Light up the Sky

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Summary

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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 gonna 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 regeneration.

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. So 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 wuvves 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 kinda 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 the 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 down to it. 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—*

But 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-ok 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, you 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, anddespaired for 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, and oh, gods, why me? *This was Sasuke’s bane—*

*An Uchiha-exclusive curse bestowed upon that despicable clan for the sins of their fathers. 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 legend, 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?

*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 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 in 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 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 much—some days he just wanted to die and take everyone with him—but Nana's smiles weren't like that. Nobody could be this absent-minded, 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 bosatsu. 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 reversed, 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, You suck at genjutsu. But because he was also a big softie—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.
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 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 lieu 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 sensei, his friends, his predecessors, the ideals he'd promised to uphold when he took the hat, and the Will of Fire.

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 jibed. 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 the Kyūbi no Yōko, 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 tabloid talk shows again, haven't you?* 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 television 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.
Chapter 5

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 unsettling when something kept warning him off at every corner during his mother's weekly supermarket runs. From dark alleys, to construction sites, to heavy traffic, 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, isn'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 was *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. *The old man is 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 times.*

*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 because 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 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 toward 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 orange fiery 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 appalled 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 an ingrained fear of orange, skin red and blotchy, and an 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 against it. 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 life, Kurama shook his head. *Try it out for a couple months, and if you can't deal with kids, then send a shadow clone to school and henge into 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 and your friends and your village and your old life. And that's fine. You're allowed to miss them. But it's not really living, is it?*

That was the heart of the matter, wasn't it? Sheepishly, Naruto rubbed the back of his neck, peeking 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 funk.*
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 hoped 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 cinched 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 kid'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, curt 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, the 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 grace 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 world view 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 kid 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 kid 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 have 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.

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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, 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 minute 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 he took out some bandages and antiseptic cream—he always carried half the pharmacy with him thanks to Kyōya's...overeagerness, the 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.

"Onī-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, and 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's 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 Kyōya'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, my friend and I train together. If you want to help your brother, why don't you learn how to fight, too? 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 cliché 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 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-war, 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 at the spot the kids were sitting at. "See them? 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 civilian-born kid."

Takeshi snorted with laughter, but he seemed quietly 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-war—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 next 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 turned back and came straight at him. Then it turned into a kid. He caught one glimpse at the kid's silvery-white hair and coal 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 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.

The 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 good, long 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 to practice this afternoon," was out of his mouth before he could stop it. 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!"
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 back in Konoha.

Takeshi might have 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 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 in the eye, gaze keen and assessing, delving, 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. Killer to killer, 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.

Now Kyōko, that little angel, started the Doom of Vongola as Naruto would later dub it—and what Kyōko started, Kyōya, that 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 his mind, break his body, ruin his reputation, and rob him blind.

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.

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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. Wants. 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 skills and threat assessment, 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. The girl must have realized they were not playing the ninja game as the teachers and half the parents were inclined to believe. The 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 between Shizune and Ino. Great with adults, terrible with kids. Her tongue was sharper than 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 fucking paperwork. Tetsuya, Naruto decided right then and there, was a kami-given gift.

He grinned at the kid, 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.)

The kid 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.
"My...relative wants to meet you, sensei. To enquire about your qualifications."

Naruto was aware of Kyōya's 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, slanted eyes and a face so similar to Kyōya's that it was 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 more grumbled 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-dish 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 in 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 solid 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 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 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? Whoa, 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 did 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 about 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."

"His 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 would never let this go. Still, he could maybe postpone it? Yeah, stalling, great tactic, let's go with that. "Look, Kyō-chan, can we talk about this later?"

Eyes fever-bright, Kyōya gave him a curt nod, then went 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."

"Great." 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, that 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." Sitting down beside the man, Naruto tilted his head toward the kids. 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 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 in his smile, but all the same pleased. "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, 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 kinda 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. 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 dissipating 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'm not one to beat around 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."

"Alright." 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 body augmentation.

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 offence 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 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 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 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 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 have 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
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/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.

The sweet grandmas were delighted to have help with their gardens—and grandbabies, and lost pets, and grocery shopping—the little 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 the little brats 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.

The 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 toward 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 casually sitting 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 is not 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 surreptitious, 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 about that thing around your neck. What
can you tell me about the 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 I'mma 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 tabloid talk shows. But now's not the time, Kurama.*

"Whatever you're thinking of doing is going to work. It's why I'm 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 silence. 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 the Vongola? It *is* a famiglia, yeah?"

Now this appeared 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's not too keen on talking about the family business when he's home."

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

"Well, Vongola's down three heirs by now, so he might have to soon." Brows knitted, she licked her lips, probably debating where to start. "Enrico was shot to death a couple 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. Plus, Nono's been gutting them these past few years, 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's not 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." But for the first time, 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 wasn't 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, the contract arrived with the added bonus of tickets for 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 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 the kids 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. The little brats had them pegged, too, silently exchanging coded messages and debating about 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 stretched cheeks and mischief 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 deserts. 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 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 kinda 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-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 the kids.

"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 on 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 FAMILGIA IS ATTEMPTING AN 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 IS 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 the kids' bloodthirsty little grins at the opportunity of unfettered destruction, and decided, "We'll help."

Colonnello's eyes trailed from his face to the 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 was gonna 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.

"CO-COLONNELLO-SE-SENPAI? WHAT—WHAT A SURPRISE, I—I DIDN'T SEE YOU THERE! LE-LET'S NOT BE HASTY!"

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 through with an exasperated sigh. "...yeah, I've got nothing."

Undeterred, the punk-panda-baby all but got in his face. "And who's this? Friend of yours?"

"Not really," Naruto drawled, 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 the brats. That was fair, right? Right. "Say, is that your famiglia?"

"Hm?" Skull tilted his head toward 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've got a yearly contract with them." Wringing his hands, the punk-panda-
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 see his teeth grinding, but eh, the guy was an asshole, so. He nodded at Skull, humor ing 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 what—?" His eyes almost popped out of his head at the sight of the brats' beautiful seaside annihilation. "What the hell? Are those...freaking 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 on his hair. The 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 eyes, and just a tad 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. One week, three days, nine hours, forty minutes, twelve seconds later (and counting), 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 in 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 above 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 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. But the next killer-baby to show up with a nin-
animal was dead meat. May god 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 in 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 her stomach. "Alright, Kyō—" A puppy growl, and yeah, that right there was more proof Namimori didn't know jack, 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, but 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 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 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 whoa, 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 down 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 into 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 boogeyman 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 burnburnbuuurn._ Inwardly, Naruto sweat-dropped, 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 traps and listen.

"Got any more complaints? No? Great! So here's what will happen. You'll arrest these 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 fucking 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. Capisci?"

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, a.k.a. 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 was _no nin-animal_ 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.)

—and finished with, "The Estraneo famiglia is hereby found guilty of illegal human experimentation and sentenced to permanent incarceration in Vendicare."
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 kinda stunt the zombie-baby was gonna pull. "You, Vongola Sky child. What is your name?"

Oh. Shit. Baby-chief was old enough to remember Ieyasu? 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 zombiefied killer-baby. "And you are?"

It might have been his dramatic one-eighty, 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 sort of regal, 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 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 toward 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
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 gonna be a regular thing now? Ducklings come 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/or controlled substances.

Team C for Circus was...something 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. She 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...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 stock 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 stalkerish fanboyism.

"—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 a copious amount 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 the 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 the sword-psycho's rage quicker 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 see why his brat had fixated on him now.

"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—" The 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, it gets kinda boring after a while even if I can never beat him..."

At this point, Takeshi stopped to breathe. The 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!

The 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, 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 'cause you want a spar! Fuck, did nobody tell you not to follow strangers around? What if I was some fucking pedophile? What then, puppy?"

Heh. The pet name stayed, and so would Takeshi. Give his brats an inch and they'll 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. But the 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 the 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 the 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 gonna own this poor bastard. Once that brat decided the 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 the sword-psycho was waiting for all along. Extending his sword arm, he pointed at 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 his hand down his face while grumbling over the unfairness of the world and the 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, the 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, the 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 the sword-psycho's torn pants, to his own bandaged thigh, Gamma threw it back with interest. "You've got 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.

The sword-psycho scoffed, then turned to leave, but not before messing 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. "Besides, 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 with a scowl, reserved for 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 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 mistrust 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 Vindicare on charges for...public intoxication and indirect violation of the secrecy law?"

The 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, and 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're 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-I'mma-take-a-nap siesta soon. It just wasn't the same with no sarcastic comeback. He needed his partner, dammit.

"Don't know 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. The kid 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 mistrust 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. 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 under 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 himself 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 up. 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.

"I'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 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, before he 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 onto 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/orange fire-chakra combo because he sucked at genjutsu.

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-active 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.

"Not bad, Volpe." 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."

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

"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 tissue 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 sharp-tipped 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 in 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 dreaming, Ero-ossan."

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

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 down 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.)

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 who the tiara-brat had run to. His mind 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 at its center. "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, raspy whisper, writhing with instinctual things, fluctuations in chakra, emotions thrashing 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 did—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.

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Naruto sat on the ground, gazing skyward, 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 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—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 mandarins, _because you can never have enough mandarins, Shamal._ Italy might suck for ramen, but it was awesome for mandarins.

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

Aria waved a hand 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 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 this shitstorm.
"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, mandarins, 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 mandarin while Shamal stared at him as if he had gone mad, the apple heathen. Ugh, why eat apples when you can have mandarins, 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 no, he did not just take his mandarins 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 mandarin 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 until 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 heavenward (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 whoa, his glare sizzled. "Goddamnit, 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, hm?"

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.

"Mm. 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 weary 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 a 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. The 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 with the pervert's straying attention, Naruto put down the notes, 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 precipitated 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 have 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 use 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 they're still learning as you can see." As they watched the kids' battle royale, Naruto pointed at 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 at 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 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 whoa, 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 blurring, 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 cold-blooded 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, though.'

'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 wrist 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 and down, a compulsive, absentminded pattern, a chain of fast, agitated words erupting from his throat. "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—"

"The 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 preadolescent 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 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 spoken, and of course, the whole pack followed. Singed, bruised, grazed, and 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 between Hayato's incomprehensible 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. "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. A tiny fist met the center of his knuckles five seconds later with a crackle of green thunder.

Shamal chuckled. "Only you, Volpe."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, I don't think I've EVER gotten so many wonderful comments in ONE chapter. THANK YOU, you lovable, amazing beings! I'm kinda pressed for time these days, so I can barely find the time to make words, but I PROMISE I will sit my ass down and reply to each and every review once I get some downtime, probably tomorrow or the day after. For now, I give you another chapter. Onward! :))

See the end of the chapter for more 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, that 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 the kids to their respective homes was drag Shamal 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 prone body 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 personality alteration?"

"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 left off.

"It messed her up. Now she's conditioned to ignore anything that might be alarming or dangerous or inexplicable because 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. "These 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 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
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 there was 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 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 had 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 in 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 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 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 you? 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 toward their own pipe. Whatever the girl had expected would greet her, Naruto couldn't guess, 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 no 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 in 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 proud of you, Anko-chan. I know I am."

Mini-Anko pressed her face against his forearm, imprinted her first happy smile on 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
"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 tan 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, that uncute little shit, wanted Mini-Anko on Team C and Hayato was gracious enough to allow it.

(He was kinda 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 along 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, and 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 toward the girls' just-twenty-meters-away picnic. "Do we look like we are in the business of kidnapping random children 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 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."

"H-how?"

Naruto grinned. It was neither nice nor comforting. The kid fainted. Or his appendix ruptured. It was kinda 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 purple 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.

"Hahi! Haru got stolen by a pretty boy. Is he...is he Haru's Prince Charming? Haru thinks he's a little...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 hellspawn 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, ruffling Kyōya's hair. "Good job, Kyō-chan."

Once the whole group had arrived, he shouted, "Teams A and B!"

They gathered like bees to honey. (Hayato and Fairy-girl were still bickering like an old married couple to the side.)

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!" Skipping 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 ran 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, that kami-given gift, bowed his head, respectful and polite as ever, then offered his arm to Hana like a little gentleman and off they went 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 backward 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 of 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, and wow, that drawl of sweet apathy would have 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 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 no one'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, 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 have scarred her for life if she was capable of hearing. Or cognizance.

"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 over 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 hadn't had a sob story that would make Zabuza cry tears of blood, and *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 splitting 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 seven ways to hell. 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, will you?"

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—

"Alright." *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 cleverly 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 moot 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 underappreciated. 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 chlick, 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 displeased."

"Fon."

"Yes?"

"Shut the fuck up and go feed your kid."

Because she was wide awake and mighty hungry if the loud cries 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 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 the touching event in one sentence. "But your chakra likes my chakra."

A baby bottle came hurtling toward 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 scientist 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 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's back, while Fon dipped his head again.

"Good luck. You are a brave man, Shamal."

Shamal snarled, nearly biting off Naruto's hand 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 out 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 look out for."

"But still…mongoose?"

"Don't diss 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 because 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 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, Naruto smiled, wiping imaginary tears from his eyes. "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…easy."
The teams' chosen leaders couldn't have been more…poignant in how they expressed their happiness and determination to succeed while their team members 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 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 kinda numb—Baby-chief decided to put him out of his misery.

"Sawada Tsunayoshi." Syllables elongated, sibilant and excruciatingly scathing, and whoa, 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 gonna 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 about 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."

"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? But, 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 cheek 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 outta him. It was probably caution more 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.

"Yep." 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 mentally 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.

"—like 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? Preeetty pleeeease 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, a.k.a. 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 it, 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 up 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. "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 they were with this kid? "How did you meet them?"

"Well, 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 wanna enlist in the zombie police force, Naruto
patted Angel-boy's 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 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 old 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 inside 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-invoking 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 the 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 breathe 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 world-wide 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."


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-riumbled, 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? Tryin' to 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 taijutsu 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 diss 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 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 shirt collar 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 pricked 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, and hightailed it outta there. "Gotcha, carry on, we'll be going, see ya!"

(Colonnello 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' 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 Colonnello'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?


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!"
"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 room, but found nothing. "And...?"
"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 overlaying the arena, giving him an unlimited view of its steadily arriving occupants, 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 daily 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 slurped 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."

"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. He felt so sorry for the loud bastard, for opening old wounds and picking at them, that he vowed to give Timoteo a piece of his mind when the old man came calling.

"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 crowd 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.

"Voooii. 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 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 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!"

"Ooiii, 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.
Chapter 21

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 come on, you're killing me, man and gimme the good news already, lest the frazzled scientist-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 scientist-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…at 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 two point zero.

"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-jī 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.

Neeeed...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-pupiled, 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 scientist laughter, green fire-chakra sparking in his eyes and on his skin and spilling from his fingertips 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 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.
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 a bit thick, but thank you!"

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 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 dad 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, wearied 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 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?

Not my fault you fell for little mind tricks.
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 enquiring 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_ 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-mortals_ 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."

"Oh, so now you care about insulting each other? Don't make me laugh." "But please do not pretend to understand how heavy—"

Yeah, no. Naruto 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, wearied 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, promise, 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.

"Come on, 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 Vindice 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."
Current ages and teams:

Kyōya, Ryōhei, Tetsuya, Mukuro, Ken, Chikusa, Belphegor: 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
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 unamused 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 the 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.**

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**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.

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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 to his feet, chuckling 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-mortalso-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 his 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 damnit, 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 meee?" 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 wood 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 in his ear. "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."
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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 cutesy 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 on his throne chair, Naruto gazed down at the arena. The Chūnin 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, sword-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 counterintelligence 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?"

"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 tick 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 give 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, eyes narrow, appreciative, all gleaming silver and cutting 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've got 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—holly 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 chauvinist 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
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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-something, 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 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 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 a 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 uncleanness 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 superheros, 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 scientist-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, sword-swinging, pissed off Sword-psycho? Although, that wasn't...quite right. Squalo 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?"

Squalo 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." Squalo 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 mishances 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 got 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 Squall 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, Squall 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 Squall, 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, Squall 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 Squall 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 sensitivities, 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. Nu-huh. No fucking way. He was so going ghostbuster on Ieyasu's ass.

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 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 in 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 civilians?"

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 and 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's 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's 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 from 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 dot cotton of her apron with one hand above her heart, she pouted. "You, 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 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 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 Nanimori 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.

(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 of 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 every thing 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 kä-san will be okay, Tsu-kun. "But there's no need to worry, honey. Everything's going to be alright because kä-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, kä-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. "Kä-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 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, kä-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 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-talker 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."

*Whoa, hold your horses! Hide your womenfolk, men! What the fuck, Al Pacino? Nobody puts the moves on my kā-san! First you gotta gain my approval for that shit! Didn't your mama teach you manners? Who you callin' Kettle, dude? I was gonna take it easy on you, Signor Pot, but now you're going down hard, believe it!"

"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 daaamm. "This son of mine, honestly…"

"No worries, Nana-san." His fedora hat dipped low, obscuring his eyes, mouth unsmilimg, 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-discriminate 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 the back of Naruto's skull, but not even choking on tufts of fur could slow down his laughter. *I guess it's four of us.*

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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 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
A gunshot echoed—Naruto demonstrated his outstanding reflexes—for a crime-fighter wannabee 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 a true teenager fashion, Naruto's mood did a one-eighty. "Ha!" He all but crowed, grinning and pumping his fist 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
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 shall 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 shall 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.
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
I would like to start by saying THANK YOU for being so supportive and patient with me. You all are amazing people! You don't know how much it means to me when you take the time to share your thoughts and laughter and let me know you’re having as much fun reading as I have writing this crazy fic.

Now on to the bad news... I'm down with AOM, and it sucks...I can't even describe how much it sucks. I mean, you don't expect this much bullshit from an ear infection of all things, and yet... I've got migraines, I've lost half my hearing, I'm dizzy as fuck, my stomach is killing me, my balance is shot to hell, my bruises have bruises by now. Somebody please kill me. Or give me the good drugs, doc, for gods' sake. T.T

Anyway, I'mma shut up now 'cause you're not here to share my pain. What I wanted to say is that updates will slow down until this horrible thing is over, which my doc assures me will be in about two weeks or so. I dun have much faith as you can tell, but we'll see.

In the meantime, I'll slowly try to make words and reply to your awesome reviews. Thanks again so much! Onward! XD

"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 it."

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 crackbrained 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. Hm, 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 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 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 understating 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 blurting, 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 is 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.

"Glad we cleared that up!" Clapping his hands, 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.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Good news, people of the internet and awesome fanfiction taste! One ear infection, one perforated eardrum, and one minor surgery later...and I'm getting better. Pain wise, at least. Hearing wise, it sucks to be me, but I'll take it. Thank you so, so much for all the well-wishes. You're all amazing, wonderful people. I'm a bit behind as far as replies go, but I promise to catch up even if it takes me days to do it. For now, I give you...dun, dun, dun...another chapter. Onward! XD

“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 twitted 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 a loop. A deep sigh, exuding vengeful satisfaction, erupted from Shamal’s lungs. “Aah, technology, I love thee.”

Espresso-maniac’s gaze was glued on 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.”

“How’s it going, 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 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 onto 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.”

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 staying 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 shtick (like, seriously, you and what army, temê?), 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-incorrect, 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 Goku! 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 Goku 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 killer 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 Goku 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 busy mooning over Usagi, and Usagi was too busy spurning Hannibal’s attentions.

“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?

“Oh, 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 before—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.”
“Yep, 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.”

Yeeeah. 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 landmark 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.)


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