing too dangerous—scoping out the area, intel gathering, some undercover work, that sort of thing. Maybe some security detail, too, if what I see of your kids impresses me. We can set up a contract and everything. Who knows, it might even lead to an alliance later on?”

And oh, there was the political angle he’d been half-expecting, too. Better make sure they were on the same page, though. “You want an alliance with me, not Vongola.”

Aria’s grin shone brilliantly across her face, as if he had just made her day. “You get an in with the mafia, Giglio Nero stays neutral, and Gamma can show your kids the ropes.”

“What?” Gamma all but upended the table as he shot to his feet. Placing his hands on Aria’s shoulders, he stared into her eyes with the face of a man who had just been sentenced to life. “Boss, no, please. You can’t do this to me.”

That face made Naruto’s day. A smirk crooked his mouth as he sealed the man’s fate. “It’ll be good practice, you know, for the future.”

“I hate you, kid.”

And once Aria saw his brats, all she had to say was, “I’ll mail you the contract, Naruto-kun.”

Behind them, Gamma let out a wordless cry of horror.

Naruto’s smirk grew to a visceral grin as he shook Aria’s hand. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

One week later, said contract arrived with the added bonus of tickets to a place called Mafia Land. Aria’s postscript explained how it was a mafia-only resort and a small token of her gratitude for foreseen events.

For a moment, Naruto wondered if that place was built with shinobi brats in mind, but oh, well, not his problem.

“Pack up your things, brats. We’re going on a field trip!”

(Mafia Land would never be the same.)
“Welcome to Mafia Land. Please state your name, the number of your party, and famiglia or affiliation.”

Naruto stared at the woman blankly. Her Japanese was too-perfect, her smile too-plastic, her voice too-even. Never mind the fact she had figured out his nationality before he’d even reached her desk. Who knew what else she’d manage to glean when he did speak. What the hell? Was she even human? This shit was on par with the instant profiling only veteran T&I specialists could pull off. He was now glad Aria had taken the initiative to provide fake documentation for him and the kids as a just-in-case. Gotta love her intuitive just-in-cases.

“Uzumaki Naruto. Seven including myself. We are affiliated with the Giglio Nero famiglia.”

“Thank you. Please wait a moment,” was uttered with only the merest twitch of facial muscles. Impressed, Naruto signed discreetly for Kyōko to take notes, and by the time the woman had processed their information, the girl’s cute smile had transformed into a passable imitation of that creepy-as-fuck, I-know-all-your-secrets smile. Not quite there yet, but Naruto gave her a B plus for effort. This trip was already proving to be highly educational.

“Here are your passes. Please refer to the desk on your right, if you wish to make use of our training facilities. Have a nice stay.”

And it was getting better. Moving out of the line, he passed the identification cards around and gathered his brats up near the exit to lay down the law. “Well, kids. I have bad news, good news, and better news.”

Six pairs of curious eyes peered at him; unblinking, with the kind of intense focus trained soldiers afforded their commanding officer. It was freaking out the motley crew of not-so-casual observers the name Giglio Nero had attracted. Heh. Amateurs. Little brats had them pegged, too, silently exchanging coded messages and debating over which target—read: unfortunate victim—they got to fuck with first.

“Bad news is, our affiliation to Aria-san is now known and our actions here will reflect on her famiglia.”

Kyōya and Hana shot him an impatient glare, in total sync for once, as if to say obviously and who do you take us for and get on with it. He had taught them well, hadn’t he? Naruto grinned a fox-like grin, all mischief and stretched cheeks and damn proud of his little ducklings.

“Good news is, we know the importance of having an alibi and plausible deniability.”

Six pairs of lips mimicked his grin; even no-nonsense Hana and stalwart Tetsuya, because they were on an effing vacation and this was their chance to de-stress and who cared about professional criminals getting their just desserts. If the bystanders were freaked out before, they were now downright alarmed.

“Better news is, they have training facilities we can use.” Naruto clapped his hands once, wrapping up his speech to the kids’ unholy glee and the mafiosi’s horrified shock. “With that said, let’s check in to our hotel. You can have the rest of the day to yourselves while I check out the training area and meet with the instructor. Supposedly, he’s ex-military, so that will be fun. We can now add firearms to our arsenal. Isn’t your sensei awesome?”
The kids cheered. Naruto mentally patted himself on the back. The mafiosi crossed themselves as if warding off evil and praying for deliverance. Rude much?

One fun underground ride later—for him, his fellow passengers kept screaming their lungs and puking their guts out like the weak-willed pussies they were—Naruto entered the training grounds, scanning around for the you-can’t-miss-him-trust-me, according to the desk guy, instructor. And what do you know, he found him alright. The green army camouflage and anti-tank rifle ensemble was kind of hard to miss. Also, the blue pacifier was a big clue. And, fuck his life, the nin-hawk on top of the killer-baby’s head.

Under normal circumstances, this meeting might have been pretty chill, but the nin-animal…yeah, that was a fucking deal breaker. If Naruto had to go through another puppy-dog-eyes-of-doom session once Kyōya caught sight of the damn avian, then this guy would share his pain. Misery loved company and all that petty shit.

Scowling, he yelled, “Oi, are you Colonnello?”

The army-baby blinked once, and again, then slowly dragged his gaze all over him. “Yeah, who’s asking?”

An eleven-year-old pretty-boy giving him the world’s angriest bitch-face must have been throwing him off his game. Not that Naruto had any fucks to spare. He clicked his tongue, skipping pleasantries altogether and unknowingly setting the pattern for any and all future interactions between his brats and the Rain Arcobaleno. (Young kids were impressionable. Kyōya, in particular, took his lead as gospel.)

“Uzumaki Naruto. The guy at the desk upstairs told me to find you after I paid for the weekend course.”

There was a pregnant pause, and another slow once-over, before Colonnello said, matter-of-fact but not unkind, “You don’t look like much, kid. Are you sure you wanna do this, kora?”

Naruto snorted. “Nah, I’m just here to test your facilities, see if they’re gonna give my kids a decent challenge.”

Gobsmacked, Colonnello goggled at him, as if he had just been slapped with a wet fish and told he needed more vitamin D in his diet. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “You signed the waiver, right?” was what eventually came out.

What Naruto heard was did you sign the lovely legal document that releases me from all liability in the case of your untimely and gruesome death? As if he was a rookie taking his first Chūnin Exams. Pfft. Please, bitch. This guy had nothing on Anko. Now, that woman had danger as her middle name. Hot as hell danger. Man, that after-war party… Good times.

All traces of irritation withered away—he grinned widely. “Yeah, I sure did. So fucking worth it.”

Colonnello’s face seemed frozen in the unflattering state of witless gaping. He must have recognized that grin from his own experiences when he wasn’t reduced to chibi-form.

Finally, he shook his head, realizing the sane option here would be to wash his hands off of him. “Whatever, kid, your funeral. Knock yourself out, kora.”

Naruto gave him a cheeky salute, then he was off like the wind, only to come back forty minutes later, looking like he had just taken a stroll through the park, not a hair out of place.
“Not bad, bit too obvious on the traps, though. You might wanna fix that. Anyway, I’ll be back with the brats tomorrow. See ya!”

Colonnello appeared at a loss for words. He regained his voice the next day when Naruto came back with his cadre of baby ninja.

“Are they…sticking to the cliffside, kora? By the soles of their feet? Vertically?”

“Running…on…water? I—am I seeing this, kora? Sweet baby Jesus!”

“Did that little girl incinerate half the tank turret with…with Storm Flames? That was expensive, kora! Fuck. Lorenzo was still inside…”

“That’s not the minefield area, kora! Why are there explosions?”

“What have you been teaching these—did that boy just grow a giant arm? These are not human kids, kora!”

“Good job, brats. If you keep this up, I’m gonna have to devise some sort of Chūnin Exams sooner than I thought.”

In the middle of that heartwarming scene, abound with praise, hair-ruffling, self-satisfied kiddie grins, and smoking craters in the background, Colonnello pounced on Naruto.

Gripping the lapels of his shirt with deceptively tiny fists, the killer-baby headbutted him, half-hissing, half-screaming, “You—who are you, kora?”

Naruto could have avoided it, but didn’t. Hell, he could have introduced himself properly, but this little asshole deserved everything Naruto could dish out and more. Because he had fucking called it yesterday. Kyōya’s eyes were glued to the nin-hawk with no intention of forgetting he ever saw the bird and every intention of making Naruto’s life hell until he got him one.

So in pure, spiteful retaliation, he decided to be an even bigger asshole. Raising a brow, he went on full-on prankster mode. “I introduced myself yesterday, didn’t I?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

“Well, like I said, the name’s Naruto. As for who I am—”

“ATTENTION. THE CARCASSA FAMIGLIA IS ATTEMPTING A NAVAL ATTACK ON MAFIA LAND. I REPEAT. WE ARE UNDER ATTACK. CUSTOMERS ARE ADVISED TO EVACUATE TO THE DESIGNATED SHELTERS IN AN ORDERLY FASHION. PLEASE REMAIN THERE UNTIL THE SITUATION HAS BEEN RESOLVED. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.”

Colonnello’s grip slackened as he banged his forehead against Naruto’s collarbone. “Oh, for the love of Sparta, not again. When will those fucking morons learn better?”

“I take it this happens often.” It was more of a dry statement than a question to the deadweight latched onto his chest.
“Every. Single. Year.”

Humming, Naruto took in his brats’ bloodthirsty little grins at the opportunity of unfettered destruction, and decided, “We’ll help.”

Colonnello’s eyes trailed from Naruto’s face to his brats’, briefly dithering, but in the end, he heaved a sigh and said with the certainty of a man who would come to regret his words, “Follow me then.”

Naruto’s left eyelid spasmed. Violently. Someone was going to die today. Because he would fucking murder one of the killer-babies. Believe it.

What was it with Arcobaleno and nin-animals? Were they doing this shit on purpose? He glared at the purple killer-baby, at the giant armored octopus, at the enemy famiglia swarming the seashore and running around like headless chickens.

“THE GREAT SKULL-SAMA IS HERE! SURRENDER OR FACE MY WRATH! FORWARD, ŌDAKO! the biker-baby belted out in stereo from atop his nin-octopus as he made his dramatic entrance.

Apparently, his voice wasn’t evocative enough on its own, oh, no; his helmet had to come equipped with a microphone, too.

Then, the blue killer-baby swooped down to save the day held by the talons of his nin-hawk.

“Your wrath, my ass! If you don’t cut the bullshit, I’ll pump you full of lead, kora! You and your stupid octopus!”

Kyōya had stopped fighting to watch the nin-animals duke it out. Yeah. One of them (or both) was so going down.


Wincing, Naruto rubbed his ringing ears as they landed beside him, and thank the sage, Kyōya’s battle-lust was back with a vengeance. Relief flooded his system. Even better, the biker-baby pulled off his helmet and squealed in a lower-but-no-less-dramatic voice, grinning and bubbly and un-fucking-believably purple, “It’s been a while, senpai! How’ve you been? I’m doing great, by the way, thanks for asking!”

Naruto’s expression went stone-cold flat. “Seriously?”

“Skull is…” Colonnello began, visibly pained, but gave up midway with an exasperated sigh. “…yeah, I’ve got nothing.”

Undeterred, the biker-baby all but got in his face. “And who’s this? Friend of yours?”

“Not really,” Naruto drawled out, then rolled his shoulders, murderous impulses under control, because this little guy was too…too kid-on-a-sugar-high hyper to stay mad at. It’d be like bullying a kid or something. So he made up his mind to treat him like one, too, and throw him at his brats. That was fair, right? Right. “Say, is that your famiglia?”

“Hmm?” Skull tilted his head towards the ongoing battle, as if he had forgotten all about it in the meantime, and yeah, with an attention span so short he checked another kid-box.
“Oh, yeah, kinda? I have a yearly contract with them.” Wringing his hands, the biker-baby swayed back and forth, biting his lip ring before admitting, “It’s just…at the end of each year…they don’t get no for an answer.”

Did that mean what Naruto thought it meant? Colonnello seemed to think so, because it was the first time he looked angry on Skull’s behalf instead of at him.

“Wait,” he cut in, pale blue eyes sharp and narrow, “Carcassa is threatening you, kora?”

It was also the wrong conclusion.

“Oh, no, nothing like that, Colonnello-senpai!” Skull hurried to disabuse them of that notion, limbs frantic and flailing all over the place. “They’re just so sad I’ll be leaving them… I can’t stand those sad faces, you know?”

Colonnello’s fingers tightened around the pistol grip. “I will shoot you, kora.”

Naruto could even hear his teeth grinding, but eh, guy was an asshole, so. He nodded at Skull, humoring the little guy and enacting his original plan before Colonnello blew a fuse. “Well, in that case, you might wanna go save them.”

Skull blinked. “Save them? From wha—?” His eyes almost popped out of his head at the sight of his brats’ beautiful seaside annihilation. “What the hell? Are those…freakin’ kids?”

“Fuck no.”

Colonnello’s deadpan didn’t convince Skull. Oh ye, of little faith.

“But—but they look like kids! Flame Active kids! Are they like us or something?”

Naruto grinned. “Nah, my kids are just awesome like that.”

“Your kids?” Unable to take his eyes off of the kiddie carnage, the biker-baby spluttered, on the verge of hysteria. “Aren’t you a little young to be a father of…” His voice rose shrilly. “…six?”

No, not really. Naruto’s grin became wicked as he shrugged. “What can I say? Ladies love me. It’s my animal magnetism, you know?”

The killer-babies stared at him amid the deafening clangor of battle and what-the-fuck speechlessness.

“Then,” Colonnello declared with the strained visage of someone who had reached his quota of bullshit, “as their father,” and who couldn’t believe he was actually saying this, “you’re paying for the damages.”

“Hey, now. I wasn’t the one who invaded the island.”

His pointed stare spoke volumes of who was.

“We—we’ll pay for everything, I swear, we will! Just, please, make them stop!” Skull wailed, pulling at his hair. Little guy was so distressed that Naruto felt a twinge of guilt, but before he could do something stupid—like, take pity on him and offer to cover for his brats’ rampage—Skull shoved his head inside his helmet and jumped into the fray, crying out, “SALVATORE, NOOOO, DON’T GO INTO THE LIGHT!”

Yeah, there was no saving that guy.
What did I miss? Kurama yawned, lazily flicking his tails.

Nothing, just kids being kids.


Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto had been...pranked.

After convincing the parents to sign up their kids for summer camp—for forgery, puppy dog eyes, and just a touch indigo fire-chakra might or might have not been involved depending on each case—they had arrived in Italy mid-June, on a sunny Sunday morning, and promptly been picked up by Gamma at the airport. One week, three days, nine hours, forty minutes, twelve seconds (and counting) later, he was still searching for a place that made a good bowl of ramen.

Italy was not—as he had been led to believe by that asshole Gamma—this world’s counterpart of the Land of Noodles. Not even close. Oh, sure, they had more pasta dishes than he could eat in one sitting, but ramen? These people didn’t know a damn thing about ramen. Low blow, Gamma. So not cool, man. Nobody messed with his ramen. There were pranks, and then there was common human decency. Some things were sacred.

And so it came to pass that Gamma was assigned temporary captaincy of Team A. Never let it be said Naruto didn’t know exactly how to give someone their dues.

The brats were learning tons. Gamma was touring the nine circles of Hell. Aria was amused. Naruto was in quest for the treasure of Italian ramen. Giglio Nero was shaking like a leaf and scared stiff in equal measure. All was right with the world.

Then Kyōko got kidnapped.

“I’m sorry, what? Wanna run all that by me again, Kyō-chan?”

Staring at the phone screen as if it would suddenly gain artificial intelligence and tell him this was all a terrible joke or a technical malfunction, Naruto counted to three in his mind. The mobile phone remained lifeless, but Aria raised an inquisitive brow over her coffee cup. Naruto made a noise of vague assent, then placed it on the table and put the call on speakerphone. If she wanted to enter the kingdom of welcome lunacy and goodbye sanity, it was her prerogative.

“We were doing a reconnaissance on the northern territories—specifically, Lombardy—when we detected signs of suspicious behavior. A middle-aged man was scouting children between the ages of six and twelve for unknown reasons. Yōsei suggested we investigate and volunteered to be the bait due to her...innocuous appearance.”

Which translated into ‘cause she’s a sweet muffin and everybody wants a piece of her, but Kyōya would rather hug Fon than come out and say it. Brat was cute like that, even if half of Namimori vehemently disagreed—as did their hospital bills—but Naruto had irrefutable proof. The nin-animal obsession spoke for itself. Case in point: he had barely succeeded in placating the little brats after the Mafia Land sightings by introducing the idea of ANBU animal masks and code names.

In the end, they had chosen to go for a yōkai theme instead, which had resulted in the birth of Tenko (Naruto), Tengu (Kyōya), Yōsei (Kyōko), Inugami (Takeshi), Suzaku (Hana), Raijū (Tetsuya), and Sarugami (Ryōhei). The kids were pleased as punch, the nin-animal fiasco once more diverted, and Naruto blessedly off the hook.
(Except, the next killer-baby to show up with a nin-animal was dead meat. May all the gods have mercy on their soul, because Naruto sure as hell wouldn’t.)

“Inugami and I followed the target after the bait was taken and are currently situated outside the secret base he entered with the captured children. End of report.”

Gotta hand it to the brat. Only Kyōya could make screw-ups of this magnitude sound like professional bullshit. Yamato-taichō’s reports had been eerily similar, down to the lack of intonation and headache-inducing factor mixed in with the rest of the crazy. Only thing missing was the flashlight and ghost-eyes visual effects.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought I heard you say.” Naruto closed his eyes, rubbing his lids, while Aria, the easily-amused traitor, giggle-snorted into her coffee cup. “Just out of curiosity, where was Gamma during all that? No, scratch that—where is he now? He’s supposed to be your team leader for this mission.”

“Gamma-taichō proposed we take surveillance shifts and had the night shift as he deemed the day shift more low-risk. He is currently recuperating at the Giglio Nero famiglia’s safe house.”

“’Course, he did.” The pads of his fingers dug into the thin skin of his lids as Aria gave in to laughter, bent in half and clutching at her stomach. “Alright, Kyō—” A puppy growl, and yeah, that right there was more proof Namimori didn’t know jack shit; his brat was fucking adorable.

“I’m sorry, Tengu. Send me the coordinates of your location, and do not move from there until I arrive—or unless Yōsei sends out a distress signal. If she does, you have permission to go forth and fuck shit up, ‘kay?”

“Affirmative, Tenko.” Kyōya’s manic please-make-my-day-motherfuckers grin was audible on the other end of the line.

Blithely, Naruto hung up and turned to Aria who was washing down laughter with a big gulp of coffee. “Your subordinate’s leadership ability sucks balls. You better pray it doesn’t transfer to the bedroom.”

Aria choked.

Naruto stood in the middle of the ruins that used to be the Estraneo famiglia’s research laboratories. Around him, human bodies were strewn on every surface, broken and slashed and burned to near death. Beside him, Gamma was silent and fidgeting with the knot of his tie, knuckles white and clenched tight, anger warring with disgust across his face. Behind him, Team A was huddled around three blood-splattered children in hospital robes, providing first aid and assurances of freedom (Kyōya) and safety (Takeshi) and emotional support (Kyōko).

“So, let me get this straight.” His voice was a low, smooth bass, carrying the kind of calm that implied he had gone past rage and straight to coldly calculating murder. “A bunch of mad scientists created some iffy possession bullet and the mafia decided that shit ain’t right and they should be wiped out, but you’re totally okay with them experimenting on a bunch of little kids? ‘Cause, correct me if I’m wrong here, this Mengele shitfest has been going on for years and nobody gave a single fuck.”

Gamma pressed his lips together, because what could he say to that. Naruto dared him to try and justify it. Still, shaken and ashen-faced, he tried. “I—fuck, this is insane. They…they hid well?”

“Bullshit. My kids uncovered this whole mess in one fucking day.”
“Your kids are not normal human children.”

Naruto heard that line from Gamma’s mouth at least twice a day, but unlike every other time, it was colored with relief and maybe a little satisfaction, as if he was genuinely glad they weren’t.

Frowning, he sighed, deciding to lay the blame where it should fall in the first place. “Isn’t there, I dunno, some kind of mafia police force to ensure this sorta thing doesn’t happen?”

The blood drained from Gamma’s face, leaving behind wan skin and stark bones and utter, helpless dread. The man had learned to read him well by now. Naruto was so calling the mafia cops on these pathetic third-rate copies of Orochimaru.

“Yes, actually, but I wouldn’t call the Vindice without—”

“Great! How do we call—”

Naruto never got to finish, because the mafia police showed up Uchiha style. Like, there was black fire and space-time ninjutsu and people coming back from the dead and the gloom of hatred in the atmosphere. It couldn’t get any more Uchiha than that. Kurama itched to burn them out of existence on principle—and right now, Naruto was inclined to let him. Bad timing on their part.

“Never mind. That’s them, yeah?” Taking Gamma’s mute shock as confirmation, Naruto examined the three bandaged Uchiha wannabes.

*Kinda feel like Edo Tensei, don’t they?*

*Close, but not quite,* Kurama spat, a black rumble of disdain and malevolence, and woah, the fuzzball’s chakra hadn’t been that restless in ages. *Edo Tensei are emotionless puppets, but these…they’re filled with hatred. Nothing but petty human hatred. They feel like…something trapped between life and death. Their chakra is…twisted, and it’s not even theirs.*

*Someone’s been feeding them that twisted chakra to keep them in that state.*

*Twisted?* Naruto made a ‘go on’ motion, partly because he was intrigued by this chakra anomaly, partly to keep the fox talking and not…eradicating. It worked, too. Kurama sat back on his haunches, resuming listen-as-I-explain-the-obvious-to-your-tiny-human-brain lecture mode instead of kill-it-with-fire chakra mode.

*You know how all living beings have fire-chakra in this world?*

*Yeah, even if they never tap into it, they still have it.*

*Well, this fire-chakra feels like what dead beings would have if, you know, they kept on living. And hating, can’t forget the all-consuming hating part. Just like that thrice-cursed Madara.*

Aaand there went the fox’s zen.

*So they’re stubborn bastards who refused to die and ended up like this, and the one who’s been feeding them this black fire-chakra was probably the one who started it all. They’re also out for blood. Whose is the question…*

Kurama was too deep in his die-Uchiha-spawn bloodrage to be of further assistance, so Naruto let him vent in peace. He had some venting of his own to do, and would you look at that? The targets were even considerate enough to line up for the ass-kicking he was about to dole out.

“Oi, shitty police dudes!” Stillness, and the temperature dropping, the humans shivering, the
undead staring into the inferno and Naruto staring into the abyss. “What the fuck is wrong with your response time? You just appear out of the blue like the fucking boogieman when someone breathes your name, but you can’t spare a goddamn minute to save a bunch of little kids from being experimented to hell and back?”

Silence, then tall, dark, and creepy droned out, “The Vindice uphold the laws of the Mafia world. It is not your place to dispense justice. Cease your accusations lest you wish to be detained.”

Really? Really? That was their damn issue here? They didn’t come to fix their mess but to arrest—

Naruto lost it. Kurama perked up. Gamma removed the kids from within the line of fire and what was about to become ground zero.

“Fuck your laws and shitty sense of justice. Innocent kids have been suffering for years and you’ve done fuck-all about it. Explain that to me.”

No explanation came forth, but an ominous rattle of chains, black fire-chakra reemerging, space-time distorting—

_Fuck it. Go wild, Kurama._

**With pleasure.**

All hell broke loose. Killing intent suffused the air, massive and heavy and inhuman, red fire-chakra pulsing hotly, a thrilled refrain of _half-dead things should know their place and taste the fear, tiny living corpses, feel it in your souls and burnburnbuuuurn._ Inwardly, Naruto sweat-dropped, a good portion of his wrath melting into embers. Cabin fever, that must be it. Maybe he should let the furball out more… With adult supervision. On an uninhabited island, far away from civilization. Nobody would miss a little island in the middle of nowhere, right?

Outwardly, he flashed jagged teeth at the zombie police, in a mockery of a grin, in a way that screamed they were going to be that island if they didn’t shut their trap and listen.

“Got any more complaints? No? Great! So here’s what will happen. You’ll arrest those fucking scumbags and throw them into the deepest, darkest cell you’ve got, never to see the light of day again. I wouldn’t be averse to some police brutality while you’re at it either. You’ll apologize to these poor kids and promise to show up the moment they call your name for help in the future. You’ll give my kids a fuckin’ medal for sorting out your mess and won’t even dream about arresting them.”

He surveyed their still-as-death forms, slowly, one by one, blood in his eyes and violence in his grin and promise in his voice. “If you do all that, then we won’t have a problem. Capisce?”

Instead of responding—either in the positive or negative, it didn’t matter to Naruto, though Kurama was clamoring for the latter—their spokesperson opted for the third option and called for reinforcements, AKA the Chief of mafia police. It was a killer-baby, too, a zombiefied one, because why the hell not, they seemed to be _everywhere_ Naruto went, and damn, did he burn with the cold fires of hatred. On the plus side, there were _no nin-animals_ in sight, so yay for small mercies. _This_ killer-baby might unlive to see another day if he played his cards right.

Baby-Chief opened with, “What seems to be the issue, Jager?” which led to five minutes of hushed conversation among the cloaked figures of unlife and justice—

(Aha. So _that_ was the name of tall, dark, and creepy. Good to know in case this turned ugly, for the gravestone and all.)
Chains coiled around the prisoners’ bodies, binding and dragging them through the portal, while the zombie-baby was still speaking, and wow, these guys didn’t waste time with superficial trivialities like, say, a court trial. An event that would have generated an untold amount of fucking paperwork. Maybe they weren’t irredeemable bastards, after all. Naruto could grow to like them in time.

“The Vindice offer their sincere apologies to the survivors for failing to enforce the law in a timely manner.” The company of the living dead inclined their heads at the too-far-away children in perfect sync, then Baby-Chief pinned Naruto with an inscrutable stare. Like, the bandages were in the way, also the hate-limited range of emotions and monotone, so Naruto had no idea what sort of stunt the zombie-baby was going to pull. “You, Vongola Sky child. What is your name?”

Oh. Shit. Baby-Chief was old enough to remember leyasu? Yeah, had to be, just his luck. Awesome. Not. Resigned, Naruto prepared for the eventuality of Vongola becoming involved, and gods above…Iemitsu. Kurama whispered insidious suggestions of immolation, including his useless father to the pyre because he was benevolent like that.

Not helping, Kurama, but thanks. You rock. “Sawada Tsunayoshi,” he grudgingly said, blocking out the fox’s fantasies.

“Your famiglia is absolved of any crimes against the Estraneo famiglia. Any future infractions will be dealt with according to the law. Do we have an agreement, Sawada Tsunayoshi?”

That…that was pure awesome right there. Baby-Chief rocked, too. “We sure do!” Naruto all but beamed at the zombie-fied killer-baby. “And you are?”

It might have been his dramatic one-eighty turn, or the fact he was still emitting low-level killing intent, or that his grin was full of fangs and his eyes a fox-slit crimson, but Baby-Chief had the most human reaction Naruto would probably ever get from him.

He slanted his head to the side, measuring him up and down with a regal sort of feline curiosity, then said, tone dead but accent thickening, “Bermuda von Veckenschtein.”

Naruto nodded and went all in. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the asshole who made that shiny trinket around your neck, now would you?” Baby-Chief’s silence in conjunction with the abrupt loathing spike was answer enough. Asshole who fucked them over found. Well, that was one revenge trip he wouldn’t mind taking, so. “Feel free to stop by for a visit when you’ve got time to kill. We’ll have tea and cookies and everything!”

Another cat-like slanting of his head. Then, “Perhaps.”

And they were gone. Not two minutes later, the little brats raced over to him, a shell-shocked Gamma trailing behind, and of course, Kyōko was the first to open her mouth, smiling like she cared nothing for his epic showdown with the zombie mafia police. (She had never doubted he would win. None of his brats did. The sensei-worship was strong in these ones.)

“This is Mukuro-kun, and Ken-kun, and Chikusa-kun—”

“—and we are coming with you.”

Mukuro-kun was the one who attached that grand declaration to Kyōko’s introductory sentence. Mukuro-kun who should be traumatized but instead was smiling like Christmas had come early and
Santa had gifted him with explosive tags. Because he was such a good boy, a paragon of virtue, the very picture of innocence, truly, and yeah, Naruto had only two things to say to that, the more important, “You’re gonna be a little shit if I say no, yeah?” and the less pertinent, “You do know we’re mafia, right?”

*Mukuro-kun’s* smile became more *innocent*. “You don’t act like the mafia I know—and you are… interesting.”

Naruto snorted. “Fair enough. Alright then, time to move out, brats.”

And so saying, they departed from the ruins of the Estraneo famiglia, Gamma still shell-shocked and trailing behind, repeating over and over, “He picked a fight with the Vindice…and won.”

Eh. He would recover soon. Probably.

Chapter End Notes

Current ages:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa: 11-12
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 10-11
Chapter 13

Naruto had a pretty damn strong feeling someone up there was screwing with him just for shits and giggles. It had started with the reincarnation bullshit, and it kept getting stronger as the years passed by. Was this going to be a regular thing now? Ducklings crawling out of the woodwork and imprinting on him at first sight? Because if it was, the government owed him some family benefits, dammit. Starting with free psychiatric care and an exemption from laws regarding underage drinking and controlled substances.

Team C (for Circus) was…something straight out of fantasy books. If Stephen King and Roald Dahl got together and had a brain baby, it would be this team. Like, there were illusion horror shows and beast taming acts and senbon throwing games and creepy murder-laughter everywhere.

Which would have been fine on its own—all his brats were bloodthirsty little monsters, it was good PTSD therapy and this team needed it yesterday—but Kyōko loved it so much, that she spent hours debating indigo fire-chakra mindfuckery with Mukuro. And that was the crux of the problem, because Kyōya… Well, Kyōya hadn’t taken that well. At all. Naruto wasn’t sure if this was the beginning of the most epic rivalry ever or a fucked-up love triangle or what.

In comparison to that lovely disaster, Ken’s competitions with Ryōhei over who was the manliest of them all was nothing. Even if it did cause more flashbacks than Naruto was comfortable with. And a food shortage. Chikusa, he had decided after having to restock the fridge for the nth time, was his favorite. Such a quiet boy, well-mannered, with proper hygiene habits. So what if it rains senbon when Kusa-chan gets emotional, Gamma? Learn how to fucking dodge, man. What next, gonna blame the kid for having nightmares?

Between the integration of Team C into the ranks of chibi-shinobi, Gamma’s slow mental recovery, Aria’s quick cover-up of the Estraneo-Vindice screw-up, and his ongoing ramen odyssey, Naruto had little time to spare for supervising missions. An oversight on his part, true, but Gamma had gone through his baptism of fire. How hard could it be to keep an eye on the brats?

Two weeks later, the answer stormed Giglio Nero’s mansion—harder than steel and twice as sharp. Trouble came from where he had neglected to be vigilant. Out of all his problem kids, he hadn’t expected Takeshi would be the one to catch Vongola's attention with his newborn stalker-ish fanboy ways.

“—brats snooping around Varia territory? Have you lost your fucking mind? I almost eviscerated that little shit! Levi tried to fry the girl! Now the idiot’s in a fucking coma and Mammon’s been bitching about the medical cost for. Three. Fucking. Hours!”

Naruto was tempted to make a snarky retort about how this guy had been bitching for half an hour already, at ear-bleeding decibels, too, but the entertainment value outweighed the temporary hearing loss. Because Gamma was the victim of the vocal torture, complete with violent sword-stabbing and copious amounts of blue fire-chakra to keep him immobile, and he deserved every second of it. If he hadn’t slept on the job again, there wouldn’t be a psychotic swordsman tearing into him, loudly and viciously, or a tiara-brat twirling knives with dexterity and progressively disturbing laughter in Giglio Nero’s entrance hall.

Still, it was becoming repetitive—also Gamma was in danger of passing out from blood loss, but that was a minor concern—so Naruto took over by nudging the source of the man’s suffering.
“And what do you have to say about all that, Take-chan?”

Never taking his eyes off of Sword-Psycho for a millisecond, smile bright and warm as the Mediterranean sun, Takeshi let out a cheerful laugh. “I had fun!”

Now, that penetrated Sword-Psycho’s rage more quickly than iaijutsu. He swung around to face Takeshi, pivoting on his heel, sword arm rising in one fluid motion, and wow, this guy danced like Kiri’s fancy swordmasters, all lithe grace and hair flipping and shit. Naruto could now see why his brat had fixated on him.

“Voi! The fuck was that, you little shit? Wanna say it again?”

Smile brighter, warmer, Takeshi gamely ignored the gleaming instrument of death that almost kissed the tip of his nose. “I just wanted to spar with you.”

“You—” Sword-Psycho’s mouth froze mid-sentence, as if there was a delay in processing Takeshi’s words because it was the last thing he expected to hear.

All was quiet for a moment. Even the tiara-brat had ceased being disturbing as fuck in his isolated corner.

“I watched you train in that field for two hours,” the boy began, a little timid, then growing more animated, until he was grinning and bouncing on the balls of his feet, happier than a hamster on a running wheel. “Your form is perfect, and your footwork’s really great, the flow’s sorta… beautiful, you know, and your style blends moves in a way I haven’t seen before, and your seme’s on oyaji’s level! Only oyaji can push me, and he’s given up the sword, so we don’t spar often. Plus, we use the same style, so it gets kinda boring after a while even if I can never beat him…”

At this point, Takeshi stopped to breathe. Sword-Psycho had been rendered speechless, his posture telegraphing how caught off guard he was, and how conflicted about the correct response. Like, should he start yelling and slice the brat in half or shut up and take the damn compliment, and boy, was he awkward when flattered. Naruto found it hilarious. Now, this was prime entertainment, even better than Gamma’s impromptu T&I session.

“So I followed you home, and my team followed me, and…and that lightning guy went for Kyōko-chan, you know? If I hadn’t taken him down fast, Kyōya and Kyōko-chan would have done something worse, trust me.”

After placing the blame on this lightning guy, Takeshi shrugged his shoulders, nonchalant and showing no signs of remorse, just like Naruto had taught him. Attaboy!

Sword-Psycho must have determined there was at least a smidgen of truth buried in all that, somewhere between sweet-talking the fuck out of him and typical Kyō duo bullshit. His posture loosened, sword arm lowering at long last. Still ingesting the flattery part though.

“Tch. You’ve got good eyes, puppy. Your baby team’s not half bad either. Levi’s an idiot, but as much as it pains me to admit it, that trash is quality.” If he was going for suave and cool, it failed miserably. The pet name was the first clue, Takeshi’s a-million-suns smile the second, and the variety of laughter coming from the peanut gallery the last. Probably why he returned to what felt natural in the next second. “But that’s not the fucking problem here! You don’t break into someone’s turf just ‘cause you want a spar! Fuck, did nobody ever tell you not to follow strangers around? What if I was some sick pedophile? What then, puppy?”
Heh. The pet name stayed, and so would Takeshi. Give his brats an inch and they’d take a mile. Naruto knew it all too well but doubted this guy was aware of what was in his future. Better to ease him into it, though. Clearing his throat, he inserted himself into the conversation, signing for Takeshi to let him handle matters from now on. “Are you?”

“Fuck no!” Offended, punctuated by sword-swinging, and way too loud.

“I don’t see the problem then,” was all Naruto said, because he had told his brats how to deal with sexual predators, in graphic detail, and following them around was on top of the list. Sword-Psycho, apparently, didn’t agree with his policy.

“You don’t—what the fuck is wrong with your brats, Gamma?”

Seeking validation from the only other adult in the room, huh? Poor choice, Sword-Psycho.

Gamma, who was in the middle of patching himself up, groaned and muttered, half in pain, half in despair, “I don’t even know where to start.”

Before he could regale Sword-Psycho with his tale of woe and hardship at the hands of little kids, Naruto chose to end this whole shebang with the tried-and-true Namimori method. “How about we take care of the medical expenses and call this incident a…misunderstanding?”

And oh, it was a meeting of the minds, because Sword-Psycho’s expression spoke of someone well-versed in this method as he said, victorious and bold as you fucking please, “That’ll get Mammon off my back, but there’s still the issue of who’s gonna take over that idiot’s paperwork now. Lussuria has him on bed rest for at least a week.”

Ouch. That hurt like a bitch. Using the P word? Naruto’s wrist ached just thinking about it… Damn, must be psychosomatic. Talk about fighting dirty, Sword-Psycho. Good for him, he’d need it in his puppy-future since that shit was for life. Takeshi was going to own this poor bastard. Once that brat decided Sword-Psycho was it, then he was it. Hell, Naruto was experiencing it multiplied by nine.

So he wasn’t kidding when he winced, flexing his right wrist, and in all seriousness asked, “I feel you, man, I really do, but what do you want us to do about it?”

This question appeared to be what Sword-Psycho was waiting for all along. Extending his sword arm, he pointed over to the once again snickering, knife-juggling tiara-brat. “You can take Bel off my hands for the week. You’re all fucking insane Flame Active brats, you should get along fine. Have a fucking play date or something!”

As the situation devolved into a hot-tempered argument—the Prince did not agree to mingle with peasants—exacerbated by sparks of fire-chakra—fuck if I care, you’ll do it and you’ll like it—and shiny, pointy objects galore, Naruto bemoaned his future being multiplied by ten.

“Alright, you’ve got yourself a deal.” Sighing a you-win-this-round-asshole sigh, he scrubbed a hand down his face while grumbling over the unfairness of the world and Sword-Psycho’s endgame and why the hell was that bastard so…so damn thespian. ‘But if you just wanted to arrange a week-long play date, couldn’t you have skipped the drama and done that from the start? That was an hour of my life I’ll never get back. I could have been in Florence checking out that Asian restaurant Tazaru suggested. It’s been five goddamn weeks of instant ramen, for fuck’s sake, I’m starting to get withdrawal symptoms.’

Taken aback, Sword-Psycho took an infinitesimal pause. Big mistake. A knife almost nicked his
femoral artery. Damn, kid was smart and relentless and knew to go in for the kill, and yeah, the tiara-brat would be right at home with his brats.

Cursing under his breath, Sword-Psycho shot a withering glare at Gamma, although why he kept expecting help from that front was a mystery. “Voi! Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with your brats, Gamma?”

Eyes moving from the tiara-brat’s maniacal grin to Sword-Psycho’s torn pants to his own bandaged thigh, Gamma threw it back with interest. “You have no room to talk.”

Which summed it up nicely, tied up in a neat little bow, and hey, Gamma could be useful, color him impressed. Must be the blood loss, some people just performed better under pressure.

Sword-Psycho scoffed, then turned to leave, but not before mussing up the tiara-brat’s hair and tossing a piece of paper at Takeshi. “Voi, puppy! Next time you want a spar, give me a fucking call first, got it?”

Takeshi’s smile went supernova. One last knife flew right on target, only to embed itself on the wall beside the tiara-brat’s left ear as if it made a U-turn. Yeah, there would be phone calls before the week ended.

Once the brats were out of the room, Naruto sighed, rubbing his temples. “That was the current Varia Commander, yeah?”

“Superbi Squalo, the second Sword Emperor. He was Xanxus’ second-in-command before the guy fell off the face of the earth,” Gamma deigned to inform him, copying his head massage. “You can’t miss him at parties… I’ve tried and failed more times than I can count.”

Naruto chuckled. He could totally see that, yeah. “Well, Take-chan likes him. Guess we’ll be seeing him often.”

There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. The only question was, “Won’t it cause problems for you?”

Maybe. Or he would have said that if not for, “Nah, does this face scream Iemitsu to you?” A thin brow arched drily. Gamma conceded his point with an equally dry snort. “‘Sides, you never denied we’re Giglio Nero. I’ll just tell the kids to pretend we are if it comes up.”

Naruto was beginning to lose faith in humanity. Why was this world filled with assholes? And why did the world keep hurling them at his feet? Couldn’t a guy eat in peace, dammit? All he wanted was a fucking bowl of ramen. Was that too much to ask for? Like, fuck, give him a break here and don’t chase kids around yelling about bastards and half-breeds and whore mothers and nasty shit like that. In broad daylight, in the middle of the street, where decent people were. Fucking. Eating.

“Oi, kid, you can come out now,” he called out, scowling down at the seven bodies lying bruised and bloody at his feet. Grown-ass men picking on little kids. Didn’t their mothers teach them better? What was the world coming to?

A small head of silver-ish white hair peeked from behind the dumpster the kid had hidden himself when Naruto’s fist met Asshole Number One’s face. Henge-ing into his sixteen-year-old past self came in handy; waitresses didn’t ask where his parents were, and assholes went down with one straight punch.

Two minutes passed before the kid deemed it safe to come out. Stomping all over the assholes no
less. Nice touch, kid.

Green eyes stared up at him, narrow with distrust and sullenly appreciative by turns, then he stated, in his infinite wisdom, ‘I didn’t need help.’

Naruto fought hard not to laugh, because was this runt cute or what, trying to be all adult and self-dependent when he was like, a decade old and seventy pounds soaking wet. “Yeah, sure, whatever you say.”

“And I wasn’t hiding!” he insisted, still firmly in I-am-my-own-man land, changing to a lecturing tone even. “I could take them if I wanted, but that would cause a damn scene and—and haven’t you heard the news? You know, about the Vindice, and how they’ve been real active lately? Last time a stupid drunk fight broke out, they arrested everyone without even asking what happened. I hear those guys are still serving time in Vendicare on charges for…public intoxication and indirect violation of the secrecy law?”

Brat sounded confused, and hella dubious about the legitimacy of said charges, as if it was an elaborate prank the Vindice were playing on the mafia, but it couldn’t be because those guys didn’t do jokes, ever. Naruto would be, too, in his place. Hell, he dearly wished he could be. Alas, he knew better, really, Baby-Chief? Taking it out on small-time crooks now? What happened to ‘we are the vessels of hatred, we know no other emotion’? You developing feelings? ‘Cause that’s nice and all, but did you have to start with frustration?

Kurama needed to wake up from his I-fucked-with-the-dead-now-Imma-take-a-nap siesta soon. It just wasn’t the same with no sarcastic comeback. He needed his partner, dammit.

“Dunno who lit a fire under their ass, but they’ve been cracking down on minor misdemeanor crap like that harder than the civilian police,” the kid finished, eyes wary and stealing furtive glances at the shadows in the alley, as if the Vindice would show up and arrest him for slander or something.

Yeah, no. Naruto wouldn’t touch this with a ten-foot pole. The mafia world could fend for itself against the dark forces of oppression and zombie-ism. Not his problem, nuh-uh. He nodded at the kid, feigning surprise and I’m-so-grateful-you-told-me-this vibes. “Really? Huh. Thanks for the heads up.”

Red color smeared along the angles of his cheekbones and down the line of his collarbone. Brat ducked his head, as if the tips of his ears didn’t betray the furious flush, words spilling rash and breathless from his mouth. “’snoproblem, you did kinda help me out and all, not that I needed it or anything!”

Oh, man, getting cuter there. So it must have been the cute factor—also the assholes, can’t forget them, kid was a trouble magnet with that face—and because he would regret it if he didn’t ask, “You got a place to stay, brat?”

And the distrust was back in full force, though diluted with enough gratitude—that he saved him, or that he even cared, damn, kid—to warrant an answer. “I’m staying with a…family friend. What’s it to you?”

“I’ll walk you home,” Naruto said simply, and it was nonnegotiable. When the kid made to protest, Naruto smiled at him, his Kyōya-smile, the one he flashed that hellspawn when words failed to convey the message of you’ll-do-as-I-say-brat. “Humor me.”

It worked on this kid, too, because all he could mutter was a subdued, “Fine.”
(Eight blocks away, inside his proud bachelor pad, Trident Shamal was enjoying an afternoon cup of coffee as he paid homage to the latest Playboy issue; until he cracked open his daily fortune cookie, that was. *May you live in interesting times* was written in fire-red ink. He still never saw it coming.)
Naruto had learned quite a bit about Gokudera Hayato as the boy led him to the flat he shared with his guardian, mostly from what the kid didn’t say. There was no mention of his birth family, or his guardian’s affiliation, or anything related to a specific famiglia. All of it painted a not-so-nice picture. Little Hayato was a bastard child, discarded by his famiglia, somehow ending up in the care of a professional hitman, probably an independent one.

It was nothing he hadn’t seen before—sad, yeah, but all too common, the world just was, nothing fair or unfair about it—but it presented an opportunity. Hayato needed purpose and bonds and somewhere to belong. Naruto needed an experienced jōnin. Because ten brats were a bit too much even for him, and while Gamma provided summer relief, that poor bastard was Aria’s man through and through. Come September, they’d be back in Namimori, and Naruto refused to leave before snagging another vict—er, temp taichō for Teams A and B. Chances were those brats would pass their first Chūnin Exams with flying colors, so all they needed now was a captain while Naruto focused on whipping Team C into shape and finding some teammates for Hayato.

Win-win, right?

There was a jingling of keys; Naruto looked down to see Hayato fiddling with the key chain, having stopped in front of an apartment building, indecisive and pink-cheeked and shifting from one foot to the other. Adorable little brat.

“Hey, no need to get nervous. I just wanna talk to your guardian, ‘kay? That’s all, I promise.”

Slowly, he lifted his hand to stroke the kid’s hair, giving him ample time to avoid it. Wide-eyed, Hayato stayed put, sucked in a breath, then at the last second ducked under his hand to unlock the door. Naruto’s mouth quirked wryly. Maybe he should have started with Sasuke’s forehead flick of familial affection for the emotionally stunted.

In silence, the boy made a beeline for the staircase, not stopping until they were inside his flat.

“’m back, Shamal,” he mumbled, shuffling to the kitchen where a dark-haired man with some stubble around his chin was…holding a magazine of…questionable content, at an odd angle, eyes glazed over and giggling like Ero-sennin outside the hot springs. Or Kakashi-sensei in an Icha Icha reading coma.

Yeah, definitely the right man for the job. The majority of Naruto’s mentors had been notorious perverts, skilled as hell but shamelessly open about their hobbies.

“You’re back earlier than—” Shamal almost fell off his chair, the magazine disappearing in the blink of an eye, then went rigid, stupid grin still plastered on his face but more fake than the pair of breasts he’d been previously ogling. “Who’s your friend, Hayato?”

“This is Naruto.” A blistering, mortified glare, all but screaming why must you be such a pervert and don’t you dare embarrass me and why did I ever think you were cool. As if remembering the chain of events that caused their meeting, Hayato became more flustered. “We, um, ran into each other by accident!” Right. Total accident. Like how Naruto’s fist accidentally broke seven assholes’ faces. “And he…wanted to make sure I got home safe, I guess.”

Kid was as bad at lying as he was at accepting affection, and damn, if that wasn’t just sad. Judging
by the pervert’s pinched features, it wasn’t something out of the ordinary either.

“Ah, I see. Well, why don’t you go wash up while I get to know your new friend, hm?”

Hayato scowled, and ooh, that niggling at the back of his mind finally clicked into place. Naruto found himself staring at a green-eyed mini-Nidaime and wondering why it took him so long to make the connection. Kid was a damn genius, certainly smart enough to read the atmosphere, and not like what it spelled out, but Shamal’s tone left no room for disobedience.

Growling, he stormed out of the kitchen, with that Tobirama-worthy scowl and genius intellect promising there would be hell to pay when he came back. Pity his chakra-sensing wasn’t up to par. The Nidaime would have crushed the insect that latched on to the boy’s nape before it could even flap its wings to take flight.

Once the brat was out of hearing range, Shamal studied him closely, rubbing his chin, eyes half-lidded. Guarded, intrigued. “That’s a clever disguise, mixing Mist, Lightning, and a core of Sky Flames, huh? Very impressive, could fool almost anyone.”

An Aburame sensor, huh? To detect the usage of fire-chakra was one thing, difficult yet doable for most chūnin, but to be able to discern all that in mere seconds… His henge was flawless, even if he had to reinforce and stabilize it with a green and orange fire-chakra combo because he sucked at indigo.

Naruto leaned against the back of his chair and smirked. “Not bad, ossan.”

Shamal’s jaw fell open. “O-ossan?” He slammed his palm against the kitchen table, knocking over his coffee cup and paying no mind to his soaked sleeve. “I’m thirty-one, brat. Thirty. One. Why, I’m in the prime of my life. Ask any lady out there and they’ll tell you—”

“Ero-ossan.”

“Oh, you little—”

“Haya-chan just fell asleep.” His smirk made his words lighter than they should be, all the heavier in their implications. “That’s a fast-acting sedative, administered by a mosquito, huh? Very impressive, could fool almost anyone.”

Shamal’s face closed off, all traces of comic outrage vanishing in an instant.

“Well, you’re a regular hero, Ero-ossan.” Rolling up his wet sleeve, he mirrored Naruto—his smirk, the casual way he spoke, how he lounged on his chair. “Now, mind telling me why someone of your caliber would take an interest in my little runaway? Far as I know, foxes are solitary creatures, not pack animals.”

Oh. Must be the henge. Naruto’s expression softened, both at the nostalgic reminder and the confirmation of Hayato’s circumstances. “So he did run away from home.”

A flicker of pain, gone too quickly. Shamal sighed. “That is a long, sad story I really don’t care to repeat. Not my kind of love story, you know? I’m all for happy endings.”

A flicker of pain, gone too quickly. Shamal sighed. “That is a long, sad story I really don’t care to repeat. Not my kind of love story, you know? I’m all for happy endings.”

Naruto’s head tilted towards the badly hidden porn magazine, a deliberate, exaggerated glance, which Shamal pretended to miss while dabbing his coffee-stained sleeve with a napkin.

“Yeah, you’re a regular hero, Ero-ossan.” He rolled his eyes, getting back on topic, because he knew from experience that no manner of violence could beat the pervert out of him. If this guy was anything like Ero-sennin, then sadomasochism was an ingrained character trait by now. “Tell me,
how often does Haya-chan get in trouble with disrespectful assholes talking shit about his dead mother?"

“Ah.” Shamal crumpled up the napkin and threw it into the bin. When he met Naruto’s stare, there was a smile in his eyes, an amused gleam, an epiphany. “One of those rare foxes, are you? Picking up kits right and left? How many have you gotten so far?”

Finally cottoned on, Ero-ossan. Now, how to make his recruitment pitch? Many scenarios raced through his mind, but… Who was he kidding? Naruto only ever had one way. Go big or go home. And, for the record, he was not going home without snatching up a vict—er, temp taichō.

The corners of his mouth peeled back, parted for a flash of too-sharp teeth. “I have more kits than tails these days.”

Fire-chakra pulsed hot and heavy, twisting and contorting, reshaping itself into something tangible. Shamal stared with eyes wide and lips shut as it took form, split into identical parts, wild energy made will and fire. Nine tails snaked around his hips, burning brightly, imitating the blood orange of Kurama’s fur.

Shamal reached for the closest one, dragged the pads of his fingers along its flaring line, down to its white-hot tip. As if in a daze, or drunk on fire, he murmured, “Thinking of adding to your skulk?”

Naruto grinned, a sly curling of lips and mischief. “Interested?”

It was rhetorical. Shamal’s chakra told him all he needed to know, indigo wisps clinging even as he drew his fingers back and away, grabbed the pack of his cigarettes and lit one up. Naruto used the small pause as the man reoriented himself to extinguish the chakra tails now that his offer had been made and received.

“Depends.” Shamal exhaled a ring of smoke, brown eyes glinting with amusement again, but there was a subtle shift to his scrutiny. Something personal, an assessment. “I like to fly solo, you know, but Hayato happens to be my responsibility these days. So why don’t we start by you telling me where your den is?”

Tricky question, but eh. Honesty was the best policy here, so he scratched his cheek and angled for a game of truth and omission. “Well, I’ve set up my own den on Giglio Nero’s land.”

“You’ve left your birth den then?”

“Nah, can’t leave somewhere you’ve never been in the first place.”

“Your sire is an idiot, right?”

“Among other things, yeah.” Naruto smirked as Shamal processed the information, plunging into the heart of the matter when the man finished his smoke. “Wanna give it a trial period? No strings attached.”

Shamal chuckled, shooting him a dirty look. “Bullshit. Hayato’s never gonna leave if you take him in.”

Naruto’s smirk broadened. “So? Nothing stopping you from leaving once you’ve seen Haya-chan’s in good hands.”

He shrugged his shoulders, cavalier to the point of insult, and Shamal laughed, tipping his head.
“Touché, Volpe. Doesn’t work that way, though, and you damn well know it.” A theatrical sigh whooshed out of his lungs. “Aah, why couldn’t you have been a vixen?”

Naruto flipped him off. “Keep on dreaming, Ero-ossan.”

Hayato adjusted to shinobi life with laughable ease, although that might have been because he met his fire-chakra soulmates.

The Red War lasted three days—three days during which Hana, Belphegor, and Hayato gave it their all to outsmart, incinerate, and kill each other, or go out in a blaze of glory. Hana won, but only because she had the advantage of knowing the five big no-nos of engagement.

Never stop to monologue. (Belphegor was too self-entitled not to give royal speeches.)

Never explain how your jutsu or strategy work. (Hayato was too proud not to explain.)

Never allow yourself to be distracted from your opponent. (Belphegor was too vainglorious not to lose his temper when his princely sensibilities were hurt.)

Never relax or cease attacking unless you've confirmed your target is incapacitated. (Hayato was too misogynistic not to dismiss Hana as soon as she played possum.)

Never exhaust your chakra and betray your position with flashy finishers unless they're a surefire hit. (Both Hayato and Belphegor were too in love with flashy moves not to throw them around like candy on Halloween.)

Shamal spent the whole time drunk, flirting with Aria, and willing himself to believe the kiddie war was an alcohol-induced hallucination. (It was real. He was doomed, and he knew it, but in the words of Oscar Wilde, “I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked.”)

The moment Gamma parked the car outside the Varia HQ, Belphegor sprinted out the door like he was being chased by the hounds of hell. Naruto and Gamma exchanged a glance full of mirth and wryness before they followed after him, only for Naruto to stop and stand stock-still once he caught sight of whom the tiara-brat had run to. His brain shut down. His body went on autopilot. (Gamma wisely returned to the car and hit the lock button.)

“Mammon! Squa-senpai made the Prince stay with peasants for a whole week. It was horrible and demeaning and the Prince did not play with children and—and I will pay you triple the normal fee if you avenge me!”

Just as the person of interest was about to reply, Naruto initiated Operation Cursed Rainbow, Wrath of the Sensei, Phase One.

“You. Baby. With the nin-frog.” A veritable explosion of killing intent shook the castle down to its foundations, with the hooded killer-baby in the epicenter. “You are very lucky the kids didn’t come along. Never. Ever. Show your animal partner to my brats. If you even think about it…” His voice regressed to a low rasp, writhing with instinctual things, fluctuations in chakra, violence thrumming in the silence, words layered with purpose and words unsaid. Death-threats, killing urges. “I will end you.”

Nothing moved. Nobody spoke. Then Squalo burst into the room, eyes searching around frantically, half-bewildered, half-hopeful.
“Voi! What the fuck was that? It felt like Xanxus’ Wrath on fucking steroids.”

Naruto leashed his chakra, smiling, his stare searing through the killer-baby’s hood. “Nothing. Just making sure your Arcobaleno and I have an…understanding.”

The hood swayed back and forth as if the tiny body underneath was in the throes of an epileptic seizure. “I—I un-understa-stand.”

Yeah, I bet you do. “Awesome. See you next time.” Naruto bent down and patted the nin-frog twice, then waved goodbye and turned to leave.

“Voi, Mammon. What the hell—are you…alright?”

“—worse than bankruptcy.”

He walked out of the Varia HQ with a smile, the satisfaction of an averted crisis, and the conviction of having seen the last of the nin-animals for the day, leaving behind a half-bewildered, half-devastated Sword-Psycho, a shaken killer-baby, and a madly snickering tiara-brat.

(It wasn’t meant to be.)

Naruto sat on the ground, gazing skywards, his back against the car door; or, more precisely, the dented hunk of metal that used to be the driver’s door before he had torn it off to escape the collision fifteen minutes ago. Both man and door had dived off the mountain road, crashing into the narrow, winding lane below the one where Gamma was in the process of ripping the motorcycle moron a new one. At least Gamma had come out of it relatively unscathed thanks to Naruto’s swift rescue. It was debatable whether he would have survived the crash with mere scratches like him.

Glimpses were all Naruto had caught before he went airborne—windswept blond hair, stricken brown eyes, a killer-baby, a yellow-striped fedora, a fucking nin-chameleon.

“—the fuck were they thinking when they gave you a driver’s licence?”

“I’m so sorry! My leg just cramped all of a sudden! I really didn’t mean—”

“Disgraceful, Pipsqueak Dino. A mafia boss doesn’t squeal like a little girl—”

That was it. He was done. Naruto made a kamikaze clone, armed it with two dozen grade three explosive tags, and tapped on his earpiece. “Gamma. Code Jōnetsu Jigoku. I’m outta here.”

Unlike the motorcycle moron, he even gave them fair warning. For Gamma’s sake. He hadn’t gone to all that trouble to save the man just to off him himself. (Because if Gamma was blown to kingdom come, Naruto was ranked number three on Aria’s stud list, right below some poor, unaware bastard named Lancia. He had seen it.)

The last thing he heard before he slipped into the earth was Gamma’s panicked, “Fire in the hole! Take cover!”
“People have started to take notice of you.” Aria’s manner was quite blasé, two fingers tapping a lazy rhythm against the tabletop, as if she was talking about the recent heatwave and not oh, by the way, the mafia are gunning for you, no biggie.

Breakfast as usual then. Ever since his spectacular stunt of blowing up one third of the mountain road, a young don-in-training, and his fedora-baby mafia tutor—but fuck them, they had it coming—even everyone and their grandma had been asking questions.

It was Gamma’s fault. If he had disguised himself, like Naruto had for the majority of their stay in Italy—

(“Because iemitsu. ’nuff said, brats. Now, let’s see your henge.”

Six flares of chakra, six perfect hen—no, wait…what.

**Tch. The Uchiha-spawn might have some taste.**

This is all your fault, you stupid fox.

“Kyō-chan, I get it, I really do. You treasure the memory of the day we met, and Kurama made one hell of a first impression, but using my six-year-old jinchūriki face as your henge defeats the purpose of this subterfuge.”

“Hn.”

**I take it back. Damn tasteless like the rest of his cursed clan.**

Great, he regressed again. Still blaming you, Kurama.)

—the fedora-baby wouldn’t have recognized him and known exactly where to point his gun. Which was why it was his job now to fend off that fucking persistent killer-baby, thus missing the joy of breakfast on a regular basis. And tangerines, because you can never have enough tangerines, Ero-ossan. Italy might suck for ramen, but it was awesome for tangerines.

Savoring his iced green tea, Naruto hummed in acknowledgement. “That asshole keeps bothering you, yeah?”

Aria waved him off with aplomb. “Uncle Reborn has been keeping an eye on me since mom passed away, it’s nothing new. I can handle him, no worries.”

“What’s the problem then?”

“Playing ignorant is not cute, Volpe.” Shamal glared at him with bleary eyes as he nursed his coffee, never a morning person, but damn, did someone piss in his cereal today or something? “She’s saying that maybe it’s time to establish yourself. You can’t hide behind Giglio Nero’s name forever, you know. Not if you want respect in our world. People will keep pushing you, trying to snatch your kids away, if you don’t state loud and clear to where they belong.”

Well, when he put it that way… His head thumped against the tabletop, accompanying Aria’s rhythmic tempo. A headache was building behind his temples, and not from his dramatics, and yeah, he had known it would happen sooner or later, but it was way too fucking early to deal with
“Shit.” Lifting his head, he swigged his tea in five gulps, slamming it down, annoyed and frustrated and eyeing the booze cabinet. “I get it alright. S’not that easy though. There’s school and parents and civilian bullshit in the way. My kids aren’t ready for that kind of venture.”

Silence fell over the table as they pondered the subject of how-to-mafia-for-middle-school-kids.

“What if you…focus on finding your niche for now?” Still quite blasé, but now there were four fingers tapping, a faraway look in Aria’s eyes, a deep, prescient blue. “Not all famiglia are about fighting power. Some of them specialize in other things, take the Bovino and their technology for example.”

It struck him like lightning. Naruto banged his head again, because it was so goddamn obvious and he was an idiot and the Nidaime must be laughing at him from the grave. His parents, too. And, dammit, Ero-sennin. Then Shamal upended the fruit bowl over his head, and he came to his senses, and oh, tangerines, thanks, man.

Throwing his head back, he bellowed to the great beyond (but mostly at the ceiling). “Fūinjutsu, I love you! Nidaime, for a humorless bastard, you had awesome paperwork ninja skills! Kā-chan, Tō-chan, I’m sorry I can’t be a badass seal master like you were! Ero-sennin, you can go suck a dick!”

After getting all that off his chest, Naruto grinned and peeled his consolation tangerine while Shamal stared at him as if he had gone mad, the apple heathen. Ugh, why eat apples when you can have tangerines, man? Aria understood him—she giggled that amused I-saw-this-like-ten-seconds-ago giggle and made a gimme motion. Reluctantly, he shared one half.

“Haya-chan’s been soaking up sealing theory like a sponge. He’s got a long way to go, but kid’s a damn genius. His head’s full of all these ideas, ya know? Like, fuck, it’s insane, it’s just so—he’s brilliant.”

Refilling the fruit bowl, Shamal pierced him with another laser-like glare, and did he…? Oh, hell no, he did not just take his tangerines hostage. “Yeah, I do know. Intimately. What I didn’t know was that even faulty explosive tags explode, but thank you for letting me study them with every inch of my body.”

This…this meant war. Naruto chewed his tangerine slice, swallowed slowly, and said as sweetly as the nectar melting on his tongue, “You think it’s bad now?”

Fruit bowl held close in his arms, Shamal flinched and hugged it tighter. “It can get worse?”

“Explosive tags are among the easiest seals to customize.” Naruto’s gaze zeroed in on the the fruit bowl, passing the silent message I’ll keep talking ‘til you release the hostages, you filthy fruit-napper. “You can play with range, chakra, time delay, proximity, even connect them to another sealing matrix and stuff like that. Just wait ‘til Haya-chan starts adding things beyond the standard triggers. He can even attune them to your chakra if he gets a sample, so all he has to do is slip one under your bed and you go kaboom! without him being near the area.”

Despite having gone white as a sheet, neither his arms nor his voice wavered when Shamal relinquished both fruit bowl and dignity. “Thank you for clarifying that. I wasn’t terrified enough before.”

Putting up a brave front, huh? Now that won’t do, Ero-ossan. “Terrified? Ha!” Naruto tsk’ed,
mock-pity and triumph slathered on his face, cuddling the fruit bowl with one arm and high-fiving Aria with the other. “Please, Ero-ossan. I was just talking about explosive tags. You haven’t heard terrifying yet. You gotta think outside the box.”

Shamal cast his gaze heavenwards (but mostly at the ceiling), sightless and beseeching the gods for mercy. “Please stop talking.”

Satisfied, Naruto gorged himself on the spoils of war. Victory tasted oh-so-sweet. “Anyway, my point is fūinjutsu’s something new, right? We can make it our business from back home, like market our storage seals and explosive tags, maybe barrier and trap seals, too. Simple stuff, nothing complicated or beyond grade two, or Sage forbid, un-fucking-real space-time and reanimation seals.”

Abruptly, Shamal snapped out of his prayers, and oh my, his glare sizzled. “Goddammit, Volpe! I said I didn’t want to know. Now my dreams will be filled with reality breaking apart and zombies feasting on my flesh while Hayato laughs in the distance.”

Huh. Now that imagery—premonition, his super intuition chimed—stuck into Naruto’s mind; until Aria flashed him those deep-blues of hers and purred, hot as fuck and all but projecting give it to me, I want it bad, “We get a discount, right, Na-ru-to-kun?”

Daaamn, woman. Naruto was proud to admit he lasted ninety-three seconds before folding like a wet tissue. “If we make the alliance official, yeah.”

An orange manila folder appeared in Aria’s hands before he even finished his sentence as if from thin air. When Naruto stared at her, amused but deadpan, she pursed her pretty lips and pouted, sliding the folder across the table. “What, I like to be prepared.”

Prepared, right, that was one word for it. He snorted, sealing the folder away. “I’ll look it over.”

Now that it was official though… Eh, why not go all the way. Naruto unsealed his fūinjutsu supplies, dipped his brush into the ink, and began drawing their emblem on a blank paper. Kids would love it; they were all for formal shinobi shit like ranks and flak jackets and whatnot.

A shadow distracted him midway—Naruto twisted his head to find Shamal peering over his shoulder at the half-drawn symbols. “We’re really doing this, huh?”

Wait, what? Did he say… We. Not you. A soft brush of fire then, indigo and orange burning, meshing, harmonizing. Naruto grinned, because it felt right and he just snagged a jōnin and hell yeah, they were doing this.

“Mhm. You’ve got credibility and the mafia contacts we need to start the ball rolling. I’ll deal with production for now ’til Haya-chan gets past basic fūinjutsu theory. His calligraphy ain’t half bad either, but it needs work. Plus, Haya-chan’ll be happier working on the R&D side of things.”

Shamal huffed a short, deranged laugh, nearly braining him with an apple. Dodging with insulting ease, not a single drop of ink wasted, Naruto chuckled and carried on with his outline.

“Tetsu-chan’s an administration whiz. Kusa-chan’s great with numbers. Kyōko-chan and Hana-chan make one hell of a marketing duo. I’m sure Kuro-chan will dabble in a little bit of everything. The rest can choose where they want to get involved or stick to regular missions. Taking one week off from school every two months or so won’t be hard to cover. And, well, we’ve got clones if it gets too much to handle.” One last stroke of his brush. With a flourish, Naruto presented his masterpiece, letting them examine it as the ink dried. “Give it a few years and we’ll be a pretty big
name in the mafia.”

“You’ve thought this through,” Shamal muttered, contemplative, mapping out swirls and lines and old, forgotten symbols. The kanji for Konoha stood above the standard fūin circle, and inside, the Konoha leaf boldly drew the eye like the center of the sun. “I just have one question.” His gaze lifted from the paper, connected with Naruto’s, a fond, warm brown that quietly asked, “Why Konoha?”

And Naruto looked at them, as he had once looked at his brats years ago when he realized they were there and they were his and introduced them to Kurama. He looked at Aria who saw the world through a million reflections of what can be and saw him. He looked at Shamal who was so much like his mentors that it hurt and it soothed all at once. He looked at his family and said, smiling and time-worn and so fucking glad they had found each other, “I’m gonna need sake for that story.”

As if from thin air again, a sake bottle appeared in Aria’s hands, and Naruto burst out laughing, because was she for real or what. Ōgama-jiji had nothing on Aria and her freaky psychic bullshit.

Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand—those were happy, manful tears, he wasn’t crying, dammit—he prodded the fox. Wanna join?

Kurama’s stare was blazing red with that all-knowing smugness, his mouth a sardonic show of fangs as he grinned down at Naruto. I suppose I could…socialize with these humans. You could have done worse. He then snarled as was par for the course with him. And I do tell that story better. You tend to emphasize minor details like the Uchiha’s insignificant contributions while understating their heinous transgressions.

Naruto snorted. Uh-huh. Sure you do.

It was late August, late morning, and Sardinia was paradise on earth. Aria’s suggestion to take a short vacation on the island while the rumor mill piped down was a godsend.

Naruto lounged on a chaise, sipping a fruity, colorful cocktail and reading through Shamal’s potential client notes. The pervert was ogling the throng of tanning female bodies, giggling and adding lines to his notebook, though he had derailed from subject half an hour ago. If Naruto had to skim through another fucking ode to Venus and godawful soft-core poetry about the passions of the flesh, he’d set both notes and man on fire. His kids had appropriated a small part of the beach for themselves, cleverly masked under genjutsu, and were playing in the sand under the scorching sun.

(They were having fun with an all-out, small-scale water war.)

Seeing as he wouldn’t be making much progress, what with the pervert’s straying attention, Naruto put the notes down, stretched his muscles, and casually relocated himself to the table on the other side of the beach bar.

The green-haired, bespectacled killer-baby occupying the table spared him a teensy-weensy glance, then resumed his engrossed observation of Naruto’s brats. “I am not interested. Consider this my response to whatever piqued your curiosity, and do not waste my time with trite excuses. My research is far more important than anything you have to say.”

Normally, Naruto would’ve declared open season on Baby-Kabuto, but he was just so fucking mellow right now, that he couldn’t muster the energy to give a flying fuck, much less sink into a
nin-animal blind rage. Also, they were lying low; last thing he needed was to reignite the rumors.

So he parked his ass and smiled a lazy, dangerous smile. “That’s funny, ‘cause I thought you were very interested in my kids, judging by the way you’ve been observing them for the past half hour.”

Baby-Kabuto finally regarded him with something other than bored condescension. “Pardon me. It seems we have gotten off to a bad start. Unintentionally, I assure you.” Adjusting his glasses, he cleared his throat, as if it took major brain effort for him to come up with unintentionally as a decent excuse for being a dick. “Verde. I am first and foremost a scientist. And you are?”

“You can call me Naruto. I’m many things, but what’s relevant here is that I’m responsible for those kids. Mind telling me what caught your attention?”

The lenses of his round glasses glinted in the sun, but Naruto didn’t need to see Baby-Kabuto’s eyes to judge his sincerity. He could hear it in his voice in tandem with a clinical sort of giddiness that clashed horribly with his overall attitude. “Their manipulation of Flames is…unique. Innovative, to be precise. Riveting, if you wish to be poetic. Did you introduce them to such novel techniques?”

Man, these scientist types were all a bunch of awkward islands, but eh, at least the ice had been broken.

“Yeah, I taught them; though as you can see, they’re still learning.” As they watched the kiddie battle royale, Naruto pointed out Ken’s perfectly timed but clumsy execution of the Inuzuka clan’s Tsūga. “That right there is…hm, if done right, middle-level stuff at best.” Then Kyōya’s—why are you breaking out the Akimichi’s Chōharite, brat? We’re on a civilian beach, for fuck’s sake! Oh, you cut down the chakra by three quarters. Never mind, carry on. “But what Kyō-chan’s doing can be high-level depending on how much chakra he pumps into it.”

“Fascinating,” Baby-Kabuto breathed out, mimicking Shamal’s fervent note-taking pace. The similarity was jarring enough to make Naruto wince.

“Eh, they’re getting better every day.” He shrugged his shoulders, because this was pretty much routine for him, then broached the matter that had brought him to Baby-Kabuto’s table in the first place. “What I find fascinating is your animal partner.”

Both Baby-Kabuto and nin-animal blinked at the same time, and woah, that was even more jarring.

“Oh. He is an alligatorid crocodilian belonging to the subfamily Caimaninae with the distinctive ability to alter his size.” Tiny fingers stroked the expanse of the reptile’s spine as he stopped talking, uncomfortable and seeming out of words. “His name is Keiman,” Baby-Kabuto ended up blurtling, which was kinda hilarious. And sad. How unoriginal the name was, despite the owner’s vaunted genius; also the fact his only friend seemed to be a moody baby reptile.

“So, he’s a size-changing caiman.” Naruto’s mouth twitched, but to his credit, he made a valiant effort to withhold his laughter. “How did you come by him?”

And damn, if that wasn’t a taboo question, because Baby-Kabuto’s fingers stilled, the baby reptile glared yellow-slit murder, and he coldly said, “I did not acquire him through conventional means, and that is all I am willing to reveal concerning this matter.”

“That’s a pity.” A sigh. Naruto didn’t want to push Baby-Kabuto’s buttons—

(Putting the fear of god in killer-babies? Yeah, bring it on, bitches. Twisting the knife in old
wounds? Nah, that shit was cruel.)

—but. And this was an important but. “See, my kids have been pestering me for ages about getting them an animal partner. Problem is…nin-animals like your caiman are quite rare. In fact, I’ve only ever seen them in the company of Arcobaleno.”

“That is a shame, but I fail to grasp how it correlates with our discussion.”

“Have you ever thought of…replicating those unconventional means?”

“No.”

“Sore subject, huh?”

“Quite.”

At this point, Naruto was ready to throw in the towel, and he would have, honest, if Baby-Kabuto, probably sensing his mounting desperation, hadn’t fiddled with the skeleton of his glasses and thrown him a bone.

“I have entertained the idea of animal Box Weapons, however.”

“Oh? Animal Box Weapons, you say?”

A hungry, demented glint entered Naruto’s gaze. Baby-Kabuto returned it tenfold. They stared at each other with the ferocity of starving beasts and the implacable will of men who would chase their dreams to the edge of insanity.

(Something deep resonated. It might have been empathy, it might have been solidarity, it might have been fire-chakra, but they were too far gone to notice.)

“Yes, you see, the original concept was derived from the work of a biologist four centuries prior to our time. Geppetto Lorenzini theorized—”

Naruto listened, nodded here and there, marveled at the ingenuity of the original concept, and when Baby-Kabuto finished with an aggrieved sigh, irritated at his own inability to actualize Lorenzini’s vision, he grinned and played his trump card.

“I see your problem. What if I could…provide an alternative solution?”

Sunlight reflected off the surface of Baby-Kabuto’s glasses, so bright it near blinded Naruto, as he stared into his eyes for a drawn-out moment. Then, “You would have my complete and undivided attention.”

Dipping his hand inside the pocket of his summer shorts to disguise his actions, Naruto pushed chakra into the storage seal drawn on his wristband and brought out the pack of grade one seals in it.

“This is a storage seal.” He separated one from the pack and passed it over when Baby-Kabuto extended his arm, not that it’d do him any good. Genius scientist he might be, but fūinjutsu was an art that took knowledge and patience and teachers and years to understand.

“The short explanation is that it stores things, from solid objects to pure Flames to anything really.” The implication of like storing fire-chakra animals into boxes was impossible to miss. “There have been hypotheses of conceptual seals even, but that’s not my field of expertise. Fūinjutsu is an
ancient and complicated art, and as of now, exclusive to my famiglia.”

Baby-Kabuto was too intelligent not to grasp all implications. “You…want me to join your famiglia?”

Confused, as if nobody had ever offered, and dammit, Baby-Kabuto, that was just sad, way too much like his namesake. Which meant he’d make an excellent Mother. Sweet!

Naruto’s grin widened. “Yup.”

“Why?” Still confused, but purple eyes clear through the lenses, razor-sharp and demanding and more than a little considering.

“I need a Head for the R&D department.” Truth, but more than that, nin-animals. “Haya-chan’s a genius, yeah, but no matter how fast he picks up theory, he’s still young and inexperienced. You, on the other hand…”

He didn’t need to complete the sentence, they both knew.

Baby-Kabuto’s hand reached for his nin-caiman, fingers running up an down, a compulsive, absentminded pattern, a chain of fast, agitated words erupting from his throat. “I…I am not accustomed to working with others. They slow down my research and they cannot understand the simplest theorems and they call my testing methods unethical and—”

“My kids will love you.” And Naruto meant it. Those little monsters would love testing out new weapons and armor and seals and all kinds of dangerous shit. And nin-animals, because he couldn’t stress that enough. Hell, Naruto wouldn’t be surprised if they built an altar in Baby-Kabuto’s honor.

The petting stopped. Baby-Kabuto blinked, pushing his glasses up his nose, and said with the air of someone who had irrefutable scientific evidence, “I highly doubt that. Past experience with pre-adolescent children has not yielded positive results.”

It just showed how little he knew of the world outside his laboratory. Poor, sad bastard.

Naruto shook his head. “Watch this.” Two loud whistles—the battle royale came to a sudden halt as his brats heeded the code for ceasefire. Even Shamal’s gaze was drawn away from the nubile young flesh he’d been feasting on. “Oi, Haya-chan! C’mere a minute, there’s somebody I want you to meet.”

Hayato sprinted across the sand not one second after his name was shouted, and of course, the whole pack followed. Singed, bruised, grazed, out of breath but wildly grinning, he collided with Naruto’s legs.

Naruto laughed as he helped him up while the rest gathered around the table with curious expressions. Except Kyōya, that hellspawn was visibly devouring the nin-caiman and eyeballing Naruto, back and forth and expectant.

“This is Verde and he—”

That was as far as he got before Hayato climbed up his lap and barely refrained from throwing himself across the table at Baby-Kabuto.

“I know who he is! Who hasn’t heard of Verde? I can’t believe this—this is so amazing…” Baby-Kabuto had this bewildered look on his face, as if science had failed him for the first time in his life
and how the fuck had that happened, while Hayato kept rambling on and on and on. “I just—your recent literature on Flame robotics engineering—”

It didn’t help matters when the other brats chipped in with their unique welcome after being clued in by Naruto during Hayato’s inco comprehensible rambling. (To everyone else. Verde understood every single word. He just had trouble believing it came out of the boy’s mouth.)

“Will Verde-san upgrade our weapons?” (Kyōya)

“Testing sounds like fun. I’m in!” (Takeshi)

“Nice to meet you, Verde-san. Welcome to the family!” (Kyōko)

“An intelligent person will be appreciated around here.” (Hana)

“Pleased to meet you, Verde-san. I look forward to working with you.” (Tetsuya)

“I’ve never met a famous scientist before! You must be extremely smart!” (Ryōhei)

“Kufufu. Interesting.” (Mukuro)

“I do not consent to genetic modification and invasive surgical procedures, Verde-san. If you agree to these terms, I have no issue with testing your inventions.” (Chikusa)

“No animal experimentation or testing either, Verde-san, and we’re cool, byon!” (Ken)

All Naruto had to say after the kiddie welcome committee was, “We live in Namimori, Japan.”

Baby-Kabuto nodded once, palm obscuring his glasses and voice oddly quiet, verging on choked-up. “I will cover the expenses for procuring an estate and transferring my equipment, but I will expect you to fund my research once I am settled.”

“Deal.” Naruto raised his fist Killer B style, fiery orange licking at his skin. Five seconds later, a tiny fist met the center of his knuckles with a crackle of green thunder.

Shamal chuckled. “Only you, Volpe.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Like all good things, summer came to an end all too soon, and with it, their Italian escapades. Aria was devastated to see them go at the airport, drowning his brats in hugs and kisses and presents, all the while sending Gamma that put-a-baby-in-me-or-else look. Gamma, the poor fuck, was trapped between feeling the yes-I’m-finally-free ecstasy and the I’m-never-gonna-be-free-am-I damnation. It wasn’t an attractive look on him. Shamal waggled his brows and covertly slipped him a bottle of pills right before they boarded their plane, which Naruto complemented by adding an illustrated BDSM-for-dummies manual. Gamma’s roar of anguish when Aria found them could be heard all the way to the jet bridge. Naruto missed them already.

Fifteen hours later, they arrived in Japan; specifically, at Baby-Kabuto’s recently purchased estate, where Team C plus Hayato were dropped off. Indefinitely. (Verde was ensconced in his laboratory, up to his neck in fūinjutsu studies, thus too preoccupied to notice their intrusion. He dismissed the shiver that crawled down the line of his vertebrae as mild exhaustion and caffeine jitters. Until the creepy murder-laughter started, and by then it was too late.)

The first thing Naruto did after depositing the rest of his kids to their respective homes was to drag Shamal over to his place and have him examine Nana. It had been gnawing at him for years—he’d be damned if he didn’t find a way to cure that poor woman from whatever mindfuckery she was afflicted with.

“So?” Naruto tapped his foot, staring at Nana’s unconscious body laid out on the couch, impatient and worried and not liking how Shamal grimaced when he withdrew his fire-chakra.

“Complicated.” Sighing, Shamal sat down and lit a cigarette, skin tight around his mouth, exhaling deeply. “I detected some minuscule traces of Mist tampering, but they’re so faint it must have been done years ago. More than a decade maybe, by now it’s more like…echoes. I can’t even pinpoint what exactly was done to her, but my best guess would be memory modification.”

Goddammit, he fucking knew it. Anger amassed and seethed low in his stomach, fueled by the sudden assault of Kurama’s rage and memories under Madara’s thrall, barely tempered by the implied, “Not brainwashing or some shit?”

“No.” A head shake, definite, reassuring. “It would have raised a big red flag when I went in. That kind of Mist tampering doesn’t fade. It has to be sustained, you know? Adult minds aren’t as easy to ‘reprogram’ as children’s because they’re already developed. If you don’t strengthen it every few months, they start to fight back and revert to their original personality.”

As nauseating as that was to hear, it loosened something in Naruto’s gut, calmed Kurama’s rage down to the ever-present, simmering resentment. “I see. What’s complicated then? You do have a theory, right?”

“I think…” Shamal hummed, brought the ashtray closer and flicked the ash off his cigarette, his words slow and measured. “…it might be subliminal stimuli. Whatever happened must have affected her so deeply, that even if it was erased from her memory, it still left mental scars. But since she can’t remember what it was…”

He shrugged, but the message was loud and clear. Naruto nodded, picking up from where the man
“It messed her up. Now she’s conditioned to ignore anything that might be alarming or dangerous or inexplicable ‘cause there’s this little voice in her head saying ‘everything’s fine, you’re fine, nobody’s gonna hurt you, nothing’s wrong here’.”

Shamal’s smile was a grim confirmation. Biting off a curse, Naruto stole one of his cigarettes. It was that or alcohol, and if he started drinking he might not stop until he was buzzed enough to mindlessly destroy half the town. Who the fuck had hurt her so bad that Iemitsu had to mindfuck it out of her? He was half-hoping whoever it was yet lived, just so he could—

*Rip out their heart and feed it to them raw, claw out their stomach and choke them with their own intestines—*

*Kurama…please. Just, not now.*

The fox went quiet, but his thoughts scraped against the walls of Naruto’s mind, red as blood, dark as murder. Naruto breathed in the smoke, breathed out the aggression. “Can it be undone? The memory fuck-up?”

“No, it’s too late for that, and I wouldn’t suggest it even if it could be done.” A sigh gusted out of his lungs. Heavy, tired, as if he had been asked this question too many times, but it never got easier to give this line when they looked him in the eye and waited for something different. “They aren’t repressed memories, they’re just gone. The shadow’s still there, yes, but the body’s missing.”

He saw red, then black, then all-consuming, burning fury. “So what do you suggest? I can’t leave her like that. I can’t protect her from herself. She’s like a walking, talking victim, for fuck’s sake! Just a lamb led to the slaughter!”

When Naruto snarled, cigarette crushed and sizzling inside his fist, Shamal gripped his wrist tight, kept him in place with soft but meaningless words, and—something bit him. Even in his blinding fury, he had seen it coming, could have stopped it, but he trusted Shamal, trusted him to—

Calm washed over him, rationality. The fog lifted from his eyes. Naruto blinked, put his head between his hands and focused on just breathing. Shamal sighed as if he had also seen this too many times, but carried on as if it hadn’t happened, and for that, Naruto was grateful.

“Well, we could treat it like…Alzheimer’s. I mean, the symptoms match—memory loss, decreased or poor judgment, problems with thinking and reasoning. It could work, for all you know, and if we don’t see an improvement… We can try standard trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, though without knowing what caused the trauma…”

Again he trailed off, and again Naruto voiced his line of thought, like there had never been a moment where he fucking lost it.

“Assassination attempt? Hostage situation with short-term torture? Sexual assault?”

Wary brown eyes met his, judging his state of mind, then Shamal carefully said, “It could be anything, but you’re asking the wrong person.”

Naruto chuckled, a cracked, bitter sound. “And it all comes back to Iemitsu.” He couldn’t care less about the shitty seal, the lies, the idiocy, the absence, but this? “Why is it always instant fire-chakra fuckery with him? How hard could it have been to just take her to a goddamn doctor?”

“He’s mafia.” There was understanding in those brown eyes, but also acceptance, matter-of-fact
and this is life for us and it is what it is. “We never do things the normal way.”

Naruto knew that, had known it longer than Shamal had lived. He had never accepted it, still couldn’t accept it. “Bullshit. It goes beyond that, Ero-ossan.” If you don’t like how it is, then you change it.

Shamal gazed at him, hearing what went unspoken, smiling and wanting to believe him. “True.” That’s why I followed you, his gaze seemed to say, as warm as it was jaded, but not even you can change the past. ”But have you wondered if maybe she was the one who begged him to take the pain away?”

And to that, Naruto had no answer, only a groan of misery. “This is giving me a headache.”

Maybe he should have gone with alcohol.

To drown out his impotent rage against the demons in his mother’s past, Naruto dove headfirst into Project Assemble Team D, training Team C, and planning the Chūnin Exams for Teams A and B.

It was going well, too, until one fine Sunday morning, Mukuro woke up, came down for breakfast, and declared he wanted his eggs sunny-side up and to adopt a little girl because, “Her Mist called to mine. I can’t ignore her after that, now can I? Please pass me the raspberry jam.”

“Well, look at you. At the tender age of eleven and ready to be a daddy. Good for you, Kuro-chan.”

Naruto passed the little shit’s jam to Baby-Kabuto and made him an omelet instead. He had learned from the Nara Tofu Incident that passive-aggressive bullshit got under people’s skin better than anything if kept up long enough. Baby-Kabuto smirked and dug in with gusto, all shining glasses and schadenfreude, while Mukuro’s innocent smile turned to stone.

It became worse when Naruto caved—because he was a bleeding heart and a sucker for lonely kids, that little shit cackled—and met the girl; or, to be more precise, the girl’s so-called family. Not that they knew he met them.

Naruto leaned his back against the wall and stared at the meek girl sitting on the edge of the bed inside Baby-Kabuto’s state-of-the-art infirmary. Shamal’d given her a routine check-up, proclaimed her malnourished but otherwise healthy, and skipped out of the room with a grin that foretold groping hands and slaps to the face and kicks to the nuts.

His mouth curved into a gentle smile that she tentatively returned. So far, so good.

“Nagi-chan,” he began, but faltered when she flinched. At what, the mere sound of her name? Damn, just what had those bastards done to this poor girl’s self-esteem? Inhaling through his nose, he put a lid on his temper and soldiered on. “I don’t usually do this, but you’re a special case.”

And he proceeded to tell her everything. Because he might not know how to deal with abused little girls, but he was one hundred percent certain the last thing she needed was pretty lies and hollow promises. Nagi listened to his voice with that nervous meekness sticking to her skin and wonder in her eyes—but never once did she interrupt or doubt him.

After all had been laid bare, the good, the ugly, the strange and the stranger, Naruto sought her eyes and didn’t let her hide beneath her bangs. “The question is…what do you want?”

“Why?” It started as a whisper, trembling and confused and near inaudible. She swallowed once,
twice, tried again. “I mean, I understood what you said about…about fire-chakra? Or was it Flames?”

He shrugged. “Whatever you wanna call it, s’all the same.”

Nagi nodded, gaining confidence and volume from his laid-back posture.

“And the mafia people and—and your famiglia?” Another shrug, another nod. “But why…?”

*Why do you care? Why do you want me? Why me?* Naruto heard all that and more. Endless whys and self-deprecation, the cries of a girl who had given up on the world because the world had given up on her first.

“Because you’re a kid,” he said to that lost little girl. “A good girl who got dealt a bad hand in life. It wasn’t your fault, but you can’t change things by yourself because you’re *just a kid*. You deserve a chance to live, Nagi-chan. To love and be loved, be happy and free, whatever you wanna be.” Her eyes had grown so large, that they almost swallowed half her face. Was it really so hard for her to believe that? It tugged at his heartstrings, dammit. Naruto sighed, a crooked, rueful smile on his lips. “And you remind me of someone I once knew.”

Nagi looked as if she wanted to ask *who*, but was too shy, too used to staying silent and invisible because questions and attention brought nothing but trouble. Breaking her out of that habit would take time and patience and Naruto really wanted to beat the crap out of her family.

“Oi, Kuro-chan!” *Shit.* She almost jumped out of her skin. Again. Right, indoor voice, copy that, keep Ryōhei away for now. “Stop eavesdropping and come over here.”

Mukuro slithered into the room with no shame and the languorous danger of a python. That brat, so damn uncute, so getting boiled eggs tomorrow.

“Link me with Nagi-chan for a bit, will ya? You can even stay to watch—or no, you know what? This reminds me, I’ve been meaning to show you some stuff but kept forgetting. Now’s a good time as any to do this.”

Intrigue darkened those mismatched eyes, lessened the contrast, amplified the danger. (For Mukuro, that was. Kurama wanted to eat the fake-Rinnegan eyeball.)

A labyrinth of pipes manifested when they were drawn inside his mindscape. Naruto drop-kicked Mukuro into the pipe that contained the memories he had selected for the brat and ushered Nagi towards their own pipe. Whatever the girl had expected would greet her, Naruto couldn’t guess at, but her expression of unadulterated shock screamed it wasn’t the Dango-ya, Konoha’s famous dango shop, and its even more famous best customer, Mitarashi Anko.

Moving slowly so as not to startle her further, Naruto wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pointed her in Anko’s direction. Nagi blinked her large eyes, tilted her head and drank in the woman’s I’m-the-head-bitch-here-bitches, come-to-mama-dango attitude.

“See that woman in the trench coat, the sexy dango maniac?”

And ooh, was that a *giggle*? Hell yeah, it was. Success! Taking the empty bench opposite from Anko, Naruto pulled the girl up and onto his lap and let her study Anko’s superhuman dango-eating speed as he talked. It was truly a sight to see, among the Seven Wonders of Konoha. Naruto was damn proud his ramen-eating capacity was another. Nobody had ever beaten his Ichiraku record of sixty-eight bowls under one hour, and boy, had good ol’ Chōji *tried.*
(On a lesser note, the Forest of Death came last on the list and Hatake Kakashi’s unmasked face topped it.)

“She was just like you once. A good kid, a nice girl betrayed by the man she trusted most in the world, used and discarded by the one person who was supposed to teach and nurture and support her. She loved him, idolized him, took his word as gospel. She gave him everything, but she still wasn’t enough for him.”

Nagi’s head slanted far back until she was peeking up at him through thick lashes, disbelieving but desperately wishing to believe, because if this woman had once been like her…maybe, just maybe, there was hope for her, too. Naruto was all for giving her that hope.

“But look at her. Can you guess what she did?” A timid denial fell from Nagi’s lips. Naruto paused for dramatic effect, the moment charged with anticipation, the suspense skyrocketing, Nagi’s heartbeat accelerating, competing with Anko’s dango-eating pace.

Then, “She walked away.”

A gasp echoed. Nagi’s jaw slackened. She sucked in a sharp breath, eyes on Anko again, pupils blown and bones grinding in her neck at the too-fast motion, trailing over the dips and angles of Anko’s face, as if she wanted to etch the shape of that face into her memory, what winning against the world looked like.

“She made the choice to leave him, to put all that crap behind her, then she picked up the pieces, picked her own family and friends and comrades, took her life into her own hands and worked her ass off to become so badass, nobody dared talk shit about her. She was one of the best interrogators and infiltration specialists I’ve ever known and one damn scary bitch when you stole her dango.” Naruto leaned his head down, a light brush of lips and breath against her ear, anchoring the girl in his arms, and said with warm remembrance, the Will of Fire ringing through his words, “All because Sarutobi-jiji gave her a chance to be herself and prove she could become whatever she wanted.”

Silence enveloped them—Nagi burrowed into his arms, thin fingers squeezing his forearm, as they watched Anko demolish her thirty-fifth dango stick, as Mukuro stealthily joined them on the bench, a little closer than the brat’s usual comfort zone, leeching off their heat and feelings.

An eternity passed, then Nagi’s voice filled the silence, quiet but alive, vivid with color and the bright hope of the newborn. “What was her name?”

“Anko.”

“Can I—do you think she would mind if…? I don’t want to be Nagi anymore.”

“I think she’d be hella flattered and proud of you, Anko-chan. I know I am.”

Mini-Anko pressed her face against his forearm, imprinting her first happy smile onto his skin. Mukuro drew a little closer, and no matter how innocent his smile was, Naruto knew the brat was shaken, disturbed, disgusted. The face of his playthings after he was bored with breaking them. So Naruto glomped him. That brat, uncute as he was, put up a token struggle, but tellingly no eldritch abominations came to his rescue.

“Same goes for you, Kuro-chan. You can do whatever you wanna do, be whoever you wanna be. I don’t care if you like to play mind games or ruin the lives of assholes everywhere or paint your walls red with the filthy blood of mafia scum. I only care about one thing.” A red eye peered at him
from inside the cage of Naruto’s arm. “Never become *that* man.”

“I would never.” A low snake hiss, dripping with venom and revulsion, then right on cue, creepy murder-laughter. “His fashion sense was terrible.”

Naruto mussed his hair and tried to smother him, but eh, Mini-Anko *giggled* at that lame joke, so he didn’t try too hard. Seriously, though, was the brat kidding or going blind? His fashion sense was just as weird-ass as Orochimaru’s.

When Mini-Anko came to practice two days later, arm in arm with her new best friends, Kyōko and Hana, smiling with all her teeth and wearing a leather trench coat, purple hair tied up in a short, spiky ponytail and bento full of dango, Naruto winked at her and excused himself to go die laughing up a tree. He was pretty sure Anko must be laughing up there, too.

Practice didn’t work out as planned, because Mukuro, the uncute little shit, wanted Mini-Anko on Team C, and Hayato was gracious enough to allow it.

(He was kind of scared of Mini-Anko and the way she twirled her dango sticks to fight for her. With good reason. Naruto made sure the first thing he taught her was how to coat them with chakra and poison and where to stick them for maximum pain and humiliation.)

It was for the best, though. Mini-Anko was the catalyst for change in the rivalry between Kyōya and Mukuro. While the girls got on like a house on fire and had fun with two-on-two battles, the boys went from back-off-she’s-mine territorial bullshit to mine’s-better-than-yours dick contests. Naruto wasn’t sure if they were now gonna be a fucked-up love quartet or double dating or what.

Another plus was that Kyōya got fired up and took it upon himself to scour Namimori for Team D potential recruits. If Mukuro could do it in his sleep, then by the gods, Kyōya wouldn’t sleep until he one-upped him.

And because he was Hibari I-motherfucking-rule-Namimori Kyōya, he found them in record time.

“Yellow,” Kyōya reported in mission mode as he flung a trussed-up-and-gagged redhead with rectangular glasses down on the ground.

Naruto sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. When Kyōya displayed no remorse for the rough treatment, he dismissed the little hellion and bent down to cut off the rope binding the poor boy’s wrists and ankles, *really*, Kyō-chan? Tying up and gagging him was the best you could do? You’re slipping, brat. You could have just knocked him out and spared me the hysterics.

“Wha-what’s going on? Who—who are you people? Are you some kind of…of *juvenile yakuza*? Oh, gods, you are, aren’t you? *What do you want with me*? Is it my organs, no, my brain makes more sense, but how did you know about my secret hack—"

Yeah, Naruto fucking called it. “Kid.”

“Wha—oh.” The kid mercifully paused in the middle of his full-blown hysteria to gaze up at him with fearful eyes. Sheepish, but still scared out of his wits, he croaked, “Er, yes?”

Brow arced dryly, Naruto gestured over to the girls’ picnic. “Do we look like we are in the business of kidnapping random children off the streets and selling them to the highest bidder?”

Blinking rapidly, the kid observed the girls and stuttered out, “Um, nooo?” only to fold in on
himself, clutching at his abdomen as if he had suddenly come down with appendicitis. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to…to accuse you of trafficking or anything! Gods, no, I—ugh, my stomach hurts…”

And, well…he could work with that. Probably. Also the kid reminded him of Omoi, and that dude was hilarious, so.

“Kid.”

“Yeees?”

“You have issues.”

“I—I know.”

“I can help you.”

“How?”

Naruto grinned. It was neither nice nor comforting. The kid fainted. Or his appendix ruptured. It was kind of hard to tell the difference.

“Purple,” Kyōya reported in mission mode as he sauntered into the training ground while carrying a blushing-and-talking-a mile-a-minute brunette in a fairy costume. Bridal style.

Heh. That little comment about slipping standards worked like a charm. Naruto gave him a thumbs up when he gently let her down.

“How! Haru got stolen by a pretty boy. Is he…is he Haru’s Prince Charming? Haru thinks he’s a little…too violent to be the shining prince in her fairy tale. But…oooh, Haru gets it! He’s the dragon, all fire and claws and teeth and rawr!”

Kyōya actually nodded. Hell, that little beast was preening as if she had paid him the greatest compliment.

“Haru knew it.” Fairy-Girl gave the boy a sage nod, gaze darting around, searching the training area and scrutinizing its scant occupants. (Only Hayato and Naruto were present at the time.) “But then where’s the—aah! There’s another pretty boy! That luscious silver hair, those gorgeous green eyes! Yes, he can be Haru’s Prince Charming!”

“Like hell I will! You’re delusional, you stupid woman!”

Naturally, Hayato exploded, but Fairy-Girl didn’t miss a step.

“Hahi! Who are you calling stupid, you…you pretty-boy villain!”

Naruto grinned, tousling Kyōya’s hair. “Good job, Kyō-chan.”

Twenty minutes later, once the whole group had arrived, he shouted, “Teams A and B!”

They gathered like bees to honey. (A little off to the side, Hayato and Fairy-girl were still bickering like an old married couple.)

One by one, he eyed them and smiled at their cute please-say-the-time-has-come-sensei faces, finally announcing, “The Chūnin Exams will take place in two weeks as promised. Prepare
yourselves and make me proud.”

“We will not disappoint you, sensei.” Kyōya, who had yet to cease preening, smirked a cat-ate-the-canary smirk and sauntered off. “Come, Kyōko, Takeshi. We will train in my clan’s dōjō. That man is visiting. Least he can do is make himself useful for once.”

“Coming, Kyōya-kun!” Flouncing off after her other half, Kyōko kept waving at Naruto, genjutsu-smile on full blast. “We’ll do our best, Naruto-sensei!”

“Eh, Fon-san’s here?” Grinning like a loon, but eyes sharp with deadly focus, Takeshi sprinted off after them. “This’ll be so much fun then. I can’t wait!”

“Thank you for the opportunity, sensei. We will put forth our greatest effort.” Tetsuya, the kami-given gift, bowed his head, respectful and polite as ever, then offered his arm to Hana like a little gentleman and off they waltzed into the sunset. “In that case, we should ask Shamal-san and Verde-san to train us. Hana, your opinion?”

“Agreed, Tetsu. Lead on.” Hana didn’t even give Naruto a backwards glance, hanging off Tetsuya’s arm as they walked away like something out of regency novels. “Finally. No more D-ranks. Ugh, children.”

To be fair though, they didn’t give Ryōhei the time of day either. “Extreme! Bring it on! Hey, wait for me, team!”

Naruto laughed. Chūnin Exams, hm? Should be interesting.

(Hayato and Fairy-Girl didn’t even notice when everyone left. That was one hell of a petty marital spat.)

Chapter End Notes

Some people asked for the kids’ ages and teams, so here we go. I’ll also add it to previous chapters later. Currently:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa: 11-12
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, Hayato, Haru, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 10-11
Chrome, Shōichi: 9-10

Team A: Kyōya, Takeshi, Kyōko
Team B: Hana, Tetsuya, Ryōhei
Team C: Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Chrome
Team D: Hayato, Haru, Shōichi
Naruto was beginning to recognize a pattern—nay, a tradition. It had started with Kyōko dragging Hana to practice that fated day five years ago, continued with Kyōya copying his better half by bringing Tetsuya into the fold, and so on and so forth—but more importantly, it had yet to stop.

*It will never stop*, his super intuition euphorically crooned as Naruto stood beside a mountain of a man—*call me Poppy, m’boy*—jovial as hell and British accent thick and skin weather-worn, beholding the spectacle that was Shōichi clinging to a corn-haired, green-eyed boy like a baby coala, crippling stomachaches and strawberry lollipops and technobabble galore.

The boy’s name was something posh and suitably British—*but call me Spanner, Konoha*, which, wow, that drawl of sweet apathy would’ve made him an honorary Nara on the spot—and he had allegedly come for emotional support after a distressed Shōichi bewailed his loss of normalcy over the internet.

*Poppy*, the boy’s grandfather, was retired Captain Charles Royston of the Royal Navy, an old hand at chasing adventure and a religious believer in the sea creed: *go where the wind blows*. Also, in full support of his grandson following in his steps and embarking on his own adventure with an impromptu journey to the Land of the Rising Sun.

Naruto threw his hands up in the air, added Spanner to Team D (for Damn Smart Pains in the Ass), opened Shamal’s finest bourbon—which *Poppy* was very grateful to partake in before he departed with promises of regular communication—and called it a fucking day.

Dumping the science brats on a half-chary, half-charmed Baby-Kabuto, he left the mansion to visit Fon, assuming being around the undisputed champion of keep-calm-and-burn-things-to-ashes would do wonders for his nerves.

(It turned out to be the wrong assumption.)

Naruto had forgotten Fon was also the master of holding grudges like nobody’s business and hitting you hard when you were already down. That damn poker face was hella misleading even when you knew what hid underneath.)

“Uh.” With that eloquent greeting and one foot inside the drawing room, Naruto stilled. Speechless, he stared...kept staring at the pile of fluffy, lotus-patterned blankets arranged on the tatami floor, at the baby girl sucking on her thumb, at Fon leisurely sipping his ginger tea.

“Congratulations?”

Fon lowered his teacup, caught his stare and smiled. Like, *whoever-told-you-you’re-hilarious-was-a-first-class-moron and I’m-too-disciplined-to-point-it-out and you’ll-have-to-try-harder-than-that* smiled. “Thank you.”

Hoooh. It was so on. *You’ve got guts, bro. I like it.* Naruto finally lifted his dead foot, striding inside with a swagger and a cocky grin, crouching down to tickle the baby’s tummy. Good thing she didn’t have ears—strange, but he’d seen weirder, like Sasuke sprouting winged-hand-thingies—because what he said next would’ve scarred her for life if she was capable of hearing. Or, more like, comprehension.

“Must have been damn kinky, you lucky bastard. ‘Cause you know they all say size doesn’t matter,
but they never mean it. So where’s the proud mother? I’d like to meet this woman of rare honesty.”

Fon’s smile was a cool, sharp challenge. “Your remarkable ability to deliberately misconstrue the situation according to your sense of humor has not changed in the slightest, I see. Truly, you are a man of rare talent.”

“Mm, too true. You know what else I am?” Cooing at the baby’s gurgling laughter and spit-bubbles, Naruto gave her one last tickle, then moved to the cushion laid for his use, pouring himself a cup of ginger tea. Mm, kinda sweet, not bad. His amusement had all but disintegrated as he sighed and met Fon’s waiting eyes. Boldly, daring him to bullshit his way out of this. “A man of rare intuition, so stop deflecting and spill. Who would leave a baby with you?”

If Fon was chagrined, it didn’t show, but knowing the man, he was probably blaming himself deep down. Somehow, someway, because that was what Fon did. Got cursed with a chakra-sucking abomination? His fault for not seeing through the deceit. Kyōya was an out-of-control little monster? His fault for not being a better instructor. Naruto would eat Kurama’s tails if this baby didn’t have a sob story that’d make Zabuza cry tears of blood, holy shit, you pulled a Zabuza, didn’t you? The baby is your Haku.

“Her parents are deceased. She does have three surviving relatives on her father’s side, but they are civilians. Normally, they would have been contacted, and if they had refused to take her in, she would have been put up for adoption, but her mother’s bloodline is…special. If I hadn’t…insisted on taking her as my apprentice, she would have been sent to the Red Dragon.” A pause, laden and dipped in red. “Even then, it wasn’t easy to convince them she would be better trained under my care, but that place is not…suitable for children younger than twelve at the very least.”

Despite Fon’s damn poker face, the soothing quality of his tone, the way he gazed at him with unapologetic veracity, there were too many pauses for Naruto’s comfort. The one subsequent to Red Dragon was the longest, the most telling and incriminating. Fire and blood and all things red.

“So, basically.’ Naruto held his cup with one hand, dug the nails of his other hand into his thigh, clay cracking and skin bruising under his grip. “She has a near extinct bloodline limit, greedy bastards want to exploit an orphan baby, you did something stupidly heroic, and that Red Dragon place isn’t suitable for children, period.” His voice cut Fon with the same intensity. Gravelly, an undercurrent of violence running through his words. “You know this from personal experience.”

A shrug was all Fon gave in response, although too smooth, too refined to be called a shrug. Naruto wanted to smack him silly for being so goddamn obstinate and for making it seem noble instead of the moronic gesture it was.

“What did you promise them?” When will you fucking have enough, you self-sacrificing bastard? You’re reaching Kakashi-sensei’s levels of stupid guilt complex.

Fon hummed softly, as if what he was about to say would bear no consequence, wouldn’t screw up his life six ways from Sunday. Which, Naruto bet it would—it was a sucker bet, too; not even granny Tsunade would have taken those odds.

“My twenty-year contract with the Triads expires in two months. I simply promised to renew it.”

“Simply, my ass.” Scoffing, gaze narrow, Naruto glared at him. “You don’t want to renew it, do you?”

Another soft hum. “I wouldn’t have minded before.”
Progress, finally. Naruto tilted his head and relaxed his body, coaxing with his voice, no longer cutting. “What changed?”

For the first time, Fon smiled a true smile, a bittersweet thing, torn at the edges. “You taught Kyōya how to be a protector instead of a berserker, you decided to become actively involved in the mafia, your famiglia is your family, and your chakra likes my chakra.”

Naruto went rigid. Of all the stupid truths he’d given him today, all the stupid reasons and deflections and excuses, this…this had got to be the stupidest, and oh, you magnificent bastard. You don’t do things halfway, do you? What he said, he meant. He ripped truth from his tongue, gave it bladed shape, stabbed him with it, brutally. Naruto felt fire on his tongue, in his veins, under his skin, rolled it up, rolled it down, swallowed it whole until there was only heat and the aftertaste of acceptance.

A full-body twitch. His orange remembered, but fuck that needy bullshit. Naruto had other shit to deal with here, like, “You’re never gonna let me live that down, yeah?”

When Fon’s smile didn’t budge an inch, exasperation localized Naruto’s twitch to his lips and eyelids. Gingerly, he picked up his cracked cup, gazing down at his reflection. Said nothing. Gave nothing…because what could he—

“All right.” Goddammit. I said it. No take backs now.

And now, Fon went rigid. “I’m sorry, alright what?”

Playing dense? Awesome poker face he might have, but Fon couldn’t do dense if he tried. Naruto snorted. “To quote Kuro-chan, I can’t ignore you after that, now can I?”

Fon’s face was a study in contrasts, like a storm in clear skies, like a natural disaster. From tranquil to agitated to tempestuous.

“I didn’t tell you because I expected—”

“Oh, trust me, I know. You’re the stupidly heroic type, not the evilly conniving.”

“You cannot fight—”

“Fight? Please, don’t insult me.”

“Nevertheless—”

“Nevertheless nothing.”

Fon’s face cycled through emotions in reverse. From tempestuous to agitated to tranquil. Which was more terrifying in that order. Still waters ran deep and the eye of the storm and all that shit personified.

Absolute fucking stillness. Then, “May I speak?”

Naruto hemmed and hawed as he casually examined his nails. Hm, they could use a good clipping. “Depends. Are you gonna say anything, I dunno, witty? ‘Cause all I hear so far are lame excuses.”

And, lo and behold, Fon raised his arm, pressing red fabric against the lower half of his face, as if that would conceal anything.

“Please do forgive me. We cannot all be as articulate when we are engaging in friendly
conversation. Perhaps if you allowed people to speak freely and frequently, you would have more fulfilling conversations with your peers.”

There it was—in the nuances of his voice, that smooth as silk inflection. Grudge-borne mockery, petty and sweet as molasses. Fon wouldn’t bat a lash ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, especially at unoriginal, common insults, but a lack of wit? He took that shit seriously and never forgot or forgave. It was a Hibari clan quirk, the inborn ability to hold grudges like no tomorrow. While Kyōya was the *I’ll-bite-you-to-death-you-weak-herbivore*, Fon was the *I’ll-mock-you-to-death-you-uncivilized-neanderthal*.

Naruto beamed, all sunshine and stretched cheeks and godliness. “You are excused.”

A rustle of red fabric. Fon resumed the topic of their conversation, but Naruto acknowledged that rustle as an omen of bad things to come, an ostentatious declaration. Right on, bro. As far as he was concerned, it had been on since his first step inside the drawing room.

“The Triads would have been displeased if I didn’t renew my contract, but they would have accepted it in the end due to my Arcobaleno status. They are well aware no Sky they currently possess can hold me, so it is worthless to even try. I-pin is another matter, though.”

Both gazed at the snoozing baby wrapped in the cocoon of blankets with warm eyes. Cute, earless midget.

Naruto was the first to turn away and shrug. “Her ties to the Triads died with her parents. They have no legal hold on her.”

“We are mafia.” Slowly enunciated, coldly pragmatic, and questioning Naruto’s intelligence.

“Exactly.” Grin wide and borderline sociopathic, Naruto inclined his head in total agreement. “We have mafia law.”

Nonplussed, Fon stared at him as if this was the start of a joke and he was waiting for the punchline. When it never came, “You…mean the Vindice.”

And boy, did he sound perturbed by the unlikely choice of saviors. Baby-Chief and Undead Co. were so under-appreciated. No wonder they had gone postal on the mafia.

“Yep.” Naruto’s grin made the transition to full-fledged sociopathy as he dropped the bomb. “We’re revenge buddies. They’re invited for tea parties and everything!”

Fon just stared with a momentary brain freeze, then a sort of slow-spreading horror, a dilation of his pupils. “What.”

Man, this was pure gold. Baby-Chief would get the good china and chocolate-chip cookies when he showed up for that tea party—and there would be lots and lots of pictures if the mere idea elicited that sort of reaction.

“Nope, not my story to tell. What matters is that I know how to call them, and with their recent rise in motivation…”

“Which I am now certain you know nothing about and had nothing to do with…”

“Bingo.” Naruto reinforced his point with a tongue click, complete with a wink and finger pistol-shot. “So you see, nothing to worry about.”
Fon blinked in recognition of that combo. One of Aria’s favorites, that woman was the queen of winks. Still, he appeared to have trouble digesting both wink combo and vote-the-Vindice-for-godfathers campaign.

“The Triads will be…more than a little displeased.”

“Fon.”

“Yes?”

“Shut the fuck up and go feed your kid.”

Because she was wide awake and mighty hungry if the loud cries in between thumb-sucking were any indication. Fon shut up and did.

Draining his tea, Naruto reached out an arm and tickled the fussing little lady, then got up to leave just as Fon returned with two bottles of warm milk. The same way he had entered, with a swagger and a cocky grin, pausing at the shōji door to deliver a killer one-liner and a blast of orange fire-chakra. “Oh, by the way, you’re proctoring the second phase of the Chūnin Exams. Welcome to Konoha where the Will of Fire burns eternal and the next generation is the King we fight for.”

“I have said it before, and I will say it again.” Fon, in turn, blasted him with his unique fusion of calm deadpan and red fire-chakra. “You are a terrible person.”

A firestorm of orange and red blazed. Naruto encapsulated this touching event in one sentence. “But your chakra likes my chakra.”

A baby bottle came hurtling towards the back of his head as he danced away laughing. Poor baby girl… She’d starve to death with that kind of father.

“The first stage is what?”

Shamal slammed both hands against the surveillance console with no regard for Baby-Kabuto’s hard work. It had taken the science-baby three days to set up the cameras and lasers and passwords and other electronic shit in the building Naruto had…borrowed from the Momokyokai yakuza to serve as the venue for the first stage of the Chūnin Exams. On top of that, Naruto and Fon had filled it to the brim with a combination of ninja and mafia traps.

The pervert was the last to join the party, which was ironic since he had the most important part to play. It wasn’t Naruto’s fault the man had skipped out on the first briefing to hook up with some random chick he met in a bar last Tuesday. Swiveling in his awesome neon orange leather chair, Naruto grabbed a beer from the mini-bar—thank you, Baby-Kabuto, you rock—and grinned as he patiently explained once more for the slowpoke among them.

“Infiltration, interrogation resistance, target extraction, and intel gathering. Thank you for volunteering to be the enemy scum who likes to hurt little girls, Ero-ossan. Your participation is greatly appreciated.”

Next to him, in his own awesome neon red leather chair, Fon dipped his head in gratitude for the pervert’s tacit agreement. Shamal didn’t look appreciative of either Naruto’s kind reiteration or Fon’s polite gesture.

“I don’t think I need to advise you not to physically harm the girls. Stick to intimidation tactics and mind games. No psychoactive drugs either. Remember to stay in character and try not to spill the
beans too soon when the boys infiltrate the secret base and your positions become reversed.” Rifling through the file cabinet, he selected the relevant files and all but taped them to Shamal’s chest with a clever application of chakra. “Here’s the intel they’re supposed to extract after they capture you and free their allies, and here’s what you need to get out of the girls. You have two whole hours to prep before we kidnap the girls and get this show on the road.”

In the middle of a fight with inanimate papers, Shamal was muttering angrily. And losing badly. “I call foul play. I have doctor rights, dammit. This is in direct violation of the Third Geneva Convention.”

Ignoring him and that sad, pitiful fight, Naruto tapped a finger against his chin. “What am I forgetting? Hmm, something…about the parameters? Oh, right. The kids have no restrictions on what interrogation means they may use, so gods be with you.”

Cheerfully, Naruto patted the pervert on the back, while Fon dipped his head again.

“Good luck. You are a brave man, Shamal.”

Shamal snarled, nearly biting off Naruto’s thumb with his teeth, clutching the papers he’d just liberated from his chest. “You will regret this, Volpe. I don’t know how, I don’t know when, I don’t know where, but mark my words. You’re a dead man walking.” He then snapped his teeth at Fon. “You, too, Fon. I just know your nephew’s gonna do something unspeakable to me.”

Unruffled, Fon smiled his signature zero-fucks-given smile. “Genealogically speaking, he is my great-nephew.”

“Big difference,” Shamal spat, storming off and slamming the door shut.

Fon’s smile now seemed to say what a drama queen. Naruto laughed, raising his beer.

Four hours later, they learned exactly how right that character assessment was.

“Not the face, ladies love my rugged good looks—wait, please no! Oh gods! The face, the face!”

“Ouch. Kyō-chan is kinda pissed, huh? Good thing Ero-ossan never wanted kids.”

“Indeed. He may no longer be capable of procreation.”

“This is wrong, so, so wrong. But sooo good… Gods, I’m going straight to hell. Why are you doing this to me?”

“The supplementary strip show illusion was a nice touch. Was that Aria in a Catwoman bodysuit?”

“Yeah, Kyōko-chan really outdid herself there. The whip action was a work of art. I doubt Ero-ossan can enjoy a strip show the way he used to ever again.”

“You live and learn.”

“Cheer up, Ero-ossan. The hard part is over. Team B can’t be worse than that. Here, have some liquid courage. I even bought the expensive shit for you. Am I nice or what?”
“Evil, you’re pure evil. Like your little demon brats.”

“Would you like some ice with that, Shamal?”

“Your nephew almost castrated me with a goddamn spiked chain. Go fuck yourself, Fon.”

“Genealogically—”

“And fuck your whole genealogy.”

“What…what are you going to do with that…? Holy mother of—noooo! Get that thing away from me! Goawaygoawaygoaway!”

“Heh. Looks like Hana-chan’s decided what animal box weapon she wants once we figure out how to make ‘em.”

“I would have never imagined she could be so…ruthless.”

“It’s the quiet ones you gotta watch out for.”

“But still…mongoose?”

“Don’t dis the mongoose, man. They eat cobras for breakfast.”

“Where did she even find one?”

“That…is a good question.”

“That’s an interesting medical procedure. Who taught you how to—wait, why are you targeting the blood vessels? That’s not how it’s supposed to work!”

“That boy may be a powerful Sun, but the healing arts are beyond him. Why do you persist in teaching him medical techniques alongside his sister?”

“In my defence, Ryō-chan’s an excellent self-healer, but that’s ‘cause he’s got an intrinsic understanding of where things are in his body. It’s just that…he’s crap when it comes to bodies other than his own. You gotta study something if you wanna know how it works, and nobody’s crazy enough to volunteer to be his patient dummy. Cadavers just don’t cut it for him.”

“That…is understandable, I guess.”

Teams A and B were gathered in a circle around Naruto and Fon in the surveillance room, each brat nibbling on a victory sandwich after having raided the fridge. Shamal had been carried off to the infirmary by one of Naruto’s clones half an hour ago. Pity he couldn’t be here to announce the news himself after his significant contribution to the first stage. They couldn’t have done it without him, but eh, they’d draw him a get-well-by-the-way-thanks card or something.

Clapping his hands together, Naruto smiled, wiping away imaginary tears. “Fon and I are proud to announce both teams will be progressing to the second stage of the Chūnin Exams. You did awesome, brats.”
“Indeed. Congratulations are in order.” Fon, too, smiled, an iota of lethal calm slipping through his smile. “Do not expect the second stage to be as…unchallenging.”

The teams’ chosen leaders couldn’t have been any more poignant in how they expressed their happiness and determination to succeed while their teammates cheered from the sidelines.

Kyōya grunted. “The day you devise an adequate exam will be the day I acknowledge our exact relation.”

Hana huffed. “Don’t underestimate us. We bite. *Like a mongoose.*”
Chapter 18

The last thing Naruto expected to happen one day before the second phase of the Chūnin Exams was scheduled to take place was Baby-Chief invading Baby-Kabuto’s opulent living room.

“B-Bermuda-san!” Naruto barely caught himself in time to avoid a major faux pas. Phew, so glad Baby-Chief’s name starts with B. To disguise his almost slip of the tongue, he put on a sunny smile and resorted to buttering him up like it was going out of style. “Damn, your response time keeps getting better and better. Like, seriously, I was just thinking of calling you one of these days, then bam! Here you are, just like that! Gotta hand it to you, man, your work ethic’s pretty damn impressive lately. Nice!”

Kurama made a retching noise. Stop praising these unnatural things. It’s disgusting. They should all burn in the fiery pits of hell with Madara.

Give it a rest, Kurama. I let you have your fun, remember? It’s my turn now, so suck it up and shut up. I’m trying to network here.

Naruto’s cheeks were starting to hurt, but he kept smiling through the pain, the awkwardness, Kurama’s dry-heaving, and Baby-Chief’s silent judgment. After an indeterminate amount of time —his facial muscles had grown kind of numb—Baby-Chief decided to put him out of his misery.

“So-Sawada Tsunayoshi.” Syllables elongated, slightly accented and excruciatingly scathing, and woah, so fucking cold it damn near gave him frostbite.

Well, shit. Mission failed, abort, abort! Why you gotta be so cold, Baby-Chief? Just ‘cause you’re sorta dead doesn’t mean you can’t have friends. “Eh, can we maybe skip the whole name thing and just go with Naruto?” Scratching the back of his head, Naruto laughed, and it was just as painful as his smile. His throat really didn’t thank him for it. “’s my nickname, you know, for friends and family and people I like and…yeah.”

A helpless, desperate shrug, and ouch, back to silent judgment it was. Naruto sighed and escaped to the kitchen, loading a tray with cups and cookies and tea stuff, because awkward as fuck or not, they were going to have a goddamn tea party even if it killed him. Also, discreetly activated the hidden cameras. No way was he missing this golden opportunity to gather primo prank material.

When he had arranged it all to his satisfaction, Baby-Chief appraised the delicious spread and the beautiful blue vintage china set with a detail-oriented eye. Or so Naruto assumed. With all those bandages and I-will-not-rest revenge streak and death-becomes-him pheromones, Baby-Chief was a horror movie buff’s wet dream, like, undead royalty or something. Zombies and mummies and spooks everywhere would totally go crazy over him.

The holy curse of the Uchiha oh-so-pretty genes surpasses death and inconsequential things like flesh. Kurama cackled, and how the hell had Naruto forgotten about that.

Holy shit, you’re right, which reminded him, you’d better start enhancing my body soon. I will not suffer Sasuke’s fate.

For all Naruto knew, he could have also been admiring the superb carpentry—that table was mahogany and one exquisite piece of craftsmanship. Baby-Kabuto, the filthy rich savant, had really spared no expense.
A minimal slant of his head. “You are too alike Giotto.”

Blindsided, Naruto blinked. That…came out of nowhere. Also, why did it sound like a verdict? Was it a compliment or an insult or what? Whatever. At least it was a conversation starter. Tea party for the win.

Still, he couldn’t not ask. “And that’s a…bad thing?”

The pad of a bandaged finger then—Baby-Chief dragged his fingernail over the rim of his teacup in one languorous graze. As if it had been ages since he had touched one, since he had been welcomed inside a home and served a simple cup of tea. As if he had forgotten the texture of porcelain. Could he even feel it now, and goddammit, Baby-Chief, that’s just…awful. Don’t do shit like that if you don’t want people to fucking notice. Now I can’t unsee it.

Retracting his finger, Baby-Chief drew his cloak around himself, with the bearing of old-world nobility, the kind of effortless class that would have had the Hyūga clan throwing their daughters at him, living status notwithstanding. For a split second, the shadow behind him lengthened and stretched, shimmering like fog, like a ghost of the past. Too short or too young; too old regardless.

“Perhaps,” was all he said.

Ambiguous as could be, but if Naruto autopsied that Germanic intonation, there was a shard of cold mirth beneath layers of dead tissue. He wanted to cut deeper, dig his hands in and dig out the person who used to live there. Before that horrible curse, before that asshole came and ruined him. Baby-Chief wouldn’t appreciate being cut open, though. It was too early, too soon to try reaching for that person. Naruto would try later, because unlike the living killer-babies, the dead wouldn’t get to live even if the curse was lifted. Someone had to give them a semblance of life.

My heart bleeds for you.

Sympathy, thy name was Kurama.

You have a heart?

The fox growled, shutting his mouth, because that was a trick question and he hated their type.

Don’t dish it out if you can’t take it. Naruto relished the spasm in Kurama’s jaw, then focused his attention on Baby-Chief who was…checking out…the decor? Like, trying to ascertain if the main art piece was an original (it so was) van Gogh or—nope, not going there again. “So, I know why I was gonna call you, but did you ha—”

“Elaborate.”

Cutting straight to the chase, huh? “O-kay then, yeah, sure, I’ll go first.” Rolling with it, Naruto recounted the tale of Fon’s induction into the brotherhood of underage (but really overage) fathers, emphasizing the Triads’ assholery while hinting at the delights of godfatherhood.

The air became colder, the shadows thicker. An echo of rattling chains overlapped Baby-Chief’s voice as he crisply said, “The Triads overstep their bounds. We have issued prior warnings against such crude ambitions. Where is the child?”

Hook, line, and sinker. Naruto bit the inside of his cheeks to hold back from smirking in victory. “At the Hibari compound with her new dad.”

Black fire-chakra ignited. “Jager will resolve the issue.” A portal opened mid-sentence—as if that
was the *come-forth-my-zombie-minions* signal, Jager stepped through in all his tall, dark, and creepy glory, only to bow his head and disappear inside another warp hole.

Naruto was hella impressed, not even his old ANBU could mobilize in the space of a second. Also touched that Jager had included him in his bow; then again, Kurama *had* scared the unlife out of him. It was probably due to caution rather than courtesy. Politeness never hurt anyone though, so. “Thanks, Bermuda-san, I knew you’d come through.”

Baby-Chief did that cat-like head slant he had down to an art form. “Is that so?”

Why did that sound like a segue into something with far-reaching consequences? Naruto had a strange feeling, neither bad nor good, just…*interesting*.

“Yes.” He bobbed his head, smiling, hoping this wouldn’t turn out to be the painful sort. “Never doubted you for a moment.”

“Then perhaps,” Baby-Chief *suggested*, chilly and imperious, a threat of *do or die*, “in exchange,” and an undertone of *you owe me*, “you would be amenable to the idea of mediating a…situation for us.”

Called it. His cheeks smarted already. “What kind of…situation?”

“One concerning another child.” There was a prickle of that cold mirth, if Naruto strained his ears, an inside joke about his similarity to Giotto if he read Baby-Chief right. “You have experience in child care, ja?”

“Ah.” It all made sense; of course, it had to do with brats. Baby-Chief wanted to foist another hellion on him, because why the hell not. He seemed to be picking up brats right and left, and apparently it was inherent in his bloodline. Naruto felt an empathetic link with Giotto, but in no way did it mean he’d go down without a fight; oh no, Baby-Chief would really have to sell this one. “Well, maybe? I mean, you gotta give me something more here, Bermuda-san. What about this kid has you asking me for help?”

He hit the nail on the head, Baby-Chief’s head, to be exact—that cat-like slant didn’t look half as regal as it should be. More discomfited, reluctant. “He is the heir of a famiglia that has committed no crime, yet he appears to be unusually interested in our operations.”

Naruto translated that into, “A baby Sky’s been stalking you and cramping your style.” And no, he wasn’t laughing up a storm inside, honest, that was Kurama. “And you came to me because…I’m good with kids?”

Baby-Chief must have not cared for his wording. At all. “See for yourself.”

And oh, there he went again with the black fire-chakra and the zombie minions and the portals. Only this time, tall, blond, and creepy stepped through, a little cherub attached to his hip, all pure-white and halo above his head and chattering away with a voice so sweet and musical as the trumpets of heaven.

—Ike playing chess! I’ll be the white king and you’ll be the black queen and the prisoners can be the pawns and it’ll be so much fun! Ne, ne, don’t you think so, Jack? Preetty pleeease with a cherry on—are those chocolate-chip cookies? Yay!”

Wow. Just, wow. Angel-Boy jumped in feet-first and landed on the table with one mighty leap, aiming for the plate of chocolate-chip cookies as if he was possessed by the spirit of Chōchō on a sugar high. Tall, blond, and creepy, AKA Jack the Black Queen, flew back into the portal with the
despair of the damned. Baby-Chief cloaked himself in darkness and hatred to ward off the holy light, then signaled at Naruto he’d be back later and followed his zombie minion. And Naruto… Naruto let loose the gales of laughter he’d been holding back up until the mafia police legged it.

_Sold, Baby-Chief. That was fucking priceless! And I even have it on tape._

“Oi, kid,” he choked out, laughing and laughing and gods, his stomach hurt, but fuck, so worth it, “you got a name?”

“I’m Byakuran of the Gesso famiglia and I like your cookies! But you know what would go better with chocolate?” Half his face and all his fingers smeared, Angel-Boy grinned, puppy dog eyes going all out to win and cheeks puffed out as he kept munching, not even bothering to ask where he was or who Naruto was or why they were suddenly alone. “Marshmallows! Can I have some? Please? The meanie nannies never let me have more than one bag a week… I can’t live like that!”

This kid was one of a kind, Naruto promptly decided, and he was here to stay for at least a month, even if he had to kidnap him. “Of course you can.”

Angel-Boy did a double-take. Hell, he even stopped gorging himself on cookies. “Really?”

“Yep.” Kid deserved all the marshmallows in the world as far as Naruto was concerned. So he grinned and made a clone, “See? My nice clone will go buy you some,” then got a faceful of Angel-Boy, arms wrapped around his head and spreading the chocolate love and almost suffocating him.

“You’re the best—um, who’re you?”

Pfft. Figured he’d ask after his sugar addiction had been sated. Angel-Boy had his priorities straight, that was for damn sure. And a hell of a tight grip. Pushing the kid’s arms away to breathe, Naruto ruffled his hair. “Name’s Naruto. Nice to meet ya, Ran-chan.”

Reaching out an arm, he grabbed some napkins to clean up the mess, while Angel-Boy kept chirping in his face.

“You’re the coolest person I’ve ever met, Naru-chan! Even better than—where did Jack go?”

Two out of three, huh? And location was the least important, which actually said a lot about how Angel-Boy had ended up with the zombie police.

“Why don’t you sit down, Ran-chan? The Vindice had to go settle something for me, but they’ll be back later to pick you up, ‘kay?”

After jumping onto the chair beside Naruto’s—did this kid ever do things normally like, say, walk—Angel-Boy settled down. Marginally. “You’re friends? I thought they didn’t have friends… other than me!”

“You can say that.” Baby-Chief might pretend otherwise, but they so were revenge buddies. Question was, what kind of buddies were they with this kid? “How did you meet them?”

“Weell, everything was so boring.” Angel-Boy let out a sort of woe-is-me noise, something between whining and sighing and _feel my pain, dude._ “Every single day, I had to study and take lessons and learn how to be a proper mafia heir and I was bored to tears. And then the maids started gossiping about how the Vindice were heroes of justice, not that they used those words, but what else could they be? I mean, they beat up the bad guys and locked them up and made the world a safer place, you know? And when I heard that, I thought it sounded so much better than
being a mafia heir, so I…ran away to find them.”

Nodding, as if this was a perfectly valid reason to want to enlist in the zombie police force, Naruto patted Angel-Boy on the head. “So you did.”

Angel-Boy shrugged, kicking out his legs and sucking on his bottom lip, then turned off the mania and turned on the puppy dog eyes. “Are they…mad at me? Is that why they left me with you? Will you…send me back to the meanie nannies and the boring tutors?”

Laughter bubbled up in his throat. Which god had sent him this kid and where could he pay them tribute? “Nice try, Ran-chan, but pull the other one.” Naruto pinched his cheeks, but not too hard, more I’m-proud-you’re-pulling-the-same-shit-I-used-to and less I’m-hurt-you-think-it’d-work-on-me. “Guilt-tripping me? I thought you were smarter than that.”

A grin full of mischief and honest joy crossed Angel-Boy’s face. “You promised me marshmallows. I like you.”

Which Naruto interpreted as, “So I get the cute means of coercion instead of the sly ones.” Angel-Boy’s grin grew sly, confirming he was the devil in disguise. Just like Naruto. The corners of his mouth lifted, his chest warm with nostalgia, and yeah, those were the good ol’ days, wreaking havoc and getting chased by Iruka-sensei and orange paint everywhere. “And the Vindice?”

Angel-Boy’s grin grew even slier. “Like I said, they’re heroes of justice. I don’t think they know how to deal with kids who haven’t done anything wrong beyond being annoyingly hyper.”

I like this kit. Kurama’s grin was nine times slier, a gleam of fangs and a sway of tails.

Yeah, Naruto liked him, too. But, really?

No, not really. The fox scoffed, as if the insinuation of the great Kyūbi liking humans was unthinkable and the height of insult, predictable as ever. Still better than your other brats. This kit has potential. No Uchiha blood for one.

Naruto snorted, both at Kurama’s self-denial and Angel-Boy’s self-indulgence. “You can’t keep following them around.”

Cue the waterworks. “But—but life will be so boring again!” He lunged for the cookies, too, shoveling them into his mouth since Angel-Boy apparently couldn’t function without sugar during stressful situations. Or, no, make that all situations.

“Tell you what, Ran-chan, you can play with my kids whenever you want.” Naruto pinched his bulging cheeks when Angel-Boy’s eyes lit up, this munchkin was fucking adorable. “If you promise to let the Vindice do their job in peace and not run away from home anymore. How’s that?”

Angel-Boy jumped from his seat and onto Naruto’s face. “Deal!”

“I wanna join,” were the first words out of Angel-Boy’s mouth once Naruto introduced him to his brats and the concept of the Chūnin Exams.

And yeah, he had seen it coming, which was why he’d also come prepared. Not missing a beat, Naruto unsealed the secret stash of marshmallows and dangled the caramel-dipped ambrosia in front of Angel-Boy’s face as he said, “The Chūnin Exams are a special Konoha tradition, Ran-chan. Sorry, but I can’t let you join.”
Eyes on the prize and momentarily distracted, Angel-Boy was airing his thoughts, an incoherent babble interspersed with leaping jumps whenever Naruto brought the bag within his reach.

“—we can become allies and we can do this a Konoha-Gesso thing!” Suddenly, he stilled. Purple eyes slanted and cunning and penetrating, he smiled with the gravitas of a world leader. “As the Gesso heir, I approve of this alliance.”

Naruto… contemplated this change and what it could mean for the future and the sheer possibilities—and came to one conclusion. Angel-Boy was a genius among geniuses. The Chūnin Exams’ true purpose was originally to show off military strength, stave off war, and draw in customers. If they coordinated with other famiglia—Giglio Nero, Gesso, hell, even the Varia, because the tiara-brat would kill to join any kind of blood sport—they could advertise their fūinjutsu business and make a name for themselves in the mafia world. They could start with Shamal’s list of potential clients, private invitation-only for now, and expand later.

“That… can be arranged.” Just like that, in the span of thirty thought-laden seconds, because Naruto was a man of action and that was how long it took him to decide serious shit. Pleased with himself, he hummed and relinquished the bag of sweets into Angel-Boy’s eager hands. “Alright, Ran-chan. You can join the third phase of the Chūnin Exams since that’s the individual battles, but I can’t promote you even if you win, ‘cause you missed the first stage and you can’t participate in the second due to your lack of teammates.”

Undeterred, Angel-Boy stuffed his face while trying to chew and talk at the same time. “That’s okay! I just wanna have fun, but if I do win, um… you can… take me on a worldwide trip and—and I can eat all the marshmallows and you can eat all the ramen!” Slowing down, that rare gravitas made a reappearance when he musingly said, “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“Ran-chan.” Naruto gripped the boy’s shoulder. Dead serious. “You’re the white to my orange, the games to my pranks, the marshmallow to my ramen.”

“Naru-chan.” Angel-Boy gripped Naruto’s shoulder. Dead serious. “You. Me. Friends. Forever.” They gazed at each other, with eyes of living flame, like dreams in burning skies, and spoke as one.

“We shall rule the world—”

“—and it shall know peace through us.”

(Thus began the Unholy Sky Alliance and the Konoha-Gesso annual trips during which Naruto and Byakuran fucked shit up in terrifyingly humiliating ways, all the while depleting the nations of confections and noodles, rescuing kittens and puppies, adopting poor orphans, and overthrowing Bond villains. Worst of all, the Vindice joined them.)
"Welcome to Mafia Land. Please state your name, the number of your party, and your famiglia or affiliation."

Naruto stared at the woman blankly—the same woman as last time, with the same too-perfect accent, the same too-plastic smile, the same too-even voice, the same too-scripted lines. *Gotta be a robot, no way she's human. Good thing Baby-Kabuto stayed home, he woulda fallen head-over-heels in love. Oi, Kurama?*

_Human,_ the fox half-rumbled, half-yawned, and boy was he right up there with a sleep-deprived Shikamaru and competing for the title of the crankiest Nara. *Now shut up and let me sleep.*

_Gonna sleep again? Haven't you had enough? Wanna be prettier? Tryna be the Beauty instead of the Beast? Are you even sure Robot-Lady's human?_

Kurama did the equivalent of kicking him out and closing the blinds. Only with red fire-chakra instead. *Ouch.* Geez, grumpy much?

"Uzumaki Naruto. Seventeen including myself. We are the Konoha famiglia."

"Thank you, please wait a moment."

She expressed no sign of surprise at the different famiglia name, unlike the assorted crowd of mafiosi loitering nearby, gawking and gossiping and rudely pointing fingers, all the while phrases like _it's the demon spawns_ and _oh gods, they came back and run for your lives_ were bandied about. Huh. Guess they made an impression last time, but what were the chances—wait, whoa, back up. Wasn't that the guy Kyōya forced into a canary costume during the nin-animal craze? Oh, man, silly bastard still had the fluffy wings on… *That's my boy! Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!*_

Naruto signaled at Kyōya behind his back, _full marks, Tengu!_ He swore he could just feel the boy plume himself on his hunting prowess like a half-grown raptor.

"Here are your passes. Please refer to the desk on your right, if you wish to make use of our training facilities. Have a nice stay."

Naruto signed for Kyōko to accept the cards in his stead, just to see if her new and improved creepy-as-fuck, I-know-all-your-secrets smile could get a reaction out of Robot-Lady. It didn't. Damn, Ibiki would have gone down on his knees and begged to have her join T&I.

Giving up on the mystery of Robot-Lady, he herded them toward the side entrance, a task made easier with the way the crowd parted before them, taking five steps back and away, but still staying in orbit, a mixture of fear and morbid curiosity guiding their actions.

"Well, kids. I only have good news.″ Naruto grinned from ear to ear, impish and thoroughly enjoying how the mafiosi shuddered as if experiencing flashbacks of his previous speech. Poor, naive bastards. It was gonna be so much worse this time. "Teams A and B are with Seiryū—"

At the mention of his code name, Fon flashed his trademark smile, that soft, fatal promise slicing through his nondescript henge. Teams A and B not only matched him, they went above and beyond. Bloodthirst, those kiddie little grins and battle cries and obviously rehearsed pageantry. All nimble acrobatics and fire-chakra blazing and weapons flying and flashy shit like that, and wow, that was pretty damn neat, color him impressed. Just how long had they been practicing this
routine? And just to rub it in Fon's face? Definitely something Kyōya would do, yeah.

"—have fun during the second stage."

Cheers, and all eyes on them. It was like they had detonated an explosive right in the middle of a peace talk. Some were rendered blind, some charred to the bone, some chock-full of shrapnel, still stupidly suicidal and lingering on the periphery.

"Also Sanshi will be overseeing your progress and…working on damage control if need be."

Shamal wasn't half as accommodating as Fon, though his henge was eye-catching as hell. Like, imitation was the highest form of flattery and all, but there should be limits, and really, Marvin Gaye? If you cover his greatest hits on the way back, I'm leaving you on the cruise ship and your new soul brother career. Once was more than enough, Doctor Sexual Healing…

"Gee, thanks, Volpe." A parody of a smile. Voice syrupy and oozing false sincerity. "Spending my free time rearranging the minds of hapless morons is the definition of my dream vacation."

Well, Naruto's didn't include bad renditions of Marvin Gaye songs, so they were even. The dawning horror on the faces of the various mafiosi all around backed him up, or maybe it was the memory-tweaking part of the conversation they disagreed with? Whatever. Not like they'd remember it for long.

"Don't mention it, Ero-ossan."

Shamal gave him the finger. Naruto gave him the One Thousand Years of Death.

In the dead silence and what-the-fuck-just-happened interlude, Fon's quirked brow all but screamed is this move fucking legit and did you actually say most secret and sacred tajjutsu technique and what did you Konoha ninja smoke when you came up with that shit. Naruto's quirked brow screamed back yo, dude, don't dis Kakashi-sensei's genius and that shit is fucking lethal and just ask Gaara's absolute defence broken bullshit. The mafiosi clearly sided with Naruto, their grimaces and frantic ass-covering screaming louder than words ever could. Also, the kiddie cheering, because his brats knew awesome when they saw it.

"Teams C and D are with me. We're gonna pay Colonnello a visit and try out his hopefully improved weekend course." Clapping his hands once, Naruto wrapped up his speech to the kids' unholy glee and the mafiosi's horrified shock and flashbacks. "With that said, let's split up. We're gonna meet up here in two days. Feel free to go wild and kick the stuffing out of Seiryū's puny exam. Isn't your sensei awesome?"

The kids' cheering grew wilder. Naruto patted himself on the back. Fon was grudge-smiling behind his sleeve. Shamal was slowly dragging his ass back while unleashing a scourge of mosquitoes on Naruto. The mafiosi were crossing themselves as if warding off evil and praying for deliverance.

Oh, come on. Seriously? This again? Way to be original, losers.

"No." Colonnello's heartfelt welcome was a thing of beauty. "Not just no, but fuck no."

And really, all Naruto had done was take ten measly steps and wave. Hell, his brats were still underground and out of sight. It was so touching and ego-stroking that he couldn't help but go, "Aw, man, I missed you, too."

"Why are you here, kora?"
"That's not really important—"

"The hell it's not—" And oh, here come his little ducklings. "Wait, hold on, did you…? Motherfucker." Colonnello grabbed his rifle and began shooting, an indiscriminate, rapid-fire assault of bullets and curses. "By Ares, you reproduced again!"

Once he had gotten his rage out of his system—or probably ran out of ammo—Naruto approached the panting army-baby, hands in his pockets and emanating I-totally-come-in-peace calm. Humming, he threw out an offhand, "Say, did you upgrade your traps?"

Colonnello blinked. "I—yeah." As if then comprehending the impeding doom, his gaze sharpened, iris a blue so pale it almost merged with the white of his eye, arctic as the Alaskan tundra and twice as unforgiving.

"Hey, don't give me that look." Naruto raised his arms, sticking to his this-is-totally-not-what-you-think spiel, although the creepy murder-laughter might have ruined the effect just a little. If there was one word that could describe Mukuro, in all honesty, it was **subtlety**. Problem was, nine times out of ten, his twisted cravings for amusement and mindfuckery won against his sneaky, snakey ways. Naruto laughed, too, his laughter loud and free-falling and obnoxious enough to drown out that uncute little shit. "I promise they aren't as…experienced as my other brats—and hey, don't you need people to rate the quality of your traps? S'why we're here actually. It'll be like a…a test run!"

Stony incredulity replaced the ice in Colonnello's eyes, muscles flexing in his arms as if he was two seconds away from butt-stroking him right in the face. Instead of going for it though, he breathed in, breathed out, long and deep and repeatedly. Like, a tribal rain ritual or fucking Lamaze or shit, each expelled breath followed by therapeutic chanting such as *fuck that motherfucking noise and so getting a goddamn raise after this bullshit is over and gotta blacklist them so fucking hard their grandkids will feel the ban.*

"Where are your other brats, kora?"

Naruto almost missed the question since the army-baby was still communing with the rain spirits, complete with diaphragm breathing and lids closed. He would like to say he debated whether to give him a break for, maybe, one whole minute before, "Aw, man, I knew you missed them, too." In reality, it was closer to ten seconds, but hey, it got the job done.

Colonnello's eyes cracked open. He blinked once, then snapped, veins throbbing and livid and with the fragile balance of someone who was teetering between sanity and lucid madness. "Do. Not. Move. Kora." A spun-out pause, gravid with intent. "I'll be back."

And back he went—to ritualistic chanting, that was, only this time it was geared toward psyching himself up and bitching about how *baby ain't gonna cut it and need whole lotta more firepower and where did I stash the RPG-7.*

Mini-Anko giggled and started clapping with an I'm-so-inspired-you're-my-idol exuberance, while Mukuro performed an elaborate, beautiful stage bow, something that would have looked ridiculous if anyone else had the balls to even attempt it. Ken howled at the moon, snubbing the midday sun in true werewolf fashion, and Chikusa outlined the number ten with senbon on the closest target, which happened to be Colonnello's lawn chair.

Hayato's eyes were sparkling, the boy somehow having sprouted puppy ears and a wagging tail and feverishly proclaiming he would *follow you to the ends of the Earth, Shodai-sama!* Haru was in the middle of a cute cheerleader jig, spelling out Naruto's name with honest-to-god purple glitter pom
poms. Shōichi was clutching at his stomach, seeming unable to decide if he should laugh or have an epic freak out, ending up doing both as he leaned against Spanner who was sucking on a lollipop, his twenty-third counting by the torn wrappers around his feet, and being sucked into his sketchpad, drawing some sort of orange mecha-Naruto aptly named *Terminator Konoha version*.

Naruto pounced on them, laughing as they scampered off into the obstacle course, because his brats were pure awesome and fucking adorable and deserved all the hugs in the world.

"Good job, brats. Team C needs to tone down the overkill, Team D needs to coordinate better, but overall nice effort. If you keep this up, Team C will be taking the Chūnin Exams next year, Team D the year after."

A feeling of déjà vu struck Naruto when, in the midst of that heartwarming scene, abound with praise, hair-ruffling, self-satisfied kiddie grins, and smoking craters in the background, Colonnello grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and headbutted him.


A shit-eating grin spread across Naruto's face. "You sure you won't miss us?"

"Just…" Colonnello tried to wring Naruto's neck, a series of strangled sounds coming from his own throat, then sighed and deflated like a popped water balloon. "…leave." Arms going slack, he jumped down and rubbed the last spots of tension out of his muscles. "And where the fuck is Skull? Being stealthy isn't like him. I should've heard his voice by now."

Confusion furrowed Naruto's brows. "I thought the Carcassa invasion only happened once a year." Why would the biker-baby—

"Yeah, but why else would my pacifier be reacting?"

—*oh. Shit. Forgot about that. Naruto let out a laugh, so phony it would have been a dead giveaway if not for the creepy murder-laughter—nice save, Kuro-chan, I'll buy you all the chocolate—gathered his brats up, and hightailed it outta there. Gotcha, carry on, we'll be going, see ya!"

(Colonello decided he didn't want to know. Because screw that motherfucker and his alien spawns and Skull and his stupid octopus. Maybe it was time to take a vacation. With no mafia bullshit. With his lovely, lovely Lal.)

Aboard the cruise ship, Naruto released the Marvin Gaye wannabe, a.k.a. Shamal the Love Doctor, upon the unsuspecting passengers in the lounge bar and chose to congregate on the deck. "So how was it?"

And yeah, it was rhetorical, but the kids' faces begged him to ask—so they could smugly display their trophies.

Fon's smile was two-faced—there was the right *you've-raised-wonderful-little-terrors* side and the left *you'll-pay-for-saddling-me-with-them* side. "Both teams pass," was all he said, which was their cue to open each team's storage scroll.

Hana went first, unrolling Team B's scroll with quick efficiency. Her already meager reserves for showing off must have dried up after the combined *we're-gonna-win-this-whole-shebang-just-watch-us* brouhaha. A variety of labeled objects materialized with a *poof* of smoke. Naruto crouched down to read the tags and examine their bountiful loot, ranging from outerwear
emblazoned with a famiglia's coat of arms, to personalized pens and wallets and notebooks, to bras and panties and boxers and briefs.

His low whistle bolstered Team B's smugness, and yeah, if his brats could steal Timoteo's Cloud Guardian's sunglasses, they had earned the damn right to be insufferable, grinning beasties.

Although, why was the Vongola Cloud Guardian at Mafia Land to begin with? Naruto sought Fon's gaze, flashing him a few signs while the kids sealed back their trophies. *Vongola. Cloud. Purpose. Team B. Target.*


So the reason for the old guy's presence remained elusive, Shamal supported Team B with genjutsu, the kids created distractions and covertly snatched his sunglasses amid the chaos, and yeah, he could live with that.

Kyōya stepped forward then, unsealing Team A's scroll with a smirk, but unlike Team B's veritable hoard, out came a single thing. The army-baby's oh-so-precious anti-tank rifle.

Naruto had known it, of course. Hell, he had watched it happen in real time, had unwittingly assisted Team A in accomplishing their lofty goal. Fon had allowed it, though—with Naruto's tacit consent—because it was a superb example of how to take advantage of the situation, make use of unexpected allies, and exploit concurrent events for the benefit of the mission.

Another low whistle, more smugness, more insufferable, grinning beasties. Also Naruto joining in on the fun and shooting Fon Kakashi-sensei's can-you-feel-it eye-smile while taunting the fuck out of someone, because *your exam, your responsibility, man.* Fon smiled as he sealed Colonello's rifle, a thousand grudges simmering beneath his sleeve. For a moment, Naruto faltered…that slow-burning fire kinda reminded him of the time Himawari—

*(We promised never to talk about that!)*

*Wow,* that actually woke you up?

**That never happened. Say it with me. Never. Happened.**

What never happened?

Exactly.)

—then the moment was over. Turning to the still-smug Chūnin hopefuls, who were swapping stories of untold chaos and mindfuckery with Teams C and D, Naruto beamed at them all, pride fierce and infinite and pulsing in his chest in tandem with his heartbeat.

"I'm the proudest—" They swarmed him. Buried under the puppy pile, Naruto was by turns laughing and choking, so many elbows and knees and gods, he'd be spitting hairs for days, so totally worth it. "Do I even need to ask if anyone wants to give u—" He got a jab in the gut. Kyōya, had to be that little hellspawn. This called for drastic measures, like unsealing the magic box and dangling it above their heads. "Awesome. Grab a number."

In the blink of an eye, Teams A and B formed a straight line, Teams C and D a few steps behind, cheering them on as one by one they stuck their hands in.

"One." Kyōya smirked as if being first in *everything* was the natural order.
"Four." Kyōko's genjutsu-smile bathed the deck in blinding light, a parade of fucking Summer Court fae, all fluttering wings and fairy dust and little vicious, sharp-toothed grins.

"Five." Takeshi laughed, the kind of laughter only high-functioning psychopaths could produce.

"Two." Hana squared her shoulders and stared at Kyōya, wills and gazes clashing violently, and oh, this just went from a one-on-one match to a Team A versus Team B face-off with their pride as team leaders on the line.

"Six." Tetsuya bowed his head first at Naruto, never one to eschew protocol, then at Takeshi, a calculated my-hard-work-trumps-your-genius tilt of his head.

"Eight." Ryōhei exploded, an outburst of yellow fire-chakra and extremes and challenges against everyone regardless of matching numbers.

"Ran-chan's already picked three, so that leaves seven for Bel-chan. Now!" Naruto flared his orange to get them back on track, and boy did they calm the fuck down. Awesome orange was awesome. Who the hell needed blue? Not him, nuh-uh. "Kyō-chan's with me. Fon will take Hana-chan. Verde called dibs on Ryō-chan. Gamma's waiting to pick up Tetsu-chan. He'll also deliver Take-chan to Squalo. Ero-ossan and Kuro-chan have Kyōko-chan covered. Ran-chan roped the Vindice into training him, don't even ask me how, and Bel-chan's training with the Varia Storm division."

As they pondered the merits of their respective teachers and what they could possibly learn from them—well, at least half of them did—Naruto and Fon eyed each other and smiled, because hell yeah, their brats were right and their pride as sensei was also on the line.

"Take a good look at your opponent because you won't be seeing them again until the matches. You have one month to prepare before we fly to Italy for the final phase. Gesso will construct the stadium and Aria will be the proctor. Good luck, brats!"
Chapter 20

"Yo!"

Fon sighed, lips pursing in mild exasperation and you are being ridiculous and what am I to do with you, when Naruto strode inside the drawing room as if he owned the place, a silent, scowling Kyōya on his heels. Brat had really not appreciated his training being put on hold for his great-uncle's whatever.

"What's up? I thought we agreed no visits. S'why we swapped kids for the month, ya know."

The little lady's happy gurgling at the sound of Naruto's voice made his lips tilt up. Also drew Kyōya's attention like a homing beacon—that mulish scowl melted off his face in two seconds flat. Naruto snorted when the little hellion shot a challenging look at Fon, then marched toward her fuzzy cherry-red cocoon, each step relaying his resolve to prove he was the better caretaker and a fanatic gleam in his eye that spoke of a budding sis con, and yeah, brat was a goner.

Fon sipped his tea, the little byplay passing unacknowledged beyond a you-and-your-silly-hissy-fits hum. "True, but we had an interesting visit yesterday."

Naruto sat down and crossed his legs, pouring himself a steaming cup of tea. Mm, not too sweet, not too bitter, kinda perfe—oh, shit. Fon had brought out the high quality stuff? That tea maniac never shared his precious oolong tea leaves unless he was having a very, very good day. Which meant Naruto was about to have a very, very bad day.

Swallowing slowly, liquid perfection gliding down his throat, Naruto savored his oolong tea, because he might regret this visit in the end, but it was still the best goddamn tea he'd ever tasted and Fon couldn't take that away from him. "And by we, you mean…?"

Just as Naruto raised his cup to take another slow sip, Fon calmly informed him that, "The Hibari clan was graced with the dubious honor of hosting the Triads and the Vindice for dinner."

Naruto did a spit-take. He hadn't expected that kind of sneak attack because wasting perfectly good tea is so not you, Fon. Seriously, what's wrong with you, man? His super intuition trilled something indistinct that made him feel...homesick. A chill crept down his spine. Fuck, today's gonna be worse than I thought.

Sighing, he reached for the tissue box and focused on the present. "Damn, Jager works fast. It's been what, four—no, five days, and he already got results?"

"Funny you should mention that." Uh-oh. Funny for whom? Fon waved him off with a hand, billows of red silk and wicked humor, and whoa, for him that was like...an extravaganza, a play imparting the moral no good deed goes unpunished. "Oh, please, do not misunderstand. I am grateful for their assistance, however unexpected it was. If only we could have been forewarned of their arrival and prepared accordingly. My dear sister, in particular, was quite distraught by the poor image we must have presented to our esteemed law enforcement."

The taste of his tea changed into a rather cloying flavor. Naruto swallowed thickly, throat clogging. "Ah."

"Yes." Fon's smile was grotesquely beatific. "Ah."

Water, need water... He looked around, scanning the table, the floor, the walls, the whole fucking
"She would like to have…words with you." Fon's tone, that loaded pause, the glee decorating his mouth like a gilded trophy—they all implied words were the last thing they would be having. "Oh, in case you misunderstood again—" Fat chance of that, bastard was just milking it for all it's worth. "—that was not a request."

_Ugh, starting to burn..._ Naruto was itching to claw at his throat, or pull off a D-rank suiton—he was crap at weak-ass suiton, he would so overdo it, totally not his fault pretty-in-red was sitting within range—but he refused to give that calm bastard the satisfaction. "Ah."

"Yes." Pause. Smile. "Ah."

Fuck it. One moment Fon was seated, relaxed and immaculately dressed, the next he was across the room, his posture still loose but the edges of his sleeves dark red and dripping. Naruto grinned, still cross-legged and elbows resting on the table, chin propped in the palm of his right hand, enjoying his drink of water.

Fon's smile now promised retribution, but eh, when did it not? Naruto had lost count of how long that grudge-list had grown. It just kept growing even if he did nothing, like that time Fon held him accountable for Kyōya stealing his nin-monkey. How was _that_ Naruto's fault? All he had done was share what he remembered from Konohamaru's know-how about primates with the boy. If Lichi liked the little hellspawn better after that, well…

"Sensei."

Kyōya's voice was soft and dark with pleasure. It sounded terribly wrong when he was cradling I-pin in his arms, rocking her back and forth and enumerating all the major bones of the human skeleton and how to break, fracture, shatter them. If Naruto didn't know he was smitten with adoration for the tiny earless thing, he'd have been the poster boy for baby serial killers.

"Hm?"

"Sobo-sama, unlike her sad excuse for a male sibling, is quite formidable. You should not take her lightly."

"Got any advice?"

"Do not run. It will be worse if you do."

"Thanks, Kyō-chan."

Naruto ruffled the boy's hair, tickled the baby's belly, then trudged his way to Fon who was waiting for him at the shōji, damp sleeves rolled up to his elbows and features schooled into an expression of quiet, sadistic anticipation.

Naruto's mouth stretched into a thin line. *Letting your sister do your dirty work? Not cool, bro.*

Fon flashed him that ah-yes-smile. *You just wish you had an awesome sister like mine. Suck it, bro.*

Yeah, he was so gonna regret this day.

Of course, with Naruto's luck, the Hibari matriarch had to be a monstrously strong, yellow fire-chakra medic grandma. He really should have known better than to dismiss the granny Tsunade
parallels. Or his scarily infallible, asshole-ish super intuition.

"We meet at last, Naruto-bō," Hibari Kin, also known as the Gold Taipan, said—gods, it was like meeting Shima-bā all over again, calling him little boy with that sweet grandma cooing rasp and—smiling before she sent him flying with a mega-punch—yeah, that.

She also billed him for the repairs of the West Wing and the hospitalization of the Hibari personnel, as if it was his fault he crashed through six walls and three cherry trees, all the way to the koi pond, taking four guards and two maids with him.

(On a brighter note, all the koi miraculously survived. They were Hibari-bred koi and thus tough coldwater fuckers.)

Gesso's idea of a Chūnin Exams stadium turned out to be a Rome-meets-Konoha coliseum. At the sky box overlooking the arena, giving him an unlimited view of the steadily arriving audience, sprawled on his gold-framed red velvet throne chair and twirling his champagne glass, Naruto had to admit Gesso had style. It was such an awesome I'm-the-king-of-the-world moment that the universe must have been compelled to piss on his party with the lamest way it knew how—via ear-splitting, blade-swinging, pissed off Sword-Psycho.

"Voi! Ramen-Trash! Who the fuck are you? Seriously."

"What, no hello, Sword-Psycho? I'm hurt. Deeply."

Squalo scoffed as he grabbed a champagne glass of his own and took the seat on Naruto's left, which meant they were now only missing the last guest of honor. If he would even deign to show up.

"You're not Giglio Nero." Squalo's voice had lowered to normal human frequencies. His gaze, on the other hand, was drilling into the side of Naruto's skull, sharp and gauging and insistent. "Puppy said as much."

"We never claimed to be." Naruto shrugged, a lazy roll of his shoulders, the when-you-assume underlying his assertion crystal clear. When Squalo opened his mouth to no doubt cuss him out for the deception or the omission or whatever bullshit excuse his mind would concoct, Naruto shook his head. "Look, how about we start over?" With an amused smile, he offered his free hand. "We are the Konoha famiglia and we're new blood."

Squalo appraised him for a moment, a sort of grudging respect in his eyes, the kind that said you have balls of steel, but if you pull that shit on me again, I'll disembowel you, then firmly shook it.

"How new?"

"Hm, 'bout four months old? Officially, at least."

"Why's this the first time I'm hearing about it?"

"Same reason you thought we were Giglio Nero."

"Tch. Fair enough." Irritated, but more at himself if Naruto had to guess, Squalo nodded above his glass, then swigged the champagne in two gulps. "So what's your fucking deal?"

**Being an insufferable pain in my ass.**

Kurama smirked, poking Naruto's chest with one of his tails, an encouraging go on, your turn now.
Naruto stared at him drily.

We're still making wisecracks?

**It's Saturday.**

A statement, matter-of-fact, as if Naruto was an idiot who couldn't even read a calendar right. More tail-poking.

Yeah, yeah, I know. Saturday's always been our wisecrack day, but my brats are about to have, I dunno, a maybe life or death exam here?

**What do I care if your brats are trying to kill themselves for the entertainment of worthless, imbecilic humans?** Kurama snarled and tried to skewer him with that fucking tail. You will not deprive me of my Saturday entertainment.

Oh, well, if you insist... Naruto chuckled while dodging to the left, then right, then left again, until it looked more like a whack-a-mole game. *Kurama, old buddy, old pal! Sorry to break it to you, but I wouldn't go near your hairy ass if it was the last piece of ass on Earth. I know it pains you we'll never be that close—*

Keep talking and you'll be coming out of my hairy ass.

That...was way too visual for Naruto. He might have just thrown up a little in his mouth. You win this round, Kurama.

The fox cracked a malicious, fanged grin and tallied up the score, with all his fucking tails and a clawed middle finger no less—ironically, Kurama was winning ten to nine—while Naruto refilled his champagne and slugged it straight back to get rid of that awful taste. Had another. And another. Squalo quirked a brow at his sudden increase in alcohol intake, but made no comment of it.

"You got the catalogue before you came in, right?"

Patting down his leather jacket—really, man, leather, it's like ninety degrees, I'm amazed you haven't become a lobster—Squalo reached into an inner pocket and fished it out, squinting at the striking whirlpool design taking up two thirds of the cover. "This...fūinjutsu shit?"

"Yup," Naruto nodded, grinning and damn proud of his family and not afraid to show it, "that's part of the reason we're doing this. See them?" He motioned with his glass toward the half-filled seats below them and around the stadium, Squalo's eyes tracking the movement, mind whirling and analyzing. "Potential clients and all that PR crap. Giglio Nero and Gesso opened the doors, but we gotta sell it ourselves."

"You're allies with both." No shit, genius. Boy, was he slow on the uptake today. "But no big names in the crowd...which means you're only targeting independent contractors."

Or maybe not. *That's better, now we're talking, I was beginning to lose faith in you.* He still didn't get it, though. Why did it always have to be fucking politics? Kurama grumbled something that sounded like what do you expect from humans, but it was halfhearted at best. His Father and Naruto had proven to him what humans could achieve if they chose to rise above the selfish needs of their nature. If he could do it once, he sure as hell could do it again. Just watch him.

"We don't actually need political clout, you know, this is strictly business." His voice was sober and unwavering and carried the weight of his convictions. "As for our alliances, it was never about
that to begin with." Squalo's gaze was growing wider with each word Naruto spoke. Now that some of the masks were off, he was starting to understand what kind of man Naruto was, where he came from and where he was going. "We have no interest in power-plays and all that old blood bullshit."

"Voi." It was more reflexive than anything. Nothing followed for long, quiet seconds. Too quiet, and it was still quiet when Squalo regained the ability to translate thoughts into words—the quality of his voice, that jaded honesty in it, how he stared at him with edged silver in his eyes. "Spoken like a true new blood. If I hadn't—" He stopped, seemed to think better of it, but Naruto had already caught hints of his thoughts—"if I hadn't felt your chakra—knew what he meant despite what he might choose to say. "If you were anyone else, I'd say you were shark food with that mindset."

"Eh, I know how to play the fucking game. Doesn't mean I will until I have to." The grin that curled his mouth was different, all jagged teeth and primal instinct. Chakra swelled beneath his skin, a violent, seething mass. Squalo stiffened when it pressed down on him. "You gonna make me?"

"Fuck no." Spat like the vilest curse. He shuddered as the pressure began to lift, breathed deeply, something cold and mangled brushing against Naruto's chakra. "If you don't want to deal with Vongola, that's your damn business." Squalo's face was a portrait of resentment and bitter disappointment and angry, gushing wounds. Its origin was made obvious with his next words. "We are the fucking Varia, not the Ninth's lapdogs."

Naruto felt bad. Goddammit, Sword-psycho. Take-chan sure knows how to pick them. You'd have made quite a pair back in the day. Good thing we managed to de-Sai him before you met.

"I hear you, man. Glad we understand each other." He raised his glass, pressed his orange against that cold, mangled thing as an apology. Warm and soothing and—wait, why was he looking at him like Naruto had just killed his puppy? Naruto knew the bastard couldn't take flattery for shit, but he apparently couldn't deal with positive reinforcement either. Was he like, conditioned for abuse or a raging masochist or what?

A warp hole ripped through the air, black fire filling the void, and from its abyssal depths emerged—

"Oh, hey, Jack!" Naruto beamed, a brilliant, dazzling smile, like distilled sunlight. "Glad you could make it, man. Ran-chan'll be over the moon when he sees you up here."

He had never been more grateful to see the living dead. Bless their black, unbeating hearts. His criticism must have stuck in their craw, because their response time was kicking some serious ass these days. Squalo, who had gone eerily quiet and still, not so much.

"Voooi," he whispered, and whoa, since when could he do that? Naruto had been certain the guy didn't know what whispering even was. "The hell is the Vindice doing here?"

"Hm? Oh, same thing we all are." When Squalo stared at him with a sort of numb horror, a bizarre mix of vacuous and alert, Naruto spoke slowly, carefully, emulating parents when first teaching their children how to talk. "I'm here for my brats, you're here for Bel-chan, and Jack's here for Ran-chan."

Squalo blinked, jaw hanging open, coming back to life. Then, "Ran—you mean the Gesso brat?"
Still whispering. It was kinda freaking Naruto out, but also cracking him up big time. Forget tea parties, he owed Baby-Chief a goddamn feast. All Naruto could do was give a jerky nod, because if he opened his mouth he'd laugh himself to death.

"How the fuck does he—no, forget it. I don't want to know."

Wow, Sword-Psycho chose the path of sanity? Naruto would have never thought he had it in him. Since when was he as bad as that loud bastard when it came to assumptions, huh? Maybe it was contagious…

The jumbotron lit up. Aria sashayed down the stairs and into the arena with the glamour of a Hollywood diva, lips red as sin and hips swaying and sexiness cranked up to eleven. With a how-you-doin wink-smile killer combo and a throaty purr, she got this show on the road.

"WELCOME TO THE CHŪNIN EXAMS! WE ARE HONORED BY YOUR PRESENCE HERE TODAY!"

Woman knew damn well how to work a crowd. Chuckling, Naruto poured himself another glass of champagne and, because he was an awesome host (but mostly to fuck with Squalo), poured Jack one, too.

Aria bowed. The camera zoomed in on her cleavage. The audience went wild. Jack's champagne mutated into something lovecraftian. Squalo gaped. Naruto grinned. The Chūnin Exams and this Konoha-Gesso-Giglio Nero trinity alliance were off to a great start.

"Holy mother of fuck. Where did you find the Cloud brat and does he have relatives I can contact? Our Cloud division's been a fucking mess ever since Xanxus blew that lying sack of shit Ottabio's brains out."

"You're asking the wrong guy. If you wanna deal with Hibari clan business, you gotta talk to Fon."

"Fon…as in, the Storm Arcobaleno?"

"Yup."

"Suddenly the Cloud brat makes sense."

"Voi. Just how well do you know the Storm Arcobaleno? That fucking insane move the Storm girl just pulled off had his name written all over it."

"Well enough, why? Your Storm division's also suffering, Sword-Psycho?"

"Fuck off, Ramen-Trash. Rumor has it he ditched the Triads last month…and the Vindice were somehow involved."

"So?"

"Shit. You're not gonna deny it, are you?"

"Would it make you feel better if I did?"

"Maybe?"

"Ahem… Whoa, Fon ditched the Triads? The Vindice were in on it? No shit? I had no fucking
idea…"

"Voi! At least say it like you fucking mean it, Ramen-Trash!"

Hana and Kyōya went at it like feral beast cubs. Fangs, and claws, and fire, and bloodlust. And the most feral won. Naruto's good fight, Hana-chan and congrats, Kyō-chan echoed amid the what-the-fuck-did-we-just-witness and who-let-the-beasts-out silence.

"Voooi. The hell did the Vindice creep bring out the chains for? He gonna fucking arrest me for public disturbance noise?"

"That was oddly specific, Sword-Psycho. Happened to you before, huh?"

"Tch. Just answer the damn question, Ramen-Trash."

"Nah, that's just Jack's special way of cheering on Ran-chan."

"You're…not shitting me."

"Kuro-chan, you sly little shit. Teaching Kyōko-chan how to combine that of all the crazy Yamanaka bullshit with medical ninjutsu? You make me proud."

"Fucking Mists…even the little ones are crazy mindfuckers. Levi's damn lucky the puppy laid him out before the Mist girl dry fucked his brainstem. His nervous system barely functions as it is."

"So your Lightning division also sucks ass. That's the third division so far, Sword-Psycho. Are you sure you're not mixing up quality with incompetence? I know this awesome dictionary—"

"Finish that sentence, Ramen-Trash, and I will cut you into tiny fucking pieces and feed you to Levi's prized stingrays."

"—that will clear up your confusion. By the way, Jack's stopped cheering on Ran-chan. I think those kinky chains are all for you."

"... I will kill you later."

Byakuran won by the skin of his teeth—with some bullshit hand-clapping technique he pulled out of his ass at the last minute that fucking negated everything. Kyōko pouted. Ninety percent of the mafiosi kissed their hard-ass reputation goodbye when they went awww and we love you, bambina and in our hearts, you won in order to console her.

All their heartfelt efforts were for nothing—because Byakuran stole their thunder by sharing his Naminori's style custard cream puffs with her.

"Voi! Go, puppy! Slice the Lightning brat up nice and easy! Just think he's that idiot Levi and put
him in a fucking coma!"

"Boy, I can really feel the love you have for the Levi guy. What did that bastard even do? Steal your girlfriend?"

"He exists."

"Voi! I thought the proctor was supposed to be fucking impartial. Why's Aria and half the Giglio Nero smiling at the Lightning brat like he's their long-lost heir?"

"Ah. About that… You know how you trained Take-chan for the month? Well, Gamma was the one who trained Tetsu-chan. She, and by extension the female portion of Giglio Nero, might be seeing her future offspring in him."

"Wait, those two are a thing?"

"If you mean a thing that's gonna happen come hell or high water."

"Voi, I'd feel sorry for the guy—"

"—if she wasn't hot as fuck, yeah."

It was kinda hard to tell who really won this fight since Tetsuya got all the hugs and kisses and stuffed animals.

(Takeshi didn't mind. Squalo's colorful praise was enough for him.)

"Voi, Bel! If you dare fucking lose to the Sun brat, I'll ship you off to Konoha for the rest of the goddamn year!"

"Oi, don't I get a choice in here, Sword-Psycho?"

"Fuck if I care, Bel! Look around, this place's filled with fucking trash! You gotta show 'em how we do things!"

"Ooii, you're developing selective hearing, Sword-Psycho?"

"Because we're Varia Fucking Quality, Bel!"

"Oooiii, don't fucking ignore me, Sword-Psycho."

"Voi! That's cheating! As if enhancing his reflexes with Sun Flames wasn't bad enough, the Sun brat had to harden his attacks with Lightning Flames? Who the fuck trained him? That underhanded asshole's going down if I ever meet them!"

"Tsk tsk. For shame, Sword-Psycho. If you're not cheating, you're not trying—"

"Still fucking cheating!"

"—but if you wanna pick a fight with Verde, I'm not gonna stop you."

"Verde…as in, the Lightning Arcobaleno?"
"Yup."

"Go fuck yourself with a swordfish, Ramen-Trash."

It was the sole match to surprisingly end in a tie. Genius psychopath versus stamina freak turned out to be an even match. While Belphegor could outsmart him, Ryōhei could outlast him. Who knew?

(Verde did.)

Kyōya, of fucking course, won the whole damn thing.
Konoha departed from Italy with a fledgling reputation as badass new blood, a slew of purchase orders by soon-to-be loyal clients, six newly-minted chūnin, and a sedated tiara-brat smuggled into their luggage.

(They were blissfully unaware of the last part for the first half of the flight. Squalo thought he was being clever and funny when he wedged him between Hana's toiletries and underwear. Hana was not amused. Neither was Belphegor when he woke up in the cargo area, half-frozen, with a pair of royal blue panties tangled up in his crown and smelling like coconuts.)

One international phone call later—involving shattered eardrums, explosive tantrums, copious amounts of swearing, and Naruto putting his foot down—the tiara-brat was occupying Baby-Kabuto's guest wing for the next month. Now, normally, he'd have thought the tiara-brat was sent with the hidden motive of spying on them.

Except, Belphegor wouldn't know a cloak-and-dagger spy mission if it bit him on the ass. The dagger part, yeah, he had it down pat, but the cloak? Hell to the no. Also, Squalo had been brushing up against his orange in a please-hit-me, abuse-starved kinda way, not that the bastard even realized it. Which, okay, messed up, but at least it proved he wasn't playing infiltration games and sneaky shit of that nature. Just that Xanxus must have been a real piece of work, totally not someone Timoteo would approve as his successor. Although knowing his Sandaime-like tendencies, he had probably half-assed everything and sooner or later shit would hit the fan.

And if the old man had the brilliant idea of saddling him with Vongola's screw ups, Naruto would enjoy exercising his hard-won right to say not my fucking problem, asshole. The moment he founded Konoha, tenuous familial obligations and old blood ties were irrevocably severed. It was too little, too late, and nothing short of time travel could fix it.

Naruto couldn't care less about Vongola and their bloody succession trifles. Not when he was so close to conquering the greatest enemy he had faced in his new life. He had been battling for years now, skirmish after skirmish, ambush after ambush, tirelessly, but finally…the end was near. He could almost taste the sweet mead of victory on his tongue.

It began with the nin-animal partners and ended with the fire-chakra summons.

Naruto gazed at Baby-Kabuto, vibrating under his skin, but taking care to conceal all traces of c'mon, you're killing me, man and gimme the good news already, lest the frazzled science-baby snap under the extra pressure and go all reptile-sage-Kabuto on his ass.

Glasses giving off a muted glow under the fluorescent lighting in his laboratory, nin-caiman laid across his lap, Baby-Kabuto was stroking Keiman's back like he owed the baby reptile a week's worth of petting at least. Naruto wouldn't be surprised if that was the case—Baby-Kabuto had a bad habit of forgetting the world existed when he was knee-deep in research. Hell, he even forgot to eat. Mukuro, that uncute little shit, had sacrificed himself in the name of science and volunteered to undertake the onerous job of being his personal nursemaid. When Baby-Kabuto gave him this betrayed how-could-you-I-trusted-you look, Naruto shrugged, having zero guilt, because it's a bad habit, we need to break you out of it before you pass it on to the baby geniuses, and if this doesn't work, I don't know what will.

"I…require your assistance."
And oh, this sounded more like…potentially good news, but eh, better than nothing, so Naruto would take it and be damn grateful.

"Sure, you got it."

He smiled, not that it registered with Baby-Kabuto. Placing the nin-caiman inside his glass terrarium seemed to be of greater importance to the science-baby. Keiman, on the other hand, glared cold-blooded murder, slit pupils constricted and blaming the end of his precious me time on Naruto.

"I…have encountered an error in my calculations."

Naruto's left eyelid twitched. "Oh?"

Strange didn't even begin to cover this three-way conversation. Baby-Kabuto was messing about with the terrarium control system. Naruto's eyes were boring into Baby-Kabuto's back, while Keiman's were going for Naruto's jugular and plotting revenge on the other side of the glass.

"Yes, well…although calling it an error is slightly inaccurate and might be oversimplifying—"

Yeah, Naruto had enough. "Yo, man, just say what you need me for."

Baby-Kabuto's spine stiffened, the baby reptile grew three sizes, which made his murder-glare all the more prominent, and Naruto gave up on ever understanding the mind of genius recluses.

"Right, of course," he sorta blurted out, and if that wasn't hilariously sad, Naruto didn't know what was, but at least it got him talking…to the thermostat.

"Fūinjutsu has been exceedingly helpful in understanding how to store Flames, but less so in how to conjure Flame-powered animals. Every attempt so far has failed—they lack independent thought and do not respond to commands and cannot be sustained for long periods of time. If they run out of Flames, they cease to exist altogether. And these are merely the major issues. However." A sudden full stop, a sharp twist of neck, painful to look at. "I believe you might be able to conjure a viable sample. The notes you provided mention…summoned animals?"

Baby-Kabuto was speaking and staring at him for the first time, but Naruto could have done without the onryō impersonation. He was so vetoing Chikusa's film recommendations next Sunday movie night. Why did it always have to be fucking ghosts?

"You're not man enough for Sadako."

Fuck off, Kurama.

"Yeah, about that." Scratching his cheek, Naruto hummed and thought back to that failed attempt at summoning after meeting Fon. "I tried it once, but…all I got was, I dunno, disconnect? Like, I got the feeling it'd just be a one-way trip to nowhere even if I overloaded the jutsu? I don't think the summon realms actually exist in this world."

"Disregarding your empirical evidence and the fascinating theory that supports the existence of groups of multiple, separate universes," Baby-Kabuto's lenses were so bright it was dizzying, his voice mad with zeal, "for now."

Despite everything broadcasting he was too overwrought to listen to reason, Naruto had to try. He needed his time off, dammit. What little of it remained anyway. "You're never gonna let it go, are you?"
"Yes, we will be discussing—"

It was soft-spoken, sending shivers down Naruto’s spine, a horripilation of dread, vengeance for inflicting that sadistic little shit on him. Memories flashed before his eyes—migraines, tons of bullshit jargon, page after page of scrawled impossibilities, Kakashi-sensei tag-teaming with Sasuke and trying to beat space-time mindfuckery into his head in hopes of recreating the Hiraishin. Because if anyone could/should/would do it, it must be him, like some sort of laughable (it was never funny) rite of passage, never mind he hadn’t inherited even a tenth of his parents’ fūinjutsu genius. Suffice it to say, it never happened, but the mental trauma stuck.

(Actually, in the end, the only thing all three could agree on was that the Nidaime bent jutsu creation over his desk and made it his bitch. It was not a good thing. Hindsight was twenty/twenty, after all.)

"—to the point where you will be eligible for a doctorate in astrophysics by the time we are done." A threat, wrapped in a promise, inside a resolution. Then, "If we will ever be done."

Naruto fixed him with a hard stare. "You…are a scary son of a bitch." Dude…respect.

"I will take that as a compliment." Baby-Kabuto pushed his glasses up his nose with his index finger, the corners of his mouth drawn back into a smirk of triumph. "Now, would you care to demonstrate as I monitor your Flame output?"

Eh, why not? Nothing to lose, nothing to gain, but if it made the science-baby happy, "Alright, just don't expect it to work."

"Allow me to determine that."

Baby-Kabuto adjusted his glasses, and whoa, was that a real smile? His whole face lit up. Maybe there was something to gain. Naruto smiled as he was led inside another room, walls reinforced with some kind of chakra-resistant alloy, if he had to guess, and barrier seals drawn by his own hand after an incident involving Hayato, experimental red fire-chakra storage seals, and Spanner's Mini-Fire-Breather 2.0.

"Ready?" Baby-Kabuto's voice rang sharply defined and amplified through the speaker system.

Naruto closed his eyes, interlaced his fingers and stretched out his arms, turning his head to the left, then slowly to the right to loosen his neck muscles. Inhaling, fire-chakra rousing under his skin, molding itself into the almost-instinctual pattern for summoning jutsu, exhaling. "Anytime you are."

"Please begin."

Chakra exploded outward in fiery orange waves, rushing across the floor, climbing up the walls, spreading along the ceiling. Burning, flaring, building up, up, up—

"I've poured enough chakra to summon the Boss three times over." And he's a no-show, Baby-Kabuto, told you so. Fukasaku-ji would have hijacked the jutsu by now, if only to whack me on the head with that sage-damned stick for wasting so much chakra.

"Please continue."

Before Naruto could rant at Baby-Kabuto about the abuse he had suffered at the hands of senile toads, a rumbling noise forestalled him.
Neeed…some o’ mine? Kurama’s jaw was a yawning chasm, tails lazily swaying, bored as fuck.

Must be nice to have all the time in the world. Goddamn shameless freeloader. A vein throbbed in Naruto’s left temple, smile tight on his lips. You think it’ll make a difference?

*It was how you first summoned that overgrown amphibian, wasn’t it?* The fox’s features contorted into something between a smirk and a scowl, all deep furrows and disdain. *Damn arrogant insect-eaters.*

Gastric fluid roiled in Naruto’s stomach, queasiness coloring his skin. A rainbow of colors. He changed from green to white to red, and back to green at the end. *Ugh, don’t remind me…gods, the larva onigiri, the snail jerky, the beetle soup…I hate you, Kurama.*

*Do not blame me for your juvenile mistakes.* Kurama couldn’t wipe that scowly smirk off his face—the furball went on gloating as if it was his Father-given right. *If you had contracted the foxes, like I would have suggested had you but politely asked, you would have been dining like a king. But no, all you wanted was, and I quote, you owe me rent money, so give me your chakra, stupid fox.*

Gods, that whine was awful, so badly mimicked. Naruto’s irritation vanished. There was just…something so nostalgic about that line. He shook his head, chuckling. *Yeah, we were both so stupid back then, huh?*

A searing red glare above a snarling snout. *Speak for yourself.*

Right. The fox had been no such thing, ever. Snorting, Naruto crossed his arms and stared him down, despite the fuzzball towering overhead. *Cut the bullshit. I was young enough not to know better. What’s your excuse?*

*Your mother chained me to a rock.*

Now he was outright growling. Naruto let him stew a little before he flashed a cheeky grin. *Kā-chan was so freaking badass.*

Kurama’s growl lessened as he inspected him with an evaluating glance Naruto really didn’t like. *Pity you only inherited her character flaws.* He laughed, darkly amused, as if that was a fine example of karma and a suitable punishment for Kushina’s sins. *Then again, the only thing you got from Minato was his sissy looks. Comparing the two, that was the greater tragedy.*

*Are you done?*

*I could—*

*Give me your chakra, stupid fox.*

Chakra erupted outward, coalescing into a flowing river of lava, a molten fusion of orange and red. From within the igneous matter, glow poured out in brilliant points of burnt orange and white-hot flame, like a red dawn, like a blood tide.

*Oi, Kurama, you seriously overdi—*

Naruto’s words died in his throat when it began to take shape, threads of fire twined around fleet-
footed legs, rebelling, flickering in and out of form, until a coat of rust-red fur hugged its body and gave it substance. A fox kit lay curled around his ankles, eyes blood-red and slit-pupilled, ears and tails tipped with fire-chakra. It had a pair of each, Naruto numbly observed.

"Huh." His low grunt was swallowed by Baby-Kabuto's delirious cry of, "Extraordinary!"

It fucking was, Naruto admitted, shock receding in favor of unbridled joy. With a manic grin, he turned to a stunned Kurama, spreading his arms wide and gesticulating madly.

*Look, Kurama, we made a baby! What should we name—wait, is it a boy or a girl?*

**The kit is male, you blind fool!** The fox snapped after regaining his wits, an equally manic glint in his eye as he decreed, Kuramaru.

What—no! He'll be a laughingstock with that kinda name! How could you do that to our baby? Your naming sense sucks.

*I don't want to hear that from you! What kind of lame name is Boruto?*

Oh, wait, I got it! We should name him...Inari!

*I suppose that is…fitting.*

Satisfied, Naruto bent down and scooped the now-named kit up in his arms, rubbing his cheek against his soft, furry face. "Inari-chan, meet your tō-chan!" A series of high-pitched, almost yippy barks, which Naruto interpreted as *love you, tō-chan, wanna meet kā-chan.* Ignoring Kurama's incensed *don't you dare* and *you're the mother,* Naruto laughed, still showering the kit in affection. "I'll introduce you to kā-chan later."

The door slid open. Baby-Kabuto sprinted into the room, only to stop dead in his tracks at the sight that greeted him. Clearing his throat, he fiddled with the rim of his glasses.

"If you are…quite finished with that…sentimental display, perhaps we could return to the original purpose of this—" Naruto's head snapped up. His glare dared him to finish that sentence with experiment. Baby-Kabuto coughed inside his tiny fist. "—project."

*Nice save, Baby-Kabuto.* Sitting down, Naruto crossed his legs and let Inari curl up across his lap for a nap. Being born must have tired him out, Naruto had firsthand experience of how exhausting it was. *Ugh, repress, must repress…*

"I dunno, man." He shuddered, grateful Baby-Kabuto had given him something else to focus on. "I mean, yeah, it obviously works, but you do realize it takes a fuckton of chakra, right? There's no way the kids can pull it off. Hell, I don't think anyone but me has the reserves for this. I could share my chakra with them, but that'd be useless in this case because it'd still be mine. Best case scenario is Inari-chan getting more siblings out of it."

Baby-Kabuto didn't waste time shooting him down. Also forsook his sanity in the process.

"Irrelevant." And he *chortled,* mad as a hatter. Like, there was delirium and shining glasses and mad science laughter, green fire-chakra sparking in his eyes and over his skin, spilling from his fingertips and onto the floor. "I have several theories that could bypass that issue once we measure the exact amount of Flames needed. It has to be an instant release of Flames, but nothing indicates it has to be instantaneously generated."

*That...wow, that was..."Fuck, that's genius! Like, a single-use yin seal? Slowly storing up chakra...*
until they've gathered enough, then releasing it all in one burst?"

Coming down from his momentary lapse of sanity, Baby-Kabuto smirked. "Exactly."

And it was genius, it truly was. Except, "That's still not easy, though. It needs damn fine control, and right now, I'd say only Kyōko-chan can maybe pull it off."

Again, Baby-Kabuto was quick to shoot him down, but at least he kept the madness inside him in check this time.

"I can modify the seal to draw and store their Flames itself." His smirk reflected all the science degrees he had hanging on his wall. "It will certainly be challenging, but I appreciate a good challenge."

"See, that's why you're my Head of R&D." Smiling, Naruto leaned closer and slung an arm over Baby-Kabuto's shoulders, pulling him onto his lap and pressed against Inari's side while he sputtered. "Come on, let's go tell the kids how awesome you are."

"I still have to analyze the data—"

"They'll still be here when you return."

Inari must have broken the Guinness World Record for most tricks performed by a fox in one minute—he jumped, rolled over, chased his tails, spun around in circles, learned to recognize the kids' names, gave them his paws to shake, and finally sat pretty to be fawned over.

Needless to say, the little brats were in love and chomping at the bit for their own fire-chakra summons. Baby-Kabuto was lavished with unintelligible words of praise, offers of assistance from the science brats, rapturous, eclipsing-the-sun smiles, and grateful, squeezing-the-life-out-of-him hugs. Naruto even caught a glimpse of half-drawn designs for a TARDIS replica with Doctor Verde on it before Hayato hastily hid them in his pocket.

"I want a mongoose." Hana's voice pierced through that lovely chaos, clear and cool and brooking no argument about her choice. It appeared to be some sort of Team B signal, because Tetsuya followed with a polite, "I would like a wolverine," and Ryōhei finished with a deafening, "I want an extreme chimpanzee!"

So, three mammals, and judging by Baby-Kabuto's nod of approval, Ryōhei's choice was influenced by the science-baby. Nice to see they were bonding.

Team B opened the floodgates. One by one, they went back to their teams, as if it was imperative that they present a unified front during this momentous occasion.

Kyōya's gaze met Kyōko's in a silent tête-à-tête. Naruto had visions of the not-so-distant future. Gods, the hormones, the eyefucking, the territorial bullshit, the revisited, in-depth sex talk.

(He'd already given the perfunctory where-we-come-from talk, but had yet to give the how-we-get-there tips.)

Then, at the same time, they parted their lips.

"A harpy eagle."

"A cassowary for me!"
"I've always wanted a dog." Takeshi smiled, cheerful as always, but it took a turn for the deadly when he specified, "a Doberman."

So, two large, exotic, vicious birds…and a dog. Somehow. Naruto was very tempted to make a walk-into-a-bar or a bird-mating-dance joke, but he'd save those kind of jokes for when teenage hormones struck.

Mukuro's gaze met Mini-Anko's, mirroring the Kyō duo, only they probably had an actual mental conversation. Also ended the same, with them speaking on top of each other.

"Kufufu. A python."

"A black mamba."

"A penguin would be my first choice," Chikusa quietly asserted, while Ken thumped his chest and boomed, "Gotta be a gorilla, byon!"

So, they were living up to their team name and going for circus attractions. Nothing new there.

Team D apparently hadn't yet started working on how to coordinate better since they all tried to speak at once.

"I'd be happy with anything you'd like, Shodai-sama, but…" Hayato was gushing, flashing Naruto puppy dog eyes, and ears, and tail, "I'd really like…an U.M.A.!

"Haru loves kitties, nyah!" It was a stroke of luck that Haru was cosplaying as a cat girl today. Naruto thought she'd leave it at that, but before he could blink, the cutesy mannerisms flatlined and she growled out, "Haru wants a tiger."

"I, um, maybe a parakeet?" Shōichi was mumbling, as if he wasn't sure he wanted a fire-chakra summon at all, but since everyone was dead-set on getting one, then he would get the most harmless and least liable to turn on him. "They're nice, I think, and smart, and they can learn how to talk?"

"Can it be a cyborg?" Spanner's face fell when Naruto shook his head, but he had been vested with the power of strawberry lollipops, so he recovered in no time. "Then I'll take a raven. It can talk with Shōichi's parakeet. Maybe they'll mate and make hybrid—"

So, what the actual fuck? It wasn't just Baby-Kabuto, he'd never understand the mind of baby geniuses either. Leaving Spanner to his rather disturbing, oral thesis on avian crossbreeding, Naruto studied the tiara-brat who was not-so-subtly sulking off to the side by mutilating one of Baby-Kabuto's majestic sakura trees.

"If you wanna have an animal Box Weapon, we can work something out, Bel-chan. But it's gonna be expensive as hell, not to mention you gotta sign an NDA. We won't be offering this to just anyone, you feel me?"

Belphegor's absurdly long bangs smacked him hard in the face when he whipped around, so quick it almost broke the sound barrier. Naruto might have missed it if he wasn't paying attention to him.

"Name your price, Ramen King. It will be petty cash for the Prince."

So, now he was dubbed the Ramen King? Naruto chuckled, mussing up the brat's ridiculous hairdo, while dodging the barrage of ridiculous knives that was supposed to disguise his blush and low murmur of the Prince can keep secrets.
Chapter 22

A year had come and passed since their breakthrough with the fire-chakra summons.

Naruto had dedicated an ungodly amount of his free time to Box Weapons research, brainstorming with Baby-Kabuto and trying to design a hybrid jinchūriki storage seal that would allow Inari to reside with Kurama instead of being stored inside a tiny box. At the furball's insistence, not that Naruto even argued against it, but it was the principle of the matter.

_Don't call me kā-chan_, his ass. He _so was_. Naruto hadn't missed the fox's sudden interest in subscribing to animal-documentary television channels and reading how-to-raise-your-young primers. Never mind that Inari, strictly speaking, wasn't a fox kit. The more fire-chakra he used, the more tails he manifested, the larger his form became, until he grew up to rival Kurama's original size.

(They were both _so_, _so_ proud of their baby. The kids were, too. The adult club of their family, not so much. Minus Baby-Kabuto, he was _ecstatic_ about _everything science._)

In the meantime, many other pleasant developments had occurred.

Baby-Kabuto was kicking ass and taking names and patenting all sort of mad genius inventions. The kids were steadily storing up chakra and should be ready to summon by next year according to Baby-Kabuto's calculations. Shamal and Fon were officially leading Teams A and B and terrorizing the mafia world one mission at a time. Team C was on the cusp of being eligible to take the Chūnin Exams next summer. Team D was working as a tight-knit unit and had been all but adopted by Baby-Kabuto. I-pin was talking and walking and spreading her earless cuteness all over the place.

The first Konoha-Gesso annual trip was coming up and it was unanimously agreed (parents included) they'd be spending Christmas in Australia this year. Aria was two months pregnant with Gamma's future miracle baby girl. Konoha's fūinjutsu business was thriving. Iemitsu (and the majority of Vongola) still had no clue. Nana was slowly-but-surely getting better. Namimori was the mecca of peace, scientific advancement, and prodigious shinobi youth. Also had just celebrated the opening of a new ramen restaurant.

Naturally, Naruto had to sample the goods. Yamaguchi's establishment in Namimori couldn't be complete until it had gained the Uzumaki seal of approval. How could he have predicted his luck would once again strike gold, perpetuating Naruto's record for saving the world via friendship, pranks, and ramen?

As he later told a calmly exasperated Fon, "Gotta be my awesome genes, so totally not my fault, man. All I wanted was a bowl of ramen. Or twenty."

"Tonkotsu, occhan! With extra chashu!"

Naruto sat his ass down and slammed his palms rhythmically against the counter, all but bouncing in his seat, vaguely registering the white-haired, glasses-wearing man slurping at a sedate pace two stools over.
"Hai! One tonkotsu with extra chashu coming up!" the old ramen chef yelled back, and ten minutes later he was serving Naruto what had to be Ichiraku quality ramen.

The hot, spicy aroma emanating from the bowl made him salivate, and after his first taste—

"Holy mother of ramen, this is delicious… I think I've died and gone to heaven." With tears in his eyes, noodles half in his mouth, half in his bowl, Naruto blathered on, overwhelmed and sending silent prayers to Teuchi-jī for spiritually lending his culinary skills to this man. "Occhan, believe me when I say your tonkotsu is the best bowl of ramen I've ever had in this lifetime."

The old chef laughed, gruff and pleased, rubbing the back of his head with one hand and waving his ladle at Naruto with the other. "Oi, oi, lad, you're laying it on a bit thick, but thank ya!"

Naruto was about to respond when his fellow ramen lover placed his chopsticks down and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help but…overhear your conversation."

Naruto's brows shot up. Overhear, really? The whole block must have heard him.

"And I have to disagree."

A twitch in his left brow.

"Shio ramen is by far the better dish."

A pause, and spasmodic twitching.

"In every. Single. Way."

Naruto's brow froze, temper held together by thin, fraying strings, but before he could rail on this… this ramen heathen, Kurama flattened him with one swat of his ginormous hand.

**Careful, brat. He's not what he seems. I get the feeling he is like…Father.**

The fox's affront was transparent in his tone. It must have been galling for the fuzzball, having to compare some nobody ramen fool to his great Father.

Picking himself up off the ground, Naruto winced as he cracked his poor back. **You mean an alien?**

**Could be.** Teeth gritted, tails whipping back and forth, a low, menacing growl. **Definitely not human, though.**

Awesome. Groaning, Naruto finished realigning his spine, feeling the onset of a headache. **Let's hope he's more like your old man and less like his psycho family. I've had enough of alien crazies.** His gaze then narrowed. Oh. It wasn't a headache, but his super intuition hammering—a light bulb went off. **You think he might be the asshole we're looking for?**

Kurama's tails stilled, an intense look of concentration scrunching up his face. **More than likely,** he rumbled, the fires of hatred seething hot and deep in his voice, **or at the very least he knows who is. There couldn't be many of his kind left on Earth if he's playing human.**

**Yeah, that's what I thought.** Nodding, Naruto smacked a fist into the center of his palm. Ramen-Alien was going down hard. It wasn't about the ramen, honest, he was doing this for Baby-Chief. And Fon, and Baby-Kabuto, and Aria, and Gamma's baby girl. **Yosh, I got this. Watch my back.**
On it. And he meant that literally.

Dodging another goddamn giant swat, Naruto flipped him off.

"Oi." Turning in his seat, he pinned Ramen-Alien with a glare and thrust out his chopsticks, splatters of broth impacting Ramen-Alien's face. "You take that back, you hear me? Tonkotsu is the ramen of the gods."

Ramen-Alien wiped off his glasses and glared back with the fickle temperament all so-called gods possessed. And thus it began.

"Shio."

"Tonkotsu."

"Shi-o."

"Ton-ko-tsu."

"Shio!"

"Tonkotsu!"

"Your taste buds need a reality check!"

"Your whole brain needs a reality check!"

"Now listen here, young man—"

"No, you listen, old fossil—"

"Excuse me? I'll have you know my lovely third wife happens to appreciate my ageless looks."

"I bet the first two did, too, before they divorced you to escape your shitty taste in ramen."

"Actually, if you must know, we parted on amicable terms. We were very happy until the day they passed away."

"Shit." Naruto reeled back, losing steam fast. Asshole or not, that was uncalled for. He knew it, and he still said it. Worked the way he intended, too, confirming their guess. Ramen-Alien had been roaming the earth for a long time if he had buried two wives. Also couldn't be an irredeemable asshole if he was falling in love with humans every other century. Maybe, just like the zombie police, Naruto could grow to like him after he forced him to fix this fucked up Trinisette mess and bow to his ramen expertise. "Look, man, I'm so—"

"There's no need to apologize." It was deliberate, slow and condescending, as if forgiving this insult was a great act of mercy, and only because Naruto was a pig-ignorant human. Ramen-Alien raised his head and regarded him, imperious like gods of yore. "Death is the natural way of things. All that begins must end, be it humans, animals, or planets." A sigh, a quiet, weary even guardians under his breath. Then, "If you still feel bad for offending me, I will accept an apology for your poor taste in ramen."

Naruto's goodwill and the remainder of his guilt evaporated at the same time as Kurama barked out, Ha! Father used to pull that trick on people all the time. And proceeded to laugh his ass off.

You couldn't have said that, I dunno, thirty seconds ago?
Unlike Naruto, the fox might be warming up to Ramen-Alien. Typical. Naruto shook his head. "I can't believe I fell for that."

As if to twist the knife deeper, Ramen-Alien shrugged. "Not my fault, I told no lies."

"Not a fucking word. He needn't have bothered. Kurama was too busy still laughing at his expense to garnish Naruto's shame with mocking commentary."

"Yeah, I know." Snorting, he rolled his eyes. "Trust me, you're not the first person to try that on me." Just been a long time since the last one. "I've known lots of people like you." When Ramen-Alien shot him an inquiring stare, Naruto's mouth quirked wryly. "Twisting the truth to your advantage while giving nothing away. Somehow, I think you have a knack for feeding people bullshit."

Ramen-Alien shrugged again. "If you live as long as I have, you develop some peculiar habits, I'm afraid."

Okay, yeah, enough, this was going a bit too far. Naruto knew Ramen-Alien knew he wasn't that stupid, and he was still keeping up this charade, playing him for a fool and pretending they were nothing more than casual ramen frenemies.

"Oh, for the love of ramen." Clicking his tongue, Naruto stared at him, steely-eyed, fed up and don't mess with me, dude and you got nothing on the mother goddess of chakra whose ass I kicked to the motherfucking moon. "Why can't you just say it like it is?" At the sarky how-do-you-think-it-is-little-mortal and enlighten-me-I'm-dying-to-know gaze he received, Naruto laid it on Ramen-Alien, holding nothing back. "You go batshit crazy. Your mind gets so messed up that one day you wake up and decide it's cool to curse people right and left and put chakra-sucking abominations around their neck."

Finally, Ramen-Alien dropped the act. His features rearranged themselves into a sort of resigned indifference, the kind accumulated through eons of living among a different race, with different values and ideals, different strengths and weaknesses, and watching as humanity unfailingly self-destructed. "I would insult both of us if I asked how you came by this knowledge."

"But please do not pretend to understand how heavy—"

Yeah, no. Naruto had heard enough five minutes ago. Now this was just piling bullshit on more bullshit. "Don't even try to justify it with some bullshit reason about saving Mother Earth. Nothing is worth ruining people's lives for."

Ramen-Alien sighed that quiet, weary sigh, reminiscent of that sacrifices-must-be-made and balance-must-be-maintained spiel Aria had once recited, only Ramen-Alien wholeheartedly supported it. "What would you have had me do?"

Naruto sighed, too, his I-can't-believe-I-have-to-explain-it-to-you sigh. "If your way is hurting people, then you find another way. And if there's no other way, then you make one. Simple as that."

"Ah." A chuckle, tired and soft, but rough in places. Ramen-Alien cupped his cheek and leaned against the counter, gazing at him as he spoke with this wistful edge to his voice. "I envy the tenacity of mortals, their resolve to preserve life when they fathom the gravity of it. I could never quite grasp from where that unshakable belief stemmed. Immutable as death, such strength of will,
but perhaps that is the way of things as well. Who knows? Souls might be eternal, it might only be memories that pass into oblivion. Pity it has become such a rare trait these days."

Inwardly, Naruto facepalmed, while Kurama growled, a surly stop-stealing-Father's-lines expression on his face.

After maybe two minutes of stilted silence, Naruto coughed and said, drier than Suna's desert, "Flattery will get you nowhere."

Ramen-Alien smiled, a faint twist of lips, as if amused by Naruto's how-to break-awkward-silences-with-inappropriate-humor proficiency. Still humored him, though, because he had years of experience when it came to indulging mortals and their silliness. "I'm happily married."

"But does your third wife feel the same?"

"'Til death do us part."

"Then it's time for wife number four, right? Man, are you the poster boy for 'make love, not war'."

"What can I say? I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Funny thing, that." Naruto's fox-like grin promised lots of fun was in store for Ramen-alien, the Night of the Living Dead kind of fun. "You see, there are some people who've been dying to fight you for ages now, they'll be so disappointed..."

"That was in bad taste," Ramen-Alien drawled out, still faintly amused, "even worse than your taste in ramen." But getting the point and going along with it, probably because he could vamoose any time he felt like it if things got ugly.

"I resent that," Naruto scoffed, jutting his chin out, "my puns are awesome."

"But do the Vindice feel the same?"

"Why don't we ask them, hm?"

"If we must."

"Good answer, lover boy."

"I try, pig lover."

It was smooth sailing from there on. Naruto suggested Baby-Kabuto's mansion as their place of meeting, in two days' time, to which Ramen-Alien agreed without fuss.

As they paid and stood to leave, Ramen-Alien smiled. "My name is Kawahira. I rather enjoyed meeting you."

Naruto could tell he meant it, and well, the honest truth was, "Name's Naruto. I'd like to say it was nice meeting you, but that'll depend on where things go from here."

Ramen-Alien seemed to know that, too. With one last rueful smile, he vanished into thin air. Naruto banged his head against the counter. Had to be a fucking genjutsu monster alien, huh? Just his luck.

Now, how to break the news to Baby-Chief?
"Sawada Tsunayoshi."

Naruto wanted to sigh, but didn't. Calling out his full name had become Baby-Chief's standard greeting, but he was the man who didn't know the meaning of giving up, so he persevered with his usual greeting. A beaming grin and a challenge. "Sticking with the whole name thing, huh? One of these days, Bermuda-san…"

"Perhaps." Baby-Chief's cat-like head slant followed right on schedule, along with the cold side of mirth and references (more like digs) to Ieyasu. "Bear in mind your ancestor failed in this particular endeavor."

Kinda bugged, but not taking it to heart, because that was just how the zombie-baby was, Naruto pointed his thumb at his chest. "Naruto, not Ieyasu, say it with me." Of course, Baby-Chief did no such thing, and Naruto went on as if he had. Like usual. "Anyway, don't freak out, but I might have sorta stumbled on that asshole we talked about the first time we met?"

And oh, Ramen-Alien might actually miss the movie premiere, because Naruto had first row seats and he hadn't even paid to watch Night of the Living Dead.

"Where?" A cracked, rasping breath, a lattice of shrieking, writhing chains, shadow and fire, death and gripping, bitter loathing.

"A ramen restaurant." And he laughed, boisterous and come on, laugh with me, I know you want to. Baby-Chief did not laugh. Naruto kept laughing as he watched the closing credits, which extended for almost ten minutes. "Look, I'm not kidding, promise. I even got him to agree meeting with you and…discussing your…past grievances, but he gave me the impression he's just humoring us. Asshole's just that type of wily bastard. Also his taste in ramen sucks. So, hear me out!" He clapped his hands, loud and echoing and trust me, I know what I'm doing. "I have a master plan."

Baby-Chief's silence betrayed the degree of his faith in Naruto's skill at foiling alien trickster gods and masterminding shit—deader than his zombie gang.

"C'mon, man, you gotta work with me here. I'll, uh…fuck, wait, I know—I'll throw you an awesome party, hell yeah, it'll be a royal feast! Jager and Jack and the entire force are invited! We can make it a my-people-meet-your-people kinda thing! I've been waiting to meet the rest of your crew since last summer!"

"—or, or gimme a sec, need to think…aha! You can join our worldwide tour with Gesso! Ran-chan'll totally love it if you come with us! And you can, maybe, ya know, sunbathe and keep order and arrest shitty mafia dudes and fun stuff like that! All over the world!"

"—bastard's not gonna stick around for an epic beat-down, alright, that's just not him. Who knows when we'll get a chance like this again? So just…just let me do the talking? At least until he agrees to our terms about the whole Trinisette mess. And if it doesn't work out, you can try it your way. Deal?"

Naruto's plan was so obvious it should have been filed under Stupidest Ideas Ever. In theory, academy kids could have seen through it. In practical application, plans of this nature always worked. Or at least they did for him. Because nobody expected his fucked up logic or his penchant for using prank jutsu on psycho alien gods during apocalyptic crises. It was the shock factor that
usually got them, that single moment of fucking glorious surrealism, that you can't be serious and am I seeing this shit right now and what the fuck, dude. As he kept reminding everyone—cough, Sasuke, cough—Kaguya had once fallen for his Sexy Reverse Harem jutsu.

So it was after they had gotten all the bad blood out of the way, after Baby-Chief had cussed Ramen-Alien out in all the languages he knew (and he knew a fucking lot), after Ramen-Alien had skimmed through Naruto's ideas for substituting the pacifiers with self-sustaining fire-chakra sources and Baby-Kabuto's notes on how to go about doing that, after they had all agreed to give it a fucking try and Baby-Chief had vacated the premises and Ramen-Alien was about to pull a disappearing act, that Naruto said, grinning and deceptively carefree, "And where do you think you're going?"

Ramen-Alien, that poor, confused soul, blinked. "Home to my lovely wife?"

"Yeah, about that." Naruto faked a sympathetic wince, dragging out the words. "The Vindice might be satisfied with just seizing your toys—" No, not really. Naruto's throat had been a raw, bleeding mess by the time Baby-Chief relented, which made for the cherry on top of this clusterfuck. "—but I won't be until I give you the ass-kicking you deserve." A bloodthirsty look flitted across his face, spiraled into his grin, eager and cunning like the revenge of a kitsune. "Ironic, isn't it?"

Ramen-Alien faked a pained smile. "Can we not—"

Naruto's grin grew fangs. "Loser has to admit his taste in ramen sucks."

Ramen-Alien did a one-eighty, all trickster smiles and revved up and ready to throw down, indigo fire-chakra spiking, passing the message you and me, right now, right here, let's do this. "I gladly accept this fight."

Kurama covered his face with his tails, as if deeply embarrassed for this fool, a tell-tale sign his Father might have also fallen for Naruto's bullshit once upon a time. Portals opened throughout the room—coincidentally, the same specially reinforced room Inari was born in—and the V indice glided through in droves, down to the last zombie minion.

"We shall be assisting Konoha as recompense for the debt we owe—" Baby-Chief had a flair for legalese and grandstanding and blue-blooded shit. "—Naruto."

Oh. Naruto's grin was so large it almost split his face in two. I knew you'd come around, Baby-Chief! We're so getting smashed in Sydney this Christmas, hell yeah!

"I believe I shall join as well." Fon's smile was the quintessence of killing-you-calmly. "It is unseemly of a Guardian to stand idle while their Sky fights, after all."

"I will provide support. It will be an excellent opportunity to test out the prototype Mist disruption seals." Baby-Kabuto's mad scientist glee traveled through the speakers, then there was some static and struggling sounds before it swapped places with Shamal's so-done-with-your-bullshit sufferance. "Goddammit, Volpe. Guy's a Mist, you need one to fight one. Count me in."

Ramen-Alien took in Naruto's gung-ho grin, Fon's deathly calm smile, Baby-Chief's space-time fuckery, the zombie minions' rattling chains, assessed the situation and had one thing to say. "You set me up."

Naruto had lots of things to say. "Not so nice when people play mean tricks on you, now is it? Someone has to teach you the difference between a good prank and just being an asshole. Don't worry, I'll buy you ramen after the lesson sinks in."
"You'd better." Ramen-Alien chuckled, dry and edgy, but amused all the same. "I want shio."

Chapter End Notes

Current ages and teams:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Belphégor: 12-13
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, Hayato, Haru, Spanner, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 11-12
Chrome, Shōichi, Byakuran: 10-11
I-pin: 1-2

Team A (led by Shamal): Kyōya, Takeshi, Kyōko
Team B (led by Fon): Hana, Tetsuya, Ryōhei
Team C (led by Naruto/Tsuna): Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Chrome
Team D (led by Verde): Hayato, Haru, Shōichi, Spanner
Chapter 23

Inari appeared in a flash of fire, perched on Naruto's shoulder, nuzzling his neck and yipping in his ear.

Scratching below his jaw, Naruto laughed. "You wanna join the fight, Inari-chan?" An affirmative, thrilled bark. "Alright, but we've got allies and need space to move around, so no higher than four tails, 'kay?"

Just as Inari jumped off, somersaulting high in the air, Ramen-Alien cleared his throat. "Please refrain from recruiting innocent woodland critters." His brows knitted into a stern frown of disapproval. "I don't like hurting small animals."

Naruto tilted his head back, gazing upward, inviting Ramen-Alien to copy his motion—both kept watching as Inari's body grew larger and larger, until it became a mass of blood-red fur, a wild blaze of fire-chakra. The fox landed behind him on all fours, fangs bared in a vulpine grin and tails on fire and casting sweeping shadows across the floor.

Lowering his head, Naruto's gaze connected with Ramen-Alien's, his grin identical to Inari's. "What about large animals?"

Still disapproving, but for different reasons, Ramen-Alien smiled, deadpan. "Now that is just not fair."

"All's fair in love and war."

"Touché."

Naruto ducked under yet another handcrafted-in-the-forges-of-hell weapon—a fucking jagged sawtooth chakram—vaulted over yet another way too human-like doll—a goddamn tall-hatted magician boy—and kept running until he kinda slipped on a hooked screw and skidded to a halt before Baby-Chief who was warping shit like nobody's business.

"Yo, Bermuda," he huffed, catching his breath, "don't take this the wrong way, but your whole crew has a few screws loose."

So far, friendly fire had better chances of doing him in than Ramen-Alien.

Baby-Chief gave him a regal slant of his head. "Fret not," he droned, dare Naruto say it, reassuringly. "We shall retrieve them after the battle has been concluded."

"That's...not what I meant."

Naruto glanced at Fon, hey, man, let's try a Konbi jutsu on the tip of his tongue, then did a double-take, orange fire-chakra fizzling out.

"Oi, Fon, I know we're missing lunch and all, I'm also hungry, man, but are you seriously gonna stop to eat?" Because his Storm Guardian had just whipped out some garlic meat buns like they were in the middle of a picnic or some shit. "Like, right now?"

Fon shot him an unmused stare. "Gyōza-Kempo is a legitimate technique that numbs the brain
and causes involuntary muscle movements." An abiding calm, a renowned martial artist's dignity, say what you will, for you cannot shame me rolling off of him in waves.

"For real? Huh. Can you do the same with—"

"If you say ramen, I will tell my sister it was you who ate her persimmons."

"That was Kyō-chan, and you damn well know it!"

"Do I?" Fon smiled, more like gloated, then took a small bite, rushing forward with an open palm. Grumbling under his breath, Naruto turned away and left Fon to his gyōza nin-taijutsu heresy. Who the hell would look at garlic meat buns and go yeah, so fucking badass, I'mma screw people's brains with this shit? Why not ramen? He wasn't the only one disappointed—from across the room, Ramen-Alien shared a commiserating look with Naruto, before taking Fon's Gyōza Fist head on and shaking it off in less than half a second.

Yeah, see right there? If it was ramen, he could have followed it up with a noodle wire trap or something.

A fucking laser beam singed the tips of Naruto's spiky hair, a little above his right ear, as it passed him by, incinerating the loose sleeve of Shamal's white coat, only stopping when it ran into Jager's warp hole and got swallowed by the abyss.

Scowling, Naruto snarled into his earpiece. "Oi, Verde, why's your mini Death Star targeting me?"

"Apologies, the homing device has been set to target the Flames with the highest degree of purity." Baby-Kabuto's voice was as contrite as it was baffled. "I erroneously assumed that would have been Checker Face's Mist Flames. It will be remedied shortly."

No more was said, but fifteen minutes later, he was sporting a new haircut à la laser coiffure, Shamal's coat was a lost cause, Baby-Chief's fire-chakra was wrapped around his head like a space bubble, and Naruto was snarling into his earpiece again. "It's still targeting me!"

"Apologies, I adjusted it to target the greatest source of Flames." Baby-Kabuto's voice was now more baffled, less contrite, his I'd-love-to-study-what-the-fuck-you-are mad scientist tone. "Another erroneous assumption on my part, it would seem."

"Just...fix it, man, before I erroneously assume it's been taken over by the genjutsu alien." Rasengan forming in one hand, he stared up into the camera with a dark glower. "You won't like what I'll do to it then."

"Understood."

Shamal shook his head, frustrated. "It's no use, Volpe, I can't sense him at all. Just where could he have gone?"

Naruto knew the pervert would get his ass handed to him if he engaged Ramen-Alien in single combat with indigo fire-chakra mindfuckery, but he was a top-notch sensor and damn invaluable when Ramen-Alien fucking transformed the whole room into jungles and deserts and whatnot and played hide-and-seek (and he played it a fucking lot, they'd spent more time sniffing him out than actually fighting him). If Shamal claimed Ramen-Alien wasn't around, then he wasn't around. Problem was, he couldn't have left either, his larger-than-life (ramen) pride wouldn't let him.
With that thought in mind, Naruto turned his focus inward. And grinned. "Somewhere he'll regret ever going." Game over, Ramen-Alien.

Why, hello there, said the fox to the alien, welcome to my parlor.

A low, sadistic purr, breath hot and fanning over Ramen-Alien's face. Naruto lay atop Kurama's head, whistling a jaunty tune, watching the show with a shit-eating grin.

Oh, hello. Ramen-Alien smiled, but it was mechanical, voice reedy and chock-full of shock, beads of sweat clinging to his upper lip. Sorry to have disturbed you. Had I been aware Naruto's mindscape was occupied, I wouldn't have so rudely intruded.

Here, he gave Naruto a black look. Naruto gave him a wave, devil-may-care and mouthing meet Inari's kā-chan, which made Ramen-Alien minutely boggle and balk at the hows and whys of that revelation. Pretty sure that short-circuited the synapses in his brain. Kurama also waved, missing the byplay.

It's no bother. Still low and purring, sadistic glee carved into his vocal cords. I enjoy entertaining visitors, I assure you.

Yes, well... Coughing over his fist, Ramen-Alien wiped sweat off his skin, trying to backtrack while seeming nonchalant. I believe I'll be taking my leave now.

No, please, stay. One of Kurama's gigantic hands came down lightning-fast, trapping Ramen-Alien between his clawed index and middle fingers, red fire-chakra bubbling up, winding around Ramen-Alien's ankles and keeping him grounded. I insist.

I'd love to, but I'm afraid I can't—

Ramen-Alien rambled on, sorta quietly frantic, in a state of low-key panic, indigo fire-chakra attacking the fox's chakra to no avail. Alien trickster god he might be, but he was no Ōtsutsuki and thus stood no chance in hell against the crushing pressure of Kurama's undiluted bijū chakra. As far as Naruto knew, in a battle of raw chakra, only the Uzumaki Chains or the Mokuton could go toe-to-toe with that. For the record, Ramen-Alien had no such illustrious ancestry.

—places to go, humans to trick, you know how it is.

Aliens to eat, Kurama tagged on, a deep, malicious laugh and a snapping of teeth, yes, I do know.

Let's not?

Oh, let's.

Ramen-Alien's last resort was sending Naruto a pitiful help-me-my-comrade-in-ramen plea. Naruto's reply was uproariously laughing in his face.

Baby-Chief, Fon, and Baby-Kabuto gave new meaning to the phrase 'kicking someone when he's down', as evidenced by the epic ass-kicking they delivered when Kurama oh-so-gently spat Ramen-Alien out. At the speed of light, too. Like, one moment there was a black meteor fall and a red dragon fire dance and a raging bolt of green thunder, all meshing in a vortex of holy motherfucking shit, the next Naruto blinked, and it was over.

Standing over Ramen-Alien's bruised, charred, sliced, worn out body, Naruto grinned and extended
his arm. "Say it."

Ramen-Alien clasped his elbow, wincing as Naruto pulled him up to his feet, chuckling in between pained, breathy gasps. "Must I?"

"You ain't leaving 'til you say it."

Naruto wasn't an asshole though, so Ramen-Alien wasn't leaving until he was semi-healed either. No need to scare his poor third wife half to death, coming home like he'd just fought a titan battle and lost. It didn't matter if he could just conceal everything under an illusion. Unsealing his medical supplies, Naruto started disinfecting visible wounds and bandaging this and that and being the bitchy nurse Ramen-Alien never wanted but ended up getting anyway.

Ramen-Alien wore the face of someone who just wanted to get this over with, go home to his lovely wife and have ten bowls of shio ramen, forget this ever happened or he'd ever met Naruto. But not really.

A sigh, defeated, as if the pain from losing their bet was worse than the pain racking his body. "My taste in ramen leaves much to be desired."

"You're damn right it does." Naruto beamed, then flooded him with yellow fire-chakra, letting him direct it to his internal injuries. "Ramen next Sunday?"

Despite the sting in his split lips, Ramen-Alien smiled, his you-amuse-me-mortal-so-I'll-indulge-you smile. "Well, you did promise to pay. Don't complain when the bill comes."

Naruto snorted, and yeah, he might have bandaged Ramen-Alien's left arm a bit too tight. "Please, you got nothing on me."

Ramen-Alien's bicep flexed in protest, smile becoming sharp, challenging. "Shall we put it to the test?"

"You're on." Naruto slapped him on the back, but not too hard, a light, friendly tap. Once he finished playing bitchy nurse, he sealed what supplies remained unused and grinned, getting one last dig in. "By the way, Kurama says you can visit him any time you want."

The cutting edge to Ramen-Alien's smile dissolved in a fragment of a second. A dull, mechanical thing took its place. "I will keep it in mind."

Naruto huffed a laugh. "You do that."

"Think we finally got it right?"

Naruto surveyed the newest version of the Trinisette device closely—seven interconnected rings, based on the design of the Olympic flag, each ring a hollow vessel, large as a satellite dish, and engraved with a sealing formula.

"Yes, I believe it should function without issue now, provided the Vindice Arcobaleno is amenable to the idea of supplying his Flame of Night."

Baby-Kabuto's voice held a mixture of amazement and fragile hope. Hidden behind thin, round lenses, purple eyes roved over the rings with a sort of hungry desperation that Naruto could see all too clearly.
"Yeah, no problem. Bermuda's not the type to go back on his word."

Baby-Kabuto's gaze slid away from the device, slow and reluctant, as if the moment he took his eyes off of the miracle he beheld, it might disappear along with the blueprints. He chose to stare at Naruto instead, who was in and of himself a miracle, a living, breathing irregularity, the single variant he could never explain, aberrant yet integral to the equation.

(No, really, Baby-Kabuto had drawn diagrams and charts and mathematical shit that quantified the fuckery Naruto's existence had brought into his life ever since he entered it. Insolvable was triple circled in neon green ink at the bottom of each sheet.)

"It was truly ingenious of you, though."

"Eh, it was pure logic." Naruto shrugged, because it wasn't that genius, just a natural thought process for those who studied fūinjutsu. Ero-sennin, that incurable pervert, could have come up with the general concept even half-drunk with his face buried between a lusty pair of thighs. "No offense, but the Arcobaleno are basically living chakra batteries. In the end, you're bound to run out of chakra and die. If you wanna have something last forever, then you gotta seal it and mess with space-time. Can't run out if it's trapped and constantly being cycled through warp holes, now can it? Bermuda's fire-chakra has that unique ability. Sorta ironic, yeah?"

"True." Baby-Kabuto gave a minuscule nod, falling silent, contemplative. Minutes passed before he opened his mouth to voice a pointed, begrudging question. "Still, do you think it wise entrusting this matter to Checker Face?"

This…made for the fourth person to ask. Naruto sighed, and told Baby-Kabuto what he had told Fon. And Baby-Chief. And Aria.

"He's the Administrator, so he gotta be the one to do it. Not only will it sound believable coming from him, but it also covers up our involvement. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm glad they're gonna be free of this curse, but the truth is…" Naruto's gaze seared right through the glass that obscured Baby-Kabuto's eyes, absolute honesty and look at me, this is who I am, this is what I care for. "I did it for you. I did it for Fon, for Aria and her baby girl. I did it for Bermuda and our family."

Baby-Kabuto swallowed thickly, but didn't draw his gaze away, kept staring, struggling to understand the emotional intricacies beneath the surface. "What relevance do your motives hold? The end result is all that matters."

"Nah, you don't get it. What I'm trying to say here is…" Naruto paused, deliberating how to articulate his reasoning. When he spoke again, he was careful with his choice of words, but not shying away from hard truths. "Kawahira, while being an asshole and going about it the wrong way, did his damn job right. Even if I hadn't found another way, the planet would have kept on going 'cause of his Trinisette system, so it's not like we saved the world. We just saved a few people, and yeah, that matters to me and you and them, but apart from that, did we really change anything in the grand scheme of things?"

A grimace marred Baby-Kabuto's face, as if he had just bitten into something sour, but instead of spitting it out, he swallowed it whole. "I concede your point."

Naruto knew how much that hurt to admit—he hated it, too, people's lives weren't toys, shouldn't be fodder for the world's survival. He smiled to ease away the hurt in his truth, to break apart the acid in Baby-Kabuto's stomach.
"There's no need to get more involved than we've already been. I'm not trying to hide what we did, but I'm not gonna come out and take credit for it either. What difference will it make? They don't owe me anything, so they shouldn't feel like they do."

A pondering silence, still staring, tracing the framework of his decisions, the base elements of his character, what made Naruto tick. Then, "Your thought processes are...quite fascinating."

There was, indeed, quite a bit of fascination in his voice, glasses blindingly glinting, and dammit, Baby-Kabuto, we were having a moment here. Don't ruin it with your mad scientist alter ego. Naruto sucked in a breath, kinda amused, kinda irked, all warm exasperation and you awkward bastard. "Now I feel like you just wanna dissect my brain or something. You need to work on your compliments, man."

Baby-Kabuto blinked. "Oh."

Naruto hummed. "Yeah."

"That was not my intention." Fidgeting with his glasses, hella uncomfortable, Baby-Kabuto fell back into old habits. "Although, I would be happy to conduct a series of psychometric tests."

And yeah, mad science mode going at full throttle, social norms be damned, because if something couldn't be measured in known numerical values—like, say, five point three kilograms of tact—it was of little import (read: unfathomable) to Baby-Kabuto. "You also need to work on your jokes."

"I rarely jest."

"Sadly, I do know, but good interpersonal communication says you gotta in this case."

Blink. "Oh."

Hum. "Yeah."

Then, "How?"

It was, Naruto realized after taking the time to think it through, not only a legitimate question, but one of those with no right or wrong answer. What worked for him, might not necessarily work for Baby-Kabuto. Also, since when was life coaching babyfied grown-ass men in his job description? But eh, what the hell, he'd done a pretty bang up job raising his little ducklings so far. How hard could it be?

Naruto shrugged, winging it. "Fake it 'til you make it?"

And, lo and behold, under Naruto's encouragement, Baby-Kabuto imbibed that profound piece of advice, taking his first baby step in freestyle funnies.

"I have zero interest in your illogical, yet morally outstanding, thought processes." A...backhanded compliment, maybe, wrapped in a jibe, or what constituted as one in the language Baby-Kabuto spoke. "From a scientific standpoint, that is."

Which, okay, lame, but B-plus for carrying out a textbook dramatic pause before the punchline.

"Thanks, man." Naruto flashed him a sunny smile and a thumbs up. "See, that's how you do it!"

Baby-Kabuto had this bewildered look, as if he had preemptively deemed their social experiment a
failure and didn't know what to do with success. So Naruto glomped him.

Sad thing was, that awkward bastard didn't know what to do with human contact either. Except, "Is being excessively tactile a prerequisite for building healthy interpersonal relationships?"

Christmas in Australia was…summer-ish.

Giglio Nero had surprised them with their last minute decision to tag along, but they were a welcome addition, especially since Gamma covered for Shamal—pervert had gone off on a beach bender—by resuming captaincy of Team A while they were cavorting in the wild. Little brats (mostly the Kyō duo) wanted to go on an Australian bird safari. Team C had similar ideas of a venomous creatures/poisonous plants gathering expedition, which Aria was gracious enough to lead in Naruto's stead. Team B was sightseeing while Fon was teaching I-pin how to swim—Ryōhei had loudly rhapsodized over the joys of shark cage diving but had been outvoted—and Team D was studying the climate change with the ultimate goal of writing an expository essay on global warming.

And Naruto…Naruto was with Byakuran, Inari curled around his shoulders, Baby-Chief riding on top of his head, roaming the streets on a ramen quest, sampling Australian delicacies, and beating the shit out of any scumbag they randomly encountered. Case in point, a little runt just ran out of an alley and smack into Naruto's knees, being chased by three mafia thugs—they were wearing pinstripe suits, also cursing in Italian, couldn't get more mafia than that—glancing up at him for the merest second, honey-brown eyes wide and cheeks tear-streaked, then diving behind Naruto's legs and latching onto the fabric of his pants with a death grip.

"Where did that little shit go?"

"Fuck, Boss will skin us alive if we lose him again."

"Hey, isn't that the brat—"

"Looking for me?" Naruto sing-songed, which prompted Byakuran's garbled, "Or mee?" around a mouthful of cotton candy sorbet, and Baby-Chief rattling off, "Sabbatini, small famiglia stationed in Palermo, two previous minor infractions. What is the reason for your presence in Sydney?"

Silence, and three terror-filled stares directed at Baby-Chief. Naruto's patience broke when the boy's hiccups intensified, his grip trembling even as it became tighter.

"Oi, Spaghetti dudes!"

"We're the Sabbatini famiglia!" they shot back in unison, their Vindice-induced paralysis infinitesimally allayed, bodies shaking half in fear, half in anger.

"Whatever," Naruto snorted, rolling his eyes, "you're still weak noodles. Now answer the damn question before I make meatballs outta you all."

"I'll add the tomato sauce!"

Byakuran was grinning and holding up a bottle of ketchup—like, seriously, from where?—but Baby-Chief had other ideas and even less patience than Naruto.

"The ingredients are rotten to the core," thus spoke Baby-Chief as he passed judgment on the dregs of pasta mafia, wrapping it up with one command of, "Jager."
Again in unison, and total fear, "Wait, we can explain!"

"It matters naught." Baby-Chief was unmoved, Jager's chains already on the prowl, despite the pasta mafia trio's pathetic attempts at evasion. Damn, Jager sure worked fast. "You are hereby charged with aggravated stalking, second degree kidnapping, and solicitation of a minor for immoral purposes."

"Second degree?"

"Solici-what?"

"We're not child molesters!"

"Five years in Vendicare should cure you of such depraved inclinations. If you display exemplary behavior, you will become eligible for a parole hearing and may be able to secure an early release. Take them away, Jager."

While they were being dragged kicking and screaming through the portal, Naruto hollered, "We're having barbecue on the beach tonight, Jager. Don't forget to tell the others!"

In the middle of chain-gagging them, Jager paused for a moment, a we'll-totally-be there dip of his head, then the portal closed.

"So, kid." Turning to the sniffling boy, Naruto gently unlatched him from his pants and ruffled his hair, waiting as the runt dried off his tears with the back of his sleeve. "Why were they chasing you?"

"They wanted information on Konoha," he mumbled, cheeks red and puffy as his eyes. Wait, what? Was this runt for real? What in the name of ramen would make those pasta morons think this six-year-old was a super spy agent? Naruto gave him a slow once-over, up and down, lingering on his stick-like limbs and big doe-eyes and cuteness-is-me face, and yeah, he was still not seeing it. "And they thought you had it?"

Byakuran, who had finished his sorbet and was now sucking on his gelato stick, suddenly perked up. "Oh, I know you! You're that new kid who's supposed to rank stuff, umm, Fu something something stars—no, wait, stars...hoshi? Eureka!" He pointed his gelato stick at the embarrassed boy, purple eyes gleaming in victory, and pronounced, all pizzazz and drama and bow-to-my-genius, "Fu Manchu Hoshimanjaro!"

In a complete turnabout, the boy's expression went flat, eyes narrowed into slits, voice cold and clipped. "It's Fūta de la Stella."

Not that it registered with Byakuran, who thought being the brainchild of a fictional villain and a volcanic mountain was a great honor, and who was ostensibly very proud of himself for coming up with that bullshit name.

"That's what I said." No shame whatsoever, grinning, poking the boy's chest with his gelato stick. "Fū-chan!"

A deep blush spread over the boy's features, ears burning, almost steaming.

"Let me guess," Naruto cut in before baby villain Mount Fū erupted, diverting Byakuran's attention with a chocolate bar. "You ranked us, liked what you saw, decided we could offer you protection, and told those guys where we'd be, so they'd bring you here. How does that even work?"
Still flushed, but shyly smiling, Fūta ducked his head while peeking up at him. "I ranked where you'd want to go on a Christmas vacation this year, then told them you were too far away to make any accurate rankings."

"And the noodles bought it. Smart thinking, kid."

Chuckling, Naruto ruffled his hair, which Fūta apparently interpreted as an adoption pitch.

"So, you'll take me in?"

Boy, was he all doe brown eyes, large and glimmering with hope, and oh, maybe they'd make an infiltration specialist out of him yet, the potential was definitely there. Naruto hummed, but it was pretty much a done deal by now. Kid had tracked them down all the way to Australia, for sage's sake. What else was there to say besides, "You got no family?"

A head shake, sad but firm. "Nobody who cares."

Well, "Alright then, Fū-chan. Welcome to the family. We've got—"

Naruto never got to finish, because Byakuran decided that flinging himself at the boy was an excellent way of burying the hatchet and welcoming him to the allied family. "Ne, ne, Fū-chan!" Draped over Fūta's shoulders with no regard for personal space or the boy's reddening, smoking ears, he chirped, "What's my number one ranking?"

It was perhaps retaliation on his part when, contrary to the explosion Naruto anticipated was due any moment now, Fūta calmed down, inhaled deep in his lungs and nodded—then his face blanked. And the universe glitched. Like, there were stars in his eyes and zero gravity and interplanetary radio shit.

"Gesso Byakuran is ranked number one most likely to take over the world with an army of marshmallow fluff."

And to that, all Naruto could say was, "Sounds about right."

Baby-Chief, on the other hand, was a staunchly pragmatic man, and thus more concerned about the current universe glitch than Byakuran's future stint as a marshmallow dictator. Also, he might have been a tad pissed off that his beloved hat was floating away. "No further rankings shall be attempted without our consent."

A black chain swayed in front of the boy's face like a rattlesnake before it flew off in pursuit of his hat.

Fūta gulped. "S-sure."

By seven-thirty the beach party was in full swing. Naruto was about to switch with Fon, since it was his turn to work the grill, when Gamma grabbed the karaoke mic and cleared his throat. "May I have your attention please?"

What followed was eighty minutes of pomp and show, Teams A through D taking turns and demonstrating the depths of Gamma's devotion via war dances, Shakespearean plays, circus acts, and amateur films, ending with Gamma getting down on one knee, a diamond ring, and a hormonal Aria bursting into tears.

"'Bout damn time! Congrats!" Naruto expressed his joy at the news with a hearty I'm-so-happy-for-
you hug for Aria and by shoving a here-have-a-well-done-sausage hot dog down Gamma's throat. "You sure went all out, man."

"Actually," Gamma managed to spit out once he stopped choking, "I did very little all told. The girls planned the whole thing and the boys did the heavy lifting." Catching the beer bottle Naruto threw at him, he paused to uncork it and shrugged. "I just…popped the question?"

Naruto laughed as they clinked their bottles. "She's gonna pop out your baby, so I'd say you did a hell of a lot."

"Tell me about it." Gamma groaned, but he was smiling when he raised his beer, kept smiling even while taking a swig. "Speaking of which—"

"Naruto-kun!" Aria all but leaped onto his lap, knocking the wind out of him, and damn, were pregnant women like a force of nature. "You'll be the godfather, right?"

"Huh?" Out of breath, Naruto steadied himself while she made herself comfortable, trying to process her words. When it finally sank in, his mind was blown away. "You want me—"

"Well, of course. Who else, you silly man?" The way she was laughing at him, amused, knowingly, told him he was an idiot for thinking he'd dodged this seer fathering business, oh, no, one way or another, he was gonna be her baby daddy. "Gamma and I want the best for our baby girl. In case it wasn't clear enough, that means you."

Naruto was so fucking touched he could cry. No, really, he kinda was. "I'm…honored."

Gamma held up a hand. "Wait, don't cry just yet." Grabbing the camera, he turned on the flash and gave him the go ahead. "Okay, now."

Naruto's brow arched drily. "Blow me."

"Only if I get to watch," was Aria's sole stipulation.

Gamma spluttered, red-faced and glaring at Naruto as if he was mentally willing him to self-combust, because blaming his pregnant fiancée was a big no-no. "See what you've created?"

"Who're you kidding, dude?" His mouth split in a wickedly crooked grin. "Aria's always been sex on legs." Aria chortled. Naruto patted her thigh, all the while shooting Gamma a you-still-have-much-to-learn look. "Don't worry, we got your back. We'll throw you an awesome bachelor party, trust me, you'll learn all sorts of kinky—"

A beer bottle came hurtling toward his head. "I hate you, kid."

Leaning to the side, Naruto laughed. "I know you love me deep down. Also, now you gotta pick that up. No littering." Gamma grumbled about the cheekiness of the new generation, but did so. Naruto nudged Aria's leg as they watched him clean up after everyone while simultaneously berating them. "Have you thought of a name yet?"

She smiled that unbearably tender smile she'd once given him two years ago, taking his hand and placing it on the bulging curve of her abdomen. Her other hand closed around the orange pacifier she still wore as a reminder of what they had gone through to get where they now were. Her daughter would hear the story, yes, but she would never bear the burden of it.

"Mhm, Yuni."
It was around the time she should start making her presence known, Naruto thought as he tried to feel her, a light caress, a promise. "Yuni-chan, this is your awesome godfather. I can't wait to meet you, so hurry up and come. I'm gonna teach you how to kick ass and have fun, believe it."

Gamma, who had come back from picking up the trash just in time to catch the end of Naruto's speech, shook his head in despair. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Yuni chose that precise moment to kick. Naruto grinned. "Too late."
Yuni was born on the eve of May Day like something out of pagan lore, all joyful cries and flowers tattooed on her skin and fires burning away the dark of the night to pave the way for her arrival.

It was love at first sight for Naruto, and everyone else, down to the last Giglio Nero member. She was passed around and welcomed home, being cooed over and receiving all sorts of blessings—Byakuran won that contest hands down when he promised her queenship in his marshmallow-conquered world—and many, many cutey endearments—Kyōya won this one when he bestowed upon her the title Little Karasu-ageha for the color of her eyes, which Kyōko shortened to Ageha-chan.

When it was his turn, Naruto smiled down at her sleeping face as he slowly dragged his fingers along the smooth baby-skin of her cheek. And promised her all that her heart desired. Somehow, he thought she heard him.

There was some minor debate about her last name since the proud parents were still engaged. Aria chose vanity over love and dug her heels in, refusing to walk down the aisle until she could fit back into her old clothes, so the wedding was scheduled for the week following after the second Chūnin Exams.

(She didn't ask for Gamma's opinion. Neither did Naruto when he proclaimed himself his best man and went all out with the preparations for his bachelor party. Actually, nobody took the groom's quite vocal objections into account. And he had many.)

Champagne glass in his hand, sprawled out across his throne chair, Naruto gazed down at the arena. The Chūnin Exams stadium was three quarters full by now, a ring of enthused roars and suit-clad bodies, infused with the zest of competition and pandemonium. He guessed it'd become full after people were done placing last minute bets. The contestants' profiles were displayed on the central screen for that reason. Except for the brand-new gambling option and the reworked fūinjutsu catalogue, nothing had changed—including the universe pissing on his party via ear-splitting, blade-swinging, pissed off Sword-Psycho.

"Voi! Ramen-Trash! I've got a bone to pick with you."

Naruto sighed and gave his glass a slow twist. "Yeah? What about?"

"Bel's fucking demon of a pet!" Squalo fell into a sort of luxurious sprawl, pouring himself a glass of champagne, though the intensity of his glare contradicted his languid posture. "Brat's been keeping his mouth shut, which is another thing that pisses me off, but I know it was you who gave him that Siamese hellcat. Half the Storm division's been mauled to death by that thing! My desk is cluttered with transfer requests! If this keeps up, only the senior agents will be left by the end of the year."

"For fuck's sake, Sword-Psycho." Naruto threw his head back and tossed his drink down his throat, drowning his groan of pure frustration in champagne. Screw that loud bastard and his propensity for dramatics and long-winded speeches and bold-as-you-fucking-please endgames. "You know what? We're not fucking doing this again. Let's skip the hour-long drama and get to the damn
point, yeah?" Refilling his glass, Naruto looked at him squarely, no-nonsense and fed up and cut the crap, you goddamn Kisame rip-off. "You want one."

Caught aback by his so-done-with-your-drama attitude, Squalo's eyes bulged, jaw dropping. After a few seconds of gaping like a fish, he clicked his tongue, giving in with a forced nod. "Tch. You bet your ass I do."

"Okay, look. How should I put this?" Naruto rubbed his chin between two fingers, biting back his instinctive response that basically amounted to too bad, so sad, you ain't getting one. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected Squalo's request, but he'd been hoping Shamal would somehow wind up dealing with the Varia since he more or less handled all the diplomatic shit. Problem was, Naruto sucked at letting people down gently, not to mention Squalo wasn't the sort of person to go down without a hell of a fight. Least he could do was give the bastard something real.

"Despite your goddamn fetish for theatrics, oddly enough, I kinda like you, which is the only reason I'm willing to do business with the Varia at all, but fire-chakra summons are a precious commodity." His gaze clashed with Squalo's in a battle of wills as he all but demanded to know, "What makes you think I'll sell you one?"

Squalo seemed to be more prepared this time. Words flowed from his mouth smooth and calm as lake waters. "Voi. I'll admit, for a new blood, you're surprisingly good with counter-intelligence shit." A pause, a violent ripple. "But not that good." Squalo stared at him hard, truth in his eyes, ringing in his voice. "Who do you think has been keeping Vongola and the big names in the dark about your little famiglia?"

So it was you. And yeah, he'd had his suspicions for a while now, because no matter how useless Iemitsu had been in regards to home security, Naruto wasn't fool enough to assume he was dead incompetent or that the same applied for the whole of CEDEF. Only he hadn't quite counted on the Varia jumping in like a fucking ANBU in shining armor and saving the kunoichi in distress.

He closed his eyes, pressed the heel of his palms against his lids and exhaled slowly, speaking past clenched teeth. "I never asked you—"

"I know," Squalo was quick to cut him off with an amused huff, "but despite your soft-as-fuck mentality, oddly enough, I kinda like you, Ramen-Trash." Which he regretted saying as soon as it slipped from his lips, judging by how he choked on his spit, strangled by his own laughter, and boy, he couldn't do suave and cool (even parroting Naruto who was the king of awesome) if his life depended on it. Probably why next thing to come out of his mouth was a lame (read: painfully obvious) attempt to cover his ass. "Bel's been…fuck, he's more stable than he's ever been, and that's saying something."

"Really now?" Naruto quirked a brow, vindictively entertained, sarcasm dripping from the tip of his tongue. "Cause, correct me if I'm wrong, but I could have sworn you said the exact opposite when you barged in."

"Fuck off, Ramen-Trash." A scoff, but there was no heat in it, more habitual than anything. Squalo floundered for a moment, then rallied again, sticking to his guns and building his defense around that lame excuse. "My point is, your famiglia's been good for the bratty prince, so I repaid the favor the only way I knew how. I wouldn't have brought it up either, but CEDEF's started to realize someone's been feeding them misinformation. Sawada-Trash might be a fucking useless moron, but Lal Mirch isn't. If Mammon wasn't as good as he is at ferreting out spies, we'd have been infested with rats years ago."

Yup, called it. Naruto memorized that name—Lal Mirch, sounded strangely familiar, where had he
heard it before?—pushing his stray thoughts aside and focusing on Squalo, who had gone miles beyond his comfort zone, but kept prattling on, an incessant string of words that made little to no sense outside of context. It was quite a sorry sight, really.

"I'm not asking—look, I just…things haven't been the same ever since the Ninth iced Xanxus. We need an edge over CEDEF. Hell, Mammon even agreed to pay any price you name. That shitty miser's loosened up after the curse got broken, which let me tell you, is weird as hell and seven shades of wrong—"

Naruto sat up straight and snapped his fingers mere inches from Squalo's face. "Whoa, back up, hold on a minute, what do you mean iced?"

It was the wrong thing to ask, because Squalo almost bit his fingers off, unmitigated wrath on his face, snarling and spitting mad and swinging his sword around. "Exactly what it fucking sounds like. There's some bullshit Sky technique Primo passed down that can literally freeze you in time, not that it's any of your fucking business."

Yeah, no. Naruto's arm shot forward faster than the eye could trace—his hand wrapped around the middle of the blade, fingers gripping tight, dismissing the sharp bite of metal as it heated under the smoldering pressure of his fire-chakra. Kiddie gloves were off. Sympathy or no sympathy, he couldn't let that shit slide. Leaning in close to impress the gravity of the situation on the enraged man, Naruto set him straight.

"You're gonna make it my fucking business if I sell you fire-chakra summons and you use them to finish what you started seven years ago." Squalo's shock showed in the widening of his eyes, in the way he recoiled as if burned to the bone, and Naruto snorted, releasing his sword. "Please, I'm not an idiot, s'not the first time I've seen how this goes."

"Voi." His verbal tic sounded hoarse, shaken, seething with suppressed emotion. His Adam's apple rose and fell as Squalo swallowed his rage, temper cooling down, and scrutinized him, seeking the origins of this sudden confrontation. Naruto would admit, as far as Squalo was aware, it had come out of the blue. "I still don't see why it matters to you."

Well, the cat was out of the bag now, so there was no point in hiding things, might as well cut him some slack.

"How about this? I'll cut you a deal." Naruto locked eyes with him, his stare heavy with intent, his offer sure-spoken and final. A peace offering. "You don't touch Federico di Vongola, and I'll make an exception for your division commanders, but only them."

As predicted, it deepened Squalo's scrutiny, his curiosity. "Why?"

"Because," a lazy drawl, mirth thrumming low in his throat, and something bitter, disagreeable, "that fucking useless moron you mentioned?"

"Sawada-Trash? What's he got to do with—"

"Happens to be my fucking useless father."

Squalo appeared completely floored. Like, he just blinked and without warning the world tilted out of its axis, shifted into this new, strange reality where pigs could fly, hell had frozen over, and Naruto was Iemitsu's spawn.

"Voooi," he whispered, after he managed to pick up his jaw from the floor, as if modulating his volume would somehow keep it from coming true, keep it contained in the sphere of imagination
and impossible things. "The fuck did you say?"

Naruto snorted with laughter, though a grimace creased his face. "You heard me. It kinda pains me to admit, so don't make me repeat myself."

"You...are Primo's blood." Squalo was liberally muttering to himself, all the while chugging glasses of champagne like he was doing shots. "Fuck me sideways, it all makes sense. I can't believe I fucking missed it." Also vacillating between voice frequencies in an erratic pattern. "Skies like you never come out of nowhere. I fucking knew something felt off about your...everything...since the moment I first laid eyes on you." In the middle of having his ninth glass-shot, his head whipped toward Naruto, champagne spilling down his chin and all over his shirt and pants, caught in the throes of some great epiphany (and possibly half-way buzzed). "Voi. If Federico bites the dust, that means you're next in line."

"Yep. Seeing as I'm the Shodai of Konoha, though..." Indolently, Naruto shrugged, all casual dismissal and no-fucks-given and insolence. "I'd say that ship has sailed."

"The Ninth won't see it that way," Squalo half-slurred, but before Naruto could tell him where Timoteo could stick it, there was a swell of blue fire-chakra and Squalo's face turning stone-cold sober in five seconds flat.

"And I should care, why?" had barely left Naruto's mouth when Squalo looked him straight in the eye and said with the conflicted visage of someone divulging state secrets to a maybe-ally, "We didn't take out Massimo."

Huh. Well, damn. There went his dogs-of-civil-war theory. Still, Naruto believed him—

(The Kiri reject speaks the truth, Kurama rumbled, kicking him out and going back to power napping.)

—so all he had to say was, "No shit?"

Squalo nodded, somber, but greatly relieved, tongue loosening when he detected no censure in Naruto's body language. Naruto refilled his glass to help him along.

"Enrico was, like, an eye for an eye kind of thing, an heir for an heir, you know? But we stopped there. What good would it do to weaken our own famiglia? 'Sides, Enrico would've been a shitty Decimo, too much brawn, not enough brains. Massimo, on the other hand, had the smarts, but he lacked ambition and had no real backbone to speak of. Whenever there was any kind of dissent, he was the first to fold like a house of cards."

Squalo paused for a deep swig of champagne, then continued as if he never stopped.

"Federico's actually not half bad. Unlike the rest of his family, he's never looked down on us. Also, he's the only one who gave a fuck about what happened to our boss. I heard he had a nasty row with the Ninth and they didn't speak for months afterward. He's no Xanxus, but...he's better than nothing."

The expression that twisted Squalo's features betrayed his line of thought, his undying hope. Naruto could even feel it in Squalo's chakra, the loyalty of a right-hand man, that under-his-breath might even unfreeze Xanxus. And, well...he could admire the loud bastard's tenacity, if nothing else, because on a personal level Vongola was turning out to be more trouble than he had previously imagined.

"I hear you, man." Naruto brought the glass to his lips and tipped it back, downing his drink, then
addressed the one thing—*red herring, red alert*, his super intuition screamed like a banshee—that put him on his guard. "But if you didn't take out Massimo, then who did?"

"That's the thing." Squalo shot him a meaningful stare, silver eyes narrow, appreciative, all gleaming edge and *thank fuck, Primo's genes overwrote Iemitsu's.* "Nobody knows."

"Shit." Naruto let out a stream of expletives, cursing his shitty luck. If his useless father had fucked him over, he'd—he didn't yet know what he'd do, but it sure as fuck wouldn't be pretty. "You're not saying—"

"Sawada-Trash did it?" Mercifully, Squalo's reply absolved his useless father from blame, though not all of it (Iemitsu was still a dead man walking). "Nah, not his style. He wasn't a big fan of Massimo, thought him a pathetic excuse of a man—his words, not mine—but he would be the *last* person to sabotage Vongola."

"You're not denying it was CEDEF."

"Pretty damn sure it was. Question is... why?"

Why would someone *supposedly* under Iemitsu's command sabotage Vongola, yeah. Unless it was only this Massimo dude they wanted out of the picture? Then again that was too good to be true. With Naruto's shitty luck, it was probably the former.

"So." Naruto drew in a deep breath, quelling his murderous urges (Iemitsu was gonna fucking die when he next saw him), coming to terms with what the future might—*would*—bring. "Federico might actually bite the dust no matter what." And yeah, a third of this Vongola bullshit was that asshole Xanxus' fault, but he kinda liked Squalo and a deal was a deal. "Thanks for the intel and for covering our tracks. We'll talk numbers after the show's over."

Hearing that, Squalo flashed him a shark-toothed grin, which Naruto really didn't like.

"Voi! Federico's alright on paper, but he's got nothing on your Sky."

"Not gonna happen, Sword-Psycho."

"Just saying, Ramen-Trash."

There was a blur of lights and sounds, eruptions of fire-chakra and fireworks splitting the sky asunder and Aria taking the stage amid the spectacular show. Silence dominated the stadium in the charged moment, but after Aria's opening speech, loud cheers and frenzy.

Naruto observed them with amusement. Squalo opened a new bottle of champagne. Mukuro stole the spotlight—he appeared out of thin air, sat upon a throne of slithering vines, his fire-chakra python—*Lucifer? Really, Kuro-chan? Where did you get that lame naming sense from?*—lazing around his shoulders. That brat, so damn uncute, so getting white chocolate truffles when he won the whole damn thing.

(Mukuro loved all the chocolate. Except white.)

"Holy mother of fuck. I thought your Tinkerbell Mist was the stuff of nightmares, but your creepy Mist brat? That vine... *thing...* is on a whole other level of messed up. Shit's mentally scarred me for life, I'm staying the hell away from fucking flora!"

"Eh, I'm sorta desensitized to Mokuton fuckery and plants trying to kill the shit outta me. Seen too
much of it, y'know? Kuro-chan really likes his sci-fi mindfuck—oi, who're you texting?"

"Mammon needs to take notes of this alien tentacle porn shit."

"So it's your Mist division that's suffering this year?"

"That joke's gotten old, Ramen-Trash."

"For you maybe. Now, c'mon, tell me, what's the real reason?"

"Sawada-Trash's been sticking his nose into our internal affairs for years. Let's see how he likes taking it up the ass for once. Unless you mind—"

"Nope, by all means, give him your worst."

"Voi. You're a fucking bleeding heart for brats, but that right there s'why I like you."

"Still not happening, Sword-Psycho."

"Still just saying, Ramen-Trash."

"Vooi. Just, just what the hell is wrong with your Mist brats? They have got to be the most fucked up Mists I've ever seen. Feels like I'm watching some kind of sugar-addicted mini T&I specialist working on a poor fuck. With illusions. And poison. And—holy shit, that's just not right! There's hitting below the waist and then there's that!"

"It was totally your lightning brat's fault. Stupid boy shouldn't have laughed at her dango sticks and told her girls are only good for baking sweet delights. Anko-chan takes that shit seriously."

"Voi, I'll give you that. Dante deserved it for being a chauvinistic pig, though that's more Levi's fault for infecting the Lightning division with his stupid sexist views, but she went too far!"

"Nah, just skewered him a little bit. You shoulda seen those trafficking assholes we met back in Australia. Anko-chan made s'mores out of their balls before the Vindice could round them up, and trust me, it takes some real skill to outrun Jager's chains."

"I'm swearing off dango for life."

"What the actual fuck? Did your Rain brat's pet penguin spit out a shower of...of ice needles? How? Rain Flames don't work like that—and I should know!"

"Sure they do. Zero-chan just let off a couple of overheated volleys. It's still not legit Hyōton, but if you get the timing right, it comes pretty close to mimicking Ice Release. Hot water freezes faster in mid-air, s'only physics, man—wait, are you actually writing it down?"

"Yeah, keep talking."

"So even your own division sucks balls. You're hopeless, Sword-Psycho."

"When I figure out this Hyōton bullshit, I'm gonna freeze the fuck out of your balls, Ramen-Trash."

"Voi, Ramen-Trash. Just answer me this and I'll shut up."
"That'll be the day. Let's hear it then."

"Did you steal the Sun brat and his freaky team from *Cirque du Soleil* or *Rambo Circus* or what?"

"You know what? Yeah, that's *exactly* where I found them."

"Bullshit. Tell me the fucking truth."

"You can't handle the truth."

"Try me. I once walked in on Luss getting his freak on with his…collection of…pretty little dead things. If that didn't break me, nothing will."

"Alright, you asked for it. Here, have some champagne. This is gonna take a while."

"You'd better not be yanking my chain."

"Shush. Just listen and don't interrupt me. Ahem... It was a warm, sunny day in late June when I received the call that would end up forever changing the mafia world as we know it. Of course, I didn't realize at the time that I was called to usher in a new era of peace and organized chaos."

A tale of captivity and deathless justice, inhuman experiments and tortures, lionhearted children and cursed warriors, blood and vengeance and unsung heroes, and yeah, Naruto might or might have not expanded (read: to full-out Tolkien-and-beyond lengths) and embellished just a tad. It was Kurama's fault, honest. Who told him to recreate the killing intent for special effects? He also might or might have not expected to find a limp mess of a man draped across the velvet throne chair beside his when he finished his glorious summertime saga.

Murmurs fell from Squalo's lips, saliva slavering down his chin, limbs sprawled in awkward angles, eyes dazed, unfocused. His champagne glass had at some point slipped through his fingers and now lay in pieces scattered across the floor.

Naruto kicked the man's leather-clad shin. "Oi, you still there, Sword-Psycho?"

Squalo stirred at the sound of his nickname, raised half-clouded eyes in Naruto's direction, though a little off the mark. A whimper crawled out of his throat, a broken, soulless thing. "... I will shut up now."

Chapter End Notes

Current kids’ ages and teams:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Belphegor: 13-14
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, Hayato, Haru, Spanner, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 12-13
Chrome, Shōichi, Byakuran: 11-12
Fūta: 7-8
I-Pin: 2-3
Yuni: 0-1

Team A (led by Shamal): Kyōya, Takeshi, Kyōko
Team B (led by Fon): Hana, Tetsuya, Ryōhei
Team C (led by Naruto/Tsuna): Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Chrome
Team D: (led by Verde): Hayato, Haru, Shōichi, Spanner
Naruto was regretting his decision to switch teams with Shamal now that Team C had been cleared for higher ranked missions, but not only did the pervert fit in with the circus’ brats better, he had also threatened to retire if he didn't get a break from the Kyō duo and their killer birds soon. Although why he thought killer snakes were the lesser evil was a mystery.

So here he was, his first official A-rank mission with Team A, sitting in the Bovino famiglia's conference room, listening to their braggart don—dubbed Crazy-Afro, because that dude's hair was crazy—as he pontificated about science and monopoly and elitist shit like that, all the while making an awful ass of himself. In short, Bovino was a big fish in a small pond, Crazy-Afro felt threatened by what he had termed a ragtag group of new blood whelps with no respect for tradition, and his brilliant solution was to arrange a meeting where he could showcase his famiglia's technology, throw his weight about, intimidate with veiled threats, and be an all-around schmuck.

It now made perfect sense why Team A had chosen this mission, even though Tetsuya had marked it down as low A-rank, treaty negotiations, requires diplomatic skills, optimal for liaison officers. It was right up Shamal's alley, but more importantly, the type of migraine-inducing bullshit that fell under boring Kage duties. The irony didn't escape Naruto.

Boring as hell or not though, it turned out to be a very good thing Naruto was personally leading this mission, because Crazy-Afro was full of shit. Within an hour of their arrival, while Naruto had been stuck listening to this asshole blathering on about enlightenment and his great-great-great-someone, Team A had infiltrated Bovino's research labs and discovered these tech morons were attempting to reverse-engineer fūinjutsu. Naturally, negotiations broke down right then and there, not that Crazy-Afro had an inkling of just how screwed he was since he hadn't. Stopped. Talking. "—think you can compete with us, you are grossly deluded," Crazy-Afro was saying with an ugly-as-sin sneer, superiority complex radiating from his pores. "Fortunately for you, I am a reasonable man." Not that his subsequent smile was any better. Slimy, revolting, tainted by greed. "It will be a waste of young talent to simply ignore your achievements, meager as they are, and take rather… drastic measures. I believe we can come to an…understanding."

To that enterprising suggestion, Naruto said, "Ah," and gave a low chuckle. Degenerates were the same in every world it seemed. No moral compass, gods no, but an overabundance of rhetoric. "I believe there's been a…misunderstanding. Or miscommunication, whatever you want to call it." Disregarding the way Crazy-Afro's beady eyes flashed with outrage and his spit-covered protests, Naruto plowed through his hissy fit, because he was a firm believer in do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If people treated you like trash, then they obviously wanted to be treated like trash. Equal opportunities and all that. "I'm not here to negotiate with you, Bovino. I'm flat out telling you to stop digging into our business before you dig yourselves into a hole so deep you'll never be able to climb out of."

"—dare you threaten us!" Crazy-Afro was still ranting, lost in his diatribe against impudent youth, panting and sweating like a pig. Or no, scratch that, he'd be insulting pigs if he compared them to this wacko. "Listen here, boy. You haven't been around for long, so you might not know how we do things, but that doesn't excuse your sheer arrogance."
Naruto's brows twitched. Was this dude for real? "Now who's talking nonsense? When did I ever threaten you?"

For a moment, Naruto wondered if Crazy-Afro had even registered what he'd so far said or if he was just that dense, but he needn't have worried. His following rant confirmed Crazy-afro had heard every single word and was fully aware he'd been busted.

"You—you just did! You might as well have said we're digging ourselves an early grave for merely studying your products! If that's not a threat, I don't know what is."

Oh, good. Phew, that was a load off his shoulders. If he'd had to explain why Crazy-Afro was way out of line here to top it all off, he'd have been more than a little pissed off. As it was, Naruto felt mild annoyance and a sharp pang in his temples, which made him wanna resolve this stupid mess pronto. And speaking of swift resolutions, Naruto knew just the guy for the job.

Sighing as if he was addressing an imbecile with no grasp of what he'd brought down on his head—one hundred percent true—Naruto spoke slowly, clearly, leaving no room for misinterpretation. "No, that was a verbal statement of fact, which the Vindice can corroborate."

"What the—" Crazy-Afro began, insulted and haughty as could be, only for his jaw to near dislocate itself in his shock when Baby-Chief tore space apart and landed on Naruto's shoulder.

Huh. Naruto blinked (he had honestly expected Jager or maybe Jack), but took it in stride and crossed his arms, looking down on Crazy-Afro, who had frozen on instinct, the classic flee-or-fight response. Naruto bet he'd just stay frozen for the duration of Baby-Chief's visit.

"Industrial espionage is an illegal practice and punishable by law." Baby-Chief's voice filled the room to capacity. Cold, cultured, perhaps a little amused. "You will cease any such criminal activity effective immediately."

Even undead and chibified, Baby-Chief was so far above Crazy-Afro's station in life that it wasn't even funny. Okay, not true, it was kinda hilarious, but Naruto valiantly held back his laughter lest he spoil the zombie-baby's fun. He knew Baby-Chief and undead co. had started feeling genuine amusement and getting their jollies by policing the scum of the earth these days—beating the shit outta Ramen-Alien had been a balm to their black souls—and they already had so little to be happy about, it just wasn't fair to take that away from them. It was the little joys in (un)life that mattered most, after all.

Just when he thought Crazy-Afro might piss himself, or scream like a little girl, or hit the floor in a dead faint, the door was banged open. A wild stampede and ear-shattering laughter assaulted the room and resounded off the walls in a mixed cacophony that promised a vicious migraine.

"Gyahahaha! You'll never catch Lambo-san!"

A maybe-four-year-old in a cow print onesie with an even crazier afro—was big hair a genetic trait or a Bovino trademark or what?—rushed inside, and wow, this kid sure had a good pair of lungs. And horrible fashion sense. Like, he had bull horns coming out of his afro and a white tail attached to his backside and large, bovine, impossibly green eyes, and boy, did he rock the bull calf theme. Haru would love him to pieces if she ever met the kid.

Naruto winced, rubbing his poor, abused ears, while Baby-Chief remained still as death, but it was Crazy-Afro's averse reaction that alerted Naruto to something worrisome—wrongwrongwrong, his super intuition whirred like a helicopter parent—about this whole tech mafia cattle farm.
"Lambo! What have I said about causing a ruckus, you insufferable brat?" Crazy-Afro hissed, strung tight under their scrutiny, hands clenching into fists, seeming ready to spring forward but feet rooted to the floor, glancing at Baby-Chief from the corner of his eye, evidently not brave enough for direct eye contact. "Can't you see we have important guests?"

"Not to?" Afro-Calf asked more than stated, voice still grating as hell, but momentarily faltering. His uncertainty faded away lightning-fast—Afro-Calf launched into some sort of harrowing tale about uncleanliness and auntie wardens and human rights that was apparently the bane of his existence and surprisingly eloquent for a four-year-old. Also referring to himself in the third person, because why the hell not, Afro-Calf seemed to be cast in the same mold as all aspiring superheroes, fighting against the system, and yeah, Haru would definitely love him to bits.

"—wasn't Lambo-san's fault! Auntie Ottavio wants Lambo-san to take a bath, but I had one yesterday!"

Unfortunately, Crazy-Afro wasn't the least bit moved by the boy's plight. If anything, the more passionate Afro-Calf grew as he defended himself, the angrier Crazy-Afro became, until he was so far gone in his fury that he actually forgot Baby-Chief's presence and revealed his true colors.

"And you shall have one today as well," he spat with a prominent sneer that was ten times worse than the one he had fixed on Naruto. "As punishment, you will forgo supper and spend one hour in solitary confinement."

Wait, what the fuck? Solitary? As in, locked up? Like, in a prison cell? What kinda fucked up mafia cattle farm was this dude running?

Afro-Calf's lips quivered, green eyes wet with tears, but before he could open his mouth, Naruto grabbed him by the tail of his onesie, pushed him behind his legs and cut in. "Hey now, he's just a brat. Chill out, man."

Cue sneering and oratory bullshit and tons of false bravado. "Despite his many inadequacies, Lambo is a Bovino. Withholding sustenance and hourly isolation are perfectly acceptable for a child his age. It is not as if we endorse corporal punishment, and in any case, I don't have to explain myself to you, Konoha. You have no right to interfere with our famiglia's disciplinary methods. You have caused us enough trouble as it is."

It only took Baby-Chief saying two words to pulverize Crazy-Afro's composure.

"Unfit guardians."

"B-beg your p-pardon?" he ended up stuttering, crab-walking sideways and jumping behind his chair as if that would offer adequate protection from the zombie-baby's cold appraisal.

Baby-Chief had no fucks to give. Neither did Naruto, but someone had to deal with this pretentious asshole, so he took over after nudging the zombie-baby with a light shoulder shrug and receiving his signature head slant as permission to proceed.

"He said you're not fit to raise a goldfish, much less a kid. Locking up a four-year-old and starving him just because he's loud and doesn't like taking baths? What the hell, asshole?" When Crazy-Afro made to reply, Naruto silenced him with a blood-red glare and a flare of killing intent. "Save it." He then crouched down to scoop Afro-Calf up, mindful of Baby-chief's position and holding the too-quiet boy with one arm against his other shoulder. "Oi, kid. Where are your parents?"

Afro-Calf gripped Naruto's shirt and sniffled, but unlike his coward of a cattle herder, the kid met
his gaze head on. "Auntie Ottavio takes care of Lambo-san."

Afro-Calf's tone was hushed and didn't imply much affection for said auntie. No love lost there then. Still, Naruto had to make certain he had all the facts right. "You like your aunt?"

A small shrug. "She gives Lambo-san grape candy if Lambo-san does what he's told."

Which, yeah, awesome parenting right there. A-plus for auntie warden and her grape candy bribes. Not that Naruto didn't use the same means when the situation called for bribing—it would be the height of hypocrisy to judge the woman based on that—but something told him that was the extent of auntie warden's parenting skills.

"And if you don't?"

Afro-Calf buried his face in Naruto's neck and refused to answer. Yeah, fucking called it. Well, no more to learn from this front. Kid had already painted a telling picture of his home life. Naruto didn't like it one bit.

"Alright, that's it." Taking care not to raise his voice, he secured Afro-Calf in his embrace and pinned Crazy-Afro with the weight of his red-eyed glare. "Are there any more kids in this godforsaken famiglia?"

Crazy-Afro, who had lost his stutter and regained some of his bravado now that Baby-Chief wasn't handling things, shook his head. "Lambo is the sole full-fledged member under the age of eighteen, if that is what you mean."

"Great." And it really was, for Crazy-Afro, because Naruto would have razed this tech mafia cattle farm to the ground and salted the earth if more kids were being mistreated. Now he was more inclined to give them a chance at redemption, provided they didn't fuck up a second time. And he would be watching them. Very, very closely. "Here's what will happen. We'll take care of Lambo until you can hire someone with the proper qualifications for raising kids—"

Crazy-Afro had other ideas, though, probably as bright as his become-our-fūinjutsu-bitches-or-face-destruction idea, so he didn't let Naruto get any further than that.

"You can have the ungrateful brat for good if you want him so bad!" Spittle flew from his mouth before he gathered himself to speak in semi-rational sentences. "He'll be no great loss, I assure you." Full of bile, at that. Naruto had a split second to cover Afro-Calf's ears since that bastard kept spitting out things no child should ever have to hear. "We never wanted him in the first place. If only his parents hadn't blown themselves up... Brilliant scientists, the both of them. We had hoped he'd inherit some of their talents, but so far he's displayed nothing beyond an unusual affinity for electricity."

Naruto was aghast. He just stood there, speechless, vying to understand what kinda screwed up logic Crazy-Afro was using to reach that conclusion, but he was coming up blank. "How would you know that? He's four years old, for crying out loud. Nothing says he's not gonna grow up to be fucking brilliant."

In retrospect, he shouldn't have asked, because Crazy-Afro's response made him see red.

"We tested him, of course." Spoken as if it was the most natural thing in the world to perform who-knew-what-sort-of-messed-up experiments on little kids. Fuck, it was the Estraneo shitfest all over again.

"You—" Naruto growled, but as Afro-Calf began to shiver and shake and sniffle again, he instantly
calmed. "You know what? Fuck it, this place makes me sick. You're not worth it. C'mon, Bo-chan." Unclasping the boy's vice-like grip on his shirt, Naruto squeezed his hand and smiled. Warm, encouraging, open with acceptance. "You can visit your… family… anytime you want, but I'm not letting you stay here."

If Afro-Calf noticed Naruto's pause and the fury coating that word, it didn't show. Instead he sucked on his bottom lip to stop his hiccups and verified his intelligence and potential for greatness by articulating what his four-year-old mind comprehended. "You'll take care of Lambo-san now? Forever?"

"Yep." Nodding, Naruto beamed at him, ruffling his crazy afro, and whoa, what the hell, he almost lost half his hand in there. Did the kid have an active storage seal trap written on his scalp? Meh. He'd get to the bottom of this later, or better yet, he'd let Baby-Kabuto have a crack at it, because the science-baby needed more interaction with small children. Just like Afro-Calf. "I've got lots of kids you can play with, 'kay? I-pin-chan's even your age."

Predictably, Afro-Calf perked up, squealing in delight, then a comical expression spread across his features. He stuck one finger up his left nostril and blurted out, "Okay, um?"

Naruto snorted. Finally realized he hadn't asked for his new caretaker's name, huh? Afro-Calf was a riot. "My name's Naruto and I'll be your… whatever you wanna call me, I guess."

Taking the bull by the horns (pun totally intended), green eyes growing impossibly larger, alight with hope and please say yes, Afro-Calf shyly, yet cheekily, asked, "Papà?"

Well, there was only one response he could now give. "Sure thing, Bo-chan."

(Incidentally, Team A and Baby-Chief did not leave until many hours later. Jager even made a special guest appearance. And Jack. And their kinky chains of doom and merciless justice.)

The time for glory had come again—

"Voi! Ramen-Trash! Bad news."

Naruto pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed. Why was the universe so fucking dead-set on ruining his awesome I'm-the-king-of-the-world moments via ear-splitting, blade-swinging, pissed off Sword-psycho? Although, that wasn't… quite right. Squall seemed less angry, more defeated, his face lined with exhaustion and dark circles, the mien of someone bearing grim tidings.

"Shit." Naruto cursed again, because that could only mean, "Federico's dead?"

Squall drained his glass, then nodded as he refilled it, sinking into his throne chair. "As a fucking doornail."

Naruto's lips thinned. Vongola losing its last heir should have been hot news and spread like wildfire within days. The fact that it had been pushed under the rug was fishy, and the hallmark of an inside job. Easier to hide the body, make up some bullshit excuse and pretend the victim was unavailable for the time being, if there was nobody to take credit for the murder.

A growl built inside his chest. "How?"

"That's the thing." Squall laughed, but it was devoid of humor, edgy with spikes of betrayal, reminded Naruto of their last conversation and the worrying thoughts they had exchanged. "Nobody knows. There's not even a body left to bury. We only found his bones."
Which, fuck, made it even worse. Frankly, it reeked of Root plants and Danzō's modus operandi and taking an organization apart from the inside. Little by little, piece by piece, and yeah, Naruto loathed backstabbing shit like that.

Who knew how many people had paid the price for the sake of one madman's ambitions? Timoteo's sons were the visible targets, the ones whose deaths had an impact on a larger scale, but they couldn't have been the only deaths. Operations like these left behind a trail of cooling corpses and grieving families, cleverly disguised as accidents or mischances or even suicides. That CEDEF had yet to cotton on spoke of gross incompetence on their part, but also convinced Naruto whoever-this-madman-was had once been part of Vongola (perhaps still was). To pull the wool over their eyes so thoroughly, so completely...only someone who (had once) belonged to the upper echelons could have sufficient knowledge to pull it off so flawlessly.

"So our mysterious CEDEF assassin strikes again, but at least that confirms he's got a vendetta against Vongola as a whole, not just a personal grudge against Massimo." Nothing for it then. Naruto let go of his anger with a heavy sigh. There was no fucking point—the deed was done, the dead were buried, only thing left was damage control. "What's Timoteo thinking of doing now?"

Squalo kept quiet for a moment, eyes downcast and mapping the surface of his drink, lost in his reflection. Naruto thought he might not answer this time, that he had pushed too far, had abused the tentative bond of trust they had forged, but was proven wrong when Squalo parted his lips. It wasn't mistrust that delayed his words, he came to realize, but bitterness.

"The Ninth's big on family unity and democratic shit like that, you know?" It creased Squalo's forehead, curled the edges of his mouth, an ugly, twisted expression, pain and resentment and something raw bleeding in the space between them. "He's been having all sorts of meetings behind closed doors, which we are excluded from by the way, but news travels fast within the famiglia."

That same laughter spilled forth, that jagged, hollow thing. He washed it down with champagne, swallowed long-held grudges, all personal feelings, until his voice smoothed out to what Naruto likened to an ANBU report. He didn't know which of the two was better, not that it mattered what he preferred, so he let the man talk, let him bleed it out.

"Opinions are many and varied so far. Timoteo's playing with the idea of calling in Reborn and having him tutor you, with his Guardians' full support, I might add. Half the traditionalists are pressuring him to unfreeze Xanxus instead, but there's no chance in hell of that happening. The other half are in favor of Sawada-Trash ditching CEDEF for the Decimo position, though it's too late for that, or tracking down Enrico's illegitimate brats and grooming them for higher things. Gods know that stupid bastard had at least a couple. Sawada-Trash's been holed up in his office, hella cagey and sweating bullets. He's even refusing to take the Ninth's phone calls, which says a lot about how opposed to the tutoring plan he is, but it's only a matter of time before he caves."

A sneer toward the end, an iota of disgust, as if he was tasting something foul. Squalo lifted his glass, stared at him through the thin, expensive crystal. "I reckon you've got maybe a year before the World's Greatest Hitman comes knocking on your door." Then he emptied his glass in one swallow.

"Awesome." Naruto's fingers clenched around his glass, knuckles whitening, before he loosened his hold and copied him. As the champagne slid down his throat, cool and light and fruity, rage rose and grew and boiled in a mass low in his stomach, and goddammit, you stupid, useless old man. What happened to don't worry, my tuna fishie, papa will protect you and you'll have a nice, long civilian life, I promise, huh? Your word means shit, kuso oyaji. What if I actually wanted to have that sort of life, or sage forbid, I was just a normal kid? You'd have ruined my life. Worse,
you'd have brought the mafia into our home and gotten kā-san killed! She had no concept of danger two years ago, and she's still not all there.

Kurama fanned the flames by recounting every single one of Iemitsu's failings with terrible clarity, accompanying Naruto's soliloquy with rumbling laughter, an aria of simmering red fire-chakra, an inventive, sadistic musical piece—he named it *Patricide: The Burning of an Imbecilic Liar* and was eagerly awaiting the live performance.

There was nothing to indicate his violent thoughts, no sign of aggression in his posture, in his silence, but Squalo must have sensed the bloodlust churning in his gut. Warily, he gazed at him and waited. For what, Naruto had no clue, because what could he do in a stadium filled with valuable clients, really?

When Naruto said nothing, kept nursing his drink while contemplating patricide via immolation, Squalo cleared his throat, his wariness slipping into his voice, an almost undetectable tremor. "You're not gonna…declare a blood feud or some shit, right?"

Wow, that was right up there with his super intuition. Could it be? Sword-Psycho might have looked nothing like Timoteo, but damn if he hadn't got the Vongola kekkei genkai down pat. Maybe they should have *him* become Decimo, and ooh, that wasn't a bad idea. Not bad at all. If only that loud bastard wasn't Xanxus' right hand, high priest, and butler all rolled into one. Chances were he'd refuse on principle alone.

Snorting, but filing that option away—because you never know, also never say never, *Sword-Psycho-for-Vongola-Decimo* might gain support with good PR—Naruto shook his head. "Nah, don't worry about it. If Timoteo wants to go down that route, it's no skin off my back. There's absolutely nothing he can do to make me heel, y'know."

And the disgust was back—Squalo curled his lip, a hint of fang and old-rankling disappointment. "Doesn't mean he'll stop trying."

Yeah, Naruto agreed with him on that front, but Squalo, perhaps on a subconscious level, was still underestimating him. Naruto wasn't the type to just roll over and take it, and Xanxus, that iced asshole, was eligible for the position. Nothing else mattered—not that he was frozen in time or a ball of rage or too goddamn volatile or that his issues had issues. Probably. All past accounts indicated these facts, but eh, there was counseling for that shit. "If things come to a head," he said with a grin that slowly unfurled to show teeth and confidence and vicious satisfaction, "then I'll unfreeze Xanxus myself and hand him Vongola on a silver platter." Also force him to visit a damn therapist even if he had to drag him there kicking and screaming.

Gobsmacked, Squalo goggled at him like he had just been told he was the Decimo-to-be instead of Xanxus. Which he so was, if Naruto had any say in it.

"Voooi," he kinda gurgled, snatched his glass with shaking fingers and gulped it all down, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. He opened and closed his mouth, then opened it again, still kinda choking on sheer disbelief and whys, wide-eyed and staring at him with a sort of manic reverence, as if Naruto was Old Man Rikudō or something. "You—you would…seriously do that?"

Heh. Not *could*, but *would*, the insinuation loud and clear. Maybe Squalo hadn't been so much underestimating Naruto's mad skills as his willingness to lend a helping hand to the Varia, and huh, that made more sense, should have been obvious, really, what with Naruto being the dictionary definition of badassery.

"Yup." His chest puffed out as his grin slashed across his cheeks. Man, it felt good to be Old Man
Rikudō. Kurama made a noise of long-suffering exasperation, grumbling about how he was just like Asura and monkey see, monkey do and that time he stole Father's shakujō and damn cocky brat strutting around like he was the best thing since ninshū, but Naruto drowned him out. Nothing could bring him down. Suck it, bitches.

"Sure beats the alternative of me getting saddled with Vongola's messes or dragging some poor, unsuspecting kid into the mafia." Or at least he thought so until he watched the gradual shift in Squalo's disposition, awe flowing outward, agonizingly slow, like blood from a mortal wound, and anguish taking its place on his bloodless face. Starting to get annoyed with all these obstacles popping up out of nowhere just to make his life difficult, Naruto all but growled. "Goddammit, Sword-Psycho. I thought you'd be all for that kinda plan. What's wrong now?"

Despite skin stretching thin and pallid over his bones, and through the closing walls of his throat, steel wrapped around the whole of his expression and burrowed deep inside his voice even as it cracked and hitched. "I promised Xanxus I'd follow him anywhere, and I fucking meant it, he'll always be my shitty Boss, but…even if you unfreeze him, he can't—he's not…"

That was as far as he went before his mouth clamped shut. Squalo averted his eyes in shame as if he had just committed some kind of cardinal sin, and Naruto ground his teeth together. "Not…what? The hell, Sword-Psycho? You can't fucking stop at the—"

"Damn," he breathed out when it struck him with the force of a rampaging bijū, and holy shit, you gotta be kidding me, all this motherfucking noise and that asshole's not even—"

"Don't tell me, he's Timoteo's adopted son?" No tact whatsoever, too pissed off to care about Squalo's delicate sensibilities, only his wordless nod, because what the fuck. Like, seriously, did nobody in this fucked up clan have a lick of sense?

Naruto had long since extrapolated that the don of a mafia famiglia was more akin to a village Kage than a clan head, hence while blood relations did play a big role in the selection process, they could be circumvented if a better candidate was available. Hell, it didn't even have to be a Sky. Hayato's father was a Storm, that Bovino asshat was a Lightning. It was also why he was all for throwing his lot in with Squalo who had a Rain attribute. Being adopted should really have no bearing, especially since Xanxus was a fucking Sky. Probably why he'd been adopted in the first place. Who cared about the Vongola kekkei genkai? Super intuition was useful when mastered, sure, but it paled compared to ocular and nature transformation bloodline limits, so no great loss if it became extinct.

What the actual fuck, old man? You can't just take a kid off the streets, promise him the world, then just go nope and fucking freeze him 'til the end of time. You and junior are in for lots and lots of family therapy, believe it.

You know, this reminds me. I once watched an episode of—

If you say Dr. Phil, I'm revoking your TV privileges for two months, Kurama.

Tch. And you wonder why I sleep all the time. I get no appreciation—

Go cuddle with Inari-chan.

Fine. What do I know about family drama? Don't come crying to me when all this blows in your face.

"Okay." Inhaling through his nose, Naruto held the breath in his lungs for five seconds, then
exhaled, struggling to chill the fuck out lest he storm the Vongola mansion just to whack Timoteo over the head with his precious pimp cane. Nonno Timo might not survive his beloved grandson's visit. "So what difference does it make? He's been raised the same as all Vongola heirs. Who's gonna object if they don't actually know he's adopted? 'Cause I ain't telling them."

And that was when Squalo lit the match that started the forest fire.

"The Vongola Rings are blood-locked," he whispered, edging away from Naruto and his steadily rising killing intent and raging fire-chakra while trying to pretend he was totally cool with the whole pyro thing going on.

"Say what now?" Naruto snapped, a red haze blurring his vision, fist closing around his champagne glass and crystal melting between his fingers. "Which brainless asshole came up with that bullshit?"

"Primo?" Squalo coughed more than spoke as he edged a little further away.

One slow, deep breath. In. Out. When his rage had been painstakingly extinguished, his vision clear of the flaming haze, Naruto scrubbed the congealing glass remnants off his skin, rubbed his face with hot palms, trying to understand what the fuck was wrong with his clan heads.

Why were they all so goddamn fixated on blood ties? Family wasn't about blood—it was about trust and love, about having the freedom of choice and bonds forged through shared experiences. Maybe Baby-Chief had the right of it with his cryptic bullshit about how first impressions are misleading and you are less alike in the ways that matter and I call him Giotto for Ieyasu does not deserve the barest modicum of my respect. Naruto sighed, a little mad, a little disappointed in his ancestor. "I'm starting to develop a major grudge against Ieyasu. Good thing he's dead, 'cause he's got a lot to answer for."

Squalo, who was straddling the left armrest of his throne chair and grasping his sword like a lifeline, looked as if he was waging an internal battle, though about what Naruto had no idea. Eventually, he ventured with a cautious, musing tone, "They say Primo's spirit resides in the Vongola Sky Ring?"

Shivers crept down the pathway of Naruto's spine. Why, gods? Why? Grabbing a new glass, he poured himself a drink and cursed his bloodline in every swearing known to man. How was this his life? Ghosts were supposed to be fictional horror stories in this world, dammit. "Course, it does. Why the fuck did I ever think there'd be no ghost bullshit?" Just as he was about to drown his sorrows in high-priced champagne, his super intuition whistled slyly. Something random, but oh-so-genius, crossed his mind. "The Vongola Rings are part of the Trinisette, yeah?"

In the middle of climbing down from the armrest while pretending he'd never climbed it in the first place, Squalo stilled. Rigid, he nodded. "That's what Mammon said, yeah."

A grin of insanity and boundless glee split his face from ear to ear. "Then I've got an inside guy who might be able to solve this problem for us."

Thank you, Ramen-Alien, I will buy you all the shio ramen. Because Ramen-Alien would fix this inheritance mess whether he wanted to or not. To begin with, it was his screw up, but mostly for Naruto's peace of mind. He wouldn't be able to sleep easy knowing Ieyasu was haunting tacky jewelry and creepily biding his time until Naruto put the damn ring on, so he could—he didn't even know what the creepy ghost wanted (oh, sweet kami, let it not be his flesh or, or his body, oh, hell no, you can't have my body, go find some other poor bastard to be your glorified meat suit!), but he wasn't getting it from Naruto. Nuh-uh. No fucking way. He was so going ghostbuster on Ieyasu's
Squalo blinked once, gazed at him owlishly, then blinked again. "Voi. "His voice was incredulous and carrying an edge of hysteria. "You mean, like, _exorcise Primo's motherfucking spirit?"

Mischief stitched into his grin, all teeth and madness and _begone, wraiths of the past, you do not belong with the living_, Naruto bobbed his head. "Works for me."

Squalo's how-to-treat-ghostly-entities manual apparently differed from Naruto's, but he was still sorta shaken and couldn't fight back with his usual, deafening volume and supreme verve. "That's...don't you think that might be a bit extreme?"

Pfft. No, if anything, it wasn't _extreme_ enough for Ryōhei's tastes. Chortling, Naruto shrugged. "Take it up with Timoteo. Either he finds another way, or the dead get to rest. Permanently. 'Sides, I thought you'd be happy. My way ensures Xanxus has an actual chance to be Decimo."

And if privately he was rooting for Squalo instead of Xanxus, that was Naruto's business.

(If Timoteo deigned to ask for his opinion though, he was so gonna tell him. Hell, he might even dangle discount coupons for the expensive fūinjutsu stuff in front of Timoteo's face as an incentive.)

That put an ignominious end to all of Squalo's protests and misgivings. "Tch. Fair enough."

"By the way," Naruto hummed, sipping his champagne and steering the discussion toward something lighter, because there was only so much ghost-talk he could take in one day. "What kinda animal did you summon?"

A shark-like grin hooked on the corners of Squalo's lips. "Blue shark."

_Figures. Can you be anymore cliché, Sword-Psycho?_ Then again, considering Inari, Naruto had no room to talk, really, so. He rolled his eyes. "Lemme guess, Squalo Jr.?" It was a joke, or it was meant to be a joke, but when Squalo didn't fire back something equally mocking, just shrugged and kept grinning with a sort of awkward pride, Naruto spat out his champagne. Squalo ducked in time to avoid the worst of it, but still ended up getting some of the spray on his absurdly long hair. "Holy crap. I was joking, Sword-Psycho." And he died laughing. "Fuck, this...this is...priceless."

Of course, that reaction got the appropriate response. Squalo's glass flew toward the back of Naruto's bent head as he wildly swung his sword around and roared, "Get bent, Ramen-Trash! And tell Primo to suck my dick while you're at it."

Naruto laughed harder, dodging with enviable ease and retaliating in kind, and yeah, it was official. _I'm definitely voting for you, Sword-Psycho. If the final decision's up to me, you better get ready to take the mantle. Believe it._

Only Aria's flashy-as-hell entrance fifteen minutes later managed to snap them out of their scuffle, and by that time, three bottles of champagne, nineteen glasses, and uncounted strands of soaked silver hair had fallen in glorious battle.

"Holy mother of fuck. I haven't seen so much destruction since Xanxus learned how to channel Wrath Flames through his guns and went ape shit on Joker's ass. It's like World War III for kiddies down there. Your Storm brat's a child genius, like, fuck, he's on Bel's level, only less psycho killer and more terrorist bomber!"
"Yeah, Haya-chan's a hardcore punk rocker when it comes to explosive seals—wait, there's a mafia Joker dude? For real?"

"Not anymore. There used to be a fucking loco famiglia obsessed with DC super-villains, called themselves Darkham, if you can actually believe it. We had a low-key rivalry for a time, competed for the same contracts and shit, which was embarrassing as fuck, until Xanxus got tired of the dark asylum morons butting into our business and wiped them out. It was a sad joke, all in all, but you can guess who had the last laugh."

"Does that mean Xanxus is like, what, the mafia version of Batman?"

"Voi. I dare you to call that fucker Batman to his face. Please."

"Hoh. You think I won't? Please."

"You don't got the balls, Ramen-Trash."

"You're on, Sword-Psycho."


"Voi! How the hell is she a Cloud?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"I mean look at her! She's cosplaying as teen Elektra! She's riding a pet tiger with glitter claws—holy shit, that's not a collar, it's a choker! With, with Swarovski? She's—Cloud…just, fuck no!"

"Yo, dude, just chillax, you're gonna pop a—oh, man! Dynamic Entry never gets old! Go, Haru-chan! Kick his ass!"

"Cloud…ninja…bling…"

"Voi. That's a fucking budgie."

"Yeah, and?"

"I repeat. That's. A fucking. Budgie."

"Yeah. And?"

"That's a fucking budgie—"

"Yeah, I know that!"

"—trash-talking Carmelo while screwing with his endocrine system and gouging out his eyeballs!"

"Obviously. I'm not blind or deaf. What's your fucking point?"

"My fucking point is that a fucking budgie just fucking owned Carmelo, and that brat's been Luss' top assistant for three years now. Your Sun brat didn't even lift a finger!"

"Shō-chan's more of a strategist, also doesn't like unnecessary violence, so unless he's forced to
step in himself, he mostly lets Galileo-chan handle the action. And the trash-talk. Unlike Shō-chan though, Galileo-chan is all for violence, huge Tarantino fan, seriously."

"Voi! The fuck? A Tarantino budgie? Okay, now I've seen it all."

"Voi! I can't believe I'm asking this, but just how many of your brats are into fucking cosplay?"

"Hmm, Haru-chan's the only one? Yup, just her."

"Bullshit. What's with the lollipop Jedi wannabe and his R2-D2 life-size figure then?"

"Oh, that. Pan-chan isn't cosplaying."

"What do you—that lightsaber is the real deal?"

"Hell yeah."

"Can I—"

"Hell no."

"But—"

"No."

Chapter End Notes

Current kids’ ages and teams:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Belphegor: 14-15
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, Hayato, Haru, Spanner, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 13-14
Chrome, Shōichi, Byakuran: 12-13
Fūta: 8-9
I-Pin, Lambo: 3-4
Yuni: 1-2

Team A (led by Naruto/Tsuna): Kyōya, Takeshi, Kyōko
Team B (led by Fon): Hana, Tetsuya, Ryōhei
Team C (led by Shamal): Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Chrome
Team D: (led by Verde): Hayato, Haru, Shōichi, Spanner
"So?" Naruto stared at Shamal with knitted brows and impatience. "C'mon, lay it on me. How bad is it?"

Instead of replying, Shamal lit a cigarette, which told Naruto things were not just bad but dire. As did the significant glance exchanged between Baby-Kabuto and Fon. And Naruto had been keeping a close watch on them, because every time he took his eyes off of them they grew another fucking inch or something. Watching them go from two-year-old toddlers to twelve-year-old kids in the span of two years was mind-boggling. Baby-Kabuto, who shall forever be Baby-Kabuto in Naruto's mind no matter how tall he grew, had spouted some science mumbo jumbo about accelerated growth rates and five to one ratios and math shit. All Naruto had heard was we'll reach the age we should be in five years or so, and that was that.

"Time's up, Volpe. One of my sources just called to tell me Reborn's heading to Japan." Well, shit. Naruto assumed it couldn't get worse than that, but was proven wrong when Shamal winced and took a long drag of his cigarette. Double shit. Exhaling a spiral of smoke, he chuckled, one part wry, one part resigned, and totally unsurprised. "Apparently, he made a big show of announcing it to all and sundry at some bounty hunter joint in Sicily."

"Son of a bitch." Rubbing his pounding temples, Naruto tried to find a thread of logic that would allow him to unravel this asshole's reasons, but he couldn't for the life of him find the tiniest fiber. He'd heard the rumors. His mafia tutor was supposed to be S-rank (for a given value of S-rank), right? Right. Where did all this fucking incompetence come from then? "What the fuck is he trying to accomplish? Did Timoteo neglect to inform him we're supposed to be civvies?"

He wouldn't put it past Timoteo. Hell, Naruto had firsthand experience of just how incompetent his esteemed clan head was. Shamal's chuckling laid that thought to rest.

"Oh, he knows. Reborn's just a special snowflake. He's kind of a cocksure bastard, you know?"

Wait, what? Did that mean what Naruto thought it meant? No sensei could be so...so damn irresponsible. Not when his students' safety was on the line. Such reckless behavior was grounds for temporary demotion or forced retirement or remedial lessons with Iruka-sensei depending on the severity of the consequences. Definitely an ass-kicking via pissed off Hokage and enraged parents and concerned clan members.

(Tsume would have kittens, and he'd have an Inuzuka riot on his hands, and then Kakashi-sensei would follow the ninken trail and learn all about it. Naruto would be hounded by Inuzuka day and night, and all the while Kakashi-sensei would project and mope around in the Hokage's office and reminisce about C-ranks and bad judgement and how I failed all of you, let me atone for my sins. Gods, he'd pull a Sasuke and be a moody asshole of the highest caliber, and one of those was more than enough, thank you very much. So, yeah, that sorry excuse for a sensei? If Naruto got his hands on him, he'd be dead meat for all that extra grief he'd cause him.)

All Naruto could say was, "Seriously?"

Probably aware of how his former Arcobaleno buddy must have appeared to someone with no prior knowledge of his personality, Fon took over. "Indeed. I assure you there is no ulterior motive
behind his actions," he soothed. "Like Shamal said, Reborn is simply suffering from an overinflated ego. It would have never occurred to him that he is placing your civilian family in danger by revealing his destination, even if that is the extent of the information he let slip. After all, who would dare target people under the protection of the World's Greatest Hitman?"

Naruto remained unmoved. "And I ask again. Seriously?"

Seeing the veins throbbing on Naruto's temples, Baby-Kabuto tried his hand at extolling the virtues of his former Arcobaleno buddy. "I am afraid so." Or not. "According to my observations of his dominant character traits, Reborn is a self-important individual with rather strong passions, including but not limited to narcissism, perfectionism, and sadism, which, as an aside, inexplicably appeal to the opposite gender."

Baby-Kabuto's shining glasses and his bemused I-will-never-understand-people look did more to reduce Naruto's temper than all of their speeches combined. Don't ever change, Baby-Kabuto.

Naruto snorted. "He sounds fucking delightful."

Shamal chuckled. "Ain't that the truth."

Fon smiled. "You have no idea."

Baby-Kabuto adjusted his glasses. "Quite."

"He's the guy I blew up, yeah? Yellow-striped fedora, fucking nin-chameleon, trigger-happy asshole?"

"That's the one. I can't believe I forgot you did that." Shamal, who had yet to stop chuckling, grabbed Naruto by the arm and shook him with a sort of desperate glee. "Please, tell me you've got pictures."

"Nope, sorry."

When Naruto shook his head, Shamal's chuckling died an agonizing death.

"Damn."

"No worries, Ero-ossan." Patting the pervert on the back, Naruto grinned, all teeth and fox eyes, the kind of grin that would have had everyone in Konoha running for the hills. "If he likes big shows, I say we give him one. You can take plenty of pictures then."

Shamal's chuckling was resurrected alongside his desperate glee. "Oh, I like the way you think, Volpe."

"You are a terrible person." Fon's grudge-smile was a work of art when it wasn't aimed at Naruto. "I highly approve."

"Fascinating." Baby-Kabuto's mad scientist alter ego awoke with a vengeance. "Your thought processes never fail to surpass expectations."

Naruto's grin was fucking terrifying. "I aim to please."

When Naruto came down for breakfast, the first thing he saw was Nana puttering around in the kitchen, then his gaze fell down on the crumpled flyer half-jutting out of her apron pocket.
"What have you got there, kā-san?"

Nana almost jumped a foot in the air, but otherwise didn't make a sound. Awesome. Naruto hid his smile. Training was going so well. _B-minus, kā-san! Keep up the good work._

"Ara, Tsu-kun!" Clutching the red polka-dotted cotton of her apron with one hand over her heart, she pouted. "My, you always move so quietly. Give your poor kā-san a warning, ne?"

_Yeah, that's exactly why I'm doing it, kā-san. Need to hone your senses now that danger registers in your brain. Trust me, by the time we're done here, nobody'll be able to sneak up on you unless they've had training._ Naruto shrugged. "Sorry, can't help it, ya know."

"Mhm, so you say every time." Nana's sassy demeanor said she didn't believe him, which was more awesome and a tremendous improvement from the no-questions-asked housewife she used to be—she even worked part-time at the local animal shelter and took online vet courses and volunteered for hospital work during the weekends, not that she'd told Iemitsu any of that, because who the fuck needed him—but she let the matter drop. Yay for progress and therapy and brain-fixing drugs. "Well, it's just a flyer, but you really don't need tutoring, so I was going to throw it away." She gazed at him with eyes full of motherly pride. "My Tsu-kun is a little genius, after all."

And she meant it. _Dammit, kā-san, s'way too early for this mushy shit._ Okay, yeah, that was a big fat lie. Naruto coughed and shuffled to his chair, a light flush tinting his skin. "Only you think that, kā-san, 'cause you love me too much."

"Of course I do! So very much!" The mere thought of him doubting her love for her precious boy was an anathema to Nana. Slim arms wound around his neck from behind as she peppered his face with kisses in between bubbly laughter. "Kā-san is the proudest mother in the world, Tsu-kun. You make me so happy!"

Naruto chuckled and whispered in her ear _love you, too, kā-san_, because he did love her, he really, _really_ did, and she deserved so much better than a shitty husband and a ninja son and a life built on secrets. Perhaps the time had come for some painful truths. He'd been planning on having this conversation with Nana further down the line, but well… Fuck Iemitsu. And fuck Timoteo.

Mind made up, he nudged a napping Kurama with his toes and a flicker of fire-chakra. _Oi, Kurama, is Espresso-Maniac around?_ From what he had seen of the so-called tutor guy in photos, there were lots of nicknames Naruto could have given him. Like, there was the smirk that Naruto distinctly recalled Sasuke sporting back in their Team Seven days, the freaky sideburns that were on par with Gai's bushy brows, the sadism that he would expect from a male Anko if Orochimaru had cloned her instead of Shin. So, yeah, Naruto could have gone with Baby-Sasuke or Freaky-Sideburns or Anko-Dude, but the one thing that all the photos had in common was... _espresso._ It didn't matter if he was shooting or flirting or reading or whatever the fuck he liked to do in his spare time—he did _everything_ with a goddamn cup of espresso in his hand. Frankly, his espresso mania beat even Fon's oolong tea obsession, and that said it all. Hence, _Espresso-Maniac._

The fox stretched his neck with a prolonged yawn, not bothering to open his eyes, concentrating and seeking out Espresso-Maniac's yellow fire-chakra signature.

_It had been blazing nonstop ever since he stepped foot in Nanomori twenty hours ago. A brilliant beacon emitting self-assurance and sup, bitches and don't fuck with me. Espresso-Maniac, cocky asshole that he was, didn't do subtle. And that was coming from Naruto._
Nah, you're good. His chakra is nearby your school, probably setting up his surveillance system.

So he's waiting for kā-san's phone call. Yeah, solid strategy right there, Naruto would have done the same. Under normal circumstances, it would have worked, too, but as Ino used to say, faulty intel gets your shinobi killed, Ho-ka-ge-sa-ma, so you will increase our budget and be damn grateful you have the best Intelligence Division in the Elemental Nations. Gods, he now kinda missed the long-ass ponytail bitch-slap after her biannual budget ultimatums, and he always wanted to shear the damn thing off. Got it. Thanks, Kurama.

Seamlessly, the fox went back to sleep. He had never opened his eyes to begin with. Naruto sighed and gathered his thoughts, then called out to Nana, who was in the process of pouring him a steaming cup of green tea.

"Why don't you sit down, kā-san? I think it's time we had a serious talk."

At his sudden mood change, Nana's head tilted to the side. She studied his hard features closely—the burnt orange in his eyes, the downward curve of his mouth, the faint folds above his brows. What she saw in him must have alarmed her. A mute nod, absent her habitual vivacity. After pouring a second cup for herself, Nana took the seat opposite from him, licked her lips and laced her fingers. "What is this about, Tsu-kun?" she murmured.

Good, she was in the right mental and emotional state. Or as stable as one could be when they were about to learn they married into the mafia.

"You know, if it was up to me, we wouldn't be having this conversation so soon, but time's running out." Unblinking, Naruto stared into her eyes, conveying how sorry he was for shattering her world. How angry. "And you deserve to know what's going on and what kind of man you married."

Taken by surprise, Nana blinked, then her eyes cleared, a soft, honeyed brown caressing his face.

"Tsu-kun, are you talking about Iemitsu again?" Evidently, she had steeled herself for something much worse than another of his why-don't-you-leave-this-stupid-fuck rants (of which there had been many over the past two years). "I know you've been…angry with him, but he's been trying his best." She breathed a sigh, heavy with regret and we've been over this, honey. "I admit he hasn't been...the best husband either, and I'd like it if he came home more often, but Iemitsu loves his work just like I love taking care of our household and the animals at the shelter and doing volunteer work. It makes him happy, and I have come to accept that."

Naruto made a noise of vague assent that Nana correctly translated as yeah, no shit, he's still a useless bastard and it still doesn't make it right.

(And Naruto would know. He made the same mistakes in his past life.)

"Tsu-kun never forgave him for his absence, though, did you?" She sighed again, but it soon turned into a sweet laugh. "You've always been so headstrong and incredibly perceptive—not that it's a bad thing! Quite the opposite! Kā-san loves you just the way you are."

As if he didn't know. Naruto's stony mask broke a little, because how could he not smile at that. Satisfied, Nana smiled back, bolstered by the crack in his shield, and boy, did she know how to push all the right buttons, appealing to his love for her and his weakness for both of his mothers.

"You don't have to accept it like I do, but please…don't hate your father?" Large doe-eyes implored him to show lenience and be the bigger man. "For my sake?"

"Kā-san." Naruto held her gaze, and damn if he didn't feel like a right bastard. Iemitsu was so
gonna pay for this. Just another thing on his long list of failures. "There's no easy way to do this, and you know I don't like mincing my words, so I'll just come out and say it." Quick, like ripping off a band-aid. "Iemitsu's in the mafia."

Nana sucked in a breath. She just stared at him, unseeing. Kept staring, dazed, confusion fogging her brain. Stifling a sigh, Naruto repeated his last line.

"Wha-at?" A croak, throat dry. Her fingers reached for her teacup—she sipped slowly, but put it down after one swallow, seeming to find the taste of the tea unpalatable today. "Ma-mafia..." she mumbled. "You mean..." Words failed her for a long moment. Naruto was about to clarify when Nana sat up with a jolt as if an electric current was running amok inside her body. What surged out of her mouth defied logic, but writhed with fear and shock. "Like the Italian mafia, like The Godfather? Iemitsu is Al Pacino?"

Say what now? Naruto's jaw dropped. Without thinking, he blurted out the first thing that crossed his mind. "Uh, no. I mean, yes? Er, kinda? More like he wishes he could be half as cool as Al Pacino."

Which, what the fuck, brain? It didn't make a lick of difference though, because Nana understood him perfectly. Like mother, like son, huh?

"Oh. Oh, my." Leaning forward, elbows digging into the wooden surface, she interwove her fingers behind her neck, letting her head sag lower and lower until her nose was almost touching the rim of her teacup. "I—I think I need something stronger than tea."

Naruto simply nodded and got up to fetch the good sake from the liquor cabinet. That Nana didn't object when he returned with two sake cups said a lot about her state of mind.

(He'd caught him drinking once. It hadn't been pretty for anyone involved. Mostly for Shamal, on whom Naruto had swiftly laid the blame with no guilt whatsoever.)

Nana knocked it back like a pro, gave a low hiss, then had another, while Naruto savored his first cup.

"Thank you, honey." If her grin was a tad unhinged and wobbly, Naruto made no comment on it. "Okay." She slapped her cheeks, once, twice. "Okay, I can do this!" Her chest rose and fell with each shallow intake of air until she managed to wrestle her respiration under control. And, of course, what she cared most about was, "How do you know, Tsu-kun?"

"Well..." Naruto paused, took a slow sip and swallowed. His mouth quirked into something wry, thinly amused, as he said, "I guess this is the part where I say I'm also in the mafia."

Teeth swept over her bottom lip while she attempted to make sense of what he had just pelted her with. It didn't take her long this time. Nana bit down hard, pupils blown wide, fraught with terror. For him.

There was an edge in her voice when she released the abused flesh of her lip. "Tell me, Tsu-kun." A promise of violence underlying each word. "Did Iemitsu force you to become part of the mafia?"

"Not exactly." Naruto smiled, pouring her another cup of sake, and told her everything. Or, well, not everything, everything, just an abbreviated version of how Konoha was founded, generalized mafia stuff and specific Iemitsu fuckery, who had really sent the flyer and, more importantly, why.

In the beginning, Nana interrupted him many times to ask questions about fire-chakra and mafia law and things she didn't understand, but as Naruto expanded on all the Vongola messes, she fell
oddly silent and just listened. It hurt Naruto to see her so lost, so listless (*brokenhearted*, his super intuition sang mournfully).

One hour later, there were two empty cups of sake on the table, two blank faces, and silence waiting to be broken.

"Iemitsu…erased my memory? Shamal-sensei is a mafia doctor?"

Naruto reached out a hand across the table, placed it over hers, relishing the small, weak smile his action elicited. It was a start, a good one, things could only get better from this moment forth.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he had his reasons, but it still doesn't excuse what he did. Also don't blame Shamal for the subterfuge. We both decided it wouldn't have done much good to tell you when you were…” A spike of rage hot and sharp on his tongue. Naruto forced it deep down, forced himself to smile as he squeezed her hand. "…like that."

"I…understand. I just—I need time to think about this." Nana's smile dimmed for the barest second, but when she brought her other hand up to lay it atop his, it was soft and warm with love and kā-san will be okay, Tsu-kun. "But there's no need to worry, honey. Everything's going to be alright because kā-san has her Tsu-kun, ne?"

Naruto fathomed what she meant to say, what she didn't say. Iemitsu was no longer the man of the house as far as Nana was concerned, and Naruto was a-ok with it. He'd been taking care of his mother since the day he'd been reborn as her son, only thing different was that she now knew exactly who kept her safe and how.

"Take all the time you need, kā-san. Shamal can visit and explain things if you'd like?" At her grateful nod, Naruto made a mental note to invite the pervert for dinner after the Espresso-maniac prank. "Nothing's changed, you know. We're still the same people, just in the mafia." His eyes bored into hers. No more lies, no more secrets, they promised. "Whatever you decide you wanna do, I'll support you one hundred percent. I'll always take care of you, I promise."

"Oh, Tsu-kun…” Her smile trembled on her lips as her eyes glittered with unshed tears, but Naruto could feel her joy in the way she stroked his hand, the way she stared at him beneath wet lashes. "What did I ever do to deserve you? Iemitsu might have hurt me, but he also gave me the greatest gift I could have ever asked for.” She laughed, in spite of everything, because of everything, light and teasing and just so very…Nana. "Kā-san will always love you, even if you are Al Pacino's son."

Eh, she was still on about that? Naruto rolled his eyes. "Iemitsu's not—" Wait a damn minute. Where there's smoke there's fire, and whoa, it hit him like a ton of bricks. Flabbergasted, he gaped at her. "You…have a crush on Al Pacino, yeah?"

Nana giggled and almost pinched her thumb and forefinger together. "Just a tiny one."

Un-fucking-believable. A snorting sort of laugh, then he was guffawing, Nana kept giggling, and soon they were both in stitches.

"So." Sides kinda hurting, gasping for breath, a terribly impish grin. "How would you like to play a prank on a real mafioso?"

"Ara, Tsu-kun!" She chirped his name and puckered her lips like she always did whenever the word prank came out of his mouth. Note that she never told him to stop, though. "You and your pranks." That wasn't a no. She tapped a dainty finger against her chin. Naruto waited. Her eyes
gleamed with laughter and mischief. Naruto's grin widened. Then, "Well, kā-san is a mafia wife, ne?"

"Ooor you can just be a mafia single mother," he suggested in a sly just-throwing-it-out-there manner. "Keep in mind that divorce is an option. All you have to do is say the word." And he winked at her, Aria's you-know-you-want-it wink, to be precise. "There's plenty of Al Pacinos I can introduce you to."

"Tsu-kun!" Again she chirped his name, all rosy, puckered lips and fanning her face. Nana was as amused as she was scandalized, it seemed. And again…that wasn't a no. Well, only time would tell.

(Naruto was banking on Iemitsu fucking up and pushing Nana over the edge when he finally deigned to drag his lying ass home.)

Naruto opened the front door with an expression of mild puzzlement, squinting at the maybe-eleven-year-old kid standing on his doorstep with half-bleary eyes, showing no signs of recognition. Operation Yellow Submarine, Educate the Tutor, Phase Two was a go.

Espresso-Maniac might have grown in body, but had essentially remained the same, smirking in that oh-so-smug way of his, nin-chameleon coiled around his yellow-striped fedora, the world's curliest sideburns framing his cheekbones, all pitch-black eyes and casting shadows and Sasuke-worthy assholery written all over his features.

"Chaos." He tipped his fedora, suave as fuck, exuding self-assertiveness and casual familiarity, like it wasn't seven-thirty in the goddamn morning and he wasn't stranded in suburban hell for the foreseeable future, greeting some poor civilian teen he'd never before met in his life with the express purpose of molding him into the perfect mafia don. "I am Reborn, the home tutor."

It was so fucking surreal that Naruto was only half-acting when he rubbed his eyes, squinted at him again and blurted out, groggy and disoriented as hell and say what now, "Huh? Um, no offense, but who're you kidding? You're, like, what? Ten? Eleven years old?"

Something flew past him, barely missing the helix of his ear by a few millimeters. Turning around to identify the flying object which could have gravely injured him at that speed, he was surprised to discover a hole the size of a bullet in the wall behind him. No, not really, but you do what you gotta do. In this case, it meant pulling a classic Shōichi and having an epic freak out in the middle of the entrance hall while staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Holy crap! Are you crazy, kid? Did you steal your dad's gun or something?" Gaze moving from the nin-chameleon-turned-pistol to Espresso-Maniac's hooded eyes and back again, he sorta stumbled further into the house, tripping over his own feet and spreading his arms wide as if that would block the entrance, all the while yelling in full-blown panic. "Kā-san, call the police and ask for Officer Miyamoto! Tell him we've got a possibly dangerous person who just assaulted me with a deadly weapon! Codes are four-one-seven and two-four-five! Hurry! Your only son's life is on the line here!"

Espresso-Maniac's eyes became bottomless, hellish pits. He surveyed Naruto's ridiculous pose, unimpressed, lashing him with a sharp-edged rebuke. "Mind your manners, No-Good Tsuna."

"Ara, Tsu-kun? What's wrong honey?" Nana's sweet-as-molasses voice snapped the tension like an elastic band. "Who's at the door?"
Her smile faltered for a moment as she slowly took in the bizarre scene. A touch of genuine bafflement furrowed her brows when her eyes fell on Espresso-Maniac, and Naruto inwardly applauded the woman for her superb acting skills. To be fair, though, he hadn't told her just how young his would-be-mafia-tutor appeared to be in order to add that note of authenticity to the whole affair. What he hadn't expected was Espresso-Maniac's libertine ways and utter lack of shame. Without a by your leave, he bent forward, grasped Nana's hand in his and pressed his mouth against the juts of her knuckles, straightening up and smirking as she prettily blushed and giggled behind her other hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, Nana-san." A wicked twist of lips, and wow, there he went again, being all smooth operator and smoldering eyes and philandering with married women while their son was standing. Right. Fucking. There. "We talked over the phone yesterday. I am Reborn."

"Oh, the home tutor from the flyer! Nice to meet you, Reborn-san. Would you like to come in?" Still blushing, giggling, thoroughly charmed. "Tsu-kun, you'll be late for school!"

Kissing Naruto's cheek, Nana urged him outside with gentle motions, a masterful performance, truly. Problem was, Naruto doubted it was all an act at this point, which added fuel to the fire. Scowling at the mafia Casanova, pissed off beyond belief but making it seem like typical teenage bluster, Naruto put himself in front of Nana, crossed his arms and stomped his foot.

"I'm not leaving you alone with this crazy, gun-toting kid, kā-san! Why aren't you on the phone like I told you so?"

A dark glint of mirth entered Espresso-Maniac's gaze. Naruto was inordinately pleased when Nana's words wiped it off ten seconds later.

"My, you're such a joker, Tsu-kun. I'm sure Reborn-san isn't carrying a gun. I keep telling you, there are no criminal masterminds in Namimori."

Fond exasperation flitted across her features as Nana kissed his other cheek and bustled Naruto out the door, then focused on Espresso-Maniac, peeking at his eerily blank face through her lashes and laughing a bell-like laugh to diffuse the newly charged tension while delivering the final blow. All according to script.

"You'll have to forgive my Tsu-kun, Reborn-san. I'm afraid he's always had an overactive imagination ever since he was little. His dream is to be a world-renowned detective like Sherlock Holmes, you know? He even visits the police station every other day after school and keeps pestering the good officers to teach him their codes and protocols." Her laughter petered out with an exaggerated sigh, head slanted to the side, eyes like warm chestnuts, cupping her cheek with one palm, and wow, give this woman an Oscar, because daaamn. "This son of mine, honestly…"

"No worries, Nana-san." His fedora hat dipped low, obscuring his eyes, mouth unsmiling, and if his tone of voice was anything to go by, Espresso-Maniac had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. "I will accompany Tsunayoshi to school and rid him of these…delusions."

Just to be certain, though. Did he buy my teenage crime-fighter act?

I'd say so. Kurama chuckled, a gravelly, sinister sound, because he was the rare type of non-
discriminating asshole who got his kicks from all manner of humiliation. He's cycling through the whole gamut of displeasure. There's plenty of angry frustration to go around, some traces of shock twined with curiosity, but mostly vexation—oh. The fox's chuckling came to an abrupt stop, only to restart after a few seconds. Now that is interesting.

Naruto cocked a brow. What is?

I don't meet many humans with the ability to compartmentalize their emotions on the fly. Despite his careless shrug, intrigue was blatant in Kurama's voice, and something close to mockery. Humans governed by pride were the fox's most (and least) favorite kind, Naruto knew all too well, because the higher the tower, the greater the fall thereof. It is also interesting that his default state of mind is a sort of amused condescension. I think... he might be viewing your crafted persona as a future source of entertainment.

_Hooh._ Naruto couldn't help the savage grin that pulled on the corners of his mouth. _That makes two of us then._

Kurama's grin was damn near identical, if a tad more malevolent. _Make that three._

Inari yipped and playfully gnawed at Naruto's ankle to get his attention. A miniature of that same grin crossed his muzzle when they stared down at him.

_Sorry, Inari-chan, tō-chan and kā-chan didn't mean to forget you!_ Naruto laughed, picking him up and nuzzling his furry face, while Kurama kept grinning from above like the proud kā-chan he was. One of his tails thwacked Naruto on the back of his skull, but not even choking on tufts of fur could slow down his laughter. _I guess it's four of us._

After leaving a cheerily-waving, sweet-smiling Nana on the doorstep of their home—Naruto, totally in character, had pitched the mother of bitch fits, which had Espresso-Maniac palming his weird-ass nin-chameleon-gun in a paradoxical display of overt-yet-discreet violence that shut Naruto up on the spot—they made their way to Namimori Middle School.

Side by side. In stifling silence. Until—

"I will only say this once." Without breaking his stride, Espresso-Maniac's head tilted back and his pitch-black stare slashed through Naruto's vow of silence. "The police force is no place for you, No-Good Tsuna."

"Excuse me?" He hissed, bristling and mortally offended, outrage riding on his low nuance. "Who do you think you are, kid?" His voice kept rising until he was kinda having it out with Espresso-Maniac right there on the pavement, however hilariously one-sided it was. "Look, I'm warning you now, I've got a taser—" Which he just whipped out from the mesh pocket of his school bag and for emphasis aimed with jabbing motions toward the general area of Espresso-Maniac's pelvis. "—and I know how to use it." Espresso-Maniac's quiet scoff, the rigid line of his mouth, his disinterested appraisal of Naruto's taser—they all spoke volumes of how seriously he took Naruto's electro-threat. "I don't care if you're only ten or eleven or whatever. Guns are not toys! If you keep this up, you're going straight to juvie, you hear me?"

"For the last time, No-Good Tsuna," he drawled in a way that foreboded some new assault upon Naruto and a world of pain if he had to repeat himself one more time, "I am not a juvenile delinquent." A pause, rife with suspense and foreshadowing bullshit. Like, there was shadowplay and shape-shifting fuckery and low-level killing intent galore. "I am the World's Greatest Hitman."
Inside his mindscape, Kurama collapsed on the floor in a twitching heap, Naruto lay on top of the fox's head overcome by a fit of spasms, and Inari was splayed across Naruto's stomach, all three laughing their guts out. Outwardly, Naruto schooled his expression to one that stretched solemnity to the utmost, squared his shoulders and looked Espresso-Maniac straight in the eye.

"Listen here, kid. You need to think long and hard about your future. Is your family pressuring you to join their criminal activities? Is that it? Because we can protect you if you need help. All you have to do is talk to Officer Miyamoto. He's a good man, he'll definitely help you. There's witness protection—"

A gunshot echoed—Naruto demonstrated his outstanding reflexes (for a crime-fighter wannabe civilian teenager), and why he was the king of middle school dodgeball (according to his fabricated sports records), by leaping back and marginally avoiding the bullet that would have at best grazed his neck.

"What the hell? Stop shooting at me!" Wide-eyed and chest heaving and glutted with indignation, he opened fire on Espresso-Maniac with a barrage of anti-mafia propaganda.

"—just adding to your record! Can't you understand that?"

Espresso-Maniac obviously didn't, because all he gave in response was a sigh and an observation. "I guess I should be glad you at least have excellent reflexes."

In true teenager fashion, Naruto's mood did a one-eighty. "Ha!" He all but crowed, grinning and pumping his fist in the air and being insufferably smug. "My reflexes are top-notch. Officer Miyamoto says I'm gonna ace the police entrance exam when I graduate—but that's not the point here! We're talking about you and your—"

Only Kyōko's timely intervention saved Naruto from the upcoming bullet with his name on it.

"Ohayō, Tsuna-kun!" Smiling—not genjutsu-powered, everyone was using chakra-suppression seals until the jig was up—she kept waving at him, Hana walking beside her and offering a brusque, "Sawada."

Perfect timing, girls! "Morning, Kyōko-chan, Hana-chan!" Naruto scratched the nape of his neck, jumping from one foot to the other, pasting a fake grin on his face and doing his best to steer them away from Espresso-Maniac's scrutiny. "Look, um, now's not a good time, okay? Can we talk later?"

Of course, Kyōko ignored his pathetic attempts. "Oh, who's this?" Giving Espresso-Maniac a slow once-over, she shot Naruto a cute frown, playing the I'm-so-disappointed-I-thought-we-were-friends card. "I didn't know you had a younger brother, Tsuna-kun."

Distressed over the possibility of his supposed crush's sadness—a crush was a must-have for a teenager, and boy, was Kyōya pissed the fuck off, but Kyōko made the most sense since Mini-Anko and Haru went to different schools and Hana…was Hana—Naruto panicked.

"I don't—I mean he's my…uh, cousin!" A flail of awkward limbs, complete with bug-eyed glances and frantic nodding and verbal diarrhea. "Yes, he's my third cousin once removed on my father's side from Italy."

"I didn't know you had Italian roots, Sawada."

Hana's dubious tone made it clear she didn't buy his bullshit excuse for a second, but Espresso-Maniac surprisingly came to his rescue.
"He does." His stare was x-raying the girls and reaching all the conclusions they wanted him to reach. "His paternal great-great-great grandfather was Italian."

"This is giving me a headache." Brows creased, Hana shook her head, taking Kyōko by the arm and dragging her away from Naruto and his special brand of crazy. "Ugh, I can't deal with children. Come on, Kyōko, let's leave Sawada to his weird family business. If we're late, that demon prefect monkey will throw a fit."

Smile bright like sunshine, following Hana's lead, Kyōko bobbed her head. "See you in class, Tsuna-kun! Bye-bye, Tsuna-kun's third cousin once removed!" Again she kept waving until they turned around the corner and disappeared from sight.

Naruto sagged in relief, mumbling under his breath about how Kyōko-chan totally got the wrong idea and that was so lame and I can't show up with this crazy kid at school, while Espresso-Maniac hummed low in his throat.

"You are aware of your heritage, No-Good Tsuna?" was what he chose to address instead of Naruto's despair over his social suicide.

"Huh?" Caught aback, Naruto blinked. "What heritage? I just know we've got some Italian ancestry." Then his gaze became narrow, cogs turning in his head, and he fixed Espresso-Maniac with a blistering glare. Full of suspicion and you've got some 'splaining to do, kid. "Question is how do you know that? Have you...have you been investigating our family?" He blinked again. His suspicion ebbed much the same way it had begun. In an instant. "Or are you really my third cousin once removed?" Naruto looked him up and down, a thoughtful gleam in his eye, and finally proclaimed, "Cause it wouldn't surprise me if you are. You kinda look like you have a little Japanese in you, y'know."

Kurama, who had been rolling on the floor for a while now, died. Inari soon followed. Espresso-Maniac stopped and stood stock-still. Naruto, too, stilled.

"What."

Unamused, perhaps experiencing culture shock, and reevaluating Naruto's mental capabilities. Espresso-Maniac stared at him amid the what-the-actual-fuck and what-drugs-are-you-on silence.

Fidgeting with the straps of his school bag, Naruto couldn't take it anymore—he burst into motion, jogging at full throttle and spilling his innermost secrets as he went ahead.

"—won't believe me anyway! Sometimes, I just know stuff, okay? It's the weirdest thing, I swear, like super intuition or something."

Espresso-Maniac caught up with him in no time. His quietly spoken I see implied that while he did make the connection with the Vongola kekkei genkai, he still couldn't quite see it and was perhaps of the opinion that Naruto's version was broken. Like the boy himself. The realization that he was burdened with the glorious privilege of shaping the future Vongola Decimo out of a semi-civilian Sherlock Holmes fanboy was probably only just now sinking in and hitting him hard. Not that Naruto even stopped to acknowledge him since he was nearing the school gates and getting ready to initiate Phase Three.

"—of course kā-san knows and she fully supports me and Officer Miyamoto says it's a good quality to have—wait, what's going on?" Adjusting his speed until he was no longer jogging but walking at a brisk pace, Naruto observed the commotion, gaze zeroing in on Kyōko's strained smile and Hana's fearsome scowl and Mochida's macho bullshit, and facepalmed. Nice work, girls!
Mochida ain't half bad either, huh. Take-chan was right, brat's got potential... "Oh, for gods' sake, Mochida-senpai needs to learn that no means no."

As predicted, Espresso-Maniac latched onto the opportunity to punish Naruto for all the shit he'd put him through in the past hour with claws and teeth.

"You like the Sasagawa girl, No-Good Tsuna?"

Yeah, he'd done his research alright. Good for him. Except, you know, those records were more fake than Shamal's usual lays.

Naruto's head whipped around to goggle at Espresso-Maniac, who was smirking like he was about to crack a yo mama joke, horrified disbelief ridging the skin around his eyes and mouth. "How do you know Kyōko-chan's surname? I never introduced you!"

"I hope you have worthwhile regrets, No-Good Tsuna. Do it with your Dying Will."

And Espresso-Maniac shot him. As in, he put an honest-to-god bullet in Naruto's head. It sliced through the chakra-suppression seal like it wasn't even there, like it was supposed to do in the first place. Grade two seals of this type were perfect for cutting off chakra circulation, but could be easily disrupted by an external source. Naruto exploited the hell out of the time frame Baby-Kabuto had given him—where he should have been knee-deep in regret and coming back to life—limiting his fire-chakra to genin levels and attaching a flair of untamed wildness to it and letting it burn his school uniform to cinders.

Now clad in nothing but his orange plaid cotton boxers, he leaped to his feet with an almighty bellow. "Reborn! Arrest the crazy, gun-toting kid with my dying will!" Instead of immediately carrying it through though, Naruto scanned the stunned audience, and after spotting his intended target he once again bellowed. "Oi, Hibari-senpai! Let go of that loser, you can deal with Mochida-senpai later! We've got a Code Yellow right here!"

Kyōya, who was in the middle of striking terror into Mochida for even breathing the same air as Kyōko (much less pretending to ask her out), glowered at Naruto, not just pissed off but half-slipping into berserker mode, and holy shit, Kyō-chan, you gotta stick to the script! We talked about this, brat! Remember? No killing Mochida! See, this is exactly why you and Kyōko-chan got the linked grade four seals!

Thank the sage, Kyōya came to his senses when his eyes bypassed Naruto and found Espresso-Maniac.

"You will explain your newborn powers of spontaneous human combustion in due time, herbivore, but for now we have more important matters to attend to." Having delivered his opening line word for word, he relinquished a half-soulless Mochida (Naruto vowed to do something nice for this poor kid), prowling past the school gates, brandishing a pair of regular tonfas and advancing on Espresso-Maniac with a demonic you-will-pay-for-everything-motherfucker grin. "Trespasser of unknown origins with unknown intentions. For entering Namimori Chū without registering with the proper authorities, you will be bitten to death."

Espresso-Maniac stared first at Kyōya, then at Naruto, then gripped the brim of his fedora hat as if he needed physical proof that this was reality and this was actually happening to him. As he was violently assaulted by fists and steel and fire, he switched to Italian, his mother tongue as pitch-black as his eyes and I'm too old for this shit and Timoteo's not paying me enough and you're a dead man, Iemitsu.
Current kids’ ages and teams:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Belphegor: 15-16
Kyōko, Hana, Takeshi, Hayato, Haru, Spanner, (technically) Naruto/Tsuna: 14-15
Chrome, Shōichi, Byakuran: 13-14
Fūta: 9-10
I-Pin, Lambo: 4-5
Yuni: 2-3

Team A (led by Naruto/Tsuna): Kyōya, Takeshi, Kyōko
Team B (led by Fon): Hana, Tetsuya, Ryōhei
Team C (led by Shamal): Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Chrome
Team D: (led by Verde): Hayato, Haru, Shōichi, Spanner
"Tadaima, kā-san!"

Naruto took off his shoes, ignoring Espresso-Maniac's reproachful silence, and trudged his way to the kitchen. Truth be told, he was kind of exhausted after the day's shenanigans. Pranking the hitman was great fun and all—the blackmail material was so worth it—but the whole teen Sherlock pretense was starting to wear on his nerves.

It might have been different if he could just sit back with a bucket of popcorn, put his feet up and watch the show unfold from the surveillance room like the rest of his family. Alas, he was cast as the main protagonist in this mafia sitcom, so for now he had to endure. Good thing they'd only planned for one episode. Undercover work was really not his thing. Neither was it Kyōya's. Brat had barely kept the (mock)fight at mid-to-high genin level, and Naruto was pretty damn sure that bloodthirsty hellion would be ambushing Espresso-Maniac the moment the ruse was over, itching for a real fight and not backing down until he got one.

"Ara, Tsu-kun, okaeri!"

Nana's warm hug soothed his irritation a little bit. Naruto hugged her back, planting a kiss on her flour-stained cheek, and ooh, you making ramen? You're the best, kā-san! Which totally slew his bad mood. Naruto beamed, using his sleeve to gently rub the flour off her skin, soaking up the sound of her giggles. "Ero-ossan's coming for dinner, so we'll talk about you-know-what later, 'kay?"

Predictably, that made Nana's day. Hosting guests was among her top three favorite things, right below taking care of her family.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Her nose wrinkled prettily, and she clapped her hands in excitement. "Sensei's favorite is chicken fettuccine alfredo, ne?"

Naruto shrugged, an amused smile playing on his lips. She was probably right on the money. He might have no idea of Shamal's preferences, but he trusted Nana's mad people skills. Not only was that woman a five-star chef, she could also find out someone's likes and dislikes—food allergies included—during the course of their first meeting. It was a special talent of hers. (The Ranking Planet had confirmed it.)

Unlike Naruto though, she had the grace to act as if Espresso-Maniac had been an active participant in their discussion from the start. Because manners. "Will that be alright with you, Reborn-san?" Also her hostess fetish practically demanded it. "You'll be staying for dinner, yes?"

Espresso-Maniac flashed her a come-hither look, the shameless fucker, which had her flushed and fanning herself. "Of course, Nana-san. It will be my pleasure to join you for dinner." He didn't stop there either, oh, no. "I'm sure it will be delicious." Purring, smirking, slick and silver-tongued and seducing the hell out of her.

"My," Nana sighed, breathless, all but swooning, "you're such a charmer."

Naruto's smile stiffened into a rictus of back-the-fuck-off-Romeo. His mellow went out the window. Yeah, no. Fuck this shit. Not cool, man. You don't mess with people's mothers. Why you gotta dig yourself into a deeper hole, dude? I was gonna break it to you easy, but now? You're gonna feel like the world's greatest moron after I'm done with you. "Yeah, yeah, he's a total lady killer, we get
Emphasis on the killer part. Neither Nana nor Espresso-Maniac missed it. Naruto turned away, because their knowing glances incited him to homicide. He could feel the hitman's gaze burning against the back of his neck as he climbed the stairs to his room two at a time. Just as well. Espresso-Maniac was walking a fine line between trying Naruto's patience and being a grade-A asshole. Nobody would fault Naruto for the punishment he was about to dole out. In fact, he'd bet poor fucks all over the world would praise him to the heavens. Time to pay up, Romeo.

Naruto silenced the little voice in the back of his head—that sounded suspiciously like Kurama—saying he had done as much, if not worse, to Gamma. That was neither here nor there. Aria just liked teasing her hubby, and she wasn't a heartbroken, mindfucked woman on the mend. Also he knew where to draw the line. Espresso-Maniac, on the other hand, seemed like the kind of man who didn't give a flying fuck about small stuff like, say, common human decency. If his body wasn't that of an eleven-year-old, and thus unable to go beyond flirting unless he was into creepy pedos, they'd be having a whole other conversation. One with fists. And fire-chakra. And a whole lotta pain.

He'd just plopped himself down on the bed, face buried in the pages of his favorite shōnen manga, when Espresso-Maniac entered his bedroom with silent steps. Closing the door behind him, the hitman leaned his back against the wall, crossed his arms and stared at him through half-lidded eyes.

"You didn't invite any of your school teachers for dinner, No-Good Tsuna." Deceptively casual, in smooth, conversational tones, a flicker of curiosity in his pitch-black gaze.

An obvious assumption since Nana had addressed Shamal as sensei. Naruto's head tilted to show he was listening, but he kept reading, the classic teenager's method of snubbing someone they had to deal with even if they found them annoying or not worth their time. "Hm? Oh, that. Ero-ossan isn't a teacher, he's kā-san's doctor."

"Nana-san is ill?" Espresso-Maniac's posture became rigid, and huh, was that a touch of worry in his voice?

What sort of bullshit intel had Iemitsu given him anyway? Probably a sad reflection on reality, all smoke and mirrors, yamato nadeshiko and tuna fish and shitty seals.

"Not exactly." Sighing, Naruto placed his manga on top of the nightstand, sitting cross-legged, finally gifting Espresso-Maniac with his undivided attention, a cold, calculative glint in his eyes, a slight crack in his crafted persona. "Look, it's complicated. If you wanna know more about it, you can ask Ero-ossan."

A thin brow rose loftily. "And his real name would be?"

Naruto raised an equally lofty brow. "Now that'd be telling."

Espresso-Maniac's face closed off. There was only the sound of fabric being stretched tight as muscles bulged beneath his suit jacket. Then, "I don't appreciate disrespectful students, No-Good Tsuna."

Low, deep, dripping with danger. An unmistakable warning to tread with caution, and what do you know, more shadowplay and killing intent and pompous shit like that. Was this guy for real? Trust was a two-way street, and throwing little intimidation tricks around like confetti was not how you do it. Hell, even Kyōya wouldn't take to this approach. He'd have fallen in line, yeah, but brat'd
have been resentful and nursing a grudge for the rest of his life against Espresso-Maniac. Man, did he suck at this tutoring business. Why on earth did Timoteo think this would ever work? If Naruto had been a normal civilian teenage boy, he'd have developed a host of childhood traumas thanks to this asshole's attitude.

Laughing it all off was no doubt the worst response in this situation—so that was exactly what Naruto did, and to add insult to injury he told Espresso-Maniac what he thought of him and his little power-plays and his overused tutoring devices. "And I don't appreciate crazy, gun-toting kids barging into my home, messing with my friends, and thinking they have the right to dictate my whole damn life." A mocking edge to his lips, another crack in his mask, larger, impossible to dismiss as nothing more than false bravado. "What kinda tutor are you supposed to be anyway?"

Espresso-Maniac stared at him for a long, quiet moment. Inscrutable, motionless, absent the merest spasm of muscle, the face of someone who had been thrown in at the deep end and was only now starting to grasp how far he'd fallen, and how ill-equipped he was. Still, he must have been too set in his ways to completely discard his old tools, not without definite proof of their ineffectiveness. "I told you before, I'm the—"

"World's Greatest Hitman, yeah, I heard you the first time." Naruto rolled his eyes. "And I'm the World's Greatest Badass." Judging by the severely unimpressed look Espresso-Maniac shot him, Naruto's (totally true) claim fell on deaf ears. Well, not his problem. Snorting, he waved a hand, because if they got into a pissing contest, they'd be here all day. "Let's pretend I believe you for one second. What would someone like you want with someone like me, huh?"

"Your Italian ancestor's name was originally Giotto di Vongola—"

"You mean Ieyasu, right?"

A muscle throbbed in Espresso-Maniac's jaw. Not used to being interrupted, much less constantly, huh? Well, too bad.

"Yes," he ground out, then begrudging, if a bit skeptical, as though it pained him to even raise the question, "has Iemitsu spoken to you about him?"

Naruto scoffed. "Nah, I looked him up in the family registry. Iemitsu talking about the family business? Please." Espresso-Maniac looked askance for a split second before his face blanked of emotion. Really? Had he that much faith in Iemitsu's crack-brained excuses, or did he not know the man at all, or was he still gravely underestimating Naruto despite all evidence to the contrary? Perhaps he should up the ante. Naruto's lips twisted wryly as words spilled unfiltered from his mouth. "He's a useless bastard who can't even keep his shitty lies consistent, s'why I call him kuso oyaji, y'know? Kā-san should've divorced his lying ass years ago, but eh, she's slowly coming around now, so at least there's that. Did he send you?"

An infinitesimal shake of his head. "His Boss did."

Nothing more, nothing less. Hmm, so he chose to withhold judgement and just observe for now? Not quite as quick on the uptake, but better late than never. Shock must be dulling his mind, Naruto guessed. These revelations, when amassed and compacted and shoved down his throat so suddenly, were enough to unsettle Espresso-Maniac's equilibrium. Hearing the unvarnished truth behind Iemitsu's lie of a family life from his own son's mouth on top of it all must have sent him reeling.

In the end, Naruto decided to throw him a bone, because while he was still kinda pissed at Espresso-Maniac for being a patronizing asshole—and a literal motherfucker, which, hell no, over my dead body, bastard—he knew it was no fault of his that Vongola was so damn incompetent.
Espresso-Maniac was a consummate professional, and Timoteo had hired him to drag Naruto and his precious people into their messes. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Then you should probably forget whatever bullshit he's fed you—wait, did you just say Boss?" Wide-eyed, laying it on a bit thick on purpose and ball's in your court now, man. "As in, a mafia don? Like, Italian mafia?"

Dark, assessing eyes dissected him. "You catch on quickly."

"I've had my suspicions for a while now." Naruto shrugged, running a hand up and down his face, then made a sound, snappy and humorless, more like a baring of teeth. "His Boss wouldn't happen to be Nonno Timo, now would he?"

Espresso-Maniac's lips thinned, but other than that he displayed no outward emotion. "I was told you were too young to remember Timoteo's visit."

Yeah, I bet. My memory's failing, huh, Nonno Timo? Don't worry, old man! Your beloved grandson will reenact that happy memory for you. Can't have you suffering from dementia, now can I? There'll be lots and lots of orange and tuna fish in your future. Kurama egged him on in between sadistic cackling and composing the second act of Patricide, which was gonna be a bona fide opera by the end of it. Naruto would be lying if he said he wasn't the tiniest bit touched underneath the never-fading exasperation. Zoning out the background noise of Kurama's kill-it-with-fire aria, he leveled Espresso-Maniac with a sardonic smile. "And I just told you to forget whatever you think you know about us, 'cause I can guarantee it'd be dead wrong."

Again that dark assessment, eyes keenly discerning and reading the map of superficial cracks, like pinpricks on exposed nerves. "I'm beginning to realize that," he said, quietly, almost to himself.

Somehow, Naruto doubted that. If Espresso-Maniac had the barest inkling of how epic this clusterfuck was, he'd have stopped trying to sell him Vongola the moment Naruto made his opinions known. He hummed, a little impatient, and for fuck's sake, Espresso-Maniac, can you hurry this up? Kā-san's making ramen for lunch! "What do they even want?"

"You are the last eligible heir—"

"Okay, I'm gonna have to stop you right there. What about kuso oyaji?"

"Iemitsu is the leader of CEFEF, which is Vongola's Intelligence Division. Being the External Advisor automatically excludes him from the succession line."

"Can't he quit or something?"

"No."

"What about illegitimate children? There's gotta be a couple of those already in the mafia, right?"

"Perhaps."

Despite his non-answer and ambivalent word choice, there was a harsh ring of finality in Espresso-Maniac's voice. Naruto thought he'd leave it at that, and they'd begin another round of you're shitting me, dude, that's the best you can come up with, seeing as Espresso-Maniac had opted for single-word sentences—in a futile attempt to discourage Naruto's needling, or maybe to restrain himself lest he give in to his trigger-happy tendencies?—but he pleasantly surprised him by getting to the fucking point.
"It is still irrelevant, though." His fedora dipped low, shrouding half his face and those pitch-black holes he called eyes, while his nin-chameleon crawled down the line of his arm to coil around his wrist. Trigger-happy time, huh? "I have signed the contract, and that means I have as much choice in the matter as you do." His nin-chameleon henged in an instant, and in one fluid, effortless motion, Espresso-Maniac aimed at the space between Naruto's brows. Dead center, with every intention to shoot, and damn if it wasn't hella iconic. Thank fuck, Nana wasn't in the room, because this guy made Al Pacino look like an amateur, Naruto would give him this much. "Which, for your information, is none at all."

Naruto treated the fact he was being held at gunpoint as he did all threats against his person. Like a challenge. He grinned, his you've-got-guts grin, all teeth and blood running hot and come at me, I dare you. "You don't strike me as a person who'd sign a contract without slipping in some sorta loophole in case you wanted out."

Espresso-Maniac's pose froze. Slowly, he tilted his head in a way that allowed for direct eye contact, his stare intent, appraising, as if he was seeing him for the first time, and goddammit, can we please get on with it? What is it with you mafia dudes and dramatic pauses and macho posturing?

"Who are you?"

Boy, was it loaded, like his weird nin-chameleon-pistol, and whoa, that's not how you build a good rapport, Espresso-Maniac. You had better point that damn thing elsewhere before someone gets hurt.

Now, normally, he'd have made the guy sweat a little before giving him a straight answer, if not for three important facts. One, Espresso-Maniac had hit on his kā-san. Two, he'd been shot at thirteen fucking times today. Three, did he mention that douchebag had hit on his kā-san? Twice?

Out of sheer spite, Naruto decided to be a dick, and nobody could out-dick Kakashi-sensei, so. He eye-smiled. "Sorry, got kinda lost thinking about the meaning of life. Did you say something?"

Espresso-Maniac miraculously didn't shoot this time, though he didn't lower his gun either. Maybe he was learning. Pfft. Yeah, right. And oh, look, more posturing bullshit.

"Don't play games with me." Oh, that's rich. "Your personality has been gradually changing ever since the moment we met." No shit, I hadn't noticed. "You kept up the young aspiring detective charade while we were at school, but let it go once we returned home. By now, you are a completely different person, and I can only assume it was deliberate on your part." Bingo, give the man a prize. "So I'll ask again." Cue dramatic pause. His eyes were hard and flinty and black as gunpowder. One wrong move, and everything would go up in flames. "Who. Are. You?"

In the face of such appraisal, Naruto straightened his back and grinned, a succession of white teeth, a predator's grin. "Finally got a clue, huh?"

Espresso-Maniac didn't even hesitate—he pulled the trigger, and Naruto knew this wasn't one of his fancy Dying Will bullets, which was why he got served with the Cursed Rainbow special.

(Back at the Varia HQ, Mammon was managing his various investments when a shudder coursed through his body. That frisson of dread, that all-consuming feeling of wrath... Oh, dear Plutus. Who in their right mind would anger that monster? On autopilot, he ordered two cases of strawberry milk. He needed some sugar, money be damned.)

The bullet that would have blown his brains out was incinerated. Naruto hadn't moved an inch,
hadn't stopped grinning. Fire-chakra rasped across the silence, a low, crackling hiss of killing intent. It slipped into his voice. "Easy there, you're in my territory, man." Rough-edged, blood-red eyes, and a mouth full of fangs. "I could have taken you out anytime I wanted, ya know?" He eyeballed him boldly. "And it would've been a fucking piece of cake." His killing intent skyrocketed. "But I didn't." Naruto let it vanish, all there was left to say in his stare. "That should tell you a lot."

Finally, Espresso-Maniac lowered his arm. Out of necessity, because it was kinda lame to keep posing, given that his nin-chameleon had reverted to his base form and taken refuge in his fedora, like, ten seconds ago. Naruto did not laugh, nope. Kurama was laughing hard enough for the both of them.

"You were testing me," he bit out, teeth and fists clenched, and boy, did it *rankle.*

Naruto's throat vibrated with amusement, but in his defense he tried to be mature about the whole thing. Key word, *tried.* "Yeah, sure, let's go with that."

Espresso-Maniac was neither amused nor willing to be mature in the least. "You were screwing with me," he spat, eyes like hot coals and all but breathing fire.

And, well…there wasn't much to say beyond, "Pretty much, yeah."

A quick, sharp inhalation. Espresso-Maniac looked one second away from making barbecue out of Naruto's tender parts, if only he could. But he couldn't. Air was violently expelled from his lungs as he pressed forward with an incensed, "*Why?*

Wow, just how fucking high was his tower? Like, was it a self-defense mechanism or a natural deficiency or what? Nobody could be this high-handed, wait, no, unless your name was Madara, then—

Kurama's laughter turned into a snarling bitchfest about *accursed Sharingan* and *how dare that pathetic ningen* and *come back to life and let me eat you* that Naruto automatically tuned out.

"What do you mean *why?*" Incredulous, Naruto stared at him and waited, half-hoping for some kinda revelation to smack Espresso-Maniac upside the head and make him see the light. When he expressed nothing but that sage-damned *why* and silent fury and rightful indignation, Naruto lost his shit. Also Kurama might or might have not superimposed his hatred for Madara on Espresso-Maniac and cranked the killing intent up to eleven. "You come into *my* territory, start fucking things up and shooting at people like no tomorrow, and you think we'll just say 'yeah, sure, come on in, please make yourself comfortable, can we get you an espresso or anything'? Seriously?" At the narrow-eyed, butt-hurt silence he received, Naruto scoffed, but had the decency to rein the fox in. Which was more than could be said for Espresso-Maniac. "That shit ain't gonna fly, man."

Stiffly, Espresso-Maniac inclined his fedora-hatted head. "And whose territory am I guilty of trespass?"

So he got half a clue. Probably. Whatever, Naruto would take it.

"Now you're asking the right questions." He stretched lazily, rolling his shoulders, and drawled, in a rather underwhelming reveal, "Namimori is Konoha territory."

Or so he had thought. For Espresso-Maniac, it was apparently akin to the greatest shock of his life if the unattractive arrangement of his features was any indication of his inner turmoil.

Bluntly put, he gawped. "You..."
When it became evident that speech eluded him, Naruto prodded him with an arced brow and a sing-song taunt. "Meee?"

"...are Konoha Primo," he ended up blurring, as if he'd just heard the mafia were denouncing their criminal ways and joining the boy scouts, and so...so not-suave that Naruto almost pitied him.

Way to state the obvious, Espresso-Maniac. Then his face underwent an entire transformation. It was hilarious to watch as he switched from shock to realization to ye gods, I'm an imbecile. Never let it be said Espresso-Maniac couldn't adapt on the fly. Still funny as hell, though.

Naruto smirked. "Yep."

"Would you care to enlighten me as to how that came to be?"

Smooth, but razor-edged, light pressure and an iota of mockery lurking between the words, mafia diplomacy at its finest. It was, truth be told, as polite as Espresso-Maniac could ever do. Heh. Interesting. Being the don of an established famiglia made all the difference, huh? Well, at least he'd moved on from why. Small favors and all that.

"Doesn't matter." Aware he was being kinda rude, thus hardly conducive to a relaxed atmosphere, but too hungry to give a damn, Naruto brushed him off, more than ready for the you-can-tell-Vongola-to-fuck-off part, until the stubborn set of Espresso-Maniac's lips prompted him to elaborate. "Or more like I don't trust you enough to explain the whys and hows of my famiglia."

Did he have to spoon-feed him everything, dammit? They'd never get anywhere at this rate, and for ramen's sake, why did nobody (except Ramen-Alien, but he didn't count, he liked shio of all the godly ramen) worship the heavenly noodles? Espresso-Maniac saw nothing wrong with his approach as he continued to harass Naruto for plain-as-day answers without compunction.

"Your words and actions so far imply there is a level of trust."

Still edgy, still pressing, seeking to capitalize on this fortuitous advantage. Smooth, Espresso-Maniac. Real smart. You just can't stop pushing your luck, can you? Well, if that's how ya wanna play it...

"You gotta thank my Guardians for that. We wouldn't be having this conversation like semi-mature adults if they hadn't put in a good word for you. If it was up to me..." Naruto's mouth curled impishly. "Well, I might have blown you up again, just for old times' sake."

And oh, man, Espresso-Maniac totally blew a fuse. Pissed off didn't even begin to describe his aura as his back detached itself from the wall, as if his body was moving by its own will, and he took one threatening step toward Naruto. It left an imprint of killing intent, tendrils of shadow, fire-chakra scorching the floor, and okay, that was going a bit too far. He could deal with a pissy hitman and bullets flying all day long, but Naruto drew the line at property damage.

Cords straining in his neck, Espresso-Maniac worked his jaw, a silky, menacing hiss slithering down his tongue. "That was you?"

Yeah, mafia diplomacy was brutally murdered right then and there. He'd have tried to put a bullet in Naruto, too, if his nin-chameleon hadn't transformed into a 'one ton' mallet and knocked some sense into his noggin. Gotta love nin-animals and their all-purpose implements of wisdom and disciplinary action. Fukasaku-jī would have approved of the baby lizard Yoda, and given him pointers.

"Yep." Nodding, Naruto raised one finger with aplomb. "You totaled our car. I blew you up."
Raised another. "You were an asshole. I fucked with you." A monitory layer coated his tone, reminiscent of his academy days, how Iruka-sensei used to talk to him after one of his pranks or when he skipped class or because he fell asleep in the middle of a lesson. As if Espresso-Maniac was what his appearance would have you believe at first glance—an unruly eleven-year-old in dire need of a lecture. "Are you seeing the pattern here? Like, who's always starting shit and who's just getting even?"

And that more than anything did the trick. Espresso-Maniac's fire was extinguished in a fraction of a second. He looked like he'd been doused with a bucket of cold water and then walloped over the head with said bucket. Wrapping the tatters of his dignity around him like a cloak, he took one step back to lean his weight against the wall, assuming his previous position and pretending there had been no egregious lapse of control, oh, no, he was the living embodiment of mafia etiquette and savoir faire.

"Point taken," he conceded, albeit rather haughtily.

Naruto had to cough to cover up his laugh. Sage save him from self-entitled pricks. If Itachi hadn't massacred his whole clan bar Sasuke, this was exactly what he'd have had to contend with on a daily basis during his tenure as Hokage. An awful thing to joke about, but eh, shinobi had invented gallows humor, and from what he'd heard from Sasuke whenever that bastard took a trip down memory lane over sake, he was right on the money.

Damn right you are. Of course, Kurama rose to the occasion, always game for some good, old-fashioned Uchiha bashing. Nobody could dish it out quite like the fox when it came to vilifying all things Uchiha. It all started with Indra, that arrogant whelp. Thought he was hot stuff, making all sorts of new techniques, all in the name of progress. Bah. Blasphemy, I say! Perversions! Father's ninshū wasn't meant—

Right. Because ninjutsu was the problem, sure, let's blame the tools for turning their creators into corrupt megalomaniacs. Bijūdama was a little ball of sunshine. Old Man Rikudō was proud of its…peaceful…properties. Pointing out Kurama's hypocrisy would be an exercise in futility, though, so Naruto shook his head and let him vent his spleen undisturbed.

"Glad we cleared that up!" Clapping his hands together, he slid his feet off the bed and onto the floor, stretching his arms behind his back. "So, about that contract of yours…" A smirk tugged on the corners of his mouth, a sly thing, vindictive. "I suggest you break it, 'cause trust me when I say you don't wanna get involved in what's coming for Vongola."

Unlike all other times Naruto had proclaimed he wouldn't succumb to Vongola's demands, it didn't annoy Espresso-Maniac, far from it actually. Being the Shodai of Konoha apparently trumped being the heir of Vongola, and wasn't that just awesome?

Espresso-Maniac's fedora shaded his eyes, but when he spoke there was intrigue in his voice, so pure it could be neither mistaken nor masked. "And what, pray tell, would that be?"

Naruto came to stand beside him at the door, caught his eye and grinned, satisfaction on the curve of his lips, all sharp angles and bright-dark eyes.

"Karma."

That single word was shackled tight, bled visceral urges, something wild, trapped, clawing to come out. Iemitsu had better come home soon now that the truth was out, because even Naruto's patience had its limits. If he had to chase his useless father down…
A quiet hum broke him out of his murderous musings. Naruto focused back on Espresso-Maniac who had one hand on top of his fedora and one in his pocket, seeming lost in thought.

"I appreciate the forewarning, but I think…" He paused, as if mulling over his words, then took his hat off and pressed it against his sternum. Tilting his head up, Espresso-Maniac shot him a stare full of lead. "I would like to stay."

Which, Naruto thought with no small amount of amusement, was as close as that asshole could get to asking for permission to stay in Naruto’s territory, but whatever. As long as he wasn't tooting Vongola's horn or endangering his mother or screwing with his famiglia, Naruto didn't much care whether he stayed or left.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged, and that was that. "Just don't say I didn't warn you." As he made his way down the stairs, because there was a bowl of ramen (or twenty) with his name on it, he called over his shoulder, "By the way, you shoot at my brats again? You're on your own."

"You don't care if I shoot at them?"

Espresso-Maniac's tone all but screamed are you fucking bipolar and didn't you warn me not to mess with your kids, like, half an hour ago and make up your damn mind, dude.

"Nope." Naruto laughed. Espresso-Maniac didn't know even the half of it, but Naruto was all outta warnings to give. He'd have to learn the hard way what life in Konoha was like. "Your funeral, man."

"I see," was all Espresso-Maniac said.

No, he didn't see, not yet. But he would, oh, he would. Naruto couldn't help but laugh again.
“Kā-san.” Naruto smiled, blissed out and patting his stomach, as Nana cleared the table. “I love you.”

Nana, who was carrying an empty stack of bowls half as tall as she was to the kitchen sink, giggled. “Tsu-kun really loves ramen, ne?”

Naruto’s smile broadened. “Well, yeah, but I love you more than ramen. You know that, right?”

A delighted squeal was his only warning before Nana dumped the bowls in the sink and smothered him in love. Espresso-Maniac beheld the spectacle in silence. There had been lots and lots of silent staring for the duration of lunch. Apart from his courteous replies to Nana when she tried to draw him in conversation—he’d toned down the flirting to bearable levels after Naruto pierced him with a they’ll-never-find-your-body glare when Nana wasn’t looking—his face seemed to have been perpetually frozen in an expression that said how much ramen can you eat and why haven’t you dropped dead from sodium poisoning yet.

Naruto eyed Espresso-Maniac’s after-meal coffee, a slow, deliberate, you’re-one-to-talk glance, which elicited an amused huff from the hitman.

Nana had just brought Naruto’s customary cup of green tea when the doorbell rang and she excused herself to answer the door. Being well acquainted with the pervert’s groping tendencies, Naruto scowled as he got up to follow, and goddammit, if it wasn’t Espresso-Maniac putting the moves on his kā-san, then it was Shamal putting his dirty paws all over her body. How was he supposed to protect his poor, innocent mother when the world was full of shameless assholes? Why you gotta be so cute and pretty, kā-san? You’re gonna take lessons from the girls starting tomorrow, ‘cause that shit has got to fucking stop.

And yeah, Naruto had every right to be worried. His eyelids twitched as he took in the way Shamal was wrapped around Nana like a horny man-octopus, the way his fingers stroked the small of her back in circles, the glazed sheen in his eyes, and his stupid, lecherous grin. There were hugs and then there was…this. A growl rumbled in his throat.

“Move that hand an inch lower...and you’re a dead man, Ero-ossan.”

Shamal jumped back as if burned, while Nana tittered and busied herself with hanging Shamal’s coat.

“Now, now, Volpe.” Holding his hands up in clear view of everyone, he waggled his fingers, though his laughter sounded nervous as hell. “Nobody’s getting physical here, see?”

Naruto’s twitching intensified, but before he could ream the pervert out, Espresso-Maniac cut in like a hot knife through butter.

“Shamal.” Soft. Quiet. It was all the deadlier because Espresso-Maniac didn’t raise his voice, or aim his nin-chameleon-gun, or flare his fire-chakra, only gazed at Shamal with pitch-black eyes that spoke of murder, of the last thing he’d see if he didn’t offer an adequate explanation for his presence in Namimori. Or, to be more precise, why he hadn’t informed Espresso-Maniac of his association with Naruto, since his nickname made it glaringly obvious that they were pretty damn tight.

A gleeful grin spread over Shamal’s face. Heedless of the dangerous vibes Espresso-Maniac was
radiating, he greeted him like an old friend he hadn’t seen in forever but was oh-so-glad to have stumbled across. “Good to see you, Reborn. How have you been? No, wait, why am I bothering you when I can just—” Fishing his cellphone out of the pocket of his dress shirt, Shamal pressed a couple buttons until he found what he was looking for and turned it around, so the screen was facing them. “—press play.” A ten-second video started playing—Espresso-Maniac’s you’re-screwing-with-me face after Naruto spilled the beans was displayed. In high definition. On loop. A deep sigh, exuding vengeful satisfaction, erupted from Shamal’s lungs. “Aah, technology, I love thee.”

Espresso-Maniac’s gaze was glued to the screen for maybe two whole minutes, then slowly, mechanically, he slanted his head in Naruto’s direction, his voice still soft, quiet. “Does the same rule apply for...” He paused, closed his eyes as if concentrating hard, and when he snapped them open there was an echo of bewildered disbelief in all that deadliness. “…your Guardians?”

Naruto’s brow arched. Somewhat of a sensor, huh? Good thing we played it safe with the chakra-suppression seals. Not bad, Espresso-Maniac. “Hm?” He hummed, pretending to think about it while Shamal’s mouth uncurled, wariness replacing his smug grin. “Oh, yeah, as long as there’s no collateral damage.” Smirking, Naruto shrugged. “Have at it.”

“Now wait a minute, Volpe! You can’t do this to me—”

“Much obliged,” Espresso-Maniac purred, his smirk emulating Naruto’s, as he tipped his fedora in gratitude amid Shamal’s wails of betrayal.

“—you’re the worst Sky ever!”

Rolling his eyes, fed up with the pervert’s bitching and moaning, Naruto resorted to using his trump card. A poof of smoke preceded the appearance of a voluptuous blonde.

“But—but I thought you...you liked me, Sha-mal-sen-sei.”

Batting lashes, pouty lips, the perfect mix of innocence and sexiness, and yeah, Oiroke no jutsu for the win. In a complete turnabout, Shamal lunged at the naked bombshell with one flying leap and that stupid kissy face of his, arms spread wide and hearts in his eyes—

“You’re the best Sky ever!”

—only to be roundhouse kicked face-first into the nearest wall. He slid to the floor with a pitiful moan, blood leaking from his nose, and his stupid, lecherous grin permanently etched on his battered face. Finally, some peace and quiet.

“Oh, my!” Nana gasped when she returned to the living room, distraught and fussing over the unconscious man, because she was goddamn Mother Teresa and too caring for her own good. “Is Shamal-sensei alright?”

Naruto scoffed. “Leave him be, kā-san. It’s the least of what that pervert deserves.”

Not that it allayed her concern. Naruto shook his head and let her do as she pleased. Shamal knew—had painfully learned—it was unwise to prey on her kind nature or take liberties with her. Even if he had to be reminded now and then.

“I see now how you convinced him to become your Mist.”

Espresso-Maniac’s flippant remark made him snort. Come on, really? Shamal might have been a pervert of the highest degree, but he was an experienced, solid A-rank jōnin. If all it took to gain
his allegiance was a hot chick, he’d have had his throat slit in his sleep ages ago. *Give him some credit, Espresso-Maniac.* Naruto stared at him, deadpan. “You’d think so, right?”

Shrewd eyes narrowed as he read between the lines. “But that is not how it actually happened.” *That,* of all things, magnified his intrigue. “Interesting.”

Still, he didn’t ask how, which told Naruto all he needed to know about the path Espresso-Maniac had chosen to take. *You’re just gonna observe and gather intel from now on, hm? Question is…for whom? Yourself? Or Vongola?* Well, only one way to find out.

Kurama voiced his approval with a raspy, dark chuckle. *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

Which, true, but Naruto had other shit to deal with than babysitting Espresso-Maniac twenty-four-seven, and while he trusted his family explicitly and had absolute faith in their abilities…they weren’t *his* partner.

**Of course not.** The fox sneered, turning his snout up, scornful as ever and full of himself. *Do not compare me to worthless humans.*

_Forgive me, oh great Kyūbi-sama. How could the likes of us mere mortals think to compete with the might of bijū?* Whoever coined the term jinchūriki must have been referring to some other demonic entity that was contained within humans. *Speaking of which, how are you finding your accommodations? I fear the space might be too small for your ego.* Naruto bowed, sarcasm oozing from his tongue, nimbly avoiding being shish-kebabbed via the fox’s tails. *Anyway, you gonna keep an eye on him?*

**Tch. You bet.** Kurama growled, then grinned, baring fangs and disdain. *He’s not as complex as he thinks he is. All you humans have one thing in common.*

Naruto sobered. *Yeah, I know.* A forlorn smile stretched across his lips. *He’s lonely, right?*

The fox didn’t reply, but one of his tails coiled around Naruto in a mimicry of an embrace…before it tried to crush him, because sage forbid Kurama showed affection. The fact he let Inari cuddle with him wasn’t mentioned aloud, oh, no, the great Kyūbi had a reputation to uphold. Naruto flexed his fire-chakra, laughing as the fox cursed him for singeing his fantabulous fur, that vain asshole.

“So.” Scratching his cheek, Naruto threw out a casual, “Where are you staying?”

Espresso-Maniac studied his relaxed posture, easily grasping the implied *’cause you sure as hell aren’t staying here,* and inclined his head in what could be construed as deference due to Naruto’s status as Konoha Primo. “I was planning on staying at your residence—with Iemitsu’s permission, of course—but I guess that is now out of the question?”

It was rhetorical, but Naruto felt explaining *why* in greater detail might be beneficial in this case. Until he had—at the very least—verbally confirmed he was going to break his contract, Naruto would continue to treat him as a potential infiltrator/spy/plant. Whether Espresso-Maniac had cottoned on to that or not, though, remained to be seen.

“Yeah, sorry, can’t have you that close to kā-san, even with my people vouching for you, until *I* decide you’re trustworthy.” When Espresso-Maniac parted his mouth, Naruto preempted whatever he was going to say with, “Don’t take it the wrong way, s’nothing personal. Trouble always follows people like us home, y’know, and kā-san’s just a civilian. She’s already been hurt once.
Your presence near her alone is putting her in danger.”

Espresso-Maniac’s mouth clicked shut. He stared into Naruto’s eyes, judging the truthfulness of his words, their weight and how far he’d go to prevent the mistakes of the past from repeating themselves. All the way, Naruto’s gaze told him. “Understandable.” And he meant it. “Allow me to say, though, I would protect her should anything threatens her regardless of the terms in my contract.”

_Chivalry, huh? Fon was right. You do have a soft spot for women. Dammit, now that petty bastard’s gonna lord it over me._ For the first time, Naruto gave him a true smile, warm and honest and _yeah, I’m a total mama’s boy and damn proud of it_. “Thanks, man.”

Caught by surprise, Espresso-Maniac blinked once, observed his smile with a sort of abstract wonder, a faraway look in his eyes, as if he was seeing someone else in Naruto’s smile, then blinked again. “What happened, if I may ask?” Curious, but not really expecting an answer, still kinda caught up in that smile.

Naruto’s smile was wiped away, breaking whatever weird-ass spell it had cast on Espresso-Maniac. “I’ve got no fucking idea since it happened before I was born, but I know who does.” The frown that creased Espresso-Maniac’s brows was only a fraction of the scowl Naruto wore, but he nonetheless appreciated his tacit support. One step closer to convincing him to break that troublesome contract. Naruto exhaled deeply, pushing his grievances aside, because now wasn’t the time for it. _Soonsoonsoon_, his super intuition (or Kurama) sadistically cackled. “Anyway, if you want a place to stay, there’s the Konoha mansion. Our guest wing’s available free of charge, if you don’t mind a little daily chaos.”

Espresso-Maniac’s smirk was decadent. “I thrive on chaos.”

Naruto laughed. “Yeah, I had a feeling you’d say that. C’mon, let’s get you settled.”

“Oi, brats, gather round! Time for introductions!”

Twenty-eight heads of various sizes and shapes turned toward the direction of his voice in total sync. Training Ground Three looked more like a battlefield. Like, everything was on fire and steel littered the earth and battle-lust saturated the air. His brats weren’t faring any better—clothes ripped, skin discolored, covered in wounds and burns, bones bruised and fractured. Bleeding sluggishly, breathing hard, all of them _grinning_. They gathered before him, four mixed groups of shinobi and summons, waiting for his familiar _good-job-brats_ gesture.

Naruto grinned back and gave them a double thumbs up, because his brats were awesome, the little killing machines. Made him so goddamn proud. Next to him, Espresso-Maniac kept quiet, examining them with eyes sharp and slightly wide, his gaze straying toward the destruction wrought upon the training area now and then. Back and forth. As if he couldn’t believe what his own eyes were telling him, his chakra fluctuating wildly, betraying he was kinda unsure about what to feel, like, should he be impressed or scared shitless or both. His battle-honed instincts kicked in and decided for him, and _‘lo, nin-chameleon-gun, nice to see ya again. Good instincts, Espresso-Maniac. You gotta keep your guard up if you wanna survive with your dignity and all your limbs intact in this place._

Naruto whistled. It was a command. In the blink of an eye, his brats transformed from bloodthirsty battle-maniacs into well-trained soldiers. Spines gone ramrod stiff, chins held high, eyes unnervingly focused and hardened. Espresso-Maniac reflexively gripped his nin-chameleon-pistol. Good, he was starting to understand that messing with his brats would be A Very Bad Idea.
Satisfied, Naruto winked at them, and when they eased up he barked, “Team A.”

Kyōya stepped forward, his I-motherfucking-rule-Namimori face on.

“Hibari Kyōya.” He tilted his head in a quarter of a nod, all displeasure and thinly veiled disrespect, fingers stroking the feathers of his harpy eagle. “Hibiki.” Both teen and bird glared at Espresso-Maniac, raptor-keen and twice as predatory. “Your surveillance system has been removed. If you vandalize Namimori Chū again, I will not be as…lenient. Consider this your only warning.”

It was met with a challenging smirk, which would have been bad news if Kyōko hadn’t linked her arm with Kyōya’s, nipping it in the bud (for the moment), genjutsu-smiling as usual, her cassowary standing imposingly tall and fixing Espresso-maniac with a gimlet eye, a queenly, looming threat amidst the sidhe mindfuckery.

“My name is Sasagawa Kyōko, and this is Titania. Nice to meet you, Reborn-san! Your sideburns are so curly and cute!”

At her…compliment, Naruto suppressed a snort, and really, Kyōko-chan? Was that truly necessary? You know how Kyō-chan gets when you say stuff like that to other boys. Espresso-Maniac’s smirk now seemed to say puberty, man. Naruto gave in and snorted, because Espresso-maniac had no idea what he was getting into here. Fon’s reassuring— petty, definitely petty— comments about how there is no need to worry, Kyōya and Reborn is the perfect gentleman and he treats women like the delicate flowers they are within Kyōko’s hearing was akin to putting the nail in Espresso-Maniac’s coffin. His girls were vicious when they thought someone was looking down on them, and they absolutely loathed being underestimated. Riling Kyōya up was only the start, and the least of Espresso-maniac’s problems.

Takeshi, probably sensing the underlying bloodlust, scratched his Doberman’s ears and laughed, his laughter rolling off metallic and sleek as it slid down the edge of a blade.

“I’m Yamamoto Takeshi, and he’s Kenshin.” A too-large, borderline psychotic, barely-human grin slashed across his cheeks. The last time Naruto had seen the likes of it was on Kisame’s face while the shark dude made some kinda sick joke (it wasn’t a joke) about loping off a limb or two as Itachi stared him down, before Sasuke barged in and did his cliché Chidori avenger sh*tick (like, seriously, you and what army, teme?), only to be Tsukuyomi-ed into the second coma of his life, of-fucking-course. “Squalo’s been saying nice things about you, Reborn-san. I wouldn’t mind a spar!”

And by nice things, he meant a torrent of vulgar, creative, anatomically-impossible, morally-reprehensible curses while fantasizing about all the ways he’d like to cut up the hitman if they ever met face to face. Despite holding a sort of professional respect for Espresso-Maniac, Squalo had never been a big fan of his, but the fact he was on good terms with Timoteo had propelled Squalo’s dislike to newer heights due to this recent shit-show.

At the mention of the Varia Commander’s name, a multitude of emotions passed through Espresso-Maniac’s gaze, too quick to decipher them all, but surprise was prevalent among them, closely followed by personal affront. Espresso-Maniac appeared to take the lack of information as an insult, if Naruto guessed right, the self-entitled prick.

Naruto’s lips quirked in a wry smile. If he was affronted now, then he’d be downright pissed when Fon and Baby-Kabuto deigned to make their presence known.

Oh, well, not his problem, moving on. “Team B.”
Tetsuya flashed Espresso-Maniac a closed-mouthed smile and bowed, his *welcome-dear-customer* bow, polite and business-like, which his wolverine managed to perfectly copy. Somehow.

“My name is Kusakabe Tetsuya, and my partner’s name is Daiki. Pleased to meet you, Reborn-san. If you have any inquiries regarding our products, our policies, or even our members, I will be available after school hours. Keep in mind that you have been afforded level two clearance and as such you may be left with more questions than answers.”

In contrast, Hana was the epitome of rudeness and girl power and *fuck with me at your own peril*. “Kurokawa Hana. Don’t mess with Akane. Don’t flirt with me.” Her mongoose bared her teeth, Hana jutted her chin out, and both dared him to even *think* about trying. “You’ll regret it.”

Ryōhei brought his fists up, engaging in a mock-spar with his chimpanzee, all punches and tempered aggression and agile footwork, all the while yelling at the top of his lungs. “Sasagawa Ryōhei, and my *extreme* friend, Son Gokū! If you want a match, we’ll extremely take you on! Any time, any place!” Suddenly, he stopped all motion, his posture solidifying into concrete, craning his neck to regard Espresso-Maniac with uncharacteristic seriousness. His lids dropped to half-mast, irises a simmering charcoal, voice dangerously low, like the calm before a lightning strike, and damn if that wasn’t Kakashi-sensei’s MO when he threate—nope, not going there, *ugh, need brain bleach*. “Don’t touch my sister to the extreme.”

And his chimpanzee enforced the boy’s point by pulling his lips back to reveal all his teeth as he slowly dragged one yellow fire-chakra-coated thumb along the curve of his neck, finishing with a gnashing of teeth and a thumbs down. Son Gokū would have been proud of his namesake.

By now, Espresso-Maniac had fathomed that keeping his mouth shut and his face void of expression was in his best interests, given how woefully unprepared he ended up being—he’d been making an ass of himself so far, they all knew it, and boy, did he despise being taken for a fool by a pack of crazy teens—until he gained more info about team dynamics and individual triggers and what the fuck was wrong with this *famiglia*. Not that he’d get a break, since Mukuro was next in line to be introduced, and that uncute brat was the root of all things evil and fucked up.

Naruto coughed a short laugh as he carried on with the obligatory, “Team C.”

Mukuro’s fake-Rinnegan eyeball did some funky shit that Naruto was ninety percent sure would come to bite Espresso-Maniac in the ass in due time, because that little shit was also the prince of delayed gratification and liked to play the long game. Subtle, masterfully executed, in a blink-and-you-miss-it kinda way.

“Rokudo Mukuro.” There was a pause, cunningness licking at his lips in something that masqueraded as a smile, then *Creepy Murder-Laughter™*. “Lucifer is behind you.” A gunshot shattered the decoy illusion that brat had woven around Espresso-Maniac to stall him for a split second. Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, the three-foot-long reptile cozying up to Espresso-Maniac—despite his increasingly more violent struggling—was very much real. “Don’t be alarmed if he sneaks into your bed at night. He likes warm people, and Suns are his favorites.”

(And it wasn’t even a lie. Ken, Ryōhei, and Shōichi could attest to that—they simultaneously shuddered, welcoming Espresso-Maniac to the unofficial Snake Snugglers club.)

“Name’s Anko, and she’s Kurohime.” Mini-Anko ducked under Mukuro’s arm, one small hand seamlessly sinking inside the back pocket of his jeans, her black mamba slithering up the length of her other arm to coil herself around their shoulders like some sort of live couples’ necklace. “Don’t worry about Hime-chan, she only bites a little.”
Mukuro’s head dipped to whisper something (so fucking not PG) in her ear, and dammit, Naruto swore he caught a bit of tongue action in there, too. Probably why he made the effort to pass the message via oral means. Naruto didn’t miss how Kyōko’s lips pursed in a cute pout, or how Kyōya growled in irritation at being one-upped by his arch-rival. Biting back a curse—for fuck’s sake, give it a rest, you damn brats, dating isn’t a competition—Naruto cleared his throat. Loudly. Mini-Anko giggled, Mukuro’s innocent smile blatantly taunted him, and Naruto all but projected you know the rules, Kuro-chan, no third base stuff ’til she’s sixteen, or we’re gonna have a big problem, which Mini-Anko also heard through their shared mental channel and used as an inspiration for her ending kill line.

“Unless you eat my dango.” Her dango sticks were glinting with a poisonous sheen as she deftly twirled them between her dainty fingers. “Then we’re gonna have a big problem.”

Amidst his struggle against Lucifer’s hug of infernal love, Espresso-Maniac took an infinitesimal break to shoot an equally venomous glare at her sticks of slow-acting, tortuous death, and fuck his life, Mukuro’s smile became more innocent. Goddamn teenagers. Naruto couldn’t believe he was about to admit this (even post-mortem), but Sasuke had been right. After all, that emotionally crippled bastard only had one kid. Nobody could understand why he stopped at the one either, what with his nonstop raving about the resurrection of his clan. Coincidence? Nuh-uh. More like a stroke of genius. And here Naruto was…with more or less…twenty of these…these little balls of hormones. Twenty, fuck-gods-shiiiit, he was done for.

This is merely the beginning. Kurama, that sadistic asshole, cackled. No sympathy whatsoever. They will grow. They will mate. They will multiply. As if to rub salt in Naruto’s wound, his voice turned high-pitched and squealing. Grandkits! Litter after litter after litter…of grandkits! Like the anthem of deranged, desperate, grandbabies-starved mothers everywhere.

It was eerie as fuck. Worst of all, he knew the future was inescapable. Naruto wanted to cry. Instead, he sucked it up—denial was useless, everything was useless—and flipped him the bird. Fuck off, Kurama. They’ll be your grandkits, too.

“My name is Kakimoto Chikusa, and my companion is Zero. Nice to meet you, Reborn-san.” Chikusa, bless his senbon-loving heart, lent a note of normalcy to this whole circus shebang with his no-nonsense demeanor. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he quietly, but adamantly, laid down the law. Economic law, that was. “I handle the finances, and I’m telling you now that we will only provide lodgings and meals.”

The temperature plunged to below zero, courtesy of his penguin’s Hyōton imitation fuckery. It had the additional effect of assisting Espresso-Maniac in his continuous attempts to free himself from Lucifer’s chokehold. Poor python couldn’t stand the cold. Naruto swallowed a sigh when the overly affectionate reptile sought the greatest source of heat nearby, namely, him. Espresso-Maniac loosened his tie, panting heavily, hands on his knees, still holding his gun with a vice-like grip, a jumble of phrases crawling out of his throat, such as snake burrito, what even, never again, can’t breathe, nearly suffocated and if I find out you’ve recorded this, Shamal, I will end you.

“Furthermore,” Chikusa finished coolly, “you will reimburse us for any damages you might incur during your stay here, and I would like to have that in writing, please.”

Espresso-Maniac’s head snapped up—the look in his eyes conveyed the only legal document they’d be getting out of him if they didn’t cut the bullshit right-fucking-now would be their death certificates. His black look didn’t curb Ken’s enthusiasm in the slightest, or his gorilla’s, as evidenced by his primal cries and rapid chest-beating.
“We’re Jōshima Ken and King Kong, but you can call us Ken and Kong! Nice to meet ya, Reborn-san!” Even though his speech was addressed to Espresso-Maniac, his feral gaze clashed with Ryōhei’s, Son Gokū and King Kong roaring in each other’s face. “If you wanna have a real match, you gotta challenge us, byon!”

Before they started brawling to determine who was the king of the jungle, Naruto charged his hands with orange fire-chakra and grabbed them by the nape of their neck. Both boys went limp, albeit snarling and sullenly glaring at each other. Chuckling, Naruto bumped them on the head, then ruffled their hair and released them.

“Team D,” he said at last, much to Espresso-Maniac’s not-quite-hidden relief.

He’d been watching their interaction while catching his breath, his expression a carbon-copy of Squalo’s is-this-a-famiglia-or-a-menagerie face. If he’d thought it couldn’t get any worse, as his audible sigh seemed to imply, he was sadly mistaken.

“Tch. Gokudera Hayato.” Hayato’s animosity was tangible when he spoke. Hell, it almost surpassed the Nidaime’s in intensity. Scowling hard at Espresso-Maniac as if the guy was Madara reborn or something, puffing away at a cigarette, a habit he’d recently picked up from Shamal that Naruto didn’t care to correct—it reminded him of Shikamaru, so he’d just shrugged and told him not to overdo it—he jerked his head toward the saber-toothed cat by his side. “This guy’s Hannibal.”

When he took pause to put out his cigarette, Haru seized the chance to introduce herself, smiling brightly and disregarding the fact Hayato wasn’t yet done, because they couldn’t go one day without bickering like an old married couple.

“Haru is Miura Haru, desu! And Haru’s pretty kitty is Usagi-chan!”

Hayato’s scowl grew harder. Haru’s smile grew brighter. Both felines ignored them. Hannibal was too was busy mooning over Usagi, and Usagi was too busy spurning Hannibal’s affections.

“I don’t care if you’re an ex-Arcobaleno or the World’s Greatest Hitman. If you dare betray Shodai-sama after all the generosity he’s shown you, I will—”

“Don’t listen to my stupid teammate, Reborn-chan! Haru won’t let this hothead hurt a cutie—”

“Have you no shame, woman? How stupid can you be to fall for his glib act?”

“Hahi! Haru doesn’t wanna hear that from you! You’re so stupid, you’re blowing yourself up every other day—”

“It’s not stupid, it’s called experimenting, though I don’t expect you to understand—”

If nothing else, Espresso-Maniac found the show they were putting on highly entertaining, or at least he did until Shōichi let out a nervous cough.

“Um, hello? I’m Irie Shōichi—”

That was as far as he got before his budgie nipped the lobe of his ear and tutted at him, all tough love and flapping wings and mother hen-ing him to death.

“I can introduce myself, Shō-chan. You just take it easy. Go eat something! So skinny, need some meat on your bones.” He then whipped toward Espresso-Maniac, measuring him up and down, lingering on his nin-chameleon-gun with a critical *is-that-all-you’ve-got-I’m-sooo-not-impressed*
stare, and turned into the bird version of Samuel L. Jackson. “I’m Galileo, and we’re gonna be cool. That’s what we’re gonna be. Now, Reborn, I’m gonna count to three, and when I count three, you let go of your gun, and sit your ass down—”

What followed was an Oscar-worthy performance about scared motherfuckers and accidentally getting shot and correctamundo, all the while Shōichi alternated between folding in on himself and wailing oh, my god, Galileo, you can’t just threaten people and he didn’t really mean it, Reborn-san and ugh, my stomach hurts, no more Tarantino, please. Espresso-Maniac had been rendered speechless, gun held loosely in his hand, stare vacant and sorta quizzical and a bit out of touch with reality, like, why the fuck am I just sitting here and getting trash-talked by this tiny ball of fluff.

The jarring sound of Spanner biting down on his lollipop filtered in Espresso-Maniac’s ears, and he blinked, clarity returning to his gaze, knuckles clenching and unclenching, deriving comfort from the cold safety of his gun.

“You can call me Spanner. I’m the mechanic. Hm, yeah, that’s about it.” A disinterested drawl. Spanner didn’t even look up from his sketchbook, as if the motion required more effort than he was willing to spend for social niceties. Instead, he unwrapped another strawberry lollipop, and boy, had apathy never tasted sweeter. “You wanna take over, Ichigo?”

The raven perched on his left shoulder gave him a sideways swat with his wing and an indignant squawk. “Oh, for gods’ sake, would it kill you to show some interest in an actual human being? And for the last time, I’m not your public relations manager!” Fluffing up his feathers, Ichigo hopped on top of Spanner’s head, nestling in the blond mess of curls, which Spanner barely even noticed engrossed as he was in whatever he was designing, and croaked something uncomplimentary about the boy’s manners, but still did as he was bidden. “Forgive Spanner, Reborn-san. Unless you’re part-machine, I’m afraid you won’t merit Spanner’s attention.”

Having his entire existence so thoroughly, so callously dismissed, and for such a ridiculous reason as his technologically unenhanced human body, was the last straw. Espresso-Maniac stood rigid and unyielding, except for a flick of wrist that hinted at his pressing need to shoot someone dead, although whether his target would be Naruto, his brats, or himself was up for debate. Naruto would have felt sorry for the dude, but, well…he had it coming. Also, chaos was supposed to be his thing, right? Right. Eh, he’d become desensitized soon…ish. Probably.

Better safe than sorry, though, so. He whistled, grinning at the immediate response he received. Espresso-Maniac’s eyes bulged, the sole sign of his surprise, when Naruto’s ninja menagerie cut the crap and stood to attention, showcasing the hardcore military training half of them previously failed to express for shits and giggles. He’d trained them well, hadn’t he?

“Okay, give the man some breathing space! Back to practice with you lot!”

With a unanimous hai, sensei, both brats and summons rushed to obey his order, scurrying back into the training area, and within five minutes they’d resumed their activities. Naruto was content to watch them for a while, a smile in his eyes, warm and blazing orange and full of pride, waiting for Espresso-Maniac to gather his wits about him.

“Where did you find these…children?”

There were traces of awed incredulity in Espresso-Maniac’s voice, if Naruto strained his ears, and something strangely familiar. Where had he heard that tone befo—oh.

“Huh, you sound just like Colonnello.” Snorting, he shook his head. “No wonder you’re old buddies.”
Pitch-black eyes, glinting with suspicion and the stirrings of fury, appraised him closely. “How do you know Colonnello?”

*Getting pissed 'cause nobody told you shit, hm? Fon’s gonna have a blast. “Same way everyone does?”* Unholy glee smeared on his grin. “We met in Mafia Land. Duh. Good times.” Speaking of which, they oughtta visit Colonnello one of these days. Poor guy must have terribly missed them after two years. Absence made the heart grow fonder, after all. “Now c’mon, there’s more for you to meet inside.”

They strode toward the Konoha mansion, walking side by side in, dare Naruto say it, somewhat companionable silence. Baby-Kabuto didn’t care what they called his digs, the sentimental connotations flying over his head, but that awkward bastard had still made it feel like home, what with the name plaques on each door and color-coded furniture and stocking the kitchen with everyone’s preferences and thoughtful little things like that. Brats loved him to pieces. Hell, Team D worshiped the ground he walked on.

Naruto came to a halt outside the kids’ study room, wherein Fūta, as the oldest and more patient of the three, had taken over Lambo’s and I-Pin’s education, i.e. how to read and write and count for now. Fūta still attended elementary school, but the other two had declined going to pre-school and opted for learning under their Fūta-nī (and whoever else was available during the weekends, they’d been learning lots of diverse and rather unconventional stuff thanks to that). They’d probably end up being in the same team with the way things were going, age discrepancy notwithstanding.

“See them?” Keeping his voice down so as not to disturb them, Naruto leaned against the doorframe, crossed his arms and ankles, and slanted his head toward the studying group. Fūta wore an expression of tolerant exasperation as he tried to explain to Lambo why *I’ll eat all the grape candy* wasn’t the correct answer from an arithmetic viewpoint, whereas I-pin seemed to have absorbed today’s lesson and was berating Lambo for his grape addiction and having the attention span of a goldfish. “Blondie-sensei’s Fūta de la Stella, I-pin’s the cute, earless know-it-all, and the grape addict’s name is Bovino Lambo.”

Espresso-Maniac arched a brow at his descriptions, to which Naruto shrugged.

“Kids can be pretty judgmental, y’know? The other kids at the park made fun of them and called them all sorts of stupid names before Kyōko-chan and Anko-chan…showed them the error of their ways. I also had a talk with the brats’ parents and solved the issue, but the damage was already done. My brats were still hurt, so I sat them down and told them words only hurt if they let them. Pan-chan was the one who actually came up with those nicknames, though that was more ‘cause he doesn’t get how they can be insulting when they are representing aspects of their personality. Pan-chan’s a genius with machines, but hasn’t got much in the way of humans. Little brats still liked his logic, though, so they kept the nicknames.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Espresso-Maniac’s shadowed features. Naruto held no such reservations. His smile was open and glutted with feeling as he raised his voice. “Oi, kids, say hi to our guest!”

They swiveled around at the sound of his voice, and Lambo looked ready to jump from his seat and race toward him, if not for Fūta reprimanding him with gentle words and I-pin’s bossy Lambo, *no, you haven’t finished your homework yet, we’ll play later.* Lambo slumped in his chair, all pouting lips and adorably petulant, but soon joined the others as they smiled and waved and babbled hellos and nice-to-meet-yous.

Naruto waved back, then turned away and motioned for Espresso-Maniac to follow.
“Moving on.” He wouldn’t give the hitman an actual tour of the mansion, because that’d ruin the awesome surprises his brats had painstakingly prepared for Espresso-Maniac’s pleasure, but he’d give him a quick rundown of the rules while they made their way to the kitchen. Whether he chose to heed the warnings or not was up to him. “Living quarters are in the upper floors. You got free access there, meaning there are no high-level seals like in the labs, but watch your step, yeah? Kids have set up all sorts of nasty little traps.”

“Hoh?”

“Yeah, s’good practice, feel free to trap your room—actually, I highly recommend that’s the first thing you do.”

“I was planning to.”

“You got no access to the private labs downstairs, so don’t even try going there. I wasn’t kidding about the level of security seals. You’ll get warnings like electrical shocks and knockout gases and stuff that’s meant for detainment, but if you somehow ignore them and keep pushing your way in, some of them can be lethal. There’s no point risking yourself when you won’t ever be able to get past the blood-based or chakra-attuned seals.”

“Duly noted.”

“But you can use the public labs if you wanna upgrade your arsenal or your wardrobe or something. Talk to Team D, and they’ll fix you up with a workshop, alright?”

“That is very generous of you. I will think about it.”

“We usually take turns in the kitchen—wait, I think there’s a schedule posted on the fridge?” Naruto walked into the kitchen, gaze zeroing in on the fridge, nodding when he spied said schedule. “Yep, there it is. If you’re feeling up to it, just add your name, but no pressure.” He debated whether he should leave it at that, but in the end took pity on Espresso-Maniac and gave him a freebie. “Word of advice. Don’t touch the dango unless Anko-chan offers.” Opening the fridge, he grabbed two bottles of beer, smirking when Espresso-Maniac eyed the coffee machine with longing but accepted his beer nonetheless. “Also, don’t complain if you don’t get what you wanted. You wanna have something specific, you make it yourself.”

Espresso-Maniac grunted something that sounded like your coffee beans better be worth it. Sitting down opposite from him, Naruto took a long swig of his beer, pretending he hadn’t heard him. He’d gotten more grief from Lambo when it came to grapes. Then again, Lambo was five.

“Fair enough.” The concession grated on him, like pulling teeth, then he must have realized being difficult over coffee was childish, because he added belatedly, “Thank you.”

“Mm. Well, I think that’s it for now. If you have any more questions about how we do things here, ask Tetsu-chan. You remember him, right?”

“The Lightning boy with the wolverine companion.”

“Yes, that’s him.”

Silence fell. Naruto sipped his beer. Espresso-Maniac studied him under the umbra of his fedora. He had questions he wanted to ask, boy, did he have questions, but Naruto knew he was wary of asking them. He’d had enough shocks for one day. Still, he didn’t expect Espresso-Maniac would want to have small talk, so his first question caught him off guard.
“Who among them are your Guardians?”

A frown wrinkled Naruto’s forehead. You wanna know about my Guardians? Not about, I dunno, Vongola shit? Plus, I just told you to ask Tetsu-chan for that stuff. What’s your angle, dude? Oi, Kurama!

**Brat, you… Are you serious?**

A mixture of dubiety and contempt was written all over Kurama’s furry face. Half-embarrassed, half-confused, Naruto scratched his cheek.

_Huh?*

**After all these years… And you’re still an idiot.**

That dubious look was wiped clean from Kurama’s face. Only the contempt remained as the fox shook his gigantic head, muttering about _clueless blond morons_ and _Kushina’s spawn through and through_. Naruto didn’t appreciate the fuzzball’s tone or his mother getting disparaged for no apparent reason.

**What’s that supposed to mean?**

**Figure it out on your own.**

**Fine! I will, you just…just wait.**

**Good thing I’m immortal because I’ll be waiting for a long time.**

Well, shit. There went that avenue. Kurama would have told him if Espresso-Maniac’s intentions were nefarious, though, so at least there was that. What else was left—oh. _Oh._

Naruto sighed, and yeah, the fox was right. Goddammit, he _was_ an idiot.

_He’s like the rest of them, right? Ex-Arcobaleno? So he’s old, and tired, and jaded, and…lonely? Probably has tons of regrets? Like Kakashi-sensei?_

Kurama sneered, but it was plain to see he was fighting back a grin. He had a reputation to maintain, though, that of a heartless asshole, hence, _So there is some of Minato in there. Good for you. Now get the hell out and let me go back to sleep. Idiot._

Naruto laughed. _Yeah, yeah, you got it. Sleep tight. Asshole._

Next thing Naruto knew, the fox had, quite violently, booted him out and closed shop.

**So.** Now that his eyes had been opened, Naruto observed Espresso-Maniac over the rim of his bottle, seeing past the arrogance, the vainglory, the sadistic inclinations, the conflicted loyalties. _You’re testing the waters, hm? Alright, Espresso-Maniac. You’re lucky I promised Ero-ossan, Fon, and Baby-Kabuto I’d give you a fair chance. You better not screw this up, ‘cause one chance is all you’re getting while you’re still contracted with Vongola._

“Ah, that’s complicated. See, if we’re talking Flame bonds, I feel them all, have been feeling them for years. But if we’re talking Guardian bonds in the traditional sense, like, old blood mafia bullshit, then none of them is.”

Only Espresso-Maniac’s iron-knit control prevented him from spitting out his beer. Yeah, Naruto
had been informed by Baby-Kabuto, who was ecstatic and all too-eager to perform a battery of tests and study the phenomenon in depth, about how rare that was. Not unheard of, but very, very rare. Usually, Skies just…stopped searching for Elements once they’d harmonized. They could, if they had the power to sustain more than one bond of the same Element, but they didn’t, because it caused a host of complications, ranging from infighting to politicking to backstabbing, resulting in the self-destruction of the famiglia.

As Shamal had simplified, I don’t know about other Elements, but Mists? We just can’t get along and play nice with each other. Hell, we barely click with other Elements. Especially when we’re fighting over a Sky. You can bet your precious ramen there’s going to be lies, murder, and mayhem before the day is out. We’re a possessive lot, you see, with all that entails. Only way we can avoid all that nasty stuff is if the Sky in question has made a clear choice, and even then the situation is iffy if the bond hasn’t yet settled and we’re still compatible. The Varia Mist Division works like a well-oiled machine because Xanxus, despite the fact he can have more than one Mist, has made it clear he’s off the market and that Mammon is in charge. Before he was iced, I mean. Now there’s just no Sky to fight over, never mind that nobody’s crazy enough to mess with an ex-Arcobaleno. I can get along with your Mist brats because one, they’re brats, two, they lack mafia mentality, and three, we’re, well…family. Even the former Estraneo brats understand that, perhaps better than the rest. It might have been different if they’d been raised in the mafia is what I’m trying to say.

In the spirit of cooperation, Naruto decided it wouldn’t hurt to share a bit more.

“Kyō-chan’s been pretty insistent lately, but I’m holding back ‘til he makes jōnin. Right now, he’s being evaluated—oh, right, you wouldn’t know. There’s a six-month probation, it’s standard procedure for any rank higher than chūnin, including tokubetsu jōnin and ANBU. It won’t be long now for Kyō-chan, just a couple more weeks to go, and so far he’s been blitzing through the requirements. Damn brat doesn’t know the meaning of moderation.”

Espresso-Maniac didn’t bat a lash at the unfamiliar terms, though Naruto guessed he’d be saving those kind of questions for Tetsuya. He seemed to get the gist of it, anyway.

“The Cloud boy with the harpy eagle companion?”

He wasn’t asking to confirm Kyōya’s identity, Naruto realized, but why that brat was chosen as a candidate. Why, indeed. Honestly. He really didn’t get what the big deal was—they were all his—what did a fancy title matter? Guardians… After Fon’s explanation all those years ago, Naruto equated them to the Hokage Guard Platoon, which was an honor, to be sure, but not all that necessary. They were only used when he attended Kage meetings, and that was more for show than protection. If there was an attack, he’d be the one doing the bulk of the fighting, and when he was in the village, the ANBU made them redundant.

Shamal might have held the official Mist Guardian position, but all his Mists held equal bonds when fire-chakra and Harmony came into the picture. The same with his Storms and Lightnings. But Kyōya, that damn hellion, wanted the validation, wanted to prove himself in Naruto’s eyes, that his tutelage hadn’t been wasted, that he was ready to make his own choices, that it was his time to leave the nest. And Naruto couldn’t say no, because he had known that kind of drive, had felt it himself at Kyōya’s age. Hell, Naruto had been fighting in a war then. Granny Tsunade had tried to shelter him, but she had still let him go in the end, let him test himself and protect his precious people with his own hands.

Naruto huffed a laugh. They grew up so fast, didn’t they?

“He’s my first student, though it feels more like my firstborn son, so it’s kinda hard to tell him no when he really, really wants something, and kami, does that hellspawn know it. So it’s pretty much
guaranteed he’ll be my Cloud.”

He shrugged in a what-can-you-do manner, then chugged down his beer.

“Ah.” An amused smirk tugged at the corners of Espresso-Maniac’s mouth. “I would have assumed the Storm boy to be the first in line. He seemed awfully devoted to you.”

“Haya-chan?” Naruto snorted in laughter, throwing his empty bottle in the trash bin. “Yeah, brat’s cute like that, but nah. I already have a Storm Guardian.”

His gaze moved from Espresso-Maniac’s face to the kitchen entrance. Espresso-Maniac froze.

“Indeed, you have.” Fon’s voice was smooth as silk and insinuating a thousand grudges should Naruto ever contemplate the idea of replacing him. He walked inside the room with silent steps and the kind of calm lethality Naruto had learned to associate with the Hyūga clan when gravely insulted. “I would be greatly disappointed if you switched to a newer model.” Yup, called it. Naruto was never gonna teach Fon the Jyūken. Nope. Knowing that petty bastard, he’d find a way to make it work without the Byakugan, and he’d use Naruto as a sparring partner (read: unwilling victim) under the pretense of perfecting it. “Good evening, Reborn.”

“Fon.”

Espresso-Maniac’s mouth didn’t so much part as contort around Fon’s name, and holy shit, if the mention of Colonnello was enough to stir his fury, then Fon’s presence made him livid. Something darkened Espresso-Maniac’s eyes, which was a feat in and of itself given their color, iris too-black and indistinguishable from pupil. Fon, of course, reveled in the sight of it. Naruto didn’t know what it was, but he’d call it Armageddon for now. Or maybe Ragnarok.

“You mean you’d make my life a living hell, yeah? ‘Cause you’re a petty bastard, don’t even bother deflecting, Mr. Number-One-Grudge-Holder. Fū-chan’s awesome planet rankings don’t lie.”

“I never denied the fact.”

Fon pressed the voluminous fabric of his sleeve against his smiling mouth. Naruto bet that sleeve cost more than his whole wardrobe. Espresso-Maniac’s iris was spilling into his sclera. Pretty sure there’d be no white left in his eyes real soon.

“Fon would be justified in this case. As a fellow Guardian, I can attest to that.”

Yeeehah. It was then that Baby-Kabuto elected to make his glamorous entrance. Because, y’know, there wasn’t enough tension in the atmosphere, oh no. All that was missing to kick off the apocalypse was Baby-Kabuto’s fashionably late arrival to the party. And what an entrance it was, Naruto had to hand it to him, if nothing else. Somehow, someway, when Naruto wasn’t looking, Baby-Kabuto had learned the glorious art of pranking, and dammit, how could he have missed such a momentous milestone in Baby-Kabuto’s social development? Everyone was growing up.

Overwhelmed, so damn proud, Naruto got up and slung an arm around Baby-Kabuto’s shoulders. His grin couldn’t get any wider. “Et tu, Verde?”

Baby-Kabuto smirked, and Naruto had flashbacks of Kurama’s oh-so-smug smirk. Then, “Believe it.” Oh, snap! You didn’t just go there, Baby-Kabuto. Next thing I know you’ll be stealing my ramen. You’d better not steal my ramen, ‘cause friend or no friend, I’ll prank the everloving shit outta you. ”Good evening, Reborn.”
“Verde.”

If Espresso-Maniac’s mouth had contorted around Fon’s name, it was nothing compared to how it horrifically twisted around Baby-Kabuto’s. Naruto wisely decided that it was time to make his exit lest he end up facing Judgement Day, which, no fucking way. Nuh-uh. You guys have fun with your...Three-Way Deadlock. I’ve seen how that goes one too many times.

“So, now that you’ve met the whole crew, I gotta get back home. Kā-san’s session is about to end, and Ero-ossan tends to get handsy when he’s not in doctor mode. You’re all welcome to dinner. See ya!” And he hightailed it out of there.

(It took ten and a half days to repair the ensuing property damage. Paid out of Espresso-Maniac’s pocket, of course. So much for no collateral damage.)
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Short chapter, I know, but I'm slowly getting back to writing, so baby steps, yeah? Anyway, thank you for all your unwavering support all these months, I REALLY DO APPRECIATE IT. I'mma reply to each and every review when I find some time to sit down and just...breathe. Work has been killing me, RL has been a nightmare of family stuff, and I dunno when the next update is coming, but I promise it'll come. Onward! XD

Naruto stifled a yawn as he slung his schoolbag over his shoulder, slipping his feet into his shoes and calling out, “Ittekimasu, kā-san!”

Nana’s cheery, “Itterashai, Tsu-kun!” reached his ears before the front door slid shut, bringing a smile to his face as he began making his way to Namimori Chū.

Normally, he wouldn’t bother going to school, sending a clone instead, but ever since Espresso-Maniac’s arrival three weeks ago, things had gotten a little crazy around here. Nothing truly alarming, just that his brats seemed to have entered into some sorta war of attrition/prank competition/initiation into Konoha with Espresso-Maniac. It didn’t help matters that Fon and Baby-Kabuto were in full support of their efforts, leaving Naruto as the sole voice of reason…yeah, the universe was doomed just from this fact alone.

No place was safe, but as long as there were no civilian casualties and the property damage was kept to a minimum, Naruto was inclined to let them have their fun and get it out of their system. It was basically hazing.

What he actually had a problem with was the sudden influx of mafiosi in his peaceful hometown and their amateurish attempts at intel gathering, not to mention the occasional assassination/sabotage/kidnapping incident. Case in point, the flying soda can he just ducked under. Naruto watched, deeply unimpressed, as its acidic contents spilled on the pavement, a purple miasma tainting the air and causing the demise of a poor little dove.

A sigh worked its way out of his lungs, and dammit, it was too early for this shit. A lazily thrown shuriken at the bicycle’s back tire put an end to the female assassin’s rather embarrassing poisoning attempt—the pink-haired nuisance jumped off her bike, landing on her feet after some dramatic acrobatics, and glared at him with a disgruntled huff as if it was his fault she was so goddamn incompetent that an Academy kid could have fended her off with basic ninja tools.

“Okay, listen, lady. I really don’t have the patience for your bullshit, so I’ll only ask once. Why are you targeting me?”

She pushed her chest out, green eyes flashing with righteous indignation, and (again) dramatically struck a pose Naruto was fairly sure she’d stolen from one of Haru’s mahō shōjo manga. “For love!”

Which, what the fuck? Why did he even bother getting up this morning? Naruto squinted at Pink-Mei, cleared out one ear with his pinky, and drawled out, “Come again?”
Obsession gleamed in the green of her eyes—wait, he knew that shade of green, *oh, no, don't tell me that's Haya-chan's wacko—*

Something that might once have been edible, but was now a purple hissing...*thing*, appeared in her hand out of nowhere. “Reborn is mine! I will have you return him, Vongola! Eat poison and die!” And she hurled it at him.

Snorting, Naruto ducked again. Death-via-poison by one of Espresso-Maniac’s groupies wasn’t on his Monday’s to-do-list or something he’d like to experience during his early morning stroll. Before she could hurl anything else at him, he held up a hand, inwardly cursing Espresso-Maniac’s womanizing ways, and just how in Hagoromo’s name did an eleven-year-old dandy-boy get more action than Naruto these days? Then again, Pink-Mei, Hayato’s sister or not, was obviously a certified psycho, so maybe they deserved each other. If the guy wanted to stick his dick in crazy, that was his choice, but Naruto reserved the right to say *I told you so* when he got his dick melted off.

“There’s just so many things wrong with that, I don’t even know where to start, but...just to be clear, you’re not here for Haya-chan?” Startled, Pink-Mei reared back at that, and Naruto’s brows climbed up his forehead, because *really*? Had she *only* come here for Espresso-Maniac? Not her own flesh-and-blood kid brother? Wow, talk about love being blind... “You know, your little brother, the poor kid you used to fucking poison for entertainment and shit? You *are* Bianchi of the Rossini famiglia, right?”

And wasn’t that just another can of worms? It had taken extensive therapy, including desensitization sessions, talking about childhood traumas, and all kinds of PTSD exercises, until Hayato could even look at his sister’s photo without his stomach committing suicide or being reduced to a shaking, moaning wreck.

Pink-Mei *flinched*. “I—yes.” All the fight left her body, features twisting in a mixture of pain and longing. “Hayato...he’s here?”

Naruto scrutinized her, feeling out her emotions, the depth of her sincerity, and when he deemed them to be genuine, he nodded. “Yep.”

“Oh.” She took a fortifying breath, gazing at Naruto with glossy, pleading eyes, as if she hadn’t just been trying to legitimately off him for some misguided notion of love, her voice soft and wavering with tentative hope. “May I see him? Please?”

Naruto stared back stonily. It wasn’t the shoddy assassination attempt that made him reluctant to grant her request—he was over that, honest, Pink-Mei couldn’t have killed him if she tried—but his uncertainty about Hayato’s reaction. Kid had grown in leaps and bounds, true, but he was still quite fragile when it came to his birth family and emotional shit.

Still, it wasn’t his decision to make and family was family, so, “That depends,” he finally said. “If he wants to see you, then yeah, sure, be my guest.”

He’d just have to keep a close eye on the situation. If Pink-Mei thought she could waltz back into Hayato’s life like nothing had changed after all the shit she’d put him through over the years, then she had another thing coming.

---

Hayato, as it turned out, was surprisingly mature about the whole thing and willing to give his big sister another chance in his own tsundere way. Aside from the merest twitch of revulsion, his face remained impassive as he stared at Pink-Mei, mentally challenging himself to not look away or
show weakness or collapse on the floor frothing at the mouth.

He swallowed harshly, then choked out, “Aneki.”

Pink-Mei smiled, small and trembling and tinted with sadness, an apology. “Hayato.”

Naruto ruffled Hayato’s hair, understanding their need for privacy but hesitant to leave before he got the okay from the stubborn brat. “You gonna be alright on your own, Haya-chan?” Panic flashed through Hayato’s gaze, but it was gone just as quickly. He dipped his chin in a resolute nod, and Naruto patted his back, a reassuring I-believe-in-you-brat. “Alright then. She’s your responsibility, so I’m leaving her in your hands. Same deal as Reborn, got it?”

This level of trust was apparently too much for Hayato to handle—he dissolved in histrionics, flustered and spluttering and forgetting all about Pink-Mei and his digestive PTSD. He’d have fallen in dogeza, too, if not for Naruto holding him upright.

“Shodai-sama…you…you’re so kind and generous and—and I’m so sorry for troubling you with my family’s problems, I can’t thank you enough—”

“Mhm. No worries. She’s your family, right? ‘Sides, I trust you, Haya-chan.”

“Shodai-sama! I’m not worthy of your—”

“Yeah, you are, you’re worth all that and more.”

Naruto chuckled, kept ruffling the boy’s hair, while Pink-Mei gazed at the spectacle that was Hayato all but prostrating himself with a fond, if slightly bemused, smile. Yeah, they were gonna be alright, though Pink-Mei was probably here to stay, but whatever, it wasn’t his dick in danger. Espresso-Maniac would just have to deal.

After sorting out Hayato’s family drama, enduring another day of mind-numbing tedium at Namimori Chū, breaking up three violent fights (Espresso-Maniac and Kyōya’s nap time did not mix well), and stopping another poisoning attempt (Pink-Mei had nothing on the unholy combo of Kyōko and Mini-Anko, and Espresso-Maniac should know better by now), Naruto just wanted to go home, gorge himself on Nana’s divine ramen, and spend some family time with Kurama and Inari. Maybe they could have a movie marathon or—whoa, hold up, what’s with the blockade and the MIB and the stupidly expensive limos?

Naruto observed the crowd of black-suited men surrounding his house as he ambled closer, trying to remember where he’d seen the emblem decorating their cars. He stopped dead in his tracks when it came to him. Baby-Kabuto should have given him a call and let him know about this latest fiasco, but knowing him, he’d either put it out of his mind after becoming immersed in his research, or (and that was more likely) Espresso-Maniac had somehow intervened since this must be his fault to begin with. That didn’t excuse Kurama’s negligence, though.

Oi, Kurama?

The fox’s chest rumbled as he let out a humongous yawn, which Inari cutely imitated, nestled between Kurama’s front legs, and oh, how Naruto envied them. He really should just go the fuck to sleep and forget today ever happened.

What do you want, brat?

Naruto crawled into the fluffy nest, curled up around Inari and closed his eyes, smiling when the
kit licked all over his neck and face. *I wanna know what the hell’s going on. Why are these douche canoes on my front lawn?*

A massive shrug. **How should I know?** Another rumbling yawn. **And why would I even care?**

And yeah, Kurama was right. Again, why did he even bother getting up this morning? *You know what? Just forget it. I’m done.*

Having his entry barred when he tried to go inside his own freaking home was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“Okay, what the fuck? This is getting ridiculous.” Naruto rubbed his hands up and down his face, exhaled a heavy *gods-why-me* sigh, then addressed the morons swarming his garden and half the street in front of his house. “Oi, you’re from the Cavallone famiglia, right?”

No response. Just a wall of black-suited bodies and blank faces. Was it something he said? Was he supposed to be unaware of which famiglia they belonged to despite all the evidence identifying them?

“Lemme guess, you’re also here for Reborn?”

Still no response. Fed up, not giving a damn anymore, Naruto marched forward into his home, and if he knocked half of them out on his way in, well… They shouldn’t have stood between him and his ramen.

He took off his shoes, absently murmured a tired, “Tadaima, kā-san,” then rounded the kitchen—

“Hello, young Vongola. My name is Dino, and I’m the—”

“Cavallone Decimo, yeah, I know.”

Naruto plopped his ass down, sizing up the blond mafioso who had invaded *his* town, sitting at *his* table, chatting up *his* mother, eating *his* ramen—Prince Charming’s days were numbered, believe it. Only thing left to know was if Espresso-Maniac was going down with him or not. “Just out of curiosity, did Reborn put you up to this or did you come on your own?”

Prince Charming puffed up self-importantly, running a hand through his hair, all prettiness and dripping with finesse and shit, and whoa, he’d make a damn good commercial model for Pantene if he ever failed at this whole mafia business.

“As a fellow student of Reborn’s, I felt it was my duty to evaluate you and judge your potential. And I have to say… I’m not impressed.”

Naruto shot him a flat stare. “That’s my line, dude.”

Prince Charming kept going as if he hadn’t heard him, while Naruto served himself a bowl of ramen, inhaling the delicious aroma and, in turn, tuning him out.

“Our attitude is not befitting of a mafia heir. Your manners are unsophisticated. Your language is crude. And more importantly… you lack charisma.”

The last line was gravely intoned and carried a note of haughty disdain. Like, *how can you even stand being so pathetic and how dare you show your face before me and I pity you, you poor, unrefined creature, for you shall forever amount to nothing.*
Naruto slurped his noodles with relish, putting on a show and making a statement of his…
inelegance. “Mm, you done?”

“No.” Prince Charming looked down his nose at Naruto, huffing in distaste. “You also have a
plebeian taste in food.”

Mid-chewing, Naruto stilled. “Are you…” He swallowed slowly, put his chopsticks down, and
spoke through clenched teeth. “Are you…dissing my ramen?”

A triumphant grin split Prince Charming’s mouth, seeming beyond pleased that his ill-advised plan
to piss Naruto off had succeeded at long last. “Why yes, yes, I am.”

Naruto’s fist was the next thing to split Prince Charming’s mouth, but not the last by far.
Naruto reclined against the wall in Baby-Kabuto's infirmary, his stare glued on the unconscious body of the Cavallone brat, lying bandaged-from-head-to-toe on one of the beds after Naruto had beaten him within an inch of his life and carried him there over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

The rest of Prince Charming's famiglia had been picked up by Tetsuya and relinquished to Kyōya's tender mercies, which might have been a cruel and unusual punishment, but at this point Naruto didn't give a fuck. They were supposed to be seasoned mafia bodyguards, so that much shouldn't kill them. Probably. Hell, they might actually benefit from some good, ol' fashioned survival training, because they damn sure needed it if they made a habit out of pulling that sort of rude crap on their 'allies'.

Espresso-Maniac reclined against the opposite wall, his stare also fixed on the prone body of his student, pitch-black eyes dancing with sadistic reminiscence and an expression that said butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

If he hadn't sworn up and down that he had nothing to do with his student's impromptu visit, and if Prince Charming's intentions hadn't been fairly benign, as evidenced by the fact that his home security's seals (and Shamal's fire-chakra mosquitoes) had allowed him entrance and hadn't reacted negatively to his presence, then this situation would have gotten way messier and bloodier than it already had.

A low moan of pain and misery alerted them to Prince Charming's awakening. He blinked, coughed a little, moaned some more, then tried to place his surroundings. What little skin showed beneath his bandages paled when his blurry gaze spotted Naruto, then turned chalk-white when Espresso-Maniac's presence registered in his foggy brain. Naruto guessed that hiding under the sheets, while whimpering pathetically about how he's not here, he can't hurt you, pain, pain go away must be an ingrained reaction or some kinda repressed memory violently coming to the surface.

"What possessed you to come here, Pipsqueak Dino?"

At the sound of Espresso-Maniac's voice, Prince Charming screeched like a cat being skinned alive, falling out of bed, limbs flailing and tangled between the sheets. After five minutes of useless struggling, he gave up and just sat there, looking lost and confused and more than a little terrified.

"Wha—? Re-Reborn? Where am I? Owowow, why does everything hurt?"

The distinct click of the safety of his nin-chameleon-gun being pulled off silenced Prince Charming's cries faster than a bullet. Espresso-Maniac scoffed. "Pathetic. I leave you alone for one month...and this is what happens? Have you forgotten my teachings already?"

Rolling his eyes, Naruto snorted. "This coming from the guy who fell for the girls' cute act? How long did it take you to neutralize Anko-chan's poison cocktail again? Or snap out of Kyōko-chan's genjutsu? And I had already warned you. Guess you couldn't help yourself, huh? Next time the girls offer to make your espresso, do us both a favor, and make it yourself. Watching you pay homage to the porcelain god for two hours straight would have been funny...if you hadn't mistaken Fon's closet for the toilet. Kyōko-chan sure as hell doesn't mess around, man. Now Fon's on the warpath, and somehow I'm on top of his grudge-list. Again."

Eyes burning with humiliation and promises of retribution glowered at Naruto under the umbra of
his fedora. "You taught them how to be absolute menaces."

Damn right he did. A shit-eating grin spread across Naruto's mouth. "Yeah, but you provoked them. I told you, man, Kyōko-chan's got the whole Hibari clan wrapped around her little fin—"

"Reborn?" Prince Charming, who had been watching them go back and forth like a tennis match, snapped out of his stupor. He gaped at his mentor, then at Naruto, then back at Espresso-Maniac, with this poleaxed look on his stupidly pretty face, as if he couldn't believe someone had the balls to not only talk back, but brazenly tease Espresso-Maniac to his face. Or that Espresso-Maniac not only accepted it, like it was a fact of life, but was also, maybe, kinda digging it. "What's…going on?"

In the midst of his stare-off with Naruto, Espresso-Maniac casually fired five shots at Prince Charming, which had the additional effect of freeing the once-again cowering, shrieking brat from the sheets he'd tangled himself in. Not that it made much difference, seeing as Prince Charming managed to somehow trip over his own two feet—while still sitting, which, just…how the fuck, dude?—ending in a spectacular face-plant. "Why are you here, Dino?"

"Weeell, you, uh, see…" Prince Charming started rambling, face still plastered against the floor, and oh, the good drugs must have kicked in right about now. It took some effort, another two falls, and lots of awkward fumbling for him to crawl toward his bed and fling his abused body on top of it. "Last time I saw Sawada, he'd been half-drunk and wailing about how you must be torturing his poor son or seducing his wife or—let's just say the list went on, and leave it at that? I'm not really comfortable repeating all the—"

Abruptly, Espresso-Maniac broke off their staring contest, malice curling his lips into a smirk, as he tilted his head to award his student with his full attention. "Hoh. Is that so?"

Naruto smirked, too, as did Kurama, because the more, the merrier, everyone was welcome on board the Iemitsu's-gonna-pay-hell-yeah train. The sickly pallor of Prince Charming's skin betrayed he dearly hoped those smirks weren't meant for him.

"Right. So!" Clearing his throat, he scratched his bandaged cheek, accidentally poking himself in the eye. "Ouch! Um, yeah, where was I? Oh, that's right—I volunteered to check up on his family and got his address. He was very grateful about the whole thing, very…extra…" he trailed off with a shudder, almost gagging, then shook himself as if to banish whatever that was from his memory. "Anyway, I thought I'd come by and see what my kōhai was like, maybe offer him some advice, since we're allies and all? I mean, he's a civilian kid, right? Your spartan training could have killed him or something, and then where would Vongola be?" And he laughed, probably to disguise something that sounded like it almost killed me in between his fake, too-loud laughter.

Unfortunately for him, it'd take a lot more than that to fool Espresso-Maniac's yellow fire-chakra enhanced hearing. "What was that, Pipsqueak Dino?"

"Nothing!" Prince Charming winced and jerked back in a futile attempt to put distance between them, which only resulted in him banging his head against the metallic headboard, ripping off his IV drip, wincing again, and yeah, this guy was a walking, talking hazard. Geez, what a pushover… Flicking his panicked gaze toward Naruto, studiously avoiding Espresso-Maniac's sinister smirk, he lamely vied to change the subject. "Sooo…you're Tsunayoshi-kun? You're…not what I expected."

Espresso-Maniac's smirk became wider, edged with dark amusement, at the oh-shit-please-don't-kill-me look on his student's face and the way his shoulders instinctively hunched. "You have a gift for understatement."
Shaking his head, Naruto huffed out a laugh. Boy, did this guy need a spine and pronto. Maybe he shoulda given him to Kyōya, too.

"No kidding—hang on a sec." Fishing out his phone, he glanced at the name flashing on the screen, a grin forming on his lips. With an I'll-be-right-back gesture directed mostly toward Espresso-Maniac, who nodded and took the chance to descend on his poor victim of a student, he exited the infirmary, leaned against the wall, activating a privacy seal, and picked up the call. "Sup, Sword-Psycho?"

Squalo's voice bellowed through the line, frantic and no-bullshit and nearly shattering his eardrums.

"Voi! No time for small talk, Ramen-Trash! Nono released Xanxus from his ice prison!"

Huh? The hell did he just say? "Wait, what—whoa, slow down! Timoteo did what now?"

"I said Xanxus' free, though he's horribly burned and not all there mentally but he's getting treatment for that—"

"Well, isn't that a good thing?"

"—and he's gunning for you!"

A slew of curses flew from Naruto's mouth. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. If this keeps up, I'm gonna burn Vongola to the ground. Predictably, Kurama perked up, filling his veins with fire and his head with cackling laughter and burnburnbuuurn. Naruto punched the wall to release a bit of tension. Damn fox getting pumped up. Damn puberty messing with his hormones. "Fuck, didn't you explain—"

"I tried, fuck, trust me—I told him you weren't interested, but Nono was there and he was talking bullshit about how you were the perfect candidate and you'd make things right and I don't even know anymore because Xanxus went on a fucking rampage. Then he put the old man in a fucking robot that's supposed to be the Varia Cloud Guardian, falsified some documents that declare him the heir, which Sawada-Trash somehow found out about and then declared some sort of inheritance dispute that can only be resolved if you fight it out and now—now Boss' coming to Namimori and he just won't listen to a fucking thing we say."

It didn't take him long to process all that, no matter how crazy it all sounded. By the end of it, Naruto had trouble deciding who was number one on his shit-list, but one thing was for certain. Heads would fucking roll. He punched the wall again, exhaled through his nose, shaking with barely suppressed fury. "You're shitting me. You sure it was my fucking useless—"

"Positive—look, my flight's about to leave. I'm on my way there 'cause Sawada-Trash sent that kid ahead, uh, what's-his-name, Basil, I think, with your set of the half-rings, so we'll talk about it more in person."

Well, at least there was one person firmly in his corner. See, that was exactly why Naruto was all for Team Sword-Psycho in this Decimo clusterfuck. "Yeah, I hear you, got it. I'll pick you up at the airport." And he hung up.

When he came back to the room, Espresso-Maniac exuded self-satisfaction and Prince Charming wore the face of a man who had gone three rounds with Ibiki, had the dubious honor of being Anko's slave, and been subjected to the Yamanaka Special. Naruto might have pitied him, if he wasn't all out of fucks to give for the day.
"You trust him?" was the first thing he said.

Naruto's unusually grim countenance erased all traces of amusement from Espresso-Maniac's face. He clipped the back of Prince Charming's head with the butt of his nin-chameleon-gun—yeowch, what the hell, Reborn?—cut him with a no-nonsense stare—shut up and pay attention, Pipsqueak Dino—and nodded once. "I'll vouch for Dino."

Which was good enough for Naruto. Not like it would remain secret for long, anyway. Not if his useless father kept getting himself smashed and spilling his guts to whoever lent him a crying shoulder and fucking things up just. Because. He could. Gods, he should've taken a detour last time he was in Italy and burned that fucker out of their life.

*It is never too late for burning imbecilic liars.*

Yeah, tell me about it.

*With pleasure.*

Listening to the croon of Kurama's voice as he sang an epic of fire and blood and kinslaying, Naruto let himself be soothed by the comforting feel of the fuzzball's chakra.

"Timoteo apparently thought it wise to unfreeze Xanxus and inform him I'm the new heir while he was still weak as hell and half-burned to death and thrashing in pain. As you can guess, he didn't take the news all that well."

There was a gurgled yelp as Prince Charming choked on his saliva, followed by a dull thump as he fell off the bed again, this time taking the undersheet with him.

"Squalo tried to explain what's what, but the guy was lost in his rage and beyond reason. Feeling kinda guilty, the old man let his guard down, which somehow resulted in Xanxus stuffing him inside a robot and getting back in the running. We could've maybe talked this shit out if Iemitsu hadn't panicked and made things worse by supporting me. Now we've got a fucking legit inheritance dispute on our hands. To sum it up, Xanxus is coming to Namimori, so we can duke it out for the Decimo position. Oh, and some poor CEDEF kid's bringing my half of the rings. Squalo's hot on his heels, so at least we got a day or two to plan ahead before Xanxus shows up with the rest of the Varia."

Unlike his student, Espresso-Maniac didn't bat a lash at the news, displaying only the slightest hint of concern when he inquired, "How is Timoteo's health?"

"Don't know, don't care." Naruto shrugged, a slow roll of his shoulders, conveying his thoughts about this issue. "Probably not doing too good." When Espresso-Maniac's lips pursed, about to make some cutting remark to respect your elders or have some decency or some shit, Naruto sighed, tired and so done with his clan head's bullshit. "You reap what you sow, Reborn. If he had bothered talking to me, this mess could have been avoided."

A conflict of interest brewed inside Espresso-Maniac's gaze, because what Naruto said was common fucking sense, and he knew it. In the end, he acquiesced with a tired sigh of his own. "True enough, I suppose. What happens now?"

"You heard me, I'm gonna make some phone calls, then pick up Squalo from the airport, and together we'll try to talk some sense into Xanxus. Or beat some sense into him, whatever works."
Prince Charming chose that moment to showcase his brilliant powers of comprehension. "You want to fight Xanxus?" Aghast, scared shitless, and trapped in a cage of sheets and loosened bandages.

Mirth welled up inside Naruto's chest, and his lips lifted a margin. It was kinda hard to stay serious when this guy was rolling on the floor, fighting a losing battle against balance, sanity, and the bed sheets. Even Lambo was less clumsy and had better coordination than this cinnamon roll. "Nah, didn't you hear me? It's 'cause I don't want to fight him that I'm gonna try and reason with him."

"He's not the most reasonable of people," Espresso-Maniac dryly opined, though he, too, was sporting the beginnings of an amused smile.

"So Squalo says." Smiling, Naruto gave another shrug, and couldn't help but nudge the bundle of nerves and sheets with his foot. "Whatever. Not my problem."

Seeing as he was making no headway with Naruto, Prince Charming sought the support of his mentor. He also tried to headbutt Naruto's foot, but ended up reacquainting his face to the floor, which might have caused more brain damage than he could currently afford. "Reborn! I can't believe you're alright with this. Xanxus will destroy him! Why are you letting this poor kid—"

"Calm down, Pipsqueak Dino, and for once in your life...think." Doubt colored his tone despite the advice he oh-so-generously offered. Apparently, he didn't hold much faith in his student's ability to perform any kind of strenuous mental activity right now—or in general—but felt it was his duty to advise him on the off chance that Prince Charming might defy expectations. "I know I taught you better than that. Does it look like I can tell him what to do or not do?"

"You—what? But...but you're Reborn! I—Christ, I'm sorry, wait, don't shoot!" Prince Charming's brain decided right then and there that it had suffered enough abuse for one day. He crashed. Hard. "I don't under-urgh—"

Naruto nudged the spasming body lying at his feet. "I think you broke him."

"So did you." Espresso-Maniac's smirk was as fond as it was pitiless. "He'll recover. It's one of his best qualities."
“Voi! Ramen-Trash!”

Snapping out of his reverie, Naruto’s gaze zeroed in on the tall, long-haired man striding toward him, all the while yelling obscenities and flinging bodies out of his way, with no consideration whatsoever.

Naruto didn’t know whether to laugh or sigh in exasperation. *Goddammit, Sword-Psycho, I knew it was too much to expect a quiet entrance from you of all people, but you could at least watch out for the little kids.* He settled for half-grimacing, half-apologizing with his eyes to the distressed mother fretting over her little boy and shooting venomous glares at both of them by turns. Neither registered with Squalo, who kept marching forward like a man on a holy mission, and kami help you, Sword-Psycho, how can you even breathe in all that leather?

Despite the ruckus, nobody even attempted to stop him. So much for airport security. Where was Jager when you needed him, huh? Ah, well…fuck it. They’d already created a scene, no point in keeping a low profile now. He met Squalo’s thunderous greeting with one of his own as they clasped arms with enough force to bruise bone. Surprised by the show of strength, he eyed the gloved hand closely, examining its grip and mobility, and ooh, is this the new prosthetics line Baby-Kabuto was working on? Niiice.

“Yo, Sword-Psycho! Long time no see. How’ve you been?”

“Better now that shitty Boss’ back.” Squalo’s grin was wild, shark-toothed, all jagged edges and sharp relief and something old-new burning deep underneath, something that felt like home—an orange-red blaze of sky-wrath-mine wound around his soul.

Humming, Naruto extended a tendril of fire-chakra, gave it a light, curious poke. It lashed out against his orange, almost sentient, possessive and furious and back off, scum, and whoa, that’s some strong shit, Batman. Kurama, of-fucking-course, couldn’t help himself in the wake of such intense, negative emotions—he poked the orange-red harder, grinning and eager for a fight, savoring the spicy flavor that exploded across his tongue. Like, you mad, bro and show me what you’ve got and I can do this all day long.

Naruto felt like banging his head against the nearest wall. *Can you maybe not aggravate that lovely mass of rage? Dude’s angry enough without you taunting him and messing with his chakra bonds.*

Blood-red eyes, openly mocking, as if to say don’t blame me, you started it, stared down at him.

*Where’s the fun in that?*

*Real mature.*

*I’ll show you mature.*

And he lunged at Naruto, fangs bared, claws swiping, in an aggressive display that was quite indicative of his (low) maturity levels. Naruto laughed, leaping back and out of the line of danger —

(Not that the fuzzball put his all into it, being an asshole on par with his gigantic proportions, and thus far more interested in irritating the fuck out of Xanxus’ orange-red.)
—then returned his attention to Squalo, slinging an arm around his shoulders and giving him the noogie of a lifetime. “Yeah, I feel it. Good for you, man.”

A ferocious scowl wrinkled Squalo’s forehead as he spat out curses and struggled to get him off, though if Naruto had to guess, the guy was more annoyed by the mussed state of his hair than the damage to his temple. The knowing gleam in his eyes also told Naruto he’d felt their chakra clash, and was rather cool with it, maybe even pleased to feel it again after so many years.

“What’s up with you and the World’s Greatest Asshole?” he bit out when he was done fixing his hair like the prissy princess he was. “You gonna keep ‘im?”

“Dunno.” Naruto shrugged, keeping an eye out for the CEDEF kid as they made their way out of the airport. “If he wants to stay, I guess? It’s a wait-and-see kinda thing. Far as I know, he hasn’t cut ties with Vongola yet.”

Scowling again, Squalo clicked his tongue. “Tch. Fucking figures.”

There was a slashing motion—a whoosh of air and the sound of leather being stretched tight, conveying how much he’d like to rip into Espresso-Maniac, much to Naruto’s amusement and the milling crowds’ apprehension as they edged away from the psychotic, cussing foreigner with the live blade in their midst.

“Voi! Heard from Mammon that flaky bastard likes ‘em kind and, and forgiving and shit, like the Ninth and that lyin’ bitch, Luce, ‘cause he’s got an image in his head ‘bout how Skies are supposed to be. And look where that got ‘em all! I’ll tell you where—” And he proceeded to express his opinions about said flaky bastard and lying bitch (even though he’d never actually met Luce), loudly and vehemently and with scorn aplenty (mostly for Timoteo), all the way to the parking lot.

Just how many people had that asshole ticked off? He’d better not start anything with the Varia in Naruto’s territory, for the sake of his savings, if nothing else. Hell, Naruto’d let Kurama and Inari have their sorry hides if it came to that.

Luce was dead—she’d paid the price for her actions, and it wasn’t his place to pass judgement either.

(But, sometimes, when Naruto thought of Fon and the red of betrayal churning in his flames, of Baby-Kabuto and his awkward fumbling through life, of Aria with her deep-blue eyes and easy acceptance of the future, of Yuni with her bright smiles and brighter eyes, he was sorely tempted to Edō Tensei her ass and make her own up to her mistakes.)

As for Timoteo… They were in complete agreement there.

“Anyway,” Naruto raised his voice, cutting Squalo off mid-rant, because as funny as it was listening to the loud bastard’s scathing commentary, they were kinda pressed for time, “where’s that CEDEF kid?”

“Voi.” Squalo paused, looked around as if expecting the kid to magically appear, then gave a nonchalant shrug. “He’s gotta be around here somewhere.”

So it was up to Naruto to locate him if they were to leave any time soon. Awesome. “Right, gimme a sec.” And he sank into a meditative state, spreading out his senses, eliminating the weak presence of civvies, until—

Huh. Blue. No wonder he hadn’t sensed the kid when standing beside Squalo until he’d actively sought him out—the sheer potency of Squalo’s fire-chakra eclipsed all other users of blue in the
“He a Rain?”

“Yeah. Name’s Basil or Balsam or—fuck, I don’t know, some sort of pansy-ass plant name.”

Squalo tsk’ed, disgusted and a little pitying on behalf of the CEDEF kid. “Sawada-Trash’s so fucking original, I swear. He used to call Xanxus Chibi Chili when Nono first brought him home, y’know? Used to piss shitty Boss off like you can’t even imagine, and then one day Federico just snapped, grabbed a chili pepper and shoved the whole thing down Sawada-Trash’s throat. I think that’s one of the few good memories Xanxus has of Fede. Vongola family dinners were one huge murder party before it all went to shit.”


Squalo’s demeanor changed abruptly, the lines around his mouth drawn taut, his tone clipped, stripped of levity. “Not well.”

Naruto clapped him on the back and, to lighten the mood, shared something in return. “Hey, back on the topic of embarrassing nicknames, Iemitsu still calls me tuna fish whenever he bothers to pick up the damn phone to check if we’re still alive. On the upside, Timoteo’s never made that mistake again after his last visit.”

“Voi.” A beat. Speechless, boggling at him in total disbelief, Squalo mouthed the syllables, one by one. “That’s—you’re the reason Nono turns green when the kitchen’s serving tuna? Holy shit, that’s hilarious.” He threw his head back and howled with laughter, his whole body shaking, leaning against Naruto in an effort to stay on his feet. “And Sawada-Trash, he—how’s he not dead yet?”

Yeah, Naruto wondered about that, too. Suddenly and all at once, he released the hold on his chakra and waited. Also dug an elbow into Squalo’s ribs. Bastard continued to laugh even as he crumbled to the ground, red-faced and wheezing, and he was still laughing when a blond teenager came running like his ass was on fire, only to slow down, the majority of his anxiety dissipating the moment he saw Naruto.

Blue fire-chakra, check. Instant facial recognition, check. Naruto opened his mouth to call him over, but never got the chance to speak a single word. The CEDEF kid caught sight of Squalo, and in the next moment he was speeding up, screaming out an alarmed, “Sawada-dono!”

Who the fuck uses -dono, was Naruto’s initial thought, then, seriously?

The CEDEF kid proved he was dead serious when he threw himself in front of Naruto, trying to shield him and herd him away at the same time, wielding an edged boomerang and swallowing a pill that forcefully ignited his fire-chakra and babbling in a style that barely made sense by modern society’s standards. Naruto’s brain approximately translated his archaic nonsense into get the hell away from the son of my liege lord and that craven wants to steal your birthright and you can fuck right off, mad dog of the usurper king, only with less swearing and more Shakespeare in it. In fluent Japanese.

Squalo, who had just about recovered before Plant-Hamlet accused him of high treason and attempted regicide, crumbled to the ground again and killed himself laughing. Something which greatly baffled Plant-Hamlet, or at least it did until he reasoned (out loud and still channeling his inner Shakespeare) that it must be an act meant to deceive him into lowering his guard. Poor kid was hella confused, being out of the loop, alone in a country he’d probably never set foot on, surrounded by strangers and false-enemies… Naruto didn’t have the heart to laugh at him. Worse, at the rate he was burning up chakra, he was close to suffering the mother of all chakra exhaustion cases, and yep, there he goes.
“Whoa, watch it, kid.” Gently, Naruto held the kid up, donating a tiny bit of his chakra, enough so that Plant-Hamlet didn’t keel over on the spot, though he’d certainly feel like crap tomorrow. “Nobody’s gonna hurt nobody. We’re all on the same side, ‘kay?”

“He is the Varia—” Plant-Hamlet was quick to argue, breath labored and running on empty, but determined to expose Squalo’s dastardly deeds.

Not in the mood for another of Plant-Hamlet’s you-can’t-trust-the-usurper’s-dog monologues, Naruto elected to help Squalo up, hoping that the lack of hostility between them would disperse the kid’s doubts. “Are all of Iemitsu’s men so…?”

“Nah, he’s a special case.” Squalo shook his head, losing his humor, voice cold and cutting like a blade of ice, implying it was the wrong kind of special, the kind where the lie might be better than the truth. “Heard Sawada-Trash raised him himself, if you can actually believe it.”

“You know what? I do believe it. Explains the—” Unable to come up with something that could accurately describe the hot mess that was Plant-Hamlet, Naruto waved his hand in an all-encompassing gesture. “—him.”

“Sawada-dono?” The boy stared at him warily, blue eyes clouded with suspicion and questions, darting from Naruto’s face to Squalo’s and back again.

Naruto exhaled a troubled sigh. “C’mon, kid—what’s your name, by the way?”

“This one’s name is Basil.”

“Awesome.” He smiled at the kid, his you’re-not-in-trouble-son and let’s-talk-philosophy smile, a combination usually directed at Lambo (and, oddly enough, Baby-Kabuto, and Byakuran), but gave him space and allowed him to follow at his own pace as he walked ahead. “Well, Basil, we’ve got much to talk about, you and I. Let’s start with the way you speak, yeah?”

Plant-Hamlet blinked, merely following quietly, either not giving a damn about what other people thought of his outdated speech pattern, or sage forbid, having put his whole trust in Iemitsu’s teaching skills. Kid was scarily good at that, which was…bad, that sort of blind loyalty.

When they reached Shamal’s car, Naruto tossed the keys to Squalo and slid into the passenger seat, studying Plant-Hamlet’s reflection in the rear-view mirror. It wasn’t just the physical similarities that clued him in—the long shape of his face, the slight upturn of his nose, that pointed chin. All those features could have been passed down from some common ancestor, because Iemitsu wouldn’t have taken him in if Plant-Hamlet wasn’t Vongola blood, not when he couldn’t be assed to raise his own damn kid, but the familiarity of his chakra… Subtle, but unmistakable.

Every chakra signature was unique, but the closer the blood relation, the easier it was to recognize or mimic or synchronize. And that earlier chakra transfusion had more than confirmed it. Plant-Hamlet’s blue felt familiar enough to identify him as close kin. Not brother, but… Cousin, perhaps. Problem was, Iemitsu hadn’t packed him off to Namimori the second he’d gotten custody of the kid, and that…that was causing Naruto a major headache. Because for all of his (oh-so-many) faults, his useless father had the self-awareness to know he’d be a shit father and that the dark underbelly of the mafia was no place to be raising kids.

Iemitsu’d still done it, though. Ugh, head’s killing me—no, wait. Oh. Oh, shit. Naruto had never hated his bullshit super intuition as much as he did now. Also the last thing he needed was Kurama rubbing it in, but that was exactly what the stupid fox did, cackling all the while.
Took you long enough to figure it out, brat.

Give me a fucking break, asshole. Naruto closed his eyes and centered himself. His head throbbed, his super intuition was playing ping pong with his skull, his family was one fucked up Greek tragedy, and Kurama was a huge pain in his ass. Story of his life. Kā-san’s memory fuck up… He did send the kid home, and that’s when it happened, yeah? Someone must have come after the kid to finish the job, probably the same guys who killed his parents, loose ends and all that.

I’d say so. Now that he’d gotten his fill of entertainment out of the train wreck that was Naruto’s life, Kurama yawned and curled up, nuzzling Inari, the very picture of contentment and familial bliss. And why wouldn’t he be? Lucky bastard wasn’t the one who had to deal with all this bullshit.

“So.” Steeling himself, Naruto decided to get it over with. The car afforded them relative peace and quiet, unlike the madhouse he called home, and he trusted Squalo to keep his mouth shut on the matter. A novel idea, true, but that loud bastard hadn’t made a peep so far, eyes firmly on the road, his blue saturating the interior of the car, a cool, soothing undercurrent, doing wonders for Naruto’s migraine and Plant-Hamlet’s wariness, which was awful decent of him, really. “Basil.”

“Hai, Sawada-dono?”

And oh, manners. Tetsuya’d be happy to have a kindred spirit, but the -dono had got to go.

“None of this -dono crap, kid. I really don’t care for formalities, not to mention nobody uses -dono in this day and age. Call me Naruto, ‘kay?”

“Verily?” Plant-Hamlet asked, brows knitted, an echo of shock and hurt dignity in his inflection, all proper little lordling-like.

Scratch that, Plant-Hamlet’s whole vocabulary was in dire need of an upgrade. Or was it a downgrade in this case? Meh. Whatever.

“Yeah, my point exactly. You need to loosen up, kid.”

“I—Master never—”

Judging by the devastated expression on his face and his incoherent mumbling, Plant-Hamlet was five seconds away from actually going into shock, so Naruto changed gears.

“About that master of yours… You say he taught you all this stuff, like how to talk and act and whatnot?”

It worked, too. Plant-Hamlet’s expression instantly brightened, and he launched into another long-winded soliloquy about the labors of squiring and the glorious history of of Japan and God’s gift to mankind, a.k.a. Iemitsu. Naruto felt a little bit sick just hearing about it, and Squalo’s blue fluctuated between disturbed and revolted, when the word honor was liberally thrown about. His useless father. And honor. In the same sentence.

“—Master has been educating me in the intricacies of the Japanese language and culture for many years. Regrettably, I am not yet adept—”

“Okay, stop, just stop,” Naruto groaned and buried his face in his hands, “shit, I can’t do this.”

“Sawa—” At Naruto’s miserable groan, Plant-Hamlet took pity on him and got rid of the -dono at-long-fucking-last. Also adopted the mien of a beaten puppy. “Forgive me, Naruto-san? Have I…
displeased you in some way?”

“Nah, s’not you, kid.” With one last groan, Naruto sagged into his seat, and goddamn it, this is... fuck, it’s years of conditioning. Can it even be undone? Ero-ossan’ll have his hands full with this one, that’s for sure. “Look, how long have you been with CEDEF?”

“My entire life, Naruto-san.”

“What about your family? Parents, siblings, anything?”

“None that I am aware of.”

“And you never got curious, never asked about them?” C’mon, kid, gimme something to work with here, Naruto silently begged, and thank fuck, Plant-Hamlet did.

“I—I did. Master never divulged their names.” Wistfully admitted, whispered like a secret, like something shameful. “However, he assured me that I belonged with CEDEF and that Vongola was my family. He bestowed upon me the name Basil and claimed me as his apprentice. That was...an honor, truly. I owe him more than I can ever repay in one lifetime. What more could I have asked for?”

Again with the honor spiel. What a fucking disgrace. You should’ve asked for the truth, kid. Even if it hurts, you deserve nothing less. Naruto didn’t care if the kid fancied himself a knight or a vassal or whatever medieval bullshit he was into (all his brats had a quirk that made them them, and he loved them all the more for it), but he vowed right then and there—by the time they’d be done with Plant-Hamlet, he’d know the true meaning of that word. And so would his fucking useless father.

After dumping Plant-Hamlet on a less-than-enthused Shamal in the infirmary, ostensibly for his mild chakra exhaustion, but in truth for a full check-up (psych eval and DNA test included), Naruto led Squalo to the main living room. And because he wasn’t an idiot, Naruto let him walk in first.

Which was why, not even two steps in, Squalo found himself escaping decapitation by a hair’s breadth.

There was a flash of metal, an eruption of bloodlust, then, “Squalo!”

Takeshi’s grin was as sharp as the edge of his katana, and equally matched by Squalo.

“Voi! Getting better, puppy! Still gotta watch your left side, though! You’re wide open!”

“I know!”

“Shiii—”

Naruto had precious few seconds, before the living room got wrecked, to Sparta-kick both idiots out the open window and holler, “Yo, take it outside! No explosive tags in the house!”

Takeshi’s always-cheerful, “Sure thing, sensei!” was swallowed in the subsequent explosion, but Squalo’s enraged, “Voi! That’s cheating, puppy!” came through perfectly audible, somehow, and wow, you actually beat an explosive tag in a contest of noise. That’s some talent you’ve got there, Sword-Psycho.

“That was...most illuminating,” Espresso-Maniac remarked, casual-as-you-fucking-please, lounging on the armchair he’d claimed as his and savoring his overpriced espresso, acclimatized to random acts of violence and the insanity that inhabited Baby-Kabuto’s mansion after three long
weeks of nonstop hazing. “I had mistaken Takeshi for the straightforward type.”

The pun, more than the assumption, startled a laugh out of Naruto. “Take-chan favors the sword, yeah, but we’re shinobi, not samurai. He’s got loads of tricks up his sleeve. Forgetting that might be the last mistake you’ll ever make.”

The last occupant of the living room wasn’t nearly as composed. Or entertained. A stunned face peeked from behind the couch Prince Charming had clumsily vaulted over when he’d heard Naruto yelling about explosive tags. He’d also evidently landed on his face and was sporting a nosebleed, but that was nothing new. “Holy crap, was Squalo…playing with him?”

Tossing him a pack of tissues, because Espresso-Maniac obviously wasn’t gonna waste his chakra for a measly nosebleed, Naruto plonked himself down and stretched out lazily. “You know ‘im?”

“We used to be roommates,” Prince Charming mumbled through the tissue pressed against his nose. At Naruto’s quirked brow, he clarified, “Mafia school.”

“For real? What was that like?”

Instead of an answer, Naruto got a lapful of cuteness, courtesy of the portal opening in the middle of his living room, a.k.a. the Vindice Express Delivery.

“Padrino!” Yuni sprinted forward in a flurry of dark curls and excitement. The lilting sound of giggles filled the air as she wrapped her arms around him, melting against his chest.

Naruto, too, melted. “How’s my favorite girl? Missed you this month, Yuni-chan. Didja prank daddy like we planned to?”

Yuni parted her lips to no doubt regale him with a colorful account of her month, but was carefully lifted off his lap, only to be replaced by an older, sexy-as-hell version of the girl.

Aria settled Yuni between them, then kissed his cheek and purred, breath hot and voice spilling wet-husky over his skin, “I thought I was your favorite girl.”

Damn, girl’s got game.

Thankfully, Gamma, father of the year and husband extraordinaire, saved him from that pitfall.

“First my wife, now my daughter,” he mock-accused with a long-suffering sigh as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Naruto laughed, waggling his brows, and neglected to inform him he was poaching from Espresso-Maniac. “You snooze, you lose.”

“I hate you, kid.”

Thankfully for Gamma, Espresso-Maniac was too absorbed by Aria’s presence to notice the theft. Although, Prince Charming’s terror-struck expression, as he seized Gamma by the elbow and all but bolted from the room, was a dead giveaway.

(But he’d definitely notice it later. Espresso-Maniac had a freaky sixth sense when it came to his precious coffee.)

“Hello, Uncle Reborn.” It was…too short, too sweet, too full of glee. No explanation, no apology given. It would seem that Aria had not appreciated being monitored all these years, and was now indulging in a bout of (late) teen rebellion. Naruto knew the signs all too well not to recognize it.
Espresso-Maniac didn’t miss the implication either. Still, he made no comment on it, offering nothing more than a cordial, “Aria.”

If he’d learned anything during his stay here, it wasn’t humility (Naruto doubted he could even feign contrition, much less humility), but the wisdom of choosing his battles. Hence, why his gaze fell on the instigator of Aria’s rebellion, heavy with censure and *how dare you corrupt my innocent niece.*

Sadly for Espresso-Maniac, while Naruto could do both contrition and humility, he felt neither in particular. A shrug was all he gave. “What? I told you I’d make some phone calls.”

When Espresso-Maniac remained obstinately silent, exuding discontent and the patience to wait forever if he had to, Naruto sighed and motioned for Aria to take Yuni outside, because he wasn’t about to start cussing in front of his three-year-old goddaughter. Aria winked at him, full of sass and *give it to him raw,* rising from his lap with Yuni in her arms. Yuni, on the other hand, glared at Espresso-Maniac for separating her from her padrino so soon, but changed tactics as Aria was nearing the door, propping her chin on her mother’s shoulder and gazing soulfully at Naruto, all puppy dog eyes and chubby cheeks and—*oh, no, not the wobbly bottom lip.*

“Aw, don’t be like that, Yuni-chan. I promise I’ll still be here when you get back. You can tell me all about your prank then, ‘kay? ‘Sides, don’t you wanna see Kyō-chan and Kyōko-chan?”

That sure did the trick—Yuni squealed with delight, chirping about her Kyō-nī and her Kyō-nē and the pretty birdies and the butterfly fairies.

Once the girls were out of earshot, Naruto’s smile vanished. His eyes bored into Espresso-Maniac’s without the barest hint of tolerance. Espresso-Maniac might have been blessed with endless patience, but Naruto’s had evaporated the day Shamal examined his mother. In truth, he’d have never agreed to be Timoteo’s successor even if he hadn’t founded Konoha. Not with the way the old man treated his *family* as disposable pawns, only caring when he had run out of choices, when he was desperate and hoping for a miracle.

“Look, I don’t know about you, but I’m sick and tired of getting mixed up in Vongola’s screw ups. This bullshit has got to fucking stop, and if I have to call in—”

As if summoned by serendipity, the person whose name was on the tip of Naruto’s tongue made his grand entrance. Like a motherfucking boss.

“Yo, Bermuda, my man. Thanks for giving them a lift.” He beamed at Baby-Chief, one dazzling
flash of teeth, oozing gratitude and we-so-are-best-buddies feels. Time for the hard part. “Now, don’t freak out, but I’ve invited—”

The polar opposite of serendipity struck before Naruto could soften the blow, and for fuck’s sake, Ramen-Alien, learn to read the mood! Why you gotta be such a sneaky asshole? You don’t go barging into people’s homes without knocking first unless you wanna get eaten. Didn’t the lesson sink in last time, or do we need to have a repeat?

Ramen-Alien appeared to have heard every single uncharitable thought Naruto had about his person—he hummed, blithe as could be, lips wryly twisted. “You mean you threatened to unleash the mother of your fox child on me if I refused to show up.”

Good thing the furball was napping, because that was an invitation to get eaten, if ever there was one, and Naruto was already on Baby-Chief watch. Ramen-Alien was on his own if Fon, Baby-Kabuto, or Aria suddenly felt like indulging in some cathartic death-dealing.

“It got you to come, didn’t it?” he snarked at the same time as Espresso-Maniac breathed out a low, sibilant, “What.”

Caught flat-footed, Naruto blinked, echoed him dumbly. “What?” What the hell’s his prob—oh. Fuck. I knew I was forgetting someone. In Naruto’s defense, Espresso-Maniac had been suppressing his fire-chakra, probably trying to become one with the furniture, after Baby-Chief’s threat-greeting. It totally wasn’t his fault Ramen-Alien was so damn popular. “Oh, for the love of ramen, not this again. Take it outside, dammit.”

As Ramen-Alien phased through the nearest wall, Espresso-Maniac giving chase with single-minded focus and murder in his eyes and guns blazing, Naruto surrendered to the impulse he’d been resisting all day long—his forehead met said wall with a resounding thud. This is why we can’t have nice things.

“My-chan! I brought buttered popcorn marshmallows!”

I take it back. Kami bless you, Angel-Boy. “’lo, Ran-chan, glad you could join us. Thanks, I’ll have some.”
Ensconced in his private study, away from the mayhem and violent skirmishes occurring on the training grounds—Squalo and Takeshi were still slashing at each other with wild abandon, and Espresso-Maniac was still chasing Ramen-Alien around, or to be more precise, his dozen-or-so decoy bodies—Naruto stared at the original Ramen-Alien with dubious eyes and an innate sense of foreboding. “So, what you’re saying is…we need the guy who made the damn things—wait, is he still even alive?”

Ramen-Alien blinked, his stare owlish and a little bewildered, as if he’d heard something preposterous and not, y’know, a valid, logical concern. “Dear Talbot? Why, yes, of course. Why wouldn’t he be?”

Why, indeed. Scoffing, Naruto rolled his eyes. “Oh, I dunno, maybe ‘cause he must be older than dirt by now?”

“Nonsense.” Ramen-Alien chortled, waving a hand with aplomb. “He’s centuries younger than I am.” Something rueful softened the sharp angles of his face as he slipped into what Naruto had dubbed his ‘story-teller grandpa mode’. “In fact, he wasn’t even born when I married my—”

Under different circumstances, Naruto’d have gladly let him natter away for hours—Ramen-Alien had lots of awesome stories to tell when he was in a sharing mood, not to mention lots of dirt on important, historical figures—but now wasn’t the time for idle chit-chat.

“Right. Moving on.” Even though he was the one to cut their talk short, Naruto almost regretted it when he broached the next subject on their agenda. “What about Ieyasu’s…” A shudder rippled through his body, cold sweat coating his skin, the thin hairs on his arms standing on end. “…ghost fuckery?”

Ramen-Alien chortled again, all poorly concealed mirth and there, there, it’ll be alright, sweetling and grandpa won’t let the monsters take you, coming off as more patronizing than soothing. “For the last time, my ghost-fearing friend, neither Ieyasu’s spirit nor his guardians’ dwell inside the Vongola rings. They are nothing more than pale imitations that have retained an ounce of conscious thought. Perhaps it would be more accurate to think of them as the magical portraits in the Harry Potter series? In any case, I assure you, their souls have long since moved on to the next great adventure.” Just as Naruto was beginning to relax and think maybe he’d need to cancel the onmyōji he’d preemptively hired, Ramen-Alien hummed, slyly adding as an aside in a lower-but-still-carrying tone, “The majority of them, anyway. I’m not certain what would be the proper term for Daemon—”

What. The hell. Demon? Like, not just regular ghost fuckery, but the demonic kind? Was that even a thing? Oh, hell no. The choked-off, hysterical scream that clawed at the tender flesh of his throat made Ramen-Alien pause and regard him with laughing, knowing eyes. Bastard was having a blast playing these sick games with Naruto’s mind.

(Kawahira toyed with the idea of finishing his sentence, but in the end discarded it as unnecessary. He was far too amused to correct the misunderstanding he’d unwittingly created, and Naruto’s imagination was already running wild with outrageous speculation. Homophones were such delightful words. That Daemon Spade’s name could be easily mistaken for an inhuman entity of evil was irony at its finest. Humans always made the best monsters.)

“Yes, okay, I get it already!” Naruto’s voice did not crack, nope, not one bit, it was a manly,
hearty roar. “Thanks, by the way, that makes me feel so much better.” No, not really. What the fuck was wrong with Vongola’s ancestry? Like, seriously, first ghosts, now demons? What next? Were they secretly descendants of Cthulhu? What kinda fucked up monster genes ran in his family? Why couldn’t they get it on with normal humans like the rest of the sane world? Forget canceling the onmyōji, he needed a whole team of paranormal specialists ASAP. He swallowed thickly, massaged his poor, abused throat until he found his voice again, and banished all thought of too-many eyes and too-many mouths and freaky tentacle hanky panky from his mind. “You sure you can modify the rings and get rid of this blood-locked bullshit, though?”

“If Talbot consents to the process, I don’t see why not.” A shrug of his shoulders, then his tone turned airy, if a tad impish. “I could attempt to modify them on my own, but I am afraid I have no experience in the practical aspects of jewelry making and craftsmanship. Worst case scenario, I could ruin them irreparably.”

I just bet you could.

It was so classic Ramen-Alien, being all godlike for the sake of humanity and fucking shit up one scheme at a time and then going oops, my bad, but hey, nobody died this time and who needs these gaudy rings anyway, gold is so last century, you should go for platinum, that Naruto could just picture Vongola’s collective meltdown at that outcome. He snorted with laughter, making a mental note to have his camera ready as a just-in-case. “Yeah, it’d be a real tragedy if that happened. I’m sure Xanxus would be gutted if we couldn’t put a pretty ring on his finger to make the whole succession shebang official.” Shaking his head, he sighed and got back on topic. “What about Verde? Man’s a freaking genius, he could probably do this with his eyes closed.”

“Undoubtedly.” Ramen-Alien’s lips quirked into a wry smile, though it wasn’t exactly a sign of agreement. “The issue with your train of thought is that ‘the whole succession shebang’ is, essentially, an internal Vongola affair. Do you honestly want to become involved to that degree?”

Naruto…couldn’t really dispute that, and huh, would you look at that? That was almost wise of you, Ramen-Alien, color me impressed. Do my ears deceive me or are you being genuinely helpful for once? Guess there’s always a first time for everything. “Guess not,” he flashed him a sunny grin and a thumbs up, “good thinking, Ramen-Alien.”

Ramen-Alien’s smile became deadpan. “I wish you would cease addressing me by that puerile sobriquet.”

Without any real expectation that his wish would be granted, it had to be said. If nothing else, Ramen-Alien could admit defeat when he knew he had lost. Which was more than could be said for Espresso-Maniac, whose rampaging fire-chakra could still be felt all the way from the training grounds even by non-sensors.

“No can do.” Cheeks stretched, eyes glinting with mischief, Naruto kept grinning. “You like shio.”

Naruto had a brief flare of panic and holy shit, it’s Danzō! when he met with whom Ramen-Alien affectionately called dear Talbot, but as it turned out, Not-Danzō was a jolly old man, full of sagacity and caustic wit, despite what his (decrepit) appearance would have you believe at first glance. Also, unlike Ramen-Alien, he looked his age. Acted like it, too.

“Ha! Out of the mouths o’ babes…” was the first sentence out of his mouth after Naruto had divulged the purpose of his abrupt visit—via the Vindice Express, and oh, they must be bandage buddies or something, probably have the same supplier, Naruto thought when Baby-Chief greeted Not-Danzō with civility instead of rattling off infractions—and what was what. Then, “And ya say you’ve no interest in bein’ Decimo? What a bloody shame.”
Scratching the nape of his neck, Naruto chuckled rather awkwardly. (He was still getting over his Danzō-false-alarm little freak out episode.) “Thanks, I think.”

“Bring me both halves of the Vongola rings, and I’ll see what I can do, lad. Mind you, there’s nothing to be done ‘bout that pesky seal on ‘em. If ya remove Primo’s blood and his Guardians’ Flames, the bloody things can never return to their original form. If they be worthy and all that codswallop... Why, when Primo came to me with his wise words and his concerns ‘bout the future generations, I should’ve never—”

And holy shit, bizarro Not-Danzō was now acting like Ao, being a grumpy old man and going on and on about how things were done in his time and lambasting the (lack of) foresight of young idealists, and that...that was just too much for Naruto to handle.

“You got it, Talbot no jī-chan!” he blurted out, while Not-Danzō was deep into reminiscence, and all but threw himself into Baby-Chief’s warp hole. Never again. Next time Ramen-Alien would be the one dealing with his dear Talbot.

Daylight was struggling to break through the last dark of night when Naruto managed to sort everything out—

(Which included mediating between Espresso-Maniac and Ramen-Alien, Baby-Chief and Ramen-Alien, basically everyone and their mother and Ramen-Alien, convincing his Guardians to let him meet Xanxus alone, getting his brats to babysit the visitors, helping Nana move in with them until the Varia leave, shouting at Kurama to stop ruffling Xanxus’ feathers for, like, a goddamn hour, and other minor crap, like Shamal hitting on Pink-Mei and getting a facelift via poison cooking bullshit, ugh, shit-gods-fuck, how was this his life?)

—grab Squalo and barge into the hotel suite the Varia were staying at. Despite Squalo’s too-loud objections about how it’s five-thirty in the ass-crack of dawn and shitty boss just got here, voooi and have you never heard of jet lag, Ramen-Trash. But who the fuck cared? Not Naruto. Not after the ridiculously crappy day he’d endured, nuh-uh. Someone had to pay for all his pain and misery, and if that someone had to be Xanxus, well... Bad timing on his part.

Give him hell.

Of course, Kurama never promised to stop egging him on, because he was Naruto’s primary enabler, poor impulse control, and personal furry cheerleader for life all rolled into one. They were off to an auspicious beginning. Believe it.

We’re here to talk, Naruto repeated for the nth fucking time, mostly out of habit by now. Get it, asshole? Talk. That’s it.

If you say so.

You know something I don’t?

When have you ever traded words without blows? The fox laughed at him and his pitiful delusions, then settled down as the highlights of their battle against Obito started playing on their version of a home theater, snuggling Inari and educating him on the delusions of pitiful humans. You’ll let me have my fun in the end. You always do.

Groaning, Naruto scrubbed a hand down his face, wishing he could just dive into the furry pile and call it a fucking day. Ain’t that the truth?
So it was with that particular mindset that he hunted down the Varia’s suite, kicked in the door and bellowed with an insane gleam in his bloodshot eyes and an insanely wide grin on his face, “Yo, Batman! Fancy meeting you here.”

And huh, what do you know, Xanxus was actually not asleep, though whether he was jet lagged was still up for debate. Neither was the rest of the Varia, judging by their slack-jawed surprise at his badass entrance and awesome greeting. *Shows what you know, Sword-Psycho.*

“Who the fuck dares—” Xanxus might have been all for badass entrances and awesome greetings, too, as his red-eyed death stare and blazing red-orange fire-chakra and the whole wrath-is-me thing he had going for him seemed to indicate, but sadly the world would never know since he got upstaged by the utter chaos and hilarity that ensued.

“Boss! Be careful, he’s not what he seems! I will protect you from that—that fiend!” Lightning guy had somehow teleported in front of Xanxus, crouching low and brandishing a pair of umbrellas and glowering at Naruto as if he held him solely responsible for all the things that had gone wrong in his life for the past four years. Which, yeah, totally true, but good luck getting Naruto to admit it. Heh. Sucks to be you, umbrella dude. “Where are your little monsters, ey? I won’t be taken for a fool again! Their reign of terror ends today! In the name of I, Levi—”

A high-pitched squeal and a vicious jab to the throat put an end to lightning guy’s Braveheart moment.

“Naruto, darling!” Lussuria had somehow teleported in front of Naruto, sighing dreamily and fanning himself and smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles in Naruto’s shirt. “You’re looking oh-so-veeery-fine—my, all these delicious muscles. Mm, orange is definitely your color.”

In all that bedlam, while lightning guy was choking on the floor and Lussuria was all over him, Naruto almost missed Wizard-Kakuzu taking advantage of the confusion to sneakily make his exit.

“Muu. Excuse me, Boss. I need to…secure the perimeter.” *And my money.* All that betrayed Wizard-Kakuzu’s presence was that echo and the swish of his cloak as he slunk off into the corridor.

(Ever since that hellish nin-animal business and Naruto’s…teeny-tiny lapse of control, Wizard-Kakuzu had been avoiding him like the plague. It’d be a miracle if he could stay in the same room as Naruto for longer than five minutes and not suffer an epileptic flashback these days. Naruto did feel bad about it, honest, but there wasn’t much he could do to fix it either, so he never addressed Wizard-Kakuzu unless he did it first, usually in another fruitless attempt to desensitize himself. Naruto’d like to believe one of these attempts *would be* successful, but eh, only time would tell. If Hayato could overcome his digestive PTSD, anything was possible.)

“Ushishishi.” And oh, here come the too-prety-to-be-functional knives and disturbing-as-fuck laughter and murder attempt number who-the-hell-even-counts-anymore. Naruto was wondering when the tiara-brat would enter the fray. Well, he had to wonder no more as Belphegor vaulted over Lussuria—who let out a cry of dismay, but never stopped ogling Naruto’s abs, thankfully from afar—all the while grinning with all his teeth and trying to kill the fuck out of him. “The Prince is pleased to see the Ramen King is in good health.”

Funny he’d say that, all things considered, but then again, Belphegor’s sense of humor had always been twisted. Naruto laughed, snatched him by the back of his shirt and threw him over his shoulder. Good thing he did that, because Xanxus’ patience for their shenanigans had reached its limit, and whenever that happened, he apparently transformed into a demolition expert.
Idly, Naruto glanced at the large, smoking hole ten times the size of his head mere inches from his actual head and whistled. Squalo was cursing up a storm, casting aspersions on Xanxus’ parentage and despairing over how he’d explain this to the hotel management. There was a soft cry of horror that sounded like nooo, my money, why, Boss, whyyy and many similar lamentations echoing from somewhere down the corridor.

“Everyone. Out.” Amid the oh-shit-nobody-move silence that followed the low rasp of Xanxus’ command, Naruto followed the trajectory of the whiskey glass that sailed across the room and smashed against Squalo’s forehead with perfect accuracy in a shower of glass and liquid fury. “Except you.”

Naturally, Squalo didn’t take that shit lying down, though it was curious to note that he didn’t dodge the flying glass either. “Voi! The fuck you did that for, shitty Boss?”

This time, it was the whole bottle that flew. Also right on target. “Start talking, shark trash.”

As Squalo raged over his whiskey-soaked mane, picking out glass shards and swearing bitter vengeance, and everyone else vacated the suite, Naruto unsealed the bottle of scotch he’d filched from Shamal’s private collection and held it aloft with that same insanely wide grin on his face. “I brought booze?”

It drew Xanxus’ heavy-lidded gaze, and for a fraction of a moment, it appeared he might be persuaded into a sorta talkable, fueled-by-alcohol, lounging-predator mood, before a pair of unwanted guests rudely crashed the party, that was.

“Hold it.” One of the pink-haired, eye-masked party crashers demanded, all authority and holier-than-thou attitude and judgy shit like that, as if they were running this show and had every right to be here. What hole did they crawl—oh, wait. That hole. Well, at least that mystery was solved. “We, of the Cervello organization, have been tasked with the duty of being the final arbiters. We cannot allow any confrontation to occur outside the sanctioned battles.”

“Does it look like I’m here to fight, lady?” So done with this shit and too tired to mince his words, Naruto dangled the bottle of scotch in front of her face, then walked past her without a second glance. He had lost all the respect he never had to begin with when they chose to make their entrance using the hole Xanxus had blown through the wall. Can you spell l-a-m-e?

Shrugging out of his jacket, he stretched his neck and parked his ass in Lussuria’s chair, then poured himself a generous drink, which he drained in one go. Had another. And another. By his third drink, Xanxus had decided Naruto had the right of it and acquired a new glass, humming an appreciative that’s some good shit, scum after his first swig.

“And who the hell appointed you, anyway?” Posture laid-back, but stare keenly evaluating, Naruto finished his drink without taking his eyes off of them for a second, spinning their words around in his mind. Cervello, hm? He’d never heard of them, and that in itself told him plenty. Not his fucking problem though, provided they had the good sense to stay away from his famiglia. “Not only are you not Vongola, not officially at least, but as far as I know, the old man’s…incapacitated, at the moment. Timoteo shouldn’t be able to think straight, much less make any sort of important decisions.”

Nothing of what he claimed came as a surprise to them, validating his theory. No change in pitch or expression, only that baseless conviction. “The Varia and the CEDEF have both consented—”

“Oi, scum.” Xanxus had, also, had enough. Or he must have really liked Shamal’s scotch, and thus was more partial to Naruto’s company out of all the people who kept insisting on gatecrashing. He
raised his gun, taking a leaf out of Naruto’s book and leveling them with a look of pure contempt and sell your bullshit elsewhere and you’ve got three seconds before I start shooting. “Didn’t you hear me earlier? Get the fuck out.”

Seizing the chance to go soak his precious locks in a fuckton of conditioner, Squalo helped the annoying pair of party crashers along, dragging them outside and closing the door behind him, not that this gave them much privacy, what with the giant, gaping hole in the wall. Still, Naruto would take it. His initial plan had been shot to hell, literally and figuratively, but he could probably still make it work as long as the booze flowed.

“Now that’s done with, let’s get down to business. Name’s Naruto, by the way.” A pause. Naruto smiled as he refilled both of their glasses, caught Xanxus’ eyes and proudly announced, “Of the Konoha famiglia.”

Xanxus gave his glass a slow twist, rumbled deep in his throat. “That so?”

If he recognized the name, it didn’t show, but the way his shoulders tensed meant he understood what was being implied. And that he was listening. Better late than never, Naruto supposed.

“Well.” Nodding, he swigged his scotch in two gulps and went all in. No hesitation, no fucks given. “But you’d have known that if you had bothered listening to Squalo. You’d have known a lot of things, actually. First things first, though.” Digging into the pocket of his jacket, he pulled out a velvet jewelry box and tossed it onto the table. “Here’s my half of the rings. Take it as a token of good faith.” With another nod toward the box, more weighted, he leaned back and exhaled a weary sigh. “You ready to talk yet?”

“Talk?” A scoff, then Xanxus barked out a laugh, a harsh, scornful thing. “Shitty old man talked a good game, too.” He sounded hollow, even when his voice was so full of rage and bitterness and loathing that Naruto could hear the cracks, the rough echoes as it drilled into his ears. “But that’s all it ever was.”

“Trust me, I know.” Naruto lowered his eyes, gazed into his glass, seeing the color of Timoteo’s eyes and untold mistakes in the swirling amber. “He ever tell you how he tried to slap a seal on me when I was, uh…five, I think?” He slugged it straight back, hissed as fire and regret slid down his throat. “Course, it never properly took, but it was still a shitty thing to do to a kid.” When he raised his eyes, he gave a humorless laugh, as empty as his glass. “And I haven’t brought enough booze to get into Iemitsu’s fuck ups.”

There was something in Xanxus’ eyes, in the burns that stood out angrily against his skin, in the wrath that seethed beneath his ribcage, that said we be of one blood, ye and I. For someone so fundamentally different, all hell-bent ambition and anger in his veins and hunger in his bones, Xanxus was easier to relate to than any of Naruto’s blood relations. Naruto couldn’t help but think of how ironic it all was.

“What’s your fucking point?” Direct, bluntly spoken, and lacking any patience for pity parties and the like.

Fair enough. Naruto didn’t come here to spill his guts either. “My point is…if that had fucking happened to you, would you wanna take over after the Ninth stepped down? ‘Cause I sure as hell don’t.” A shake of his head, jaw tight with resolve, voice emphatic and dripping with derision. “Nah, man, I’ve got my own family to look after now. You can have Vongola if you want it so bad, though I can’t imagine why you would. There’s something seriously rotten underneath, y’know? If you don’t believe me, you can investigate yourself. Signs are all there to see, if you know what to search for.”
“So that’s it?” Skepticism furrowed Xanxus’ brows, twined with an acerbic sort of amusement, as if he couldn’t believe Naruto had the balls to pull this Trojan horse stunt on him. “You barge in here, relinquish your rights to succession, warn me about some cryptic shit, and then what? You walk the fuck away?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Not bothered by the veiled stab at his integrity, Naruto shrugged. He hadn’t expected Xanxus to take him at his word right from the get-go, just to make him listen. The Varia—or Baby-Chief or Ramen-Alien or hell, anyone who wasn’t Naruto—could take care of the fallout. “I talked with Talbot no jī-chan earlier today. He says he can fix the damn rings, so they’ll accept your claim. If you still want the Decimo position, it’s all yours, as far as I’m concerned at least.”

At that, Xanxus swore a streak of profanities in nine different languages. Now there was an incentive to become a polyglot.

“Fucking shark can never keep his loud mouth shut.”

“Squalo did you a favor. The truth would’ve come out eventually, when you tried to put that tacky ring on. As it is now, nobody else has to know.” Cracking his neck, Naruto stood and donned his jacket, clinking his glass against the half-full bottle on the table. “Anyway, that’s all I came here to say. Think about it, and when you decide what you wanna do, give me a call. Squalo has my number.”

“And if I decide I want to blow your fucking brains out, Leaf scum?”

Ah, there it was—in the grin that slashed cross his scars, the stirring of his fire-chakra, that promise of destruction, that violent, searing rage. The pissing contest from hell Naruto had hoped to avoid. Alas, no such luck, and goddammit, why didja have to go there, Batman? Kurama’s gonna be damn insufferable now—

**My turn?**

Kurama was gloating. Naruto was done.

**Yeah, yeah, have fun.**

As the furball let loose, Naruto mirrored Xanxus’ grin and paid him back in kind, eyes red as blood and chakra-bright. “You can fucking try, Batman.”

(Xanxus’ later cussfest on the riveting topic of tree huggers and shark trashes and that fucking piece of shit Joker was one for the books.)

When Naruto walked out of the hotel, dead tired and dragging his feet, the sun was peeking through the clouds. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, slowly let it out, and again. In. Out. In—

“I know you’re there, kuso oyaji.” A shadow moved in his peripheral vision as he exhaled the last breath. “Come out and face me like a man.”
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

What’s this? An update? Oh, my. ‘Tis indeed! Rejoice, for your wish has been granted! *dances madly and shares the lols*

Thank you all so much for reading and sharing your thoughts and being absolutely amazing! I really do appreciate it.

In other news, I’ve posted an AU one-shot based on this ‘verse with Sasuke-as-Xanxus. For those who are interested, you can find it included in this series under the title ‘we are proud individuals’. Onward! XD

Appearance-wise, Iemitsu hadn’t changed much, still sporting a light scruff, dressed in bright orange overalls and a wife-beater, sticking to his ridiculous I’m-a-simple-construction-worker-in-the-South-Pole guise. He was staring at Naruto with this stupefied look on his tanned face, obviously struggling to reconcile the memory of his fluffy-haired five-year-old kid with this steely-eyed fifteen-year-old teen in his mind.

His jaw fell open. “Tsuna…” he rasped, with an imperceptible wince, watching helplessly as the silence thickened, at a loss for words.

“No…” Still shrouded in Kurama’s volatile chakra, Naruto turned his back on his useless father, keeping his strides slow and even, his fury shackled beneath his skin. “Save it for when we get home. Kā-san’s staying with the kids, so we can have a long nice talk about where the fuck you’ve been and all the shit you’ve put her through over the years.”

Silent, Iemitsu followed, his gaze boring into Naruto’s back, burning with questions and shocked confusion. Naruto didn’t say a word until they were sitting at their kitchen table, opposite from each other, a jug of sake and two small, ceramic cups between them, and boy, at this rate, he’d soon be a pro at daytime drinking. Granny Tsunade’d be conflicted between tearing him a new one and being snidely commiserating if she could see him now.

“You know,” he began, shattering the silence with a long sigh, exhaustion sinking deep inside his bones, “I had a whole speech prepared in my head, but now that you’re here…” Naruto tilted his head and looked Iemitsu straight in the eye. “Just tell me why.” Gravelly, dangerous, the black rumble of Kurama’s hatred bleeding through and distorting his words.

A dilation of pupils—Iemitsu’s face blanched, breath hitching in his throat, cords straining in his neck as he swallowed. “I didn’t—I never meant…” He inhaled sharply, and when he spoke again, his voice was cracked, guilt-ridden, almost a sob. “I wanted to protect you.”

“Yeah?” The smile that curled over the edges of Naruto’s mouth was gruesome, all fangs and biting promise, tearing flesh from bone as easily as breathing. “How did that work out for ya?”

How Iemitsu flinched, muscles violently contracting in his face, was answer enough. He poured himself a cup of sake, knocked it back and licked his lips. “How long have you known?” he asked instead.
“Long enough.” Naruto shrugged, a languorous motion of his shoulders, eyes a fox-slit crimson and stalking Iemitsu with the raptness of a predator on a hunt. “I didn’t tell kā-san until recently, though.”

Suddenly, Iemitsu bolted upright, his knees colliding with the table, chest heaving and gaze frantic, what little remained of his composure fractured to pieces. “Nana…knows?” he breathed out, disbelieving, a spark of anger and solid reproach tangible in his tone. “What did you tell her?”

“What you should’ve told her before asking her to marry you,” Naruto drawled, then chuckled wryly. “What did you expect, oyaji? That you’d come home and it’d be like you never left? That she’d be happy with some sparse phone calls and the occasional postcard? That she’d never call you out on your bullshit as long as you stayed away?” With each sentence out of his mouth, Iemitsu’s complexion paled another shade, until he was nothing more than ashen skin and thin, bloodless lips. A sardonic smile played on Naruto’s lips, mean-spirited, challenging. “No, really, tell me.”

Iemitsu pressed his lips together, still as stone, depressingly quiet for a few moments. Then, “I didn’t expect—this.”

Punctuated by rapid hand gestures toward the empty house, the sake cups, the animosity sizzling like wildfire in the space between them, indicating Naruto’s…everything. Iemitsu was, apparently, in the middle of having a panic attack, combined with a midlife crisis and maybe a touch of existential angst sneakingly creeping up on him. Naruto brought his sake cup to his mouth and tipped it back, exhaling in pleasure.

“Tough luck.” He snorted above the rim of his cup, still smiling sardonically and I could care less and if you’re gonna croak, go do it outside, the carpet’s brand new. “You made your bed, now you gotta lie in it.”

Naruto’s comment was so bluntly delivered, so blasé about Iemitsu’s plight and lacking sentiment, that it broke through Iemitsu’s angst fest with the force of a sledgehammer. He deflated, sagging in his chair, like a puppet with his strings cut.

“What do you want me to say, Tsuna?” Forlorn, he shook his head, with the over-exaggerated countenance of someone drowning in despair, and all but whined. “Nana’s aware of the mafia despite all my efforts to shelter her from this bloody life. You’re so…so bitter and so angry…I can hardly recognize my own son. My family’s on the brink of self-destruction and nothing makes sense anymore. Nothing I’ll say will make this right.”

Fed up with all this melodrama and woe-is-me bullshit, Naruto kicked his shin under the table. Hard. “That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try,” he shot back, kinda disgusted, kinda agreeing with the main point of Iemitsu’s speech, as his useless father pulled his leg up and cried about someone named Lal and domestic abuse and shit. “Don’t be that kind of spineless coward, kuso oyaji.”

Weirdly enough, Naruto’s last sentence resonated with Iemitsu’s ideals of manliness and he-man tendencies, because his useless father managed to gather himself in record time, suck it up and meet Naruto’s less-than-impressed stare head on.

“Tsuna!” he shouted at the top of his lungs, going from depressed to determined in point five seconds, damn near giving Naruto whiplash, and whoa, talk about crazy fast mood swings. The hell you copying the Shodai for, shitty old man? No. Just. No. “I’m sorry.” Indeed, Iemitsu did look appropriately repentant, although Naruto could have done without the whole accidentally-emulating-Hashirama thing. “I’m no good with apologies, but…I’m sorry. You don’t know how sorry I am. I tried my best, I tried to keep you and Nana out of all this. It just…my best
wasn’t enough in the end.”

Ears ringing, the image of that horrific Hashirama-Iemitsu hybrid burned into his retinas, Naruto sighed. “D’you even wanna make amends?”

Cue yet another fucking mood swing. This time, Iemitsu’s face glowed with hope. “Yes! Gods, yes. I just…just want my family back.”

Naruto closed his eyes and prayed for patience. Kill me now. Please.

*You brought this on yourself.* Kurama huffed, all arrogance and backtalk and schadenfreude, and with one menacing snap of his jaws demonstrated his preferred course of action. *I told you to let me eat him. This is why you don’t have deep, meaningful conversations with your food.*

*Oi, I talk to ramen all the time!* Naruto fired back, indignant on behalf of his ramen, only to realize he had just compared his useless father to the holiness-that-is-ramen and grudgingly concede the furball’s point. *You can eat him later. I still need to know stuff. Like Nana’s memory fuck up. And Basil’s parents. And—*

*He can spill his guts while I digest him,* was Kurama’s oh-so-witty counter, and Naruto sweat-dropped.

The longer they kept this particular argument up, the more likely he was to tragically lose it, much to his useless father’s detriment. *And wouldn’t that solve, like, sixty percent of your problems and then some,* suggested a sarky little voice in the back of his mind that suspiciously sounded like the Nidaime. (If he had somehow found a way to transcend death and implant his personality and cutthroat policies into Naruto’s super intuition from beyond the grave. Naruto wouldn’t put it past Senju jutsu-creation-is-my-bitch Tobirama, honest.)

*Don’t tempt me. Seriously, don’t.*

“I want to know why you fucked with kā-san’s head for starters.” Naruto studied the changes in Iemitsu’s expression as the man slowly registered his words—the deathly pallor of his face, the weeping grief in his eyes, the ghosts that lived inside him. “We’ll see where we go from there.”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen.” To his credit, Iemitsu neither denied it nor pretended he was blameless, only gripped his sake cup with white-knuckled fingers, his voice spilling forth hoarse, anguished. “I swear, it wasn’t—I… I fucked up.” He averted his eyes, taking a sip to hydrate his throat, while Naruto quietly listened. “We were in the middle of negotiations with the Serpente famiglia. Up until then, we’d been at each other’s throat more often than not, but Timoteo was dead-set on putting old grudges to rest and forging an alliance. It was a political move to join our famiglias through marriage, even though some people from both sides disagreed. Things like that were common back in the day, when your word meant something, you know?”

“You know shit, old man. Your word means nothing.” Blood filled Naruto’s mouth as teeth bit the inside of his cheeks. Politics and old blood mafia bullshit again. It would have been laughable if it wasn’t so bloody infuriating. Still, Naruto let him talk, didn’t comment on the hypocrisy of it all.

“I was already married to Nana, but Karina, that was my sister…she did her duty to the family. One year later, they’re both dead, their little boy orphaned, and everyone’s accusing everyone and questioning if their son should be the legitimate Serpente heir. I couldn’t leave him in that pit of vipers, so I pulled some strings and gained custody until he’d be old enough to stake his claim,” he trailed off, his voice losing its narrative cadence, its steady flow, broken and cut on all the pieces. “Thinking back on it now, I shouldn’t have…it just made things worse. Basil was still one of
theirs, and I—I took him away without thinking what kind of message that would send.”

Face awash with pain, eyes reddened in shame, Iemitsu stopped there—he finished his drink, refilled his cup, then carried on with renewed urgency, as if he couldn’t wait to get the next part off his chest.

“Nana was so happy when I brought him home. She was five months pregnant with you and wanted to raise you as brothers. I didn’t want to leave until you were born, but Timoteo convinced me it would be best if I came back and talked things through with old man Serpente. When I met with that old snake, he said he’d taken his grandson back and I should give up custody to them if I wanted my wife returned alive.” Bitterness lanced through his voice, old-festering and self-loathing and full of raw things. “Nana was…she hadn’t been treated well. She couldn’t deal with the trauma, especially in her condition. I—I didn’t know what else to do…”

Iemitsu might have said more, but all Naruto heard was white noise in his ears, nothing but the drum of his heart as blood pumped faster in his veins, the roar of Kurama’s hatred as it crashed against the walls of his mind. Hands clenched into tight fists, nails digging into the fleshy part of his palms, Naruto sat rigid in his chair and felt the call for vengeance consume him. “Did they pay?”

“They’re all burning in hell,” Iemitsu spat, still scraped raw, as vicious in his revenge as he was hollow, and Naruto believed him.

It wasn’t enough to excuse him—it would never be enough—but it silenced the clamor for violence in Naruto’s head, leaving behind devastation and bone-deep tiredness and the fierce desire to protect what was his. He focused on that desire, sharpened his claws and fangs, and struck while his prey was cornered and at his mercy. “Why didn’t you respect her wishes?”

Iemitsu’s head snapped up—he stared at Naruto, wide-eyed, tongue-tied. “I couldn’t. Not after—”

A rough noise scratched at the back of his throat. “Basil was my responsibility, the only thing left of Karina.” He sounded like a wounded animal, like a man pierced by his own hubris, stripped down to the bone. “Now, he’s a reminder.”

“No.” Naruto gritted his teeth and spoke past the disgust roiling in his gut. “He’s just a boy. He shouldn’t have to pay for your mistakes.”

“He’s family,” was all his useless father said in response.

There was such absolutism in his tone, such ingrained dogma, that it took all of Naruto’s restraint not to punch him. He despised that type of stereotyped reasoning. It was nothing but gilded varnish to excuse what was inexcusable.

“You have a funny way of showing it.” When Iemitsu made to reply, brows creased and gearing up for a fight, Naruto cut him off with an abrasive laugh. It grazed against his tongue, rolled off weary and mirthless. “Nah, save your breath. I don’t wanna hear your excuses.”

Iemitsu let out a sigh, defeated. “What do you want then?”


It wasn’t merely cold—it transcended that, plunged in abysmal waters and the monsters dwelling within. Iemitsu shivered. He swigged his sake in one gulp, sought warmth in alcohol and the
swelling of his fire-chakra beneath his skin.

“I’ll talk to her, I promise. I just—can you tell me how she took it?”

For some reason, this annoyed Naruto more than anything else his useless father could have asked. “She’s her own person. I don’t speak for her, kuso oyaji.” He drained his cup, slammed it against the tabletop. “Consider yourself damn lucky that I don’t.”

Surprisingly, Iemitsu had the good sense to back down and leave the matter be. “So…where do we go from here?” he prodded, cautiously, with that same hope of before.

“Nowhere.” Scoffing, Naruto shook his head, a bit too eager to disabuse him of all notions of reconciliation Iemitsu might have harbored. “You love your famiglia more than your family, and nothing’ll change that. To put it in terms you can understand, as things stand, you’re nothing but a liability.” Iemitsu’s face fell. Hell, he even had the gall to look betrayed. Against his better judgement and Kurama’s vitriolic complaints, Naruto felt compelled to throw him a bone, if only to say that he had genuinely tried when Nana flashed those large doe-eyes of hers and implored him to show leniency. “I want nothing to do with Vongola. If you ever decide to retire and come home for good, then maybe we can revisit this conversation.”

And oh, surprise, surprise, Iemitsu, that useless fucker, had to go and throw Naruto’s good intentions in his face. “You’re on pretty friendly terms with Superbi,” he accused, gaze narrow and flinty and gleaming with betrayal, as if Naruto owed him some sort of explanation and not the other way around.

Luckily for Iemitsu, Naruto was more entertained than insulted by his silly hissy fit. His lips twitched as he drawled with the air of someone explaining gravity to a chicken, “He’s Varia.”

It flew right over Iemitsu’s head if the stubborn cast of his features was anything to go by. “Still Vongola,” he insisted, expression souring, not too fond of his own admission, but too self-absorbed to get off his soapbox.

“Didn’t seem like it these past few years.”

“That’s their own issue. Xanxus is—”

“I don’t give a fuck what he is or isn’t.” As diverting as this back-and-forth was, Naruto had other shit to do, like getting some damn shuteye. “Xanxus wants Vongola. Me? I’m all for Squalo being Decimo, ‘cause frankly? Loud bastard’s more suited to the position from what I’ve seen so far, but guess what?” A patronizing smile, full of taunt and hard realism, smeared across his mouth. “We can’t always get what we want.”

Stunned, Iemitsu blinked. “You honestly believe you have a choice?” was what he chose to address. “Tsuna…” he spoke slowly, carefully, with some measure of contrition, “…you don’t.”

“Says who?” Naruto snorted and raised his hand, ticking his reasons off on his fingers. “Timoteo’s a freakin’ robot battery. You’re the head of CEDEF, emphasis on the external part. Vongola thinks I’m a civilian kid who doesn’t know jack shit. Giglio Nero and Gesso will support me. The Vindice are on my side.” And yeah, Naruto could have added more reasons, but he was all out of fucks and fingers, so he just spread his arms wide and grinned. “So, really. Who’s gonna make me, huh, kuso oyaji?”

The look of utter shock and what-the-fuck-did-you-just-say on Iemitsu’s face as he gaped at Naruto almost made this conversation worth it. He opened and closed his mouth, then opened it again,
red-faced and spluttering. “That’s not how it—wait, Timoteo’s what now?”

Naruto’s brow rose drily. “Out of fucking commission.”

That, apparently, wasn’t what Iemitsu expected or wanted to hear. He all but upended the table as he shot to his feet and lunged at Naruto. “You can’t just—what have you done with him? Where is he?”

The satisfying sound of flesh hitting flesh reverberated throughout the kitchen. Naruto savored this glorious moment (one of many to come), grinding his knuckles into his useless father’s cheekbone, before he kicked him off his feet and stepped over his body with one last vindictive kick to his ribcage.

“Fuck if I know. Go find ‘im yourself.” Iemitsu groaned and turned on his back, applying pressure to his left side, barely paying attention. So Naruto kicked him again. “You’ve got one day to talk with kā-san, so you better make it count.” And again, “Oh, and if you pressure her in any way…” this time, with a fuckton of fire-chakra coating the sole of his foot, to have the message sink in and all, “I will destroy you.”

Shamal sent him a sympathetic glance when Naruto trudged his way into the kitchen and, sage bless his perverted soul, put a steaming bowl of ramen on the table. “So, how did it go?”

“Fucking awesome,” Naruto said, all the while masticating, loudly and euphorically. Some droplets of broth splattered over the silk-white edges of Fon’s sleeve, and ‘lo, smile of the thousand grudges, haven’t seen you in…ten days. Wow, must be a new record or something. Coughing, Naruto swallowed hastily and went on in a more dignified manner, because he wanted to go the fuck to sleep some time today, thank-you-very-much. “Iemitsu’s gonna later show up here to talk with kā-san. Can someone keep an eye on the situation if I’m still sleeping?”

“I will gladly chaperone their meeting with the utmost discretion.” Fon was still grudge-smiling behind his sleeve. Naruto bet his useless father would be chaperoned, alright. “Rest assured, if Iemitsu-san overstays his visit or causes Nana-san undue distress—” A pause, drawn-out, red-hot chakra hazing the air around the soaked fabric of his sleeve. Naruto watched, hella impressed, as the broth stains disintegrated without burning holes into the silk. “—he will be dealt with.”

“Thanks, man.” Naruto gave him a grateful nod, then resumed gobbling up his ramen. When he stood to wash the empty bowl, Shamal snatched it from his hands, shooing him away with a smile. “Wake me up after they’re done. I wanna have some…last words with him, before he leaves.”

“Now wait a minute, Volpe,” Shamal’s voice stopped him right before he exited the kitchen. “Nana’s been my patient for years. As her primary physician, it’s my responsibility to inform her family members of what her therapy entails. Blunt force trauma isn’t the panacea for all cerebral afflictions, you know. The good doctor prescribes ten doses of contagious disease at minimum.”

Naruto’s brows shot up, laughter bubbling up in his throat, especially when another voice piped in.

“I will have to concur with Shamal,” Baby-Kabuto remarked in the gleefully sadistic science-y tone that he usually reserved for his more…controversial experiments (from an ethical standpoint), sidestepping Naruto and heading for the coffee machine. “In addition, electroconvulsive therapy has been proven highly effective in select cases of aggressive mental disorders.”

Bonding via tormenting the fuck out of his useless father, huh? Naruto approved. “By all means, go for it.”
(Eight hours of blessedly uninterrupted sleep later, Naruto woke to the sweet music of his mother’s voice as she told his useless father that, “I want a divorce, Iemitsu. I don’t need your money, but I’m keeping the house. Oh, and Basil. After all, he’s family, dear.”)
Chapter 34

“—views are weak and influenced by personal bias. I fail to see how, exactly, ‘cause orange is the coolest color ever, believe it!’ makes for a convincing argument. Yellow is, obviously, superior.”

“Oh, yeah? You know what I say to that?”

“Enlighten me. Please.”

“Because fuck you. That’s how.”

Naruto was in the middle of yet another heated Orange-versus-Yellow debate with Espresso-Maniac, their fifth this week—not that Naruto counted, but he did, no fucking way was he losing to that…that freakin’ dandelion—when Xanxus sauntered into his living room, a loud, exasperated Squalo on his heels.

Conversation stalled. Everyone stopped and just…stared. Naruto was staring at Xanxus with a curious sup-bro-what-can-I-do-for-ya smile. Espresso-Maniac was staring at Xanxus’ guns with a smug I-bet-I-could-outgun-you smirk. Xanxus was staring at the bottle of Chivas Regal on the table with a satisfied you’ve-got-good-taste-scum gleam in his eye. Squalo was staring at them all as if they were batshit crazy and how the fuck had he gotten mixed up with their lot. Which, wow, Sword-Psycho, rude.

After shooting Espresso-Maniac an insolent I’d-like-to-see-you-try glance, Xanxus sat down, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, all but sprawling in his cushy armchair. “Nice digs, Leaf scum,” he said by way of greeting, red eyes half-lidded and never straying from the booze.

“Thanks, dude.” With an eye-roll, Naruto chuckled and slid the bottle toward him. “Mi casa es su casa. Want a drink?”

Something that didn’t go over well with Espresso-Maniac—he glowered at Naruto, offended and upper lip curled and why does he get the VIP treatment when I got the third degree. ‘Cause, unlike you, he has guest rights, was written across Naruto’s features with bold, mocking letters, now scram, the adults are gonna talk.

Espresso-Maniac’s lips thinned. Nevertheless, he rose from his seat and walked out with as much dignity as he could muster, which was a fucking lot, actually. That guy made walking look like a Broadway production, the suave bastard.

“Voi, Ramen-Trash!” Brows sewn together, Squalo remained standing, but poured himself a drink, motioning all around with his glass. “I thought this was Verde’s digs.”

“Eh, details.” Lazily, Naruto gave a small shrug, refilling his empty glass. “What’s his is mine and what’s mine is his, ya know. Don’t sweat the small stuff, Sword-Psycho.” His gaze came to rest on Squalo’s frowning face, sharp and inquisitive and belying the relaxed poise of his body. “You came alone?”

Getting the message, Squalo nodded. “You don’t have to worry ‘bout those Cervello bitches. Mammon took care of it.”

Despite his assurances, Squalo’s frown had become more prominent instead of lessening. A stab of unease niggled at the back of Naruto’s mind. His gut feeling kept warning him that they hadn’t
seen the last of the pink-haired annoyances, and Naruto’d be damned if he let harm come to his
group because he’d underestimated their level of danger or hadn’t been vigilant. “Did he find out
who they were? Or who are they working for?”

“No clue. It was a dead end.” Disgruntled, Squalo shook his head as he shared an irritated look
with Naruto. At least, they seemed to be on the same page, though if anything would come out of it
remained to be seen. “They appeared some years ago, but nobody knows from where. From what
we can tell so far, they tend to keep a low profile until shit hits the fan and then they
start…*meddling*. Mammon’s still looking into it.”

_Not good enough_, Naruto’s super intuition anxiously fretted, and Naruto sighed. Secret spy stuff
was Wizard-Kakuzu’s bread and butter, true, but no matter how much Naruto didn’t want to step
on the slippery guy’s toes, better safe than sorry, so. He couldn’t help but offer, “Lemme know if
he needs help. I’ll sic Kuro-chan and Anko-chan on ‘em.”

As soon as those two names filtered in his ears, Squalo _shuddered_. He downed his glass, hissing
and muttering under his breath, an unintelligible tsunami of words, but with this loud bastard’s
volume it was more akin to whisper-yelling. “Fucking Mists with their f*cked up illusions and
poison and tentacle porn shit, like, oh my god, what is…I don’t even—how can you sleep at night,
voi?! Keep your little crazy mindfuckers—”

Whereas Naruto was content to watch Squalo pacing back and forth and wearing a hole in Baby-
Kabuto’s priceless antique Persian rug as he unraveled into an incoherent, cussing mess, Xanxus
had less patience and even less qualms about employing violence-glutted calming techniques.
Glass-throwing was evidently the Varia-approved method for dealing with psychotic swordsmen
on the verge of having a conniption-fit.

“Quit your bitching, shark trash,” Xanxus rumbled through a yawn, totally unruffled, topping off
another glass without a care in the world for his dripping, raging right-hand man. “I can’t take you
anywhere.”

Infuriated, Squalo pivoted on his heel and glared through whiskey-soaked, glass-littered strands,
pointing an accusing finger at his lounging boss. “Voi! That’s f*cking rich coming from you, shitty
boss!”

What followed was an act more in line with a comedy duo than two mafia hard-asses sniping at
each other with all the screeching viciousness of fishwives, complete with copious amounts of
filthy swearing and wasted whiskey glasses and sword-swinging galore. Finally, after ten minutes
of this ridiculous sideshow, Squalo had enough of being treated like a human glass disposal box
and stormed off in search of stress relief via sparring with Takeshi.

Naruto, who had been sipping at his scotch and playing Jan-ken-pon with Kurama and Inari, came
back to the present, casually picking up the conversation. “You decided yet?”

It was rhetorical. Xanxus wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t made up his mind, they were both aware,
but Xanxus’ low, pleased hum indicated how much he appreciated that Naruto had _asked_ instead of
assuming things for him.

“Old man’s getting treatment at the hospital,” he said, slowly, bitterly, something conflicted in his
manner, in the way he laughed before his next words. “First thing he did when he woke up was call
Sawada and his trash Guardians, then ask for you.”

And Naruto understood, didn’t bother hiding his wince or censoring his views, because what kind
of deadbeat father did that? Seriously.
(Apparently, Timoteo did. Iemitsu’s A-plus parenting made sense now, what with that sort of role model.)

“Shit. That’s gotta hurt. Sorry, man.” Still, he didn’t linger on the sore subject, only raised his glass in a toast. “Here’s to shitty dads.”

Xanxus’ shoulders rose and fell in an I’m-used-to-it kinda way as they clinked their glasses, and damn, if that didn’t twist the knife a little further. “Asshole showed up there looking half-dead.” There was a ruthless sort of satisfaction in Xanxus’ grin when he cocked his head to the side and locked eyes with Naruto. He stared at him, all fire and red, livid scars and quenchless rage, vindicated. “You fucked him up?”

“Sort of?” Naruto made a so-so gesture, huffed a laugh, the soft heat of his bonds simmering under his skin, warming the deep places inside his soul. Gods, but he loved those crazy bastards, even if they were a handful at the best of times. “I got a few hits in, hell yeah, but most of it was my Guardians’ handiwork. Also, kā-san got him good with Take-chan’s baseball bat.”

“Heh.” One of Xanxus’ brows arched in not-quite fascination, but close to getting there, intermixed with hints of amusement and welcome surprise. “From the way that stupid fucker talked about his wife, I didn’t think she had it in her.”

“You’d be surprised,” Naruto retorted dryly, fondness drawing his mouth up at the corners. “She might not look it, but kā-san’s tough as nails, had to be to put up with Iemitsu’s bullshit for sixteen fucking years.” Yeah, his kā-san was pure awesome, and Naruto would beat the everloving shit out of anyone who disagreed, not that Xanxus did, oh no, dude looked like he’d just love to meet her, which was way, way worse.

“So…” He cleared his throat with a short, awkward cough, steering their talk away from the subject of his too-pretty-for-her-own-good mother before Xanxus could get any… ideas, and hell no, over my dead body, dude. You ain’t getting near her without my say-so and, like, maybe Fon there to chaperone the heck out of you. “We good?”

(Let it be known that Naruto might have been blowing things out of proportion, as he was wont to do in similar cases, but he’d rather overreact now than come to regret not nipping whatever-the-hell-this-turned-out-to-be in the bud later. It was still considered rather tame compared to Iemitsu’s reaction after Fon’s petty comments about how Nana-san was delighted to host the Varia for dinner and why, Xanxus-san even offered to hire her as his personal chef after tasting her Filet Mignon with Roquefort and oh, but I am certain he meant nothing unsavory by it, nothing at all.)

“Shark says we have a…‘fucking close working relationship’, ” Xanxus’ red-orange was a scorching mass of possessive instincts, his expression a tangled mesh of emotions, as he repeated Squalo’s words. Bemused, ambivalent about what to make of it, perhaps regretting the circumstances that had facilitated the building of said relationship. “Explain that shit to me.”

And yeah, Naruto could understand where Xanxus was coming from, so he didn’t hold the man’s reservations against him. The Varia was Xanxus’, like Konoha was Naruto’s. Even if the world ended tomorrow, nothing would change that singular truth—not death, not distance, not the passage of time, and sure as hell not some bullshit frozen prison.

“Well, it’s quite simple,” he began, choosing his words carefully, but earnest and smiling brightly and open about his intentions all the same. “We supply you with our fūinjutsu merchandise, you keep Vongola off our back, and that’s pretty much it. Oh, there’s the Chūnin Exams, too, but that’s more like a collaboration between Konoha, Gesso, and Giglio Nero. Gesso’s hosting it this year, so you gotta talk to Ran-chan about the details.” Here, his smile slipped off his face, replaced by a
tight grimace, features pinched and a little queasy. “Word of advice, if he mentions anything about marshmallow sticky death traps, you just say no. Last year, we lost six poor souls during the Second Task…” A dead, haunted whisper, a sound of gagging horror, and something spooked, disgusted. “…they drowned in sugar.”

Xanxus’ eyes had grown marginally wide, alarmed, but not overly so, as if he couldn’t decide whether Naruto was screwing with him or legit traumatized by the morbid shit he’d witnessed. For the sake of his sanity—and his stomach—Naruto prayed he’d never have to experience such horrors up close and personal like he had when he was obligated to retrieve the bodies from their nauseatingly syrupy graves. Ugh, so much syrup…Kotetsu and Izumo were crazy motherfuckers…

Washing down the memories with the strong taste of whiskey, Naruto regained his smile, his indomitable cheer, and wrapped up his impassioned come-to-the-dark-side-son-we-have-seals speech. “I don’t see why anything has to change just ‘cause you’re taking over. Squalo’s still gonna be our liaison, right?”

Xanxus’ reply wasn’t immediate, and when he did answer, it wasn’t what Naruto had asked. “So you really aren’t interested…” Voice strangely charged, filled with quiet realization, he exhaled a breath. Heavy, relieved.

“Nope.” Naruto grinned, free and fearless and uncompromising, the points of his incisors peeking through his grin. “I’m cool with the Varia, but I’m not selling shit to Vongola ‘til you clean house. Oh, and if I were you, I’d start with CEDEF.”

A dip of his chin, wordless gratitude. Finishing his last drink, Xanxus rose then. He turned to leave with slow, measured steps, but stopped when he was beside Naruto, gazed down at him. “How sure are you those scums did Fede in?”

Crimson flashed as their eyes connected, like melted blood, like hellfire.

“Pretty damn sure,” Naruto said, mouth unsmiling, a straight, grim line. “You’ve got your work cut out for you. Good luck, man.”

(It would have been a badass exit…if only Xanxus hadn’t been forced to make a detour to the training area to collect his wayward Rain. Naruto’s camera worked overtime when Squalo had to be dragged away mid-spar—we’re leaving right the fuck now, shark trash—cursing and slashing all the way out—fuck off, shitty boss, I was having fun—decimating Training Ground Three in the process. Fortunately, Wizard-Kakuzu always paid good money for blackmail evidence, even if the haggling had to be done through Shamal because the feel of Naruto’s fire-chakra made him wanna go curl up and cry his eyes out in a dark corner somewhere far, far away.)

Naruto clicked his tongue, barely biting back a taunt, when the barrel of a gun was rudely shoved under his chin the moment he stepped foot inside Timoteo’s private hospital room.

“Ah, Tsunayoshi-kun.” Timoteo smiled from where he lay on the hospital bed, looking frail and carrying the shadow of a man who’d narrowly escaped death, as if greeting estranged underage relatives with lethal weaponry was the norm in the reality he lived in. “It is good to see you.”

Unimpressed by this cheap power-play, Naruto didn’t smile back, only peered into Timoteo’s eyes with harsh honesty, disregarding the press of cold metal against his jugular. “Yeah, wish I could say the same, old man.”

The proud owner of the deadly instrument was just as unimpressed with Naruto’s refreshing
“Watch that impudent mouth of yours, brat,” No-Chill growled, pushing Naruto back, all deep wrinkles and admittedly impeccable mustache and standard intimidation bullshit tricks. “That’s Vongola Nono you’re speaking to.”

This time, Naruto did smile, his smile colder than the steel digging into his throat and twice as lethal. Timoteo, being more diplomatic in nature and probably forewarned by his well-honed kekkei genkai, must have realized that blood would be spilled if he didn’t rein in his guard dog in the next five seconds. His smile became strained as he bade No-Chill to stand down with one placating wave of his hand.

“Thank you, Coyote, but that is quite enough.” At the firm reprimand in Timoteo’s voice, No-Chill dropped Naruto and stepped away, but wisely didn’t holster his gun, not that it’d avail him much if Naruto decided to become...creative. Timoteo seemed to know that, too, because he hurried to send No-Chill out before his stupidity landed him in the room next to his. “Now, if you don’t mind, I would like to speak with Tsunayoshi-kun in private.”

Once No-Chill had left, with one last glare in Naruto’s direction for good measure, Timoteo’s smile mellowed again. Clasping his hands in his lap, Timoteo’s gaze trailed over the contours of Naruto’s face, brimming with hope and a light touch of wonder. Naruto could tell he wasn’t seeing him, but the likeness of Ieyasu in him. When he spoke, it was with the gentle, but calculated words of someone well-versed in dealing with the aftermath of a political nightmare.

(And Naruto would know. He’d used the same tactics on the Hyūga and the Inuzuka clans whenever they had a tiff about who should lead the Tracking Division, which happened like, twice a year without exception. Tsume would argue that he was being sweet on the Hyūga because they were his in-laws. Hiashi would counter-argue that he was being strict on the Hyūga because they were his in-laws. Naruto would pretend to listen and nod here and there until he could crawl back home and beg Hinata to handle her side of the family and spare him half the work. In the end, Kakashi-sensei would somehow involve himself by playing the ever-helpful predecessor card—ha! Helpful, Naruto’s ass!—and suggest the Aburame clan should lead and—let’s just say Naruto would spend the remaining time fantasizing about killing his bastard of a sensei while everyone bickered like a bunch of self-entitled brats.)

“I’ve been informed that I have you to thank for liberating me from my son’s...ill treatment.”

Naruto chewed on the inside of his lip to halt his initial response that basically amounted to no shit, old man. “No need for thanks. I didn’t do much, honestly. If ya wanna give thanks to someone, Squalo’s the one who talked sense into Xanxus.” A split-second pause, mouth twitching. “Him, and Chivas Regal,” he then amended.

Timoteo chuckled softly. “Yes, I, too, have found that alcohol does tend to quell Xanxus’ temper during family quarrels.”

Huh. Family quarrels. That’s what you’re gonna go with here? Un-fucking-believable. Lids falling shut, Naruto inhaled through his nose, reminding himself to keep his temper in check. When he lifted his lids, Timoteo was regarding him with sunken eyes and barely concealed apprehension. “You really made a mess of things, old man.”

“I am well aware,” he acquiesced quickly, perhaps too easily. “I handled the situation rather poorly, but it was never my intention to slight my son. I wish I could have explained things better.”

“When?” Naruto didn’t think his question was misleading or complicated, but the guarded stare he
received prompted him to elaborate. “I mean, when exactly do you think it all went wrong? When you took him off the streets and gave him your name? When you let him believe he was your own flesh and blood? When you put him in ice for confronting you with the ugly truth?” With every question that spilled from his throat, Timoteo fought harder and harder not to avert his eyes, until he eventually lost the battle, his gaze turning downcast and tracing the age spots on the back of his clasped hands. Suppressing a sigh, Naruto gave up on this line of questioning and asked something else instead, something less cruel, less painful. “Were you ever gonna tell him if he hadn’t found out by himself?”

In the quiet that had enveloped the hospital room, Timoteo’s voice rang thin, quivery, laden with tears. “I had hoped that day would never come.”

Another sigh filled Naruto’s lungs, and he released it with a deep exhalation. “That’s what I figured.”

“You must understand, Tsunayoshi-kun.” Strength entered Timoteo’s voice as he raised his head and looked at him, lashes damp with unshed tears, eyes like dying flames. “No matter what Xanxus believes or what is written on his birth certificate, he is my son. He will always be my son, and I love him—I loved all of my sons. Losing them so suddenly, one after the other…it tore at my heart.”

And to that, Naruto had no answer, other than, “I’m not the one you should be telling that.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Timoteo nodded with a watery smile, then reached for his handkerchief, dabbing at the corners of his eyes. Naruto leaned his back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest, and waited until the old man had gathered himself. “Regardless,” Timoteo said soon enough, placing his handkerchief upon the nightstand near his reading glasses, significantly more composed and less prone to tearful outbursts, “please allow me to apologize for the trouble my son has caused you.”

Oi. The fuck? Your son? Are you kidding me, old man? What about the trouble you caused me, huh? Naruto’s expression went stone-cold at the same time as Kurama’s chakra burned hotter than an inferno. The duality, the sheer magnitude of raw, underlying emotion, its complete absence from Naruto’s face—they all rendered Timoteo speechless, almost breathless. “No need for apologies either. It’s kinda late for those, old man.”

I still say we should kill him with fire, the fox proposed, inspecting his claws, as if they were discussing how to best cook tonight’s dinner. Flambé appeared to be the winning choice, with rotisserie coming in second place.

We’re in a public place filled with innocent patients, Naruto pointed out, quite logically, only to be stumped by Kurama’s equally logical quip.

We’ll wait until he’s discharged.

Maybe.

“Yes, Iemitsu—” Timoteo started to say, but faltered as the mere mention of Naruto’s useless father made the air crackle with tension, what little oxygen was left in the atmosphere burned up as fuel for the roaring fire. “—might have mentioned something similar.” His chest hollowed as he drew breath in, then expanded as he let it out, and Naruto had to give the old man props for not calling it quits right then and there. “Tell me, Tsunayoshi-kun,” he began anew in a tone that someone naive would mistake for reasonable, but was in truth full of implacable command, “what will it take for you to accept your inheritance?”
Oh, I dunno, lemme think. Brainwashing? Time traveling? Rewriting reality? Naruto settled for scoffing. “Yeah, no. That ship sailed years ago. ‘Sides, you’ve already got an heir. How I see it, you can either give Xanxus what’s rightfully his, or you can put it to the vote and let Vongola decide who they want to follow. Oh, and if you want my opinion, I vote for Squalo all the way. Dude’s made for the job, seriously.”

By the end of Naruto’s tirade, Timoteo’s mouth had been agape, once more bereft of words. He blinked once, tried to wrap his mind around the insanity that had come out of Naruto’s mouth, succeeding in looking dazed and confused and somewhat constipated. “I…am afraid that is…not how things are done.”

The smile that hung on Naruto’s lips was fucking angelic, if angels came equipped with razor-sharp fangs and red-slit eyes and emanating malice like a sieve, that was. “Not. My. Fucking. Problem.”

“Tsunayoshi-kun—”

“No, you listen to me, old man. I didn’t come here to debate politics with you. I’m not playing your games. Never have, never will. Vongola’s not my family. You made that crystal clear when you chose to seal my Flames instead of taking me in.”

“I—”

“Yeah, yeah, you regret that, yadda, yadda, I get it. Problem is, like I told Iemitsu, I don’t give afuck. Figure out your shit with Xanxus and then get the hell out of my territory. Sooner rather than later, yeah?”

“Wait—”

“Glad we had this talk. See ya never, old man.”

(On his way out, No-Chill made the grievous error of attempting to pump him full of lead. Good thing the private room next to Timoteo’s was currently unoccupied, and, well…the hospital could do with some extra funds, anyway. The things Naruto did for the prosperity of Namimori’s community.)
Chapter 35

Vongola was quickly getting on Naruto’s last nerve.

It wasn’t the incessant, vexing badgering about how you have a duty to the family, Tsunayoshi-kun and please give me another chance, tuna fishie and this isn’t over, brat, mark my words. It wasn’t Timoteo’s desperate pleas and honeyed words and tired, sorrowful eyes. It wasn’t his useless father’s stalkerish ways and begging Nana to take his sorry ass back and messing with Plant-Hamlet’s slow deprogramming. It wasn’t No-Chill’s pathetic attempts to show him who was the real boss of his family or die trying. It wasn’t even Xanxus’ daily raiding of his booze stash and eating Naruto out of house and home and angrily flirting his way in his mother’s good graces. It was just… They wouldn’t leave. By now, Naruto had half a mind to kick them out of Namimori and forever wash his hands off of Vongola and screw the consequences.

Moreover, Mukuro, that uncute little shit, kept tempting Naruto with conveniently-timed suggestions of indigo fire-chakra mindfuckery and puppet ruling in conjunction with Kurama’s burn-them-all ravings and Kyōya’s bite-them-to-death impulses. It was all very Game of Thrones-like, Mafia Edition.

In the midst of all that crazy, Naruto could be excused for not taking it seriously when one fine Tuesday afternoon Byakuran suddenly lost his shit and started screaming his head off about alternate dimensions, future apocalyptic fuck ups, world-subjugating megalomaniacs, and new marshmallow flavors. Baby-Chief, on the other hand, treated Byakuran’s temporary descent into madness like he did every other time that brat displayed alarming signs of mental instability. Very Seriously™.

(It took the combined efforts of all his Mists and Wizard-Kakuzu and Aria’s Mare ring to stabilize Byakuran before his mind fractured beyond recovery and he permanently joined the exclusive ranks of the criminally insane warlords of the universe, right next to the likes of Emperor Palpatine. Naruto was never, ever, again going to doubt Baby-Chief’s flawlessly accurate Byakuran-crazy-o-meter. That shit was right up there with his super intuition.)

The whole family was gathered in the living room, minus the little kids (Fūta, I-pin, and Lambo) but including Nana, who had been the most upset over Byakuran’s condition and was now mothering him like nobody’s business, all soft, cooing sighs and petting his hair and stuffing him full of freshly-baked marshmallow delicacies, which had the brat literally eating out of her hand.

Naruto smothered a snort. Brat more than deserved it after his recent, harrowing ordeal, but if he didn’t slow down soon, the only thing certain in his future’d be the inevitable, painful trip to the dentist. “How’re you feelin’, Ran-chan?”

Byakuran grinned around a mouthful of marshmallow cake, cheeks puffed out and smeared with white, sugary fluff. “My brain’s not melting anymore!”

Laughter and eye-rolls followed his enthusiastic response. It was just so Byakuran that Naruto couldn’t help but ruffle the brat’s hair and try to wipe his face clean, though without much success since he never actually stopped stuffing his face.

“Awesome.” Naruto grinned back, glad the brat’s messy manners and usual, carefree disposition hadn’t been affected by whatever meltdown he’d suffered, then gestured to the eager, curious faces all around them with a tilt of his head. “D’you wanna share with the class?”
Byakuran’s head bobbed, a flickering, deranged light in his eyes, proof that he hadn’t escaped totally unscathed. “Sure! Um, lessee, there’s another me and he wants to destroy the world! Or rule it? No, that’s not right either—aha! World peace, yes, that’s his ultimate goal!” Leaning forward in his seat, he pitched his voice lower, as if sharing a deep, dark secret, and there was something childishly cruel and amused layering his words despite how mature he made it sound. “I don’t think anyone’s ever told him how to do it, though, sooo... he kinda sucks at it. Like, big time.”

And oh, there was the epic clusterfuck Naruto had been half-expecting to fall into his lap, because why the hell not, a Nagato-inspired Byakuran with dimension-traveling superpowers was just what the world needed, and dammit, why is it always world-endingfuckery in the name of peace? Just once couldn’t it have been in the name of, I dunno, sharing the ramen love? Is that too much to ask for?

**I knew I liked this kit for a reason.**

Kurama’s grin was sly and burgeoning with pride. Naruto eyed him dubiously.

*Since when did you like Nagato?*

**Do not speak to me of that wretched copy of Father**, the fox snarled, red fire-chakra bubbling up and seething with hatred, tails slashing through the heated air. *And don’t put words in my mouth. I like the kit’s ambition.* And the fanged grin was back, slier, prouder than ever. *Eradicating humanity is a worthy goal to have.*

Naruto’s stare turned into one of profound pity and oh, you, poor misguided fool that the fuzzball instantly mistrusted. *I think you’re mistaking peace for genocide, but no worries! It’s an easy mistake to correct.* Old Man Rikudō’s kids, present company included, tend to have that in common. I’ve only met one who knew that crucial difference, and I’m not sure Hashirama even counts since I’m supposed to be his transmigration or something, anyway. Asura’s, too, come to think of it.

**I hope the alternate kit guts you.** Kurama growled and, with another slash of his tails, forcefully evicted him.

When all Byakuran’s rant-y bullshit explanation did was to elicit confusion and wide-eyed stares and jaws dropping, Naruto sighed. “Maybe you should start from the beginning?”

Byakuran, too, made a sigh-like noise, something between whining and huffing and why you gotta mess with my mojo, dude. “Oh, alright,” he nodded, somewhat sullenly, but perked up as soon as he got going. “Well, there’s this thing I can do now which I didn’t know I could do before, but it’s super fun! Basically, I can interact with alternate versions of myself and learn all sorts of useful things from their worlds, like, science stuff and advanced medicine and—well, you get what I mean. Thing is, even though I know better and wouldn’t abuse this power for evil, I’m not the only one who can do it.”

Contrary to Byakuran’s elated mood at the endless possibilities his new power afforded him, everyone else’s plummeted as they realized what that meant for their future. Except Baby-Kabuto and his cadre of science-obsessed brats—for some unfathomable reason, they looked ecstatic and struck by inspiration and a million other terrifying things that Naruto didn’t dare to name, and gods, who was he kidding, the world might really end at this rate regardless of Byakuran’s evil twin’s mad marshmallow ambitions.

*(Dark wings, dark words,* Kurama quipped, cackling, keeping up with the Game of Thrones theme
that’d been prevalent these past few days. Damn furball just had to have the last word.

*Just...just shut up, Naruto ground out, kneading his temples, thoroughly fed up.)*

“—thought he could take over the world and make it better, so that’s what he’s been doing ever since,” Byakuran was saying, heedless of their paling complexions, their despairing groans, the way they buried their faces in their hands and shook their heads and wished he would just. Stop. Talking. “Only, it didn’t quite work out like he’d planned... Alternate me didn’t account for Yuni-chan’s martyr thing, y’know? So far, he’s destroyed countless worlds—actually, I think the only worlds he hasn’t taken over are his and ours. It’s honestly quite boring just watching him do the same thing over and over...”

A hush fell over the living room once Byakuran finished his futuristic tale of world domination, parallel dimensions, marshmallow dictators, hapless adolescent resistance fighters, and time traveling shenanigans. Naruto lifted his head from his folded arms and, when nobody else was brave enough to break the gloomy silence, cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention.

“So, to sum up,” he began, with a calm he wasn’t feeling, like, at all. “My alternate self is the biggest wimp to ever live and got suckerized into being Vongola’s bitch, Shō-chan somehow got a hold of the Bovino’s bullshit bazooka and decided to fuck with the future for fun and profit, Ran-chan’s got an evil twin who’s hell-bent on world domination, only he isn’t just your garden variety psycho with delusions of grandeur, but a dimension-hopping, mass-murdering psycho with the power to destroy all of creation if something isn’t done to stop him, and the only ones who stand between him and total annihilation are a bunch of half-trained brats who are way, way in over their heads.” He paused, thought back on Byakuran’s many, many revelations, then added with false cheer, “Oh, and all that happened ‘cause Shō-chan dreamed of being the John Lennon of his generation.”

That was apparently Shōichi’s cue to have his delayed epic freak out, all the previous science-induced glee fleeing from his mind at the speed of light. “I—I’m sorry!” He flailed, sinking to his knees and wrapping his arms around his waist, olive-green eyes huge and teary behind his glasses, as if he were Atlas reborn and he’d just utterly failed at his primordial duty of carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders. “Oh, gods, I’m so, so sorry! I swear, I didn’t mean—what was he even thinking? I can’t believe—ugh, my stomach hurts...”

Unbidden, Naruto’s lips twitched upwards. Shōichi’s over-the-top reaction was just what everyone needed to get out of their funk and regain their wits. Before another of his kids had a mental breakdown, Naruto pulled him up from where he lay flopping on the floor like a fish out of water, clapping him on the back, and smiled at the poor, distressed boy, his comforting smile. “Oi, Shō-chan, just relax, ‘kay? Nobody here’s holding the actions of your alternate self against you.”

Or that was what Naruto had assumed. Spanner, it seemed, disagreed. Right as Shōichi was beginning to calm down, Spanner stood up and took Naruto’s place, clapping both hands on Shōichi’s shoulders, staring into his science bro’s eyes with an uncharacteristically somber expression.

“Shōichi,” he drawled out the boy’s name in tones scarily similar to Baby-Chief when the zombie-baby was passing judgment for some heinous crime, “I’m very disappointed in you. I don’t understand why you’d go for the starving street musician trope when there’s Vocaloid—”

“Oh, my god, Spanner!” Shōichi wailed when he made sense of what he was actually being accused of. “That’s not the issue here! Don’t you understand how serious this—”
Chuckling, Naruto flicked them on the forehead and raised his voice, ending that ridiculous argument, although the mulish crease between Spanner’s brows betrayed it wasn’t settled yet, only shelved to be revisited at a later time. “Okay, focus, people! Any ideas?”

His gaze sought each and every one, receiving blank stares and pondering silences and helpless shrugs, until—

“Perhaps,” Fon hummed softly, thoughtfully, “we should give Alternate Tsunayoshi the benefit of the doubt and allow him the chance to defeat Alternate Byakuran. He may be an alternate version of yourself, but he is still…you. He cannot be that much of a coward.”

Shamal sniggered, mumbling something that sounded like oh, you’ve no idea, and Naruto hid a wince. From what he’d seen and heard so far, it wasn’t the poor kid’s fault that he was a shrinking violet afraid of his own damn shadow, but it still galled him that any version of himself would let Espresso-Maniac, of all the annoying bastards who walked god’s green earth, run roughshod over his life.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Fon. Normally, I’d have been inclined to agree with you, but—oi, Ero-ossan, quit it with your sniggering! Do me a favor and share some of Ran-chan’s memories, will ya?”

There was a tingling sensation at the forefront of Naruto’s thoughts that bore the signature of Shamal’s indigo fire-chakra, then an assorted film of memories flashing through his mind—the familiar faces of his brats fighting enemies and allies alike, sometimes winning but always by the skin of their teeth, sometimes losing and crushed by feelings of inadequacy, the not-so-familiar face of his alternate self panicking over the smallest hiccup, lots of explosions and underneath-the-underneath tests and high-pitched, undignified hies.

Naruto shared some similarities with this hot mess of a brat, like their refusal to lead Vongola and uncanny ability to attract crazy kids and penchant for adopting all the things in their path, but their respective personalities and approach to life were as different as night and day. And as for firepower, well…everyone here had first row seats to the disaster that was waiting to happen if they followed Fon’s suggestion. He wasn’t weak, per se, kid sure had potential, like, ten years down the road, maybe, if he didn’t shuffle off this mortal coil in some sort of freak accident during Espresso-Maniac’s training first.

“Oh, dear.” Flummoxed, Fon blinked, picking up his teacup and gazing into its shallow depths as if it held the answers to life’s great mysteries. “That…is not good.”

“Ara, Tsu-kun. My, he’s so cute!” Nana giggled, quite taken by the brat’s…fluffiness, but Naruto could tell that she also felt disquieted at her alternate self’s gross negligence and air-headed manner. “Is that…really you?”

“That…” Kyōya didn’t so much speak as snarl his denial and, true to form, didn’t waste time rejecting any relation between Naruto and his alternate self, just as he had done for himself and his great-uncle for most of his life. “…is not sensei.”

“Our continued existence depends on that child?” Hana’s thin brows had hiked up so high on her forehead that Zabuza would have been green with envy. “Ugh, crazy.”

“Kufufu.” Mukuro, of course, found this entire situation supremely entertaining, because that was the sadistic little shit’s grand purpose in life—creepily laughing at people’s misfortune while secretly planning their tragic demise with the added bonus of reaping whatever benefits there were to be had on the sly. “Now, isn’t that interesting?”
“Shodai-sama…he—you—that—!” Hayato had worked himself into a frenzy, torn between passionately decrying that weak-willed impostor, reassuring Naruto that fear not, Shodai-sama, I’ll never accept him, and slipping into some kind of Highlander-esque rage with an ominous cry of there can only be one. “Who the hell is that?”

Kyōko, Haru, and Mini-Anko were of the same opinion as his mother, huddled together and gushing over how frickin’ adorable the brat was. Ken and Ryōhei were chomping at the bit to fight their alternate selves and prove their superior battle prowess. Tetsuya and Chikusa were quietly discussing logistics and costs and past damage reports, lamenting the fact that they couldn’t exchange the Kyō duo for the significantly-less-troublesome-and-high-mentainance Alternate Kyōko and Alternate Kyōya. Spanner had picked up that ridiculous argument and was having it out with Shōichi. And Takeshi was laughing at nothing and everything without a care in the whole wide world. Granted, Shamal was laughing, too.

“That…” Naruto dryly encapsulated over the ruckus, ”is Sawada Tsunayoshi, sole remaining Vongola Decimo candidate and the universe’s last hope for survival.”

Silence, and all eyes on him—they just stared, kept staring, eyes vacant and glazed and broadcasting how they thought it all one big cosmic joke, then Shōichi broke out in hysterics as was par for the course with the anxiety-ridden brat. “Oh, gods, we are doomed! I’m so sorry—”

“No, we are not,” that was Baby-Kabuto’s voice, his absolute in-my-lab-I-am-god-and-what-I-say-goes tone, to be precise, and huh, Naruto had been wondering where he’d slipped off all this time, but the open laptop on his knees spoke for itself. “I have been working on several theories that explore inter-dimensional travel ever since Naruto first made mention of it, if you recall, and this recent discovery has provided the missing link.”

Ha! If you recall, he says! As if Naruto could ever forget. Gods, the migraines, the all-nighters spent debating space-time mindfuckery, the incomprehensible technical terms pounded into Naruto’s poor, abused brain, theory after crazy theory after crazier theory. Naruto’s head ached just remembering, and goddammit, give me back my youth, Baby-Kabuto!

Naruto shot him a nasty glare, the kind that said I respect you, dude, but if you do that to me again, I’ll set fire to your precious laptop and then I’ll find your backup server and set it on fire, too. “Meaning?”

Baby-Kabuto, that scary son of a bitch, had the nerve to smirk at him, all shining glasses and triumph. “An anchor,” he all but crowed, swiveling in his chair to fix Byakuran with an intense you-and-I-are-gonna-have-some-fun-breaking-the-laws-of-physics stare, which…oh, well, better him than Naruto. It was for the greater good, really.

Byakuran, who had been ignoring everything after he’d delivered his bullshit news and was halfway into a marshmallow-gorging coma, blinked. “Er, what? Meee? Reeaally?”

“No.” Nodding at his newly acquired test subject, giddy with barely restrained anticipation, Baby-Kabuto tried to explain his theory. And because he was an asshole who feared neither god nor man —there is only science!—he didn’t even have the decency to simplify it for the less educated among them. “I believe it is possible to traverse between dimensions if—”

Naruto’s patience lasted for the Herculean amount of three minutes. “Yeah, alright, we get it!”

Baby-Kabuto’s smirk was telling. Do you really, it mockingly asked. Naruto’s glare was sizzling. No, not really, it snidely retorted, but that’s your job, now isn’t it?
Deep, deep down inside, Naruto was so proud of this sassy side to Baby-Kabuto even if it was at his own expense. *Carry on, Baby-Kabuto, carry on.*

“So!” Clapping his hands together, Naruto observed their excited faces and grinned. It was the same grin he wore every time they embarked on their annual Konoha-Gesso trip. The world had learned to tremble at the mere sight of it. “Who wants to go on an awesome adventure in another dimension, maybe prank our alternate selves, definitely kick the shit out of Ran-chan’s evil twin, and oh, probably save the world while we’re at it?”

Maybe the better question would have been *who didn’t want to go.*

(In another world, for a sliver of a second, Yuni’s eyes shone with lucidity and the long-forgotten feeling of hope. Byakuran dismissed it as a trick of the light. Sawada Tsunayoshi was but a child playing at being a savior. He wasn’t made for war.)
Chapter 36

Baby-Kabuto had kidnapped Byakuran.

Naruto tried not to think of the happenings—read: unspeakable horrors—that were taking place behind the sealed doors of Baby-Kabuto’s private lab in the name of science. Instead, he sent a silent prayer for the brat’s questionable sanity (and maybe his virtue) and occupied himself with thoughts of Scaredy-Cat and his dream team of snot-nosed brats.

As much as it would have made sense to jump right in and take over, Naruto was hesitant on this course of action for one important reason. Scaredy-Cat needed this—needed to be challenged, to strengthen his bonds and unite his family, if he were to ever both grow as a person and a leader of men, to gain perspective through blood, sweat, and tears. Fighting side-by-side with your comrades for the survival of the world against insurmountable odds? Those were the best kind of life lessons, Naruto knew from firsthand experience. They’d done him a world of good when he’d been a snot-nosed brat with dreams larger than life and his mouth writing checks his braggart ass couldn’t cash. It had taken that bastard Sasuke calling him a scaredy-cat after he’d gotten his ass handed to him on their way to Wave for Naruto to man up, get his shit together, and go on to create his nindō. Naruto thought that was exactly what this kid needed.

Oddly enough, when he presented his case once Baby-Kabuto finally emerged from his lab with a mildly-violated-looking Byakuran in dire need of some marshmallow comfort, Espresso-Maniac was the first to voice his agreement. He was also only too happy to substitute for Shamal when the pervert begged off coming on account of being too sexy for your bullshit, Volpe.

Thus it was decided they would aim for arriving somewhere in the middle of this future shit-show.

A month later, Konoha (plus Espresso-Maniac) departed from their world in a flash of light and space-time fuckery.

With one extra passenger.

(Naruto had forgotten how much the universe loved to piss on his party and ruin all his awesome I’m-the-king-of-the-world moments via ear-splitting, blade-swinging, pissed off Sword-Psycho.)

“Holy shit, it actually worked.”

Jaw slack, blinking spots out of his eyes, Naruto shook off his slight disorientation and patted himself down. Body unharmed, check. Clothes intact, check. Equipment working, check. Squalo surviving his last-second mad dash through the portal, check. For an experimental trip through space and time, it had been rather smooth sailing, not much different than traveling through Baby-Chief’s warp holes.

There was a buzzing noise, then Baby-Kabuto’s voice filtered through his earpiece.

“Of course it did.” Undeniably unhinged, part huff, part chortle, all mad science glee and who do you think I am and bow down to my genius. “There seem to be no communication issues on our side. Yours?”

Naruto, who had been busy counting heads while Baby-Kabuto had a mini sciencegasm, chuckled. “Nah, I hear ya loud and clear—just gimme a sec to check if we all made it through. Oi, is
everyone here and in one piece? No missing limbs floating around in outer space or anything? I’m looking at you, Sword-Psycho.”

Squalo put his artificial hand to good use by giving him the middle finger. “Fuck off, Ramen-Trash.”

A chorus of affirmatives came from the majority. Except Kurama. The fox had managed to sleep through the whole thing. Somehow. Despite an overexcited Inari jumping up and down on his ginormous head and doing his best to yip his ear off. Classic furball. Naruto snorted. “Awesome, yeah, we’re all good.”

“Excellent,” Baby-Kabuto hummed, almost absentmindedly, probably still on a science-induced high, the silly bastard.

As everyone gathered their bearings, Naruto took a moment to scan his surroundings in order to determine where exactly they’d landed, frowning when he realized he had no answer besides in another world, duh. “Do you have any idea where the hell are we, though? ‘Cause this area looks nothing like Namimori or any other place we’ve been to.”

“I could consult our maps based on your coordinates—” Another hum, less stoned, more attentive, mixed with the soft tapping of fingertips flying over the keyboard. “—however, given that we do not yet know whether this world’s geography is identical to ours, there is no guarantee they will be accurate. In any case, that is not important at the moment. The feedback I am receiving from the tracking device places Alternate Byakuran’s Flame signature within ten kilometers from your current location. You should focus on that instead.”

“Got it, thanks, man. I’ll get back to you when we find that crazy little shit.”

“Understood. Good luck.”

“Well, kids.” Naruto flared his orange to draw their attention, and when some semblance of order had been achieved, added with a broad grin and a deliberate pause, “And Sword-Psycho.”

The kids snickered. Squalo flipped him off again. Fon was smiling in a way that told Naruto he’d deeply regret lumping him with the kids due to his body’s outward age. Espresso-Maniac, sadly, didn’t rise to the bait—he smirked at Naruto, the lines around his eyes and mouth crinkled, expression grudgingly, exasperatedly fond and pitch-black with humor.

“I should be offended, truly, I should, but I know anything I say in response will be used as ammunition for your horribly uninspired dad jokes, so I will save you from further embarrassment and leave your comeuppance to Fon.”

Hooh. Those are fighting words, dude. Challenge accepted.

“I’ve only got one thing to say.“ Naruto spread his arms wide. A grin made of jagged teeth and pure, destructive chaos bisected his cheeks. “Let’s go save the multiverse and fuck shit up.”

The kids cheered. Squalo cracked a grin worthy of his nickname. Fon’s smile was a soft, deadly promise. Naruto’s stare never disengaged from Espresso-Maniac’s. How’s that for uninspiring, bastard?

Espresso-Maniac’s smirk sharpened as he slowly tipped his fedora. Naruto laughed. Right on, bro.

Finding Evil-Twin turned out to be a cakewalk, what with how he kept pulsing his orange in a
showy come-one-come-all pattern, as if trying to psych out his sworn enemies before engaging in glorious battle, and far be it from Naruto to disappoint him. Naruto understood why the brat was so pumped up once he assessed the situation they’d accidentally stumbled upon from his vantage point atop the tallest skyscraper. Not only was the crazy little brat there, but so were his flower minions, their alternate selves, and bonus spectators, like Prince Charming’s still stupidly pretty future self.

After making sure there were no innocent civilian souls lurking around, hidden somewhere throughout the skyscraper-only city that was their chosen battlefield—ya gonna fight to the death here, like, seriously? You’re gonna be picking glass outta your asses for weeks—Naruto made the universal sign for follow my lead and entered the scene Granny Tsunade style. Like, there was badassery and war cries and raining ninja brats and earth-shattering shit.

“Yo.” Unfurling from his low crouch, he waved at the panicked, bewildered crowd that was all but goggling at them with few exceptions, chief among them Evil-Twin, whose carefully shuttered expression and painfully frozen smile could only be described as oh, shit and why the fuck are you here and I didn’t sign up for this bullshit. Heh. Good to know Konoha’s reputation preceded them even across dimensions. “I hope we aren’t late to the party! ‘Cause, y’know, that’d be pretty embarrassing after we fucked with space and time and broke, like, ten laws of modern physics just to get here.”

They gaped at his manly, handsome mug, at his bloodthirsty, grinning beasties, at the belated so-much-lamer entrance of Fon, Squalo, and Espresso-Maniac as they leisurely strolled through the scattered rubble, and Naruto patted himself on the back. Yep, still got it. Pity he hadn’t accounted for Hayato coughing into his fist with a half-sheepish, half-cheeky smile and opening his damn genius mouth in the next second.

“Er, excuse me, Shodai-sama, I don’t mean to sound impertinent, but…strictly speaking, we didn’t break any new laws of physics since there aren’t any scientifically proven theories that pertain to successful inter-dimensional travel to begin with.”

Oh, come on. Why you gotta choose now of all times to channel the Nidaime, Haya-chan? Don’t get me wrong, I’m so damn proud of your brains, you little prodigy, but…but. Naruto’s face twisted into something conflicted as he resisted the urge to facepalm. “Way to make me sound like an idiot monkey there, Haya-chan, thanks a bunch…”

And oh, there he went with the dogeza and the undying loyalty and the extra-or-nothing apologies. “I humbly beg for your forgiveness, Shodai-sama! To show my repentance, I will create all the laws—”

Meanwhile, Scaredy-Cat was flicking his gaze between Hayato’s rapidly bowing figure and Naruto’s yep-that’s-my-boy face, back and forth, with a commiserating sort of fascinated dread and no small amount of shock racking his skinny frame, pupils blown wide and transfixed, desperately wanting to look away but unable to take his eyes off of this spectacle. Finally, after five minutes of mute-struck staring, his gaze managed to wrench itself away—he whipped his head toward the disturbed-but-also-quite-fascinated Alternate Hayato beside him, all the while screeching and flailing and pulling at his gravity-defying, flufftastic hair. “Gokudera-kun—what—why—how are there two of you? Just, just who are these people?”

“I don’t know, Jūdai, but leave it to me. I will find out for you, don’t you worry about a thing!” Beneath the scowl that furrowed his brows, hope had begun to manifest in Alternate Hayato’s gaze, flushing his cheeks, an incandescent, fanatic gleam usually found in religious zealots, as he straightened his spine and hollered, “Oi, you, the guy that looks like me—just answer me this and
I’ll forgive you for stealing my face, promise! Are you...are you the legendary U.M.A. that can shapeshift—"

Yeah, Naruto got the commiserating thing now. Hayato just wouldn’t be Hayato without his U.M.A. obsession even in the middle of what he perceived to be an alien invasion. Hell, he’d probably cry tears of joy and rave about the honor of having ‘first contact’ or something. Scratch that, he already was.

“Well, well, well…isn’t this a surprise?” Evil-Twin was the first to address Naruto directly, though his tone didn’t match the tight cast of his features. Brat was trying too hard to appear unaffected and on top of his game when it was evident he was anything but. Guess acting skills weren’t covered in the ‘How to Banter with Your Enemies in Five Steps’ manual he’d read. Obito’d be so ashamed. Lids lifting by the slightest margin, lilac eyes slanted and shrewdly analyzing and a little self-deprecating, Evil-Twin let out a strained chuckle. “I must admit, I didn’t expect to ever meet you, but I suppose that was rather…shortsighted of me, no?”

Trying to reassert control over the situation, huh? Now that wouldn’t do. Evil-Twin had a lot to answer for. Naruto figured he’d start with Byakuran’s noble sacrifice in the name of science and go from there. So he beamed and gave that crazy little shit his due. “’lo, Ran-chan’s evil twin. I’ve got a message for you from our Ran-chan. He says, and I quote, ‘if you wanted to be a hero of justice, you should have joined forces with the Vindice instead of playing this boring world domination game. Jack thinks so, too.’ Oh, and if you were wondering, Jack’s his favorite Vindice babysitter.”

At the oh-so-casual Vindice name-dropping, Scaredy-Cat released another screech, whereas Alternate Hayato’s fascination peaked, launching into some sort of conspiracy theory that involved the mafia zombie police, kitsune U.M.A., their dark alliance, insidious plans to subjugate the world via changeling babies, and—wait, hold on. Shit. Hayato was listening and nodding along as if it was the greatest thing he’d ever heard. Naruto… Naruto had a bad feeling. Sage-fucking-dammit, he was so gonna regret this in the future, wasn’t he? Oh, well, not his immediate problem. Shamal could tackle this one when they got back, that’d sure show him for skipping out. Naruto wasn’t shirking his parental duties, nope, just…delegating.


Naruto, one. Evil-Twin, zero. Satisfied, Naruto adopted a mien of faux-curious innocence to screw with Evil-Twin’s increasingly fraying composure and gestured all around them. “So, not to be rude or anything, but is there any particular reason why you’re just sitting around looking dumb and not, I dunno, duking it out while the fate of the world hangs in the balance?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.” Frustration, more diversion tactics, a tick in Evil-Twin’s jaw, a grinding of teeth. “We were about to play a game of Choice before you…crashed the party, as you so charmingly put it. Why don’t you leave us to it and go enjoy what our lovely world has to offer before it comes to an end, hmm? I hear our Japan’s ramen-themed amusement park is to die for.”

It was the wrong thing to say. If Evil-Twin hoped to douse Naruto’s fighting spirit, then it spectacularly backfired on him.

What. What did he just say? Naruto’s mental faculties short-circuited. His heart thumped out an arrhythmic tempo inside his chest. All systems were down. Was this...was this what it felt like when all your dreams were cruelly snatched away just as they were about to come true?

There’s...there’s a ramen-themed amusement park? Praise be to the sweet, merciful gods! No fucking way was Naruto letting him destroy this wonderful, wonderful world. Nuh-uh. Bring it, you evil little shit! I’mma teach you some common fucking decency even if it’s the last thing I’ll do.
Threatening the sanctity of ramen? That’s a declaration of war, believe it! Ready to throw down right then and there, all previous notions of assisting in Scaredy-Cat’s growth taking a backseat, Naruto’s grin underwent a partial jinchūriki transformation, hungry for blood, retribution, and ramen. “For real? Our timing’s great then! Where do we sign up for this thing?”

Evil-Twin might have blanched, but it was kinda hard to notice in all that white. Still, he tried to keep his cool and reconstruct his unflappable *this-is-my-world-and-I-call-the-shots-here* mask. “I’m afraid it’s too late—”

Naruto gave him kudos for staying true to his convictions. Gotta hand it to the brat. Not that it’d spare him the epic beat down Naruto was itching to dole out, but boy, did he have guts. Scaredy-Cat should be taking notes instead of butchering his way through the human voice spectrum, because that was how you do it. In recognition of his bravery, Naruto gave it to him straight. “It’s either that or we can just skip the kiddie prelims and get to the nitty gritty of beating your crazy ass to the next dimension and back. Which would you prefer, huh? *Choice’s* all yours.”

Evil-Twin didn’t seem the type for blunt frankness, but he was apparently all for puns and ultimatums, judging by the startled, delighted snicker he made no attempt of muffling. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

“Ah, I see. Well, in that case, how can I possibly refuse?” A fraction of that shrewd, analytical quality returned to his gaze as he smiled and slyly suggested, “Since you aren’t familiar with the rules of Choice and haven’t had time for preparations, maybe we should postpone it until you’ve been briefed by your…alternate selves? How does three days sound to you?”

*And now you’re stalling, huh?* Naruto could have refused, but where would be the challenge in that? Even if Evil-Twin somehow ascended to Kaguya-level bullshit godhood in that scant period, it wouldn’t make any difference. Plus, it afforded Naruto the time he needed to impart some important life lessons to Scaredy-Cat and Dream Team, so why the hell not?

“Sounds pretty awesome to me. Glad we could come to an understanding. See ya then, Ran-chan’s evil twin!”

After Evil-Twin and his flower minions had vacated the premises, Naruto approached the pack of Vongola brats studying their counterparts with a multitude of expressions, ranging from bafflement to wariness to intrigue, but clearly reluctant to make the first move. Apart from Alternate Hayato and Hayato, that was. Brats didn’t even hesitate to accept each other as their long-lost twin bro, then start talking U.M.A. and obscure myths and mad science and Naruto didn’t want to know what else, if only so he could claim ignorance when shit hit the fan and it exploded in their face.

The rest just stared at their counterparts, separated by an invisible line, one they weren’t willing to cross any time soon. Espresso-Maniac *stared*—he stared at Scaredy-Cat with this stony look of self-flagellation and *how the fuck did this happen* that he distinctly wore whenever he fell for one of the brats’ traps or Naruto’s pranks. Scaredy-Cat stared back, a frisson of fear trailing down his spine, as if he should be very, very afraid of Espresso-Maniac’s close scrutiny, but not quite understanding why. Poor kid hadn’t yet made the connection, had he?

“I am seeing this,” he spoke slowly, still eerily unblinking, “and I still don’t see it.” Glancing at Naruto from the corner of his eye, he mused aloud, mostly to himself, with the sudden clarity of a man who’d just had his whole worldview flipped on its head. “I thought it was bad when you were pretending to be the second coming of Sherlock Holmes, but *this...* I didn’t doubt your word when you claimed your alternate self wasn’t nearly as experienced, but still...*how.*” Here, Espresso-Maniac gave Scaredy-Cat another thorough, critical once-over, while the poor kid quivered in
fearful silence. “There is inexperience…and then there is this.”

“I would also like to know the answer to that question,” a babyish voice cut in with an adorable lisp and a low mutter of among others as Chibi-Espresso-Maniac materialized on top of Scaredy-Cat’s head, x-raying Naruto’s bold, unapologetic stance and drinking in his alternate self’s uncursed form like a parched man lost in the desert by turns.

That got the expected reaction from the up-until-then petrified brat, and damn, if it wasn’t a severe case of textbook Pavlov’s dog.

“Hie! Where did you even come from, Reborn? I thought you were a hologram!”

“You aren’t paying enough attention to your surroundings, Dame Tsuna. We will have to rectify this terrible shortcoming of yours. A mafia boss must always be vigilant and aware of hidden dangers, no matter the situation—”

Which…for fuck’s sake, was there even one single dimension where that asshole could devise a tutoring plan that emphasized balance between positive and negative reinforcement? Naruto pinned Espresso-Maniac with a narrow-eyed glare. “Seriously? That’s the superior teaching method you keep bragging about? The one you wanted me to try on Bo-chan? Damn, now I feel kinda sorry for the Cavallone brat.”

Espresso-Maniac, the unrepentant fucker, appraised Scaredy-Cat’s cowering figure again and shrugged. “It worked for Dino, and it seems to be perfectly tailored to this student’s needs, too.”

While Naruto didn’t much care for his standoffish reply, Scaredy-Cat did.

“What—what are you talking about? And, and who are you? I mean, you sort of look like me, like us, but…but you can’t be us! That’s, uh…that’s insane!”

Wow, kid still hadn’t cottoned on? Or, no, wait. Maybe, Naruto reasoned, he really, really didn’t want to contemplate the possibility of two Espresso-Maniacs, and thus instinctively shied away from the answer staring at him with pitch-black hellish eyes, and yeah, Naruto wouldn’t blame him.

“It should be pretty obvious by now, kid. Hell, Ran-chan’s evil twin confirmed it, what, only ten minutes ago? Don’t tell me you forgot,” he reminded him, not beating about the bush, because the sooner he accepted it, the sooner he could begin to cope. Shamal might swear by denial as a healthy coping mechanism, but not everybody could pull it off with the same long-practiced, helped-by-alcohol ease he did. It took a special kind of person, and so far, denial had only made things worse for Scaredy-Cat.

And speaking of special people… Squalo, with his penchant for ruining moments and even less delicacy than Naruto, could always be counted on to liven up the mood.

“Voi!” he bellowed, taking a habitual sword-swing at a swiftly-backpedaling, shrieking Scaredy-Cat, probably thinking he’d have better chances at playing Stabby McStabby with him than Naruto, all vigor and hair flipping and shit. “Enough of this meet-and-greet bullshit, Ramen-Trash. Where’s my fucking counterpart? I’ve got questions for him!”

“How the fuck should I know, Sword-Psycho? If you wanna meet your alternate self, then go find ‘im yourself. I ain’t your damn keeper, ya know.”

“Tch. Fine, I’ll be back later. Don’t go anywhere without me!”
“Yeah, yeah, have fun.”

And so shouting, Squalo stormed off with one last equally unsuccessful stab at Scaredy-Cat. Kid had top-notch reflexes, Naruto’d give him that. As much fun as this little interlude was though, it still wasn’t enough to distract Naruto from noticing Konoha’s power couple sneaking off, no doubt bored of all the silly staring and heading for some typical Kyô duo bullshit. Heh. Cheeky brats. *You’re a hundred years too early to be tryna pull one over on your awesome sensei, you damn hellions.*

One of Naruto’s brows rose pointedly. “Oi, and where do you think you’re going, lovebirds?”

Kyôko hooked her arm through Kyôya’s, and fuck Naruto’s life, they traded one of *those* glances that seemed to go on forever and emulate weird-ass raptor mating rituals as they simultaneously parted their lips. One, to report their self-appointed mission. The other, to chirp about the bonus perk of said mission.

“On a recon, sensei.”

“On a date, Naruto-sensei!”

Called it. Naruto couldn’t tell who was more disturbed by their lovey-dovey display—Alternate Kyôya, Alternate Kyôko, or Scaredy-Cat. The first was alternating between glaring daggers at his counterpart and Naruto, as if Kyôya had done him an unimaginably, unforgivably grievous injustice by submitting himself to Naruto’s authority, the ferocity of his glare only marred by the on-and-off minuscule frown that screamed: *romance, what is that.* The second’s lips had formed a silent *o* of realization intermingled with an inner war between *this feels so wrong* and *they’re kinda cute together.* And the last had chosen to believe in his ol’ trusty sidekick, a.k.a. Wilful Denial, and curl into a tight ball of misery while chanting *this isn’t real* and *Kyôko-chan and Hibari-san aren’t dating over and over.*

Sighing a *you’ve-got-a-long-way-to-go-kid* sigh, Naruto shook his head. Well, mapping out the terrain wasn’t a bad idea, so. “Alright, just make sure to come back before we leave, yeah? Oh, and bring Kuro-chan and Anko-chan with you, if you happen to find ‘em on your way back.”

Mukuro’s and Mini-Anko’s genjutsu-double-layered clones shot him identical, wickedly cunning smirks before fading out of existence. Naruto, too, smirked, his heart swelling with pride and fierce love. *A hundred years too early, brats, but keep it up. I’ll be waiting for the day you surpass me.*

“Now, where were we again?” he asked to no one in particular.

Ironically, Chibi-Espresso-Maniac *tried* to exploit Naruto’s minute distraction as he internally fawned over his little ducklings to pull one over on him. Pfft. As if *he* could pull it off when Naruto’s awesome ninja kids couldn’t after years of Kakashi-sensei style training. *Keep on dreamin’, man.* “You were about to share the reason Byakuran not only appeared to know of your existence, but was also inexplicably wary of you.”

Rolling his eyes, Naruto snorted with laughter. “Nah, I definitely wasn’t, but nice try, Chibi-Reborn.”

“Chi-chibi-Re-Reborn?” Scaredy-Cat blurted out, stuttering and shaking like a leaf, obviously well-attuned to his mafia tutor’s darkening mood and his kekkei genkai’s warnings, but showing his very first sign of daring by stepping up before Chibi-Espresso-Maniac did something unwise like, pull his nin-chameleon-gun on Naruto for dubbing him thus.

Giving Scaredy-Cat a *good-job-brat* head pat—that hair was so fluffy, it was practically made for
it, seriously—would’ve been counterproductive when the poor kid was still leery of him and easier to spook than a kitten, so Naruto refrained, barely, disguising the involuntary muscle twitch in his arm by shrugging and pointing his thumb in Espresso-Maniac’s direction. “Eh, I can’t be calling him Reborn when our version of him is standing right next to me, now can I? That’ll get confusing real fast.”

“Our version?” Scaredy-Cat ended up blurring again, shock hitting him hard and ridding him of his stuttering as a welcome (probably the only one) side-effect, eyes nearly popping out of his head and terror-stricken, the proof too clear-cut to be denied this time. “Wait, wait, wait, that’s Reborn?”

“Yep,” Naruto nodded, albeit sympathetically, at the same time as Chibi-Espresso-Maniac scoffed, no sympathy whatsoever, “Your observational skills are severely lacking, Dame Tsuna. If you fail to refine them within the next week, you will not like the consequences.”

That was the end of the line for Scaredy-Cat. A shrill, disjointed garble of excuses sprang from his mouth as he gave in to hysteria and despair. “I, um, I didn’t, not really, no, what I mean is…I, er, kind of thought he looked fami—omigodtherestwoRebornshiieee—!” And he fainted.

Alternate Hayato burst into motion with an alarmed cry of Jūdaime! mid-sentence, abandoning his U.M.A. info sharing with Hayato in favor of hurrying to Scaredy-Cat’s aid, then there was another softer cry, and the next thing Naruto knew, he’d been blinded by bright-blue eyes shining with tears and so much relief—

“Padrino!” Breathless, Alternate Yuni jumped onto his chest and glomped him, sobbing into the hollow of his neck. “I knew you’d come for me.”

Ah, shit. You’re breaking my heart here, Yuni-chan. Naruto stroked her hair as he held her close, only stopping when her crying fit had subsided to hiccups and light sniffles.

“Yuni-chan, stay with Uncle Reborn.” Naruto’s mouth curved into a soothing smile, full of reassurances and padrino’s gonna make it alright now, lowering her to the ground and urging her toward Espresso-Maniac’s open arms and warm, healing fire-chakra. For once, Naruto and that asshole were in total sync, exchanging an unspoken, unbreakable promise over Alternate Yuni’s head. “He’ll keep you safe, ‘kay? I gotta have a long nice chat with your daddy ‘bout a father’s responsibility.” A small pause, a concentrated spike of killing intent, eyes flashing blood-red and slit-pupiled. “And stuff.”

Alternate Gamma, who had been watching their interaction with distrustful and a tad envious eyes, froze. “What.”

What? Kurama echoed, yawning, stirring with the call for bloodlust.

Now he’d wake up. Of-fucking-course.

Naruto pinched the bridge of his nose. You’re so late to the party that Kakashi-sensei woulda named you his eternal rival.

What.
Alternate Gamma, who had apparently not fathered Alternate Yuni but was still responsible for her safety, couldn’t understand why Naruto was so pissed at him until he—so done with everyone’s fucking bullshit denial—whipped out the wedding photos.

(And the bachelor party photos. Nothing said ‘crazy-ass alternate reality’ like seeing yourself taking body shots off of a sexy dominatrix with the Lightning Arcobaleno meticulously building a pyramid of glow-in-the-dark jello shots in the background. Even years later, Alternate Gamma still flinched when someone breathed the words ‘jello shots’ within hearing distance. Naruto didn’t think he could do anything worse to that poor fuck, honest.)

A shell-shocked Alternate Gamma had to be carted off to the sick bay after that, but at least his not-daughter was there to keep him company.

“—so here we are!” Naruto grinned at his enraptured audience as he finished his narration of the events that had landed them in Scaredy-Cat’s dimension after they’d all retreated to their super-duper underground base—with some notable absences, i.e. the Kyō duo, Mukuro and Mini-Anko, and Squalo, who were still out there doing only gods knew what. “That’s basically the gist of it, yeah. Any questions?”

“Plenty.” Chibi-Espresso-Maniac was quick to capitalize on the general confusion, while the majority was floundering and struggling to digest the hows and whys of it all, and direct the flow of the conversation to wherever he willed. Never let it be said he couldn’t process information in less time than it took for most people to blink. “For starters, why do you call yourself Naruto?”

Unfortunately for the fedora-baby, Naruto wasn’t among that category. “‘Cause I feel like a Naruto,” he drawled out, grin insufferably smug, following in Kakashi-sensei’s steps and trolling the hell out of him. Espresso-Maniac, who knew damn well how Naruto’s mind worked by now, lowered his fedora over his eyes, hiding his gaze, but not his smirk, and huh, was that an iota of schadenfreude in the low simmer of his fire-chakra? Guess seeing his alternate self also getting owned by Naruto made him feel better about all the times he’d lost their verbal sparring. “Any more questions? Like, intelligent ones?”

Chibi-Espresso-Maniac went rigid, seething quietly, tiny hands balling into fists and nearly ripping fistfuls out of Scaredy-Cat’s hair, which had the poor boy wincing and finally snapping out of his blue-screen-of-death stupor.

“Um, sorry, Na-Naruto-san? Can I, er, ask a question?”

At the resurfacing of the kid’s nervous stutter, Naruto’s grin softened into a lopsided, encouraging smile. “Sure, go ahead, kid.”

Blinking, Scaredy-Cat just stared at him for a long moment, still half-wearing that error-error-does-not-compute look and mouthing something that might have been aren’t we the same age, then marshaled his thoughts and shyly stammered out, “Y-you, uh, you said you’re n-not…not Vongola?”

“Nope,” Naruto inclined his head, emphasizing the word with glee, as he reveled in the glorious memories of beating his refusal into No-Chill’s noggin. Heh. Good times.
Apparently, that wasn’t good enough for Scaredy-Cat. “How?” he blurted out, bewildered and desperate for answers, shock working to his benefit (again) and ridding him of his stutter. “I mean, dad’s still Vongola in your world, right? So…so how did you…”

He trailed off, seeming unable to even fathom the possibility of an alternate version of himself giving Vongola the middle finger and having it stick, much less articulate it, and Naruto took pity on him, completing Scaredy-Cat’s sentence. “How did I end up not inheriting Vongola’s screw ups?” When the poor boy nodded in mute shock, Naruto shrugged. “It’s simple, kid. I just said no.”

Again, that wasn’t enough to satisfy Scaredy-Cat. It appeared that, in his epic quest for a miraculous solution to his Vongola crucible, he’d failed to realize the simple beauty of no. A common mistake, to be sure, one the kid couldn’t be faulted for, especially when being tutored—and Naruto used that term very loosely—by Chibi-Espresso-Maniac, whose dictionary didn’t recognize no as a real word that applied to anyone other than his exalted ass. Case in point, the nin-chameleon-mallet that thwacked Scaredy-Cat on the back of his skull when the kid made to voice his painful truth.

“But…but I’ve been saying no for—hiiee!”

Fed up, Naruto pierced Chibi-Espresso-Maniac with a glare, all reproach and fox-slit eyes and do ya mind, I’m trying to have a conversation here, asshole.

I could silence him for you, Kurama offered, a bizarre mix of offhand and eager, still sorta bummied out that he missed the party.

Naruto eyed the sulking fuzzball wryly. Permanently, I’m guessing?

Silence is golden, the fox sniffed, snout turned up, not averse to resorting to human sayings when it suited his needs, the giant hypocrite. Close enough to yellow, I should think. He likes that obnoxious color.

Somehow, I doubt he’d see it that way, but thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.

Left unsaid was that Naruto’d be using this point in his next Orange-vs-Yellow debate with Espresso-Maniac. Waste not, want not and all that.

Chibi-Espresso-Maniac, either sensing the imminent threat to his life or (more likely) having reached his quota of insults, leaped off Scaredy-Cat’s head and descended on Fon with a barrage of rapid-fire questions and bullets. Bad move, Chibi. Good luck getting answers out of that petty bastard.

“Look, Tsuna-chan. It’s like this.” There was such fervent hope in his doe-eyes, in the brilliant, fiery amber of his iris, that Naruto almost felt bad for what he was about to say. Denial hadn’t helped this kid, though, and it wouldn’t do to leave any room for misinterpretation after they’d come this far. Mincing his words had never been Naruto’s forte, anyway, but he could somewhat gentle his tone, even as he laid it on the poor kid with the delicacy of Gyūki in a china shop. “If ya wanna get any sort of respect in our world, then you gotta back your words with actions. What have you done ‘sides screaming your lungs out, huh? ‘Cause, while that might work in civilized society, it sure as hell ain’t gonna work for the mafia. And in case you haven’t noticed, we might not be Vongola, but we’re still mafia.”

Scaredy-Cat blinked once, fire slowly, agonizingly dying in his gaze, stupefied and devastated and at a loss for words, then blinked again. “I—I don’t… I just don’t understand you. If…if you’re strong enough to say no, then why…” Embers still burned deep in his soul when he mustered his
resolve and looked Naruto straight in the eye. “Why would you want to be mafia when you could have been anything else?” Suddenly, irrationally angry and betrayed and just not understanding.

And, okay, yeah, Naruto did suck at letting people down gently, but he didn’t suck that bad. Puberty was to blame for this…this ugh-I’m-so-misunderstood-what-is-life paroxysm, yep, had to be. “Why not?” he all but sighed. Scaredy-Cat opened and closed his mouth, but before he could open it again and spew out more teenage angst, Naruto cut him off with another sigh. “Listen, kid. Like it or not, we were born in the mafia, and that’s not something you can run away from. More than that, though…eh, how should I put this?” Brows knitted in thought, Naruto paused and examined his options, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck. Words wouldn’t do much good at this point and a picture was worth a thousand words, so. “Tell ya what,” he jerked his head in the direction of his family, “go on, take a long, good look at us, and tell me…what d’you see?”

With a huff, Scaredy-Cat turned his head away to follow Naruto’s instruction, no matter how mutinous, how stubbornly petulant he was in doing so.

Hayato was embroiled in another petty marital spat with Haru, closely mirrored by their alternate selves. Spanner had picked up that ridiculous argument and was having it out with Shōichi and Alternate Shōichi, the latter more than the former, with Alternate Spanner’s lollipop-filled endorsement. Tetsuya and Chikusa had cornered Alternate Kyōya and were grilling him about his average body count and collateral damage and hospital bills per month. (The answer to everything was, quite eloquently, hn.)

Hana was avidly listening to Alternate Kyōko’s ninety-percent-civilian life story with this half-wistful, half-confounded look on her face and muttering how under her breath. Ryōhei was engaged in an extreme-and-extremely-loud boxing match with his counterpart, while off to the side, Ken was howling about how unfair it was that his counterpart was missing and hounding Alternate Mini-Anko to reveal his whereabouts. Takeshi and Alternate Takeshi were immersed in a disturbingly deep, philosophical discussion about their respective life choices under the pretext of a Kendo-vs-Baseball debate, all the while laughing like utter nutters.

Fon was calmly sipping at his Oolong tea and smiling at Chibi-Espresso-Maniac and his dogged pursuit of intel in regards to the Arcobaleno curse. Espresso-Maniac was casually sipping at his coffee and terrorizing the fuck out of Alternate Prince Charming with decidedly more success in his endeavor than his counterpart.

And as he kept watching, Scaredy-Cat’s expression gradually began to shift in something akin to understanding. Lower lip caught between his teeth, wide-eyed and bludgeoned with enlightenment and eye-opener shit, he turned back to meet Naruto’s waiting gaze.

“Family,” he breathed out, a little awestruck, a little humbled. “They’re…they’re your family.”

“Yes,” Naruto beamed, “now you’re getting it.” Reaching out a hand, he ruffled that mess of fluffy spikes, pleased when Scaredy-Cat blushed to the roots of his hair, but didn’t flinch away. Hell, he even managed a slow, shaky smile in return. Attaboy! “It’s the same for you, yeah?”

“And your family, too,” Naruto added. “They’re…they’re your family.”

“Yeah.” He bobbed his chin, smiling, then faltering when he had to dodge one of Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s stray bullets. “I think,” he tagged on, kinda low-key despondent, with a tremble of uncertainty and it’s too late to take it back now, isn’t, and Naruto laughed, giving him a proud good-job-brat head pat.

“Thing is, Tsuna-chan, you’re still growing up, still learning how the world works and what’s your place in it, y’know? There will come a day when you’ll be strong enough to say no and have people listen. And when that happens, your family will be right there beside you, having your back and
stickin’ with ya through thick and thin, and that ain’t something everybody can have in this life. You just gotta hold on ‘til then. Things will get better, I promise, ‘kay?"

Face flushed, hair mussed up and falling into his eyes, Scaredy-Cat peeked up at Naruto and choked out, “O-okay.”

“Okay.” And that was that. His motivational speech done, Naruto let out a sigh as he cracked his neck, slipping into a more action-oriented mindset. “Well, now that all the emotional shit’s over, we gotta set up a training plan. For the sake of simplicity, let’s stick with our alternate selves, yeah? Which means—Tsuna-chan, you’re with me.” Scaredy-Cat’s startled squeak might have been a sign of protest, but it was devoured by the bedlam that broke out after the rising of Naruto’s voice and fire-chakra. “So are your Kyō-chan and Kyōko-chan, oh, and Anko-chan, since ours seem to be…still out on a recon.” And yeah, Naruto tried not to think about that… Much. Eh, whatever. If this world could take Evil-Twin’s bullshit, it could also take his brats’. Probably. But just to be on the safe side… “Oi, Take-chan, Kusa-chan, keep an eye out for your teammates, yeah?”

In a complete turnabout, Takeshi’s cheerful, “Sure thing, sensei!” and Chikusa’s cheerless, “Hai, Naruto-sensei,” got swallowed by Scaredy-Cat’s panicked screech of, “Kyōko-chan? Wha-what do you mean Kyōko-chan? You…you can’t train them!”

A frown lined Naruto’s forehead. “Don’t be doing what I think you’re doin’, kid.” Folding his arms across his chest, Naruto stared Scaredy-Cat down. “Why the hell not?”

“You just…just can’t!” was Scaredy-Cat’s bullshit justification, backed by Alternate Ryōhei booming in solidarity, “You extremely can’t!”

Naruto’s frown deepened. Are you for real, brats? Scaredy-Cat’s and Alternate Ryōhei’s defensive posture said they very much were. Naruto unfolded his arms to wrap them around their shoulders, squeezing tight and keeping them in place by force. “How about we ask what they want, hm?” It wasn’t really a question.

At that, Alternate Kyōko perked up. She’d been watching them in silence, all fluttering lashes and concealed disappointment.

“Eh? I’m not so sure how we can help.” Tapping a finger against her chin, she slanted her head cutely and sought out Alternate Haru’s opinion. “Ne, Haru-chan, do you think we should?”

Alternate Haru chewed on her lip, obviously torn between caving under Scaredy-Cat’s frantic pleas and claiming her independence, but the incentive of learning how to kick ass and take names won out in the end. “Hahi! Haru wants to help, but…Haru doesn’t know how to fight.”

Pretty much how Naruto had expected it would go, yeah. “Alright, change of plans. Hana-chan, Haru-chan, can you—”

Hana didn’t even let him finish his sentence, taking Scaredy-Cat’s no-girls-allowed policy as a personal offense against her gender, despite the fact that Alternate Mini-Anko disproved that theory. “I’ll teach them how to defend themselves.” Her indignation was at its zenith as she huffed and jutted her chin out, hurling all of her disgust at Scaredy-Cat, who cowered and hie’d in fright. “Why they haven’t learned by now is beyond me.”

“Hahi! Leave it to Haru, Naruto-sensei!” Haru was all smiles and purple glitter and magical girl poses. “Haru has extra cute kunoichi outfits they can borrow!”
Naruto laughed. “Awesome. Keep it up, girls.”

He had a real good feeling about this. Scaredy-Cat and Alternate Ryōhei, on the other hand…not so much. Naruto gave them a consolation noogie.

Now, where the hell was Squalo?

Naruto stared down at the panting, bleeding, smoking, bruised mass of flesh that was Alternate Kyōya after two hours of (beating the snot outta him) rigorous training. Scaredy-Cat was worse off, but at least he had the presence of mind to stay down and take a breather on the sly.

“Not bad, brat. You’ve got a good grasp on your chakra for someone who started training in it so late, and you’ve also got decent speed and power behind your hits. Nice!”

Alternate Kyōya was too much of an Uchiha brat not to dignify Naruto’s totally objective assessment with, ‘Hn.”

_end him._ Kurama snarled. _End him now before he can spread his detestable Uchiha seed—_

Naruto carried on as if he’d heard nothing. Nope, there was no Uchiha Grunt™ and no Die Uchiha Spawn Rage™ and definitely no mention of Uchiha baby batter, _ugh, gods-shit-fuck, why me, just kill me now—_

“Now, for your issues. Despite what you might wanna believe, you’re _not_ a one-man army, not yet, at least—trust me, I’d know. You need to learn how to work with others, brat.” Alternate Kyōya expended what little energy remained in his body to roll onto his back, if only to glare up at Naruto through one heavily swollen storm-gray eye and grunt again. It was kinda sad how well-versed in Uchiha-speak Naruto was that he could correctly interpret it as _togetherness is for the weak._ “Oi, don’t give me that look. It’s not a sign of weakness, ya know. We call it _strategy_, and you’d be surprised at what you can accomplish by fighting _smarter_, not harder. I had to learn that lesson, too.”

Dead silence greeted him. Hell, Alternate Kyōya didn’t even grunt, which said a lot about what he thought of Naruto’s heartfelt _your-team-is-your-family_ lesson.

“Don’t believe me, huh? Alright, how’s this then? You come at me with everything you’ve got, and if it’s still not enough, then you do it my way. Which basically means, you work with Tsuna-chan and try to take me down, ‘kay?”

Whereas Alternate Kyōya was thrilled to begin round six, staggering to his feet with a bloody grin, Scaredy-Cat had many, many objections.

“Wha-aat? I—I didn’t agree to this! No, waitwaitwait, I’m not ready!”

Amused, Naruto shot him a glance full of mock-pity and _you can do this, brat._ “Tsuna-chan…you actually do have to fight _harder_. Don’t think I missed all those times you played possum, brat. There’ll be none of that now.”

(Round six ended the same as all previous rounds, of course. Uchiha brat didn’t take that well. Neither did Scaredy-Cat. But, hey, it was the first time they agreed on something. Yay for progress and teamwork and sadistic training regimens. Kakashi-sensei would have been so fucking proud.)

“Hi-Hibari-san, that’s, um…that’s not Naruto-san you’re aiming for—_thatismyfacehiieee!_”
“I see no difference, herbivore.”

“He’s…not entirely wrong, Tsuna-chan. But, for the sake of this training exercise, try and aim for the guy who’s actually kicking your ass, ‘kay, Kyō-chan? There ya go, now you’ve got the right person, see?”

“Hiieee! Hibari-san, watch out! You’re heading straight for my X-Bur—oh my god I’m so sorry! Pleasedontkillme—!”

“…Omnivore.”

“Well…that could’ve gone better, but good job, brats! You just gotta…coordinate better. Don’t worry, you’ll get the timing right next time. Now, c’mon, let’s go again!”

“Wow, we, um—we actually did it. Did you…did you see that, Hibari-san? We got Naruto-san’s jacket!”

“Wao.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, brats! Nice work with that combo! Now all you gotta do is land a solid hit. Shouldn’t be too hard—oi, hold up, the cup ramen I was gonna have for lunch was in that pocket…my precious ramen…”

“We’re going to die, aren’t we? It was nice knowing you, Hibari-san.”

“Hn.”

“That’s the spirit! Nah, no worries, ya ain’t gonna die just yet. You owe me ramen, brats.”

Naruto had been well aware of their silent observer, but since she hadn’t attempted to interfere in his training session, he’d opted for letting her watch until the brats had succumbed to exhaustion and he’d been forced to carry them to the sick bay.

“You’ve had experience in training soldiers,” she remarked as soon as Naruto exited the room, falling into step with him and striking up a conversation as they made their way to the kitchen for a late lunch.

Giving her a subtle once-over out of the corner of his eye, cataloging her strict military poise and the pacifier around her neck, Naruto huffed a laugh. “Yeah, you could say that. Sorry, I didn’t catch your name before.”

“Lal Mirch. I’m with CEDEF.”

Yep, that clinched it. “Oh, right. I remember now. You’re my useless old man’s babysitter.”

A peculiar grimace flickered across her face at Naruto’s description of her primary job. Exasperated, pissed, and perhaps the slightest bit rueful. “Yeah, you could say that. Have we met in your world?”

“Nope. I’ve heard about you, though.” Waggling his brows, grinning from ear-to-ear, Naruto nudged her shoulder with his. “You’re Colonnello’s girl, right? He talks ‘bout you a lot, and I do mean a fucking lot.”
Lal Mirch flushed so hard, that she put Scaredy-Cat to shame. Also shoved him face-first into the kitchen door. “That—that stupid fool! How—how is he?”

Heh. Tsundere. Always fun to tease. Naruto scrubbed a hand down his face to make sure nothing was broken as he opened the door, but eh, no regrets. “I haven’t visited him since before the curse got broken. Last I heard, he was still living it up in Mafia Land. Ya know, same old, same old.”

Lal Mirch nodded, still flustered and in bitch-slap mode, but whatever she meant to say got forestalled by the sole other occupant of the room.

“Yes, about that.” Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s voice dripped with a maddened sort of curiosity as he dragged out the words. “How, exactly, was our curse lifted? My counterpart claims to be unaware of the specifics, only mentioning Checker Face’s involvement, and Fon has been aggravingly tight-lipped on this matter.”

If Chibi-Espresso-Maniac believed he was being all scary and shit, then someone had clearly lied to him. What Naruto heard was an adorable baby lisp and…well, no, that was just it. Go retake Intimidation 101 and come back, dude. Plopping his ass down next to Lal Mirch, Naruto snorted. “Course he has. Did you expect anything else from the grudge-meister?”

“That still doesn’t answer my question.” Pitch-black eyes narrowed, and ‘lo, baby lizard Yoda, still fighting the good fight, I see. “You’re digressing on purpose.”

Leaning back on his chair, Naruto’s gaze darted from Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s face to the nin-chameleon-gun and back again, all sarcasm and casual dismissal and Kakashi-sensei-worthy dickishness. “No, really? I hadn’t noticed, but thanks for pointing it out.”

A suppressed snicker came from Lal Mirch’s side, and Naruto winked at her. Right on cue, she flushed a brilliant crimson, complete with bitch-slapping and still no regrets. Chibi-Espresso-Maniac looked askance for a split second, as if he just couldn’t deal with a face so similar to his student’s not hie-ing every five minutes and dearly wished for things to go back to normal. Scaredy-Cat, that poor ball of fluff, had spoiled him rotten.

Stiltedly, he gripped the brim of his fedora to anchor himself and ground out, “How. Did. It. Happen?”

“Ya know, Chibi-Reborn,” a chuckle, mirth humming low in his throat, and something cold, calculating, “that’s not the way to go ‘bout asking someone for a huge favor.”

Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s face closed off as he finally realized he’d been led into a trap. With only the barest hesitation, the bait too juicy to be ignored, he sprang it. “What do you want?”

(Good thing that Chibi-Espresso-Maniac was like a dog with a bone and couldn’t wait to pounce on Naruto until after he got to know him better. Because, if he had waited, then he’d have known what a fucking bleeding heart Naruto was and called his oh-so-clever bluff.)

“Hmm, lemme think…” Naruto paused, rubbed his chin in an overly exaggerated ssesh-I’m-thinking-deep-thoughts manner, then fixed that little asshole with a long, level look. “How about you not sabotaging Tsuna-chan’s growth by being the World’s Greatest Asshole? Kid’s already got a horde of childhood traumas without you fucking with his self-esteem for shits and giggles.”

Silence, glorious, beautiful silence. Lal Mirch was the first to react—she stood to fill up a plate and gave Naruto a nod of respect as she breezed past him. Chibi-Espresso-Maniac stared at him as the seconds passed by, speechless. Slowly, reluctantly, he canted his head in a nod. “That…can be
It didn’t sound like he knew what, precisely, that entailed, or if he could even pull it off, but it was a start. Espresso-Maniac loathed failure more than anything in the world, the perfectionist bastard, and Naruto had no reason to suspect his counterpart would be any different. It was guaranteed that he would, at the very least, try. And, well…that was all anyone could ask of him, really, so.

“Awesome. I knew you’d see things my way. In that case—wait a sec, hold that thought.”

Naruto tapped his earpiece, accepting the call, and thank the sage, Squalo’s voice bellowed through the line. He had worried for a second there that it’d be his brats calling to bail them out of Vendicare or something—

“Voi! Ramen-Trash!”

“Where the fuck have you been, Sword-Psycho?”

“I followed my counterpart back to the Varia HQ, but that’s not important right now. Your fucking crazy Mist brats showed up here and kidnapped Fran ‘bout three hours ago! My counterpart’s furious and Bel’s out searching for your brats—”

—he spoke too soon, didn’t he? Gods-fucking-dammit, can’t I have one day of peace and quiet? One. Fucking. Day. “Whoa, back up, what? They kidnapped who now?”

“Some Mist brat who’s supposed to be Mammon’s replacement or something. My point is, nobody can actually find ’em, so you better get your ass here and sort this fucking mess out!”

“Fine, just…just let me grab Tsuna-chan and his Kyō-chan first. See ya soon.”
OMFG, people, you won't believe what happened! This story has fanart! No, seriously, I'm not kidding, y'all! There's art made for my crazy fic! It's so, so amazing and I can feel the love in it! Sorry, I'm way too emotional and bursting with excitement, I know, but it's just... I've had a few people hint at making fanart, but nobody has actually done it, and then out of fucking nowhere, I come here to post the new chapter after a week of not visiting the site, and *bam*! This beautiful person who goes by the pseud 'spyriteVestar' here on AO3 surprised me with this utterly charming drawing of Team A. Go check this gorgeous thing out!

Here be the link: [Team Awesome by spyriteVestar](#)

In other news, I hate the sun. Heat strokes ain't fun. *crawls back in my gutter and dies*

Scaredy-Cat took the news of their impending visit to the Varia HQ with minimal fuss—read: a mild panic attack—mostly thanks to his exhaustion and Alternate Kyōya’s contribution by way of tonfas and lectures on how-to-omnivore. In contrast, Chibi-Espresso-Maniac took it far worse, as it served to stall his quest for answers, and would have insisted on coming along, if not for Evil-Twin’s nasty radiation bullshit. Naruto’d be lying if he said he didn’t find this whole kidnapping crisis amusing. Guess every cloud had a silver lining.

Finally, two hours after Squalo’s damn phone call, Naruto walked out of the underground Vongola base, a still-mildly-panicked Scaredy-Cat and an irritable, nap-deprived Alternate Kyōya in tow, destination clear in his mind and holding back laughter as he stole one last glance at Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s expression. If that wasn’t a resting murder face, Naruto didn’t know what was.

*(A mirror could have told him. All he had to do was look into one several hours later.)*

Naturally, Naruto never made it to the Varia HQ on schedule. Also, it stopped being amusing halfway there. Chibi-Espresso-Maniac’s resting murder face had nothing on Naruto’s, and Scaredy-Cat would vouch for it when he was all out of *hies*.

Of course, with Naruto’s luck, his crazy brats had to be in the process of planning the most epic jailbreak in the history of epic jailbreaks when Naruto inadvertently caught up with them on his way to the Varia HQ.

Naruto really should have known better than to dismiss his scarily infallible, asshole-ish super intuition. *Breaking into Vendicare? Seriously, brats? Kuro-chan, you sly little shit, no more chocolate for you.*

Naruto stood outside Vendicare’s black massive gates, in the midst of snow, snow, and oh, more goddamn snow, in the ass end of nowhere, more commonly known as ‘somewhere in the flipping Alps’. Before him, a gaggle of brats was arrayed in two separate groups, all unapologetic and shit,
self-satisfied smirks and creepy murder-laughter everywhere. Behind him, Scaredy-Cat was hunched into himself next to Alternate Kyōya, nothing but shivers and chattering teeth, either freezing his balls off or creeped out by the laughing echoes, though it was probably an even mixture of both. Uchiha brat had defaulted to murderous scowling the second he had caught sight of Mukuro, and only the crushing pressure of Naruto’s chakra had kept his berserker blood at bay.

“So, let me get this straight.” Naruto’s voice was a low, rumbling baritone, his face that of the beleaguered father who had no more patience for his kids’ bullshit, but also couldn’t help but be so fucking proud of the chaos they brought upon the world with every breath they took. Gods, he needed a stiff drink. That asshole Xanxus had better share some of the good stuff. Or else. “While you were…out on a recon, Kuro-chan’s counterpart, who, by the way, wasn’t switched by the Bovino’s bullshit bazooka, communicated with you via his latest possessed meat-suit and sent you off to recruit Wonder-Frog boy, so you could bust him out of Vendicare. Along the way, you also just happened to stumble across Kusa-chan’s and Ken-chan’s counterparts, oh, and Miss Gold-digger Choco-Girl over there, who were in the middle of trying to break into Vendicare for the same reason. Just out of curiosity, did it occur to you, at any point during this epic ‘Free Pineapple’ journey, to inform the Varia of the circumstances behind Fran-chan’s kidnapping incident?”

Mukuro and Mini-Anko affected a guilty, sorta pouty, kinda sheepish, oops-my-hand-slipped look that resembled Lambo’s each time he’d been caught with his hand in the grape candy jar, not that they fooled anyone, but Naruto gave them a seven out of ten for sheer effort and for managing to creep Scaredy-Cat out and piss Alternate Kyōya off to infinity.

Alternate Ken and Alternate Chikusa leveled him with untrusting, hostile, who-the-fuck-put-you-in-charge, go-away-and-leave-us-to-our-jailbreaking-business glares. Choco-Girl defended her gold-digger ways and her obsessive love for Alternate Mukuro in between criticizing Naruto’s fashion sense, because orange was apparently too prison-like for her tastes and not something one should wear when attempting an actual jailbreak.

Wonder-Frog just stared at him, deadpan, then after an indeterminate amount of silent staring expressed his interest in joining their yōkai clan, asking what were the trials one had to undertake in order to be declared ‘kitsune-friend’ and if, unlike Varia’s initiation test, one could choose the nature of their inner yōkai identity, because he’d always felt more like a toad than a frog, also deadpan.

Right then and there, Naruto changed the boy’s nickname from Wonder-Frog to Gama-chan and vowed to have words with Alternate Squalo and the tiara-brat’s counterpart for their gross mislabeling in Fukasaku-jī’s place. That shit just wasn’t right, man. A toad was a toad was a toad. The end.

All Naruto could say was, “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Rolling with the crazy, he sighed and made for the Mordor-like gates. “Well, alright. Let’s go and try to negotiate with the Vindice for Muku-chan’s conditional release, ‘kay?”

His brats’ pouting took on genuine colors at Naruto’s adult approach, and Naruto made a mental note to keep an eye on them in Vendicare in case they decided to instigate a prison fight out of boredom. Or something. Gama-chan mistook this as one of the aforementioned trials and tried to prove his worth to Naruto’s clan by reciting relevant excerpts from a twelve-volume treatise on criminal law, supposedly published by Baby-Chief himself during the nineteenth century, though Naruto had serious doubts about the original text having been written in Pig Latin. Alternate Chikusa, Alternate Ken, and Choco-Girl eyed Naruto as if he were the one with the crazy plan here, but nobody dared object—apart from Scaredy-Cat’s token protest in the screeching form of ne-negotiate? What—what do you mean negotiate? You can’t negotiate with the Vindice!
Alternate Kyōya, who had graduated from the Bruce Willis’ Negotiation Institute, was more than willing to teach him proper negotiation etiquette, if the way he span his tonfas was anything to go by. So was Mukuro, who promptly buried both brats under a metric fuck-ton of snow, smiling that innocent smile of his and throwing some mocking quip about needing to cool their heads off, which…yeah, awesome demonstration of rule number one: *Keep it cool and open a can of whoop-ass.*

Thus began the most violent, homicidal snowball fight slash negotiation lesson Naruto’d ever witnessed. As he fished a half-frozen Scaredy-Cat out of his makeshift bolthole, Naruto sighed and prayed for patience. Xanxus’ booze collection had better be worth it.

(Although, Naruto privately admitted, Gama-chan’s running commentary of the action almost made this whole kidnapping crisis worth it. Brat was hilarious, like, an unholy fusion of Sai and Samui, with a tiny bit of Uzumaki charm thrown into the mix to make him likeable instead of a mouthy little jackass, what with his deadpan delivery and bold-faced satire and conjectures about the mating habits of bird yōkai and pineapple slime monsters, definitely prime kidnap material. If the Varia hadn’t gotten to him first, Naruto might’ve been tempted to pull a Fon and adopt the little brat when they got home just for the entertainment value alone. Oh, and because toads were cool, believe it.)

“Yo, Jager, my man. Glad to see you’re still alive…ish and kicking. Is Bermuda in?”

Still tall, dark, and creepy, but showing no recognition beyond a fleeting glance over at Scaredy-Cat, Alternate Jager stared. Grinning, Naruto stared back and waited. Without any sort of acknowledgement, Alternate Jager turned around and escorted them to Alternate Baby-Chief’s rather Spartan office. His brats took one look at the bare walls, the utilitarian desk, the shelves overflowing with reports and criminal records, and Naruto just knew there was no way this office wouldn’t get redecorated by the time their visit was over. Byakuran wasn’t here to do it himself, so it fell to them to brighten up the zombie-baby’s dreary domain. Whether Alternate Baby-Chief appreciated their initiative or not was a whole other matter, but eh, details.

While Alternate Baby-Chief was busy scrutinizing Scaredy-Cat, Naruto flashed them a subtle thumbs up, receiving matching devious smirks in return and an image of Alternate Baby-Chief’s new-and-improved office. There was lots of orange. And photos from their annual trips around the globe. ‘Nuff said.

“Sawada Tsunayoshi.” Scaredy-Cat almost jumped a foot into the air, a near soundless hie tumbling out of his throat, but stood his ground and met the zombie-baby’s (bandaged) stare head-on, which earned him that signature head slant and an ounce of regal, feline curiosity. Some things remained the same in every universe, it seemed. “We have had sporadic contact, and yet I can tell you seem different than last we met.”

Nervous, fidgeting, hands tugging at the edge of his belt, Scaredy-Cat ducked his head and chanced an imploring glance at Naruto, conveying what do I do and omigod please help and holy crap, is he scary. Gaining confidence from Naruto’s you-can-do-this-brat nod, he raised his head and offered a small, confused smile. “A-ah, thank…you…?”

*Short and simple. Nice going, kid. We’ll make a leader out of you in no time.* Scaredy-Cat’s shoulders sagged when Alternate Baby-Chief’s stare left his twitchy face to focus on Naruto, boneless relief exploding from his body with a far more audible sigh, but whatever. Baby steps.

“You…” A pause, another cat-like slant of his head, longer, deeper. “I have never made the acquaintance of.”
Unfazed, Naruto beamed at the zombie-baby. “Perceptive as always, Bermuda. Long story short, I’m not this dimension’s Sawada Tsunayoshi, just, y’know, visiting…and stuff.” Still beaming, but trying not to come off as too eager, he shrugged his shoulders and casually put forward, “To avoid misunderstandings, you can call me Naruto.”

If Naruto had been unfazed by the zombie-baby’s cold appraisal, it was nothing compared to Alternate Baby-Chief’s deathless propriety and fondness for using someone’s full name even when given permission to discard formalities. “What do you seek in Vendicare, Sawada Tsunayoshi not of this world?”

Well, damn. It was worth a try, anyway. “Straight to the point, huh? I always liked that about you, Bermuda—” The air around Alternate Baby-Chief became colder, chains rattling and black fire-chakra writhing under his cloak and ominous shit like that, and Naruto hurried to add, “—san.” Thank the sage, it appeased the zombie-baby. Somewhat. Not taking it personally, Naruto powered on through. “I hear you’ve got Rokudo Mukuro stashed somewhere around here. Tsuna-chan kinda needs him to defeat Ran-chan’s evil twin, so.”

At Naruto’s sideways, pointed stare—because Alternate Mukuro was his responsibility, dammit, no ifs, ands, or buts about it—Scaredy-Cat came alive, squeaking and stammering and completely forgetting Alternate Kyōya’s negotiation lessons. “P-please, um… B-Bermuda-san.”

This kid… So much work to do, so little time. Shaking his head, Naruto took over, because if he let Scaredy-Cat handle it, he’d somehow muck it all up and find himself in the cell adjacent to Alternate Mukuro’s for the rest of his life. “You have heard about the whole Vongola vs. Millefiore thing, right? End of the world and all that?”

There was an icy layer of mirth coating Alternate Baby-Chief’s aura as he watched Scaredy-Cat squirm under his scrutiny, but all traces of it vanished the moment Naruto posed that question. “We are aware of the recent feud, ja.” Voice like pure hoarfrost, unforgiving.

Oh. Shit. Touchy subject, huh? Naruto didn’t want to touch that, honest, but he couldn’t not ask, if only to confirm his suspicions concerning the Vindice’s neutrality. “Mind if I ask why you haven’t interfered yet?”

And oh, there was the I-cannot-decide-if-you-are-an-idiot-or-a-genius cat-like head slant Naruto was so used to getting from his Baby-Chief. “Perhaps I have misjudged you, Sawada Tsunayoshi not of this world.” The look on his face—damn, were bandages always this expressive? Seriously, how?—revealed that yes, he very much minded, as did his scathing comeback. “You appear to possess knowledge that this Sawada Tsunayoshi lacks. Do not ask inane questions lest you wish for your intelligence to be called into question as well.”

So, Evil-Twin’s nasty radiation bullshit didn’t affect only the current Arcobaleno. Copy that. Fuck that shit. One more reason to beat his scrawny ass to the next dimension. Despite the zombie-baby’s frostbite-inducing reply, Naruto’s smile was an upturn of rich warmth, a heartfelt promise. “Sorry, man. Just had to be sure, ya know? Don’t worry, we’ll fix this mess.”

Alternate Baby-Chief, of-fucking-course, had to go and ruin their moment with his morbid sense of humor. “I shan’t hold my breath.”

Naruto’s expression went flat as a pancake. You don’t breathe, Baby-Chief. “So, about Muku-chan’s freedom issue.”

“I will agree to release the criminal known as Rokudo Mukuro in Vongola’s custody, on the condition that you will personally escort him to Vendicare, so as to resume serving the remainder
of his sentence, once this feud has reached its end, regardless of whose side claims victory.”

On the whole, it was a fair deal, and just what he’d come to expect from any version of Baby-Chief. After thinking it through, Naruto nodded and went ahead with his counter-offer, for Scaredy-Cat’s sake, because the poor kid wasn’t in any condition to be making demands on the Vindice, at least not now (perhaps not ever, but Naruto had to have faith in his student or nobody else would). “Only if ya promise to talk with Tsuna-chan then. He’ll probably wanna renegotiate for Muku-chan’s permanent release or something.”

And, miracle of miracles, Scaredy-Cat manned up and copied Naruto’s nod, albeit with less self-assurance and this omigod-please-help-me look plastered on his face, when the zombie-baby chose to include him in the sealing of the deal as he droned, officious and frosty and final, “We have an accord, Sawada Tsunayoshi.”

(When Alternate Jager returned to escort them to Alternate Mukuro’s cell per the zombie-baby’s instruction, Scaredy-Cat had retreated into a thousand-yard stare, following along blindly and stumbling through the hallways as they went down, down, down—

Eh, he’d snap out of it soon…ish. Hopefully. Dealing with the living dead built character. Lesson learned.)

Once Alternate Mukuro had been retrieved, Alternate Jager had tossed them out in the snow and slammed the gates in their face, unceremoniously and without preamble, as if to say good riddance and never darken our door again. Ah. Alternate Baby-Chief must have discovered the…colorful…changes, and not cared for his office’s new aesthetic appeal. At all. Scaredy-Cat would need some supplementary lessons in diplomacy, i.e. sucking up and networking, before he approached the zombie-baby in the future.

While brushing snow off of his hair and shoulders, Naruto took the time to study the tall, lithe form of Alternate Mukuro in his fetching prison garb, a drab, washed out gray that really brought out his eyes, if Choco-Girl’s love-struck exclamations were to be believed. So much for her unparalleled fashion sense.

“’lo, Muku-chan. You caused me a fuck-ton of trouble, brat.”

Alternate Mukuro tied his weird-ass hair back in a low ponytail, caught his eyes and smiled. Like, you-don’t-say and was-it-hard-to-think-up-that-line and I-live-to-make-your-life-miserable smiled. “I’m sure you’re used to it.”

Hoo. Talk about being resilient. Even spending the better part of a decade locked up in Vendicare hadn’t cured that little shit of his uncuteness. Naruto snorted and did the adult thing again, because if he got into a verbal spat with the uncute brat, they’d never leave this frozen wasteland. “You got that right, but enough about me. Let’s talk about you making amends, yeah? Starting with an apology to the Varia for kidnapping Gama-chan.”

(That was what had happened, yep. Naruto’s brats hadn’t taken advantage of this unique opportunity to wreak havoc, nope. That was the official version, and nobody could prove otherwise. Naruto dared them to try.)

Alternate Mukuro’s smile didn’t falter, though the slight stiffening of his spine was another story. Something complex, multifaceted, passed through his gaze—displeasure, affront, disgust, attachment, a sense of entitlement and deep, old-festering loathing. “He was my apprentice first. I don’t see why I have to give him up just because the Varia has taken a similar liking to him. He’s
better off not getting mixed with the dregs of society.”

As opposed to an exemplary pillar of society like yourself? Oi, brat, don’t tell me you’re…jealous? In all honesty, Naruto shouldn’t have been surprised. Mukuro was a possessive little shit, but he was usually less callous and more shameless in his affections. Also way, way less bitter. Naruto chalked that up to those Estraneo mad scientist fuckers. He hadn’t asked (and he wouldn’t), but his gut feeling told him nobody’d rescued this Mukuro. It still didn’t excuse his behavior toward Gama-chan.

Somebody had to put that little shit in his place, and it obviously wouldn’t be Scaredy-Cat, not with the way he was stealing glances at Alternate Mukuro, all wariness and reliving past traumas and shit, as if the guy was one step away from giving in to his serial-killer inclinations and going off on a merry murder spree across the Alps.

Naruto crossed his arms and stared at the pair, unimpressed, although for different reasons in each case. “And that makes him your property?”

It was the last word Naruto managed to get in edgewise. Inspired by Naruto’s defense, Gama-chan took it upon himself to showcase why he was Alternate Mukuro’s star pupil, how to snark in perfect deadpan, and the best way to set off homicidal pineapples, and wow, this shit was comedy gold. Naruto now understood why Byakuran had slipped him ten packs of buttered popcorn marshmallows ‘for the road’.

“I’m not getting a tattoo that says ‘Property of Pineapple Head’ on my left butt cheek, Master. It’s vulgar, like your face.”

“Be silent, apprentice, or I will make that frog-shaped monstrosity a permanent part of your physiology.”

“Bel-senpai made me wear it. Does that mean I have to kiss him if I want to break the spell? Ew. You’re the evilest witch of them all, Master. The most wicked of the pineapple fairies.”

“You haven’t seen evil yet, but if you’re so eager to experience Hell, it will be my pleasure to indulge you.”

“Careful, Master. Your perverse vulgarity is showing. People might misunderstand our relationship —”

We are keeping this brat, yes? Kurama drawled in between loud crunching sounds as he popped marshmallows into his maw by the bucket.

I wish. Naruto wiped an imaginary tear off of the corner of his eye, watching this beautiful disaster, all the while munching on his much smaller pack and feeding Inari. Gama-chan’s like, the gift that keeps on giving.

Scaredy-Cat, though… Kurama and Naruto exchanged a dry stare as that brat tripped, flailed impotently, and inevitably found himself face down on the snow for the third—no, wait, make that fourth time. What the hell? Did he trip on his own frickin’ face? How? Was Prince Charming’s clumsy spell contagious or something?

(It was a long, trippy, freezing-ass cold, fucked-up genjutsu trek down the mountain. On the plus side, Alternate Kyōya seemed to have found a new appreciation for toads and black comedy. Naruto counted it as a win.)
Someone up there (probably the god of order or sanity or shit) must really hate Naruto. There was no other explanation for this.

Naruto stood in the middle of the wreckage that used to be one of Evil-Twin’s secret bases. Around him, human bodies were scattered about every which way, broken and mindfucked and riddled with holes like so much fucking Swiss cheese. In front of him, Kyōya was flicking blood off of his tonfas, face set in contempt and dissatisfaction, while Kyōko was fairy-smiling and daintily sitting on Alternate Belphegor’s back as the tiara-brat struggled against his bonds in all his princely glory. Behind him, Naruto’s entourage was observing the carnage with varying reactions, Scaredy-Cat’s petrified denial and Alternate Kyōya’s frown-y intrigue most prominent among them.

“You know, when I gave you the go ahead to scope out Millefiore and their base of operations, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, brats.” Aware that attempting to reel the Kyō duo in at this point would be an exercise in futility, Naruto gave up and went with the flow. “What number are you on?”

“Seven.” Kyōya’s scoff revealed from where his dissatisfaction stemmed. Brat had no respect for unworthy opponents, especially when they wasted his time with empty boasts of their fighting prowess. No wonder ninety percent of the moaning bodies were missing their front teeth, and thus their ability of speech.

“I’m still on my fifth, but only because I was…delayed.” Kyōko pouted and petted Alternate Belphegor’s ridiculous hair, and if that wasn’t indicative of the depths of her dismay, then the fact that she gleefully stole his precious crown amid his hissing threats certainly was. “Bel-kun was attacking this base when I arrived at the scene. At the rate he was going, there wouldn’t have been any targets left for interrogation, so I was forced to incapacitate him.”

Alternate Belphegor snapped his teeth at her when Kyōko brought her tiara-twirling hand dangerously close to his face. “You will bleed for this, elf witch.”

Before Kyōya could interpret this gesture as a challenge on his mating claim—which, he sure as fuck would, and dammit, Kurama, this animal kingdom thing is all your fault, your wandering days are over, believe it—he cleared his throat. “I get it, Kyōko-chan, I really do. You’ve every right to be pissed that he got in your way, but do you think you could maybe untie him now that—”

Naruto never got to finish, because Gama-chan struck again, only this time he took it a step further and went all Shakespeare on the tiara-brat’s ass. Also, no way was his ad-lib performance totally spontaneous. Was he taking lessons from this world’s Plant-Hamlet or rehearsing this theater bullshit in the mirror every morning or what?

“You should address her royal elfiness, the High Queen of Summer, with the respect she is due to her station, Bel-senpai. Or she will feed you to her hounds.”

“And you… I found you at long last, Froggie. You will regret forcing the Prince to search for your peasant self.”

“O Fake Prince of Knives, heed my words. Confess your sins, repent for your crimes. ‘Tis mighty foolish of you to proclaim your false royalty in her majestic presence. The Summer Queen sees all. The Summer Queen knows all.”

“What is this nonsense, Froggie? Are you away with the fairies again? The Prince warned you not to consume every strange mushroom you find because you think they’re pretty.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Bel-senpai, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. ‘Tis
not I who lives in a world of make-believe. Do not lay the blame for your pathological need to lie on poor, innocent fungi.”

By this point, Kyōko had fallen half in love with the cheeky brat, which was bad, very, very bad, indeed, because—

“Kyōya-kun.”

“Kyōko.”

“We are keeping him.”

—yeah, that. Naruto’d need gallons of brain bleach to erase that image from his poor, violated memory. Forget the Sunset of Youth genjutsu flashbacks. A Gai-and-Lee routine with blatant sexual vibes was just… _Holy fucking shit, this is just wrong! Gods, someone, anyone, please, say something—_

Thank fuck, Scaredy-Cat’s voice box regained some of its lost function in the next second, though not all of it, unfortunately. “Kyōko-chan, you, uh…you can’t just—he’s Varia!”

Locked in a heated stare-off with Kyōya, rainbows and blooming flowers and fucking nymphs dancing naked in the background, Kyōko, for better or for worse, emulated the other half of her parentage in response. “Hm? Did you say something, Tsuna-kun?”

Scaredy-Cat’s voice box malfunctioned again. Alternate Kyōya’s brows drew apart in a smooth expression that signified deep, instinctive, animalistic understanding. The part of Naruto that still prayed for divine intervention died inside of him. The god of order or sanity or whatever could go fuck itself. Booze was the only divine spirit he believed in, anyway.

Naruto’d probably come to regret his decision to green-light his brats’ self-appointed mission and allow the destruction of Evil-Twin’s bases to continue, but that was a concern for a later time. (Or never, but he wasn’t counting on being that lucky.) All he cared for at the moment was that his brats had graciously agreed to join forces with Scaredy-Cat and provide him with practical lessons in the art of aggressive negotiation. Alternate Kyōya was all over that. So was Alternate Mukuro. And Alternate Belphegor. Actually, the sole objection came from Scaredy-Cat, who persisted in being the odd man out and whose fledgling nindō was shaping up to be: _I will never take my reality for granted._

And that was how Naruto arrived at the Varia HQ, blissfully alone and _more_ late than Kakashi-sensei on a bad hair day, strolled through the entrance and hollered, “Yo! Anybody home?”

Squalo, who was in the middle of _something_ with his counterpart (that, for some reason, involved comparing the tail length of their fire-chakra sharks—_nope, not gonna ask, not for all the money in the world_), cursed in apparent defeat and scowled at him. “Voi! You finally got here, Ramen-Trash! Took you long enough.”

“Yeah, I had to do some pit stops on the way here and collect my brats, but we finally made it.” Understatement of the century, and Squalo seemed to know it, too.

“I don’t want to know,” he all but spat, bolting across the room, as if being in close proximity to Naruto would somehow lead to a memory transfer.

Naruto lacked the energy for anything more demonstrative than a wry twitch of brows and lips.
“Wise of you,” he deadpanned, and huh, would you look at that, Gama-chan was rubbing off on him. He should return the favor and teach the brat some Uzumaki-style mannerisms, y’know, for diversity. “So, here’s the deal. Gama-chan’s gonna spend some time with us—”

Alternate Squalo had kept silent until now, eyeballing Naruto with the air of someone inspecting an extraterrestrial life form, which was jarringly abnormal and kinda throwing Naruto off, but this… he could not abide. “Voi! I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, trash, and I don’t care to know, but you’re not fucking kidnapping him again. Fran is ours.”

“I never said he wasn’t.” Fed up with all the constant interruptions today, Naruto concluded that two could play the who’s-the-bigger-asshole game and edited his original (vastly more detailed) synopsis to, “Look, some shit happened and now Gama-chan thinks Kyōko-chan’s his fairy godmother or something, alright?”

Squalo nodded to himself, as if his hunch had just been validated, and poured them all a glass of scotch. Fucking finally! I’ve been waiting all day for this. You’re good people, Sword-Psycho. Alternate Squalo just gazed at him, mouth agape, flabbergasted.

A blink. “What.”

“Yeah,” Naruto exhaled a breath as he savored his drink, “that happened.”

Another blink. “How?”

Squalo’s gaze connected with Naruto’s, totally on the same wavelength, then they shrugged and said in unison, “Same way it always does?”

All that came out of Alternate Squalo’s gaping mouth was, “Voi. How the fuck do you deal with this bullshit?”

The million dollar question, yeah. Again in unison, this time with raised glasses for emphasis, “Booze. Lots and lots of booze.”

Speaking of which. “Oi, Sword-Psycho.” Naruto slashed him with a glare, blood-drenched and listen, man, ‘cause I’ll only say this once. “Tell that fucker Xanxus he owes me—”

“I owe you what, scum?”

Oh, for the love of—what is it with rude assholes cutting me off everywhere I go? Like, what the fuck, Batman? Did you lie in wait and time this shit just to mess with me? All petty grudges, no matter how trivial, awoke with a vengeance and accumulated, swelling through his veins, as Naruto fixed his blood-red glare on that fucker. “You? Nothing yet. Your counterpart? Sixteen bottles of whiskey, eight bottles of wine, four bottles of bourbon, one bottle of tequila, and my mother’s purity.”

Alternate Xanxus’ hand froze in midair as the rim of the glass was about to touch his lips. “Your mother?” Then, because it evidently bore repeating, “Your mother. Wait, isn’t she Sawada’s wife? The fuck?” He stared at the whiskey in his glass with this numb sort of betrayal, the are-you-for-real unmistakable in his tone, then at Naruto, whose glare was blazing with abso-fucking-lutely, ‘ttebayo.

Alternate Xanxus threw the offending glass at Alternate Squalo’s head and drank straight from the bottle. For the first time since Naruto had met him, that bastard missed. Then again, Squalo never had it in him to actually dodge, so. One whiskey-soaked Sword-Psycho was as good as another.
(Of the many lessons Naruto had to impart today, this one definitely stuck: *Don’t screw around with people’s mothers*. Now, if Espresso-Maniac could also take the hint, that’d be golden.)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!