Almost forty years after the Alien invasion mankind faces the definitive ultimatum. The Great War is the only reality Captain Uzumaki knows and everything he's seen: it will take an outsider to convince him that they actually deserve to be saved.
In physics,

resonance is a phenomenon in which a vibrating system or external force drives another system to oscillate with greater amplitude at specific frequencies.

PROLOGUE

FROM: S.N. Head of Intelligence UEF

TO: UEF Supreme Commander, Lady Tsunade Senju

OBJECT: Report - day 15.003 Nr. 003

Interrogation of the Snake (prisoner #34356) is finally over. Was no easy task but the Bad Guys finally managed to obtain useful information from him. Disclosed the location of the prisoner's secret laboratory in a now inhabited suburb west from Capital City (1°17'33.1"N 103°47'38.9"E).

He admitted his affiliation with Akatsuki too.

We've reasons to believe that proof about the Confidential Project he was working on under their request could be found in his secret hideout. For this cause, General K. wasted no time sending the Kyuubi to check on the location. Full squad is armed since we expect to find some Akatsuki in there; they left present day, h 07:15 a.m. CCT.

The Snake didn't give any hint about what the subject of his studies was, despite the Bad Guys'
insistence. Taking into account his personal history and reputation, we must consider the eventual results of his research as an impending menace for the Union's security.

For this reason, I didn't oppose General K. rushed decision, which was anyway shared by General A. and General G.

We're currently considering setting up a second questioning for the Snake, since we've been forced to give him a break; Tenzo and his guys know the way.

I'll contact you again as soon as we get information from your favorite Captain.

Stay safe.

The Deer.
With a practiced movement, Naruto pulled up the high collar of his black technical shirt, covering the lower side of his face up to half his nose. His piercing blue eyes were focused on the shiny metal of the AK-47 lying in his lap, ammo already loaded, waiting to be hooked to the safety strap around his torso. He fumbled in the left pocket of his body armor, finding his fingerless gloves and methodically putting them on. He couldn't shake off the bad feeling he had about the whole thing.

Softly he sighed through his nose, warming the material now concealing his features, uncomfortably cold from the December air. He spent the last hour desperately trying to focus on the task at hand but all the efforts seemed to be in vain. He couldn't bring himself to drive away that damn grim sensation that have settled in the pit of his stomach since the moment he and his men left the base under this new assignment.

Running his fingers through his savage blond locks in exasperation, he skimmed the serious expressions on his comrades' faces in the dusty dim light, until he found the very familiar green iris of his best friend.

His squad was currently camped in the filthy cargo-back of a military truck, headed towards the western suburbs, getting ready for a surprise raid on Orochimaru's secret research center. Nobody but the highest generals of the Elite Forces knew precisely about their current mission or location.

Getting information on the Snake's laboratory's whereabouts had been anything but an easy task; Orochimaru had finally surrendered only after three endless interrogation days at the Bad Guys' mercy. Such a long resistance was actually unprecedented, and Naruto had to admit the guy must hide some balls under the fancy kimono-robies he usually wore.

Naruto had been ready to jump in action since the very moment that motherfucker was captured by Sand Squad, almost four days ago, after a long month of frustratingly groundless investigation that nearly made them give up any hope of reaching him.

Now that he was called to do his part, though, the alarm bell incessantly ringing in his head didn't allow him to concentrate fully. And it was frustrating. Logically, he had no reason to feel that way, and he knew it. But the fact that his instinct had actually saved his life countless of times in the past, during his military career, made it nearly impossible to ignore the warning signals and simply get on with the mission.

Sakura had always been amazingly good in perceiving his distress, even when he really was trying his best to hide it. There was a reason if she had grown under his skin to the point he now considered her his best friend. They have been fighting together for so many years already, sharing countless missions.

In occasions like this one, anyway, Naruto would have preferred if she wasn't as good at reading as she was with an open book. He was the Captain of the fist squad of the Union's Elite Military Forces, he couldn't afford to show his men any sign of insecurity before a mission. Particularly, not before one as important as this one was.

In any case, unavoidable like only death, here Sakura was, sat on the other side of the cargo bed, looking at him like she perfectly knew what exactly was going on in his head. Her strawberry blond
hair was collected in a messy bun above her head, some rebellious locks falling down to frame her half covered face. Her eyes were unavoidable to put it dimly.

Naruto smiled at her fondly, despite the fact it was hidden behind his uniform’s high collar.

He nodded in her direction and she tilted her head to the side slightly, her emerald gaze hardening.

"You cannot fool me", her eyes were saying.

Naruto knew without needing to be reminded.

He didn't have the time to share his musings and preoccupations with her, all the same. Furthermore, he wanted her to be perfectly focused on the impending mission and not even remotely influenced by the negative sensation that, for some reason, was mercilessly chowing at Naruto's inside.

The truck took a sharp turn to the left, his tires creaking on the ruined asphalt of the road. A particularly deep pothole made the whole vehicle tremble, the metal of the equipment they were wearing clinking against the bulletproof walls. The small light bulb hanging from the ceiling of the trailer wavered, illuminating on and off the concentrated faces of his men.

Naruto secured his weapon to the strap, hearing Choji at his side doing the same.

Other metallic sounds were heard in the small dusty space, revealing his squad getting ready to jump in action. Ten Ten, sat on the floor at Sakura's right side, flexed her back pushing her arms forward, stretching like a cat. As usual before an important assignment, nobody was exactly in the mood for small talking.

The heavy truck came to a halt with a desolate squeaking of brakes.

Naruto jumped up first, AK-47 hanging at his side like a faithful dog, his calloused hands immediately finding the huge handle of the trunk. He pulled and rotated, unlocking the mechanism, then pushing the door open.

In front of him, in the gray light of the morning, a narrow abandoned road stretched between the skeleton of old industrial buildings.

Naruto jumped down the track, his powerful, trained legs flexing under him for a soft landing, the brownish water of a puddle slightly muddling his combat boots.

That grim sensation in his bowels was still gnawing at him, putting his senses on alert. They had no more time to find a possible cause for it or to revise the plan, now.

They had to go inside and get the dirty job done as soon as possible; many things depended from the results of their incursion today. The whole Union was counting on them.

Naruto embraced his weapon, removing the safety with a small, almost lovingly caress. He looked back to his squad, armed and ready, awaiting for his command.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he smiled, making sure that there was absolutely no trace of uneasiness in his tone. "Let's do this!"

Creaking of weapons and leather, boots on the broken asphalt.

In a minute the Kyuubi was in mission asset.
Shikamaru had recommended to be ready for a conflict, since there was a concrete possibility that Orochimaru's hideout was guarded by some Akatsuki soldier. As far as Naruto had seen in the last ten minutes, anyway, that outcome didn't seem as probable as they prepared for.

The squad had stuck meticulously to the plan, easily checking on the outside of the building to be sure there were no cameras or sentinels. *All clear* declared, Kankuro proceeded with blowing up the security door with small charges, and they entered the place undisturbed. Naruto was leading the way, his squad organized in the usual combat formation behind him, with Sakura and Ten Ten in the middle. Shino was the end man of the group, checking constantly their back searching for eventual menaces that might be hidden and come for them from behind.

The building looked abandoned, the dark corridors crowded by garbage, dirt and broken pieces of furniture. To find their way in the scarce light they were using small torches mounted on the top of their machine guns, despite the risk to give away their presence. Even through the material covering their noses, the stench of rat-piss mixed with the smell of dust and foul air was clearly noticeable.

Shikamaru had given him a small description of the hideout layout, the way Orochimaru had instructed him. Naruto knew that they were expected to find a flight of stairs going underground, after they went through a couple of empty halls.

Turning smoothly on the right after checking the hallway emptiness, the Captain got a glimpse of the first hall, with old-looking, worn-out recliners amassed against the wall to the left. The room was windowless, exactly like the corridors they’ve walked through up to this moment. The walls looked stained by something akin to soot and ashes, though it didn’t look like the building suffered a major fire.

Naruto moved into the room quietly, his men silently following him like they were extensions of his own body. Some of the wooden boards occasionally protested under their boots, but no other noise was audible in the stillness.

The door opening on the second hall was just foots from them now, and Naruto lengthened his steps to rapidly walk through.

The second room was equally shattered, a broken table and some debris collected in a pile right in the middle. Suddenly enlightened by some flashlights, a big mangy rat scrambled away from a heap of trash nearby. Nobody moved.

Stairs where nowhere to be seen.

Naruto gestured for his squad to check the room, to see if there was some hidden door or passage that was not immediately noticeable.

While his men were moving to obey the order, already starting to remove some of the trash, kicking it around, something metallic clinked under Naruto's boots, and the Captain lowered his weapon to lighten up the floor beneath his soles. It was barely visible under all the dust and dirt, but looking closely, he could spot a big metallic panel covering the normally wooded floor in that area. Naruto had inadvertently stepped on a small iron ring connected with the metal plate, or probably he wouldn't have focused his attention to the floor this quickly.

The blond captain knelt down, his big hand removing some dust around the ring to reveal another one identical to the first, located approximately twenty-five centimeters left.

"Kiba, c'me here," it was barely a whisper, but the soft sound of his friend's footsteps right behind his back confirmed Naruto that he'd been heard loud and clear.
"We gotta lift it."

Kiba only nodded, putting the safety on his weapon and keeling down beside Naruto. He looked closely to where his Captain's attention was focused and noticed the metal plate on the floor as well.

"Take it from here," Naruto instructed, gesturing for Kiba to grasp the second ring near the one Naruto himself was holding.

"I can guess hinges are in front of us on the other side, but I cannot be sure. It's also possible that we simply have to slide the slab."

Kiba took a hold of his ring-handle and gave an experimental pull. He snorted, then shrugged.

"Nah man. Slide is the way. It's better if we pull, if ya trust me."

Naruto smiled and didn't comment. He hooked his fingers better, then planted his feet to the floor.

"To the three. One, two, three!"

The metallic plate glided on the wooden floor, scratching, and here the staircase was, only the first two steps visible in the darkness heading down to the basement.

Kiba roughly cleaned his hands on the back on his pants, then embraced his machine-gun again. Naruto pointed his flashlight into the opening of the stairs.

"This way." he commanded.

The whole team moved to follow.

Orochimaru's hideout was actually a weird dungeon of rooms and hallways stretching apparently endlessly underground. Some of the rooms were evidently designed to be lived in and contained torn, but perfectly usable, beds and chests and closets. Other rooms included desks, chairs and shelves, and so many books of various shapes, languages and topics. Heading to the most secluded areas of the lair, they had also spotted a small kitchen-space with a living room, looking like the inhabitants had been forced to leave the place in a rush.

They hadn't encountered a single form of life since that chubby rat on the ground floor.

Paradoxically, the air was way more fresh and clean down in the underground, hinting that the place was likely equipped of some system for the air flow. The floor was clean, all considered, testament to the presence of people until not much time before.

They entered a large, long room squashed with custom designed racks, each of them filled with weird glass containers of different shapes and dimensions. Some of the jars were full of liquid, in assorted shades of gray, light blue and yellow.

Naruto moved on, guiding his squad in a line in between the rackets, shifting his AK-47 to check the surroundings with the torch. He could see that there was something stored in the containers together with the liquid, but he really didn’t feel like investigating about what it was. It looked suspiciously like fetuses or body parts of creatures that once used to be alive. For sure, Naruto wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out that some of the jars contained organic material belonging to some missing human being.
A sudden creak of glass crushed under soles broke the creepy stillness of the laboratory, resounding high in the silence despite being akin to a whisper.

Naruto immediately shifted his attentive eyes across the room, not spotting any suspicious movement, but already being sure they weren’t alone anymore.

"Crouch down!" he barely had the time to shout, before a series of gunshots was on them, bullets destroying the rackets, glass exploding everywhere. The Captain shielded his eyes with his left hand, cold, unclassified liquid soaking his clothes and raining down from the now precarious shelves.

"Turn the lights off!" he commanded, gesturing at the same time with his fingers, to be sure he was heard above the noise. Darkness would give them some advantage, making them more difficult to detect. Of course, his hope was that their attackers didn't have equipment to improve their night vision.

Either way, those motherfuckers would need to reload their ammo, sooner or later. Naruto had enough experience to know for sure that there were at least two people hunting them, since the shooting came from two different directions, crossing above their heads.

He gestured for Kankuro and Kiba, right behind his back, to be ready to aim in front of them approximately 45° to the right, while for Shino and Ten Ten to aim sharp left. His guys nodded, waiting for his signal to counter-attack.

The shooting stopped, pretty much at the same time from both directions. Motherfuckers likely had some instrument to communicate with each other live.

Naruto waited, patiently listening to the smaller noises in the room mixed with the sound of dropping liquid and the creaking of broken glass. The shooter on the left was close, probably just five or so meters from them, hidden behind some racket. He couldn’t hear the other man though, so he didn’t trust standing up to aim right then.

The Captain clearly heard the closer man speaking in some foreign language to his mate, probably through an ear-bud.

"It’s Japanese," Sakura whispered, and Naruto understood why it sounded someway familiar. "He’s telling someone to turn on the lights."

Naruto nodded, gesturing for Ten Ten to be ready.

A soft click was heard, and the row of neon lights above them blinked lazily and then came to life, the white aseptic brightness almost blinding them after the prolonged period in the darkness.

The Captain immediately signaled Ten Ten, thinking that if they were disturbed by the sudden light, their enemies would reasonably be in the same situation. Clearly, they didn’t have additional equipment with them.

Ten Ten jumped up immediately, aiming and shooting half of the magazine to the left. At the same time Naruto stood up shooting blindly forward, right from left, providing her coverage. They crouched again at the same time, silently waiting for further noises to be heard.

Someone was running from right to left in front on them, and Naruto gestured for Kankuro and Kiba to aim. They both stood up but only Kiba shot, instantly crouching down when more bullets started to rain on them from the front.

"I got him, but not in the right place." the tattooed man whispered, reloading his M4 just to be
"There’s a blond man at the door to the left." Kankuro supplied, looking bothered. "He has a sniper rifle. He could likely get us through the many rows of shelves if he gets to aim. We gotta move."

Naruto nodded to both of them. "That’s what we do," he instructed, thinking quickly. "Backwards, usual strategy. Let the ladies work their magic together."

The group started to head back, crouched as they were, still facing the front. After three meters, Choji an Shino jumped up, aiming and shooting forward, shifting their trajectories smoothly to cover with bullets a triangular area with them at the vertex.

When their magazines clinked empty, oiled like the perfect killing-machine the Kyuubi was, they simultaneously crouched down to reload, while at the same time Sakura and Ten Ten stood up to shoot the same way with their bigger caliber Tommy-guns.

In three rounds like this the squad reached the end of the room, to the side they came in a few minutes ago. Naruto signaled them to split in three cells, the one headed to the extreme right made up by the three man with the longest range weapons.

He took Kankuro with himself, heading left to the bastard Ten Ten shot already, and sent the two girls back in the middle row. They went forward again, this time faster, alternatively covering each other. In the middle of the left row, a man in Akatsuki clothing was unnaturally sitting with half of his back against a shelf, a puddle of blood spreading around him on the tiled floor.

'So Ten Ten got him.' Naruto rapidly took note, before being distracted by a sharp movement in front of him. Shooting resounded again, but it wasn’t aimed at him.

A man with red hair and the same Akatsuki uniform came visible for a second from behind a bookcase at the end on the row, aiming two automatic machine-guns towards his general direction. He heard Kankuro fire from behind himself, missing but forcing the motherfucker behind the bookshelf again, and he aimed for where the bastard once was, sure that he was ruthless enough to try to come at them again the same way.

Somebody was screaming from the end of the room, but Naruto didn’t recognize the voice as one of his comrades. Shooting sounds started again and the redhead son-of-a-bitch did as Naruto had deftly foresaw, his possessed expression perfectly visible in Naruto’s gun-sight. Naruto pulled the trigger the same instant his enemy gained aim, the bullets cutting immediately through the others forehead.

The redhead stumbled to the floor, lifeless, to the sound of Sakura’s all clear.

Naruto smiled, proud of his team. But the fucking sensation of uneasiness still hadn’t left him for a minute.

He lowered his weapon, still stepping ahead to reunite with the rest of the squad to make the point, when-

"Shit, the bastard has a bomb on him!" Kiba shouted and Naruto’s pupils dilated, adrenaline getting to him like drug.

"Fuck! Seek shelter!" he instantly countered, but it was late already, debris and the hotness of the blast wave hitting them all at high speed.
Unbalanced, he fell backward against Kankuro and they both tumbled to the floor, the warmness of the air mixed with the dust from the rubble making them cough.

His left cheek hurt and stung as if something pointy had cut through, but he could feel well all the rest of his body, so he judged he had been lucky, all considered.

He turned towards Kankuro to notice the man was in a similar condition, his right arm and side sporting some annoying cuts because of the glass in the room, but no deadly wound was visible on him.

He struggled to find his equilibrium and stood up, his hands already to the metal of his AK-K7, his eardrums steadily whistling. Since he was deaf to the majority of the sounds, he run by heart towards the last location he heard Kiba’s voice coming from, only to find a small crater in the floor, adorned by pieces of what must have been a body only seconds before. Blood and half burned fragments of flesh and bones were splattered everywhere.

"Kiba!" he shouted, turning around madly in search for his friends. Sakura came out from a hiding beneath a knocked over shelf, looking irritated but unarmed. Looking more closely, Naruto saw TenTen hidden together with her. Shino was coming for him from the right corner of the room, together with Choji.

The Captain relaxed a bit, noticing how good his squad had been to avoid the blunt of the explosion. They all looked ruffled and a whole lot irritated, but they were all walking steadily on their legs.

"Kiba!" Naruto yelled again, his hearing gradually coming back accompanied by a sense of dread.

“Fuck man! I am already hurt, could ya plis stop damaging what’s left of ma tympanums?”

Naruto didn’t understood all that was said to him, but simply hearing Kiba’s voice made him feel over a thousand of times relieved. He crossed the hole in the floor in front of the room's exit, headed into the adjoining one. Kiba was there, slumped against the wall right behind the door, his left arm bloodied and hanging in a strange position from his shoulder.

"Man." Naruto called him, and Kiba immediately responded, his eyes smiling a bit.

"You gotta speak to my other side if you hope for me to hear." he gestured with his good hand to the blood gushing out of his left ear.

Naruto barely got the general meaning of it, taking a step back and better assessing the severity of his injuries. Broken arm for sure. Some burns here and there. A breached eardrum.

Sakura joined them behind the wall.

"Shit! I am sorry you’re hurt but, honestly, I expected a lot worse. What the hell happened?" Naruto asked, still half screaming, as Sakura searched for the first aid kit in her backpack.

"Dunno why, but for some reason I got the idea to check on the body." he grimaced, dirt drawing expressive lines on his forehead skin.

"Thanks God you did!" Naruto cheered, watching Sakura as she opened a bottle of peroxide.

"He had a small charge attached to his chest, under his uniform, timer already zeroing. So I turned him face down, hoping that his body would have softened the blunt of the explosion, and warned all of you to stay away. I barely managed to get shelter behind the wall. Luckily it wasn't a powerful
Sakura was pouring peroxide on the burns wrecking his arm, disinfecting the wounds with the help of a small gauze.

"You weren't wining for a broken arm but you are for some peroxide?" Sakura taunted, mercilessly keeping on with her job and trying to figure out how to immobilize their comrade's useless limb until the end of their mission.

"Whatever you did, it worked." Naruto praised Kiba, watching as pain finally reached his face. The guy clicked his tongue, still sneering under the pink-haired girl's treatment.

"How long will it take for you to fix him?" he then asked Sakura, once again all business now that he was certain they all were fine. Sakura shook her head, not completely sure what to answer.

"Some time," she offered, still working her hands around Kiba's arm. "It's better if you move, I believe. Kiba and I will catch up with you as soon as we can. We still haven't seen any rooms with computers or files, nor Orochimaru's private studio. Time's running and there's still plenty of work to do... We don't even know what exactly we're searching for!"

The Captain considered her words in silence, fingers clutching the metal of his AK-47. He didn't like the idea of leaving some of his men behind, but deep down he knew Sakura was right. They were searching for files, or concrete evidence, of the Confidential Project the Snake was working on under Akatsuki's commission. The only problem was, they had no idea what precisely this project was about. They were pretty sure it was some sort of secret weapon, but Orochimaru was widely popular in the Union, and considered ahead of his time, because he always managed to provide the unexpected. It could be literally everything. Plus, they've been given eight hours of time for their raid, almost four of them already passed, before the rescue squad would come and get them. Naruto wouldn't risk to head back empty handed.

"Okay. Whatever shit happens, we stick to the plan like mussels to the rock." he recommended them, before turning in search for the rest of the Kyuubi.

"Guys, we move! Kiba's fine but he needs some patches!" Kiba snorted at the choice of words and someone laughed soundly from the other room. Shino. "They'll get to us as soon as Sakura makes him whole again."

Before heading forward, resuming his leading position, Naruto turned back to look at Sakura for a second, feeling an odd need to tell her something, but unsure about what exactly.

"I trust you." he softly spoke, forcing himself not to linger. Her emerald eyes were soft as they met blue.

They found another staircase, this time not concealed, heading further underground. Under there, some rooms looking like prisoners' cells were discovered, all of them empty except for basic furnishing.

Whatever those Akatsuki soldiers had done with the lightning system, they apparently turned it on in the whole hideout. This made the Kyuubi's march quicker and more efficient, since it was easier to find their way and check the various rooms with the help of the full light.

They had also found a hall that looked like an info lab at first sight, but all the computers there had been crushed or taken away already. All that was left were tons of cables and routers, plus desks,
overturned chairs and some DVDs that Shino had taken.

Naruto was slowly losing his patience. They were running out on time, and nothing relevant had emerged so far. The place looked like the people sent to clean it had done their job thoroughly. Nothing was left behind; no personal object or document on the desks. They had even checked a small room that had been completely trashed, ashes and remnants of burnt paper everywhere, but nothing useful came out from there either.

Naruto sighed, leading his squad at the end to the umpteenth hallway, into a spacious laboratory. He checked the surroundings like the procedure wanted, declaring the green light before properly letting his gaze wander, moving further into the room and letting his guys in.

Three enormous glass cylinders, going from floor to ceiling and ample enough to easily contain a man like Choji, were aligned against the wall in front of Naruto, apparently empty. A long, lean desk was positioned in the middle of the room, between the team and the weird, enormous test tubes on the other side. On the desk were some books and various technical material, some can containing chemicals and syringes, plenty of them, some even fallen to the floor.

In a corner of the room stood a chair that looked like some torture tool for electroshock treatment, all the electrodes hanging limply from an armrest.

Naruto distantly listened to his men working, trusting them blindly, knowing they were the best in their field. The bad feeling that had been accompanying him during the whole expedition was back again, stronger than ever. This room seemed to stir his discomfort, which was furiously biting into his stomach.

The Captain calmly strolled around the table, only vaguely looking at the pincers and surgical blades laying on it, distantly feeling sick at the thought of what they had likely been used for. He walked to the glass tubes at the end of the room, his head reclined to see their junction point with the ceiling. Naruto briefly turned to look at his back, checking on his squad once again, assessing the presence of a small archive section with china-closets and bookcases to his right, a secluded space against the wall they came through. Ten Ten and Kankuro were already looking it through.

He directed his focus back to the glass cylinders, strangely curious, noticing a weird hole in the top of each of them that looked at least of a half-meter diameter. Naruto laid his left hand onto the cold glass, leaning closer, taking in smaller details like the presence of a draining system at the bottom. Arguably, it was possible to fill those tubes directly from the upper floor, with water or God-only-knows what.

A glimpse of his own reflection into the glass momentarily distracted him from his inspection. He looked tired, despite his bright blue eyes revealed resolution and strength. His blonde messy hair was darkened and tamed by dirt, and his right cheek bloodied, a harsh looking cut going from near his nose to his cheekbone, right under his eye.

A soft buzzing in the distance, the sound of a bee landing on some flower, was the only warning before the light blinked off.

Naruto heard the surprised gasps of some of his comrades, holding perfectly still in the attempt to catch any eventual movement, though the explosion before shaded his hearing a bit.

He detected someone moving, some air shifting. Somebody hit against something, making a metallic instrument of sort fall to the floor with a clung. Nothing too out of place.

Another vibrating sound, and the electricity came back.
Some thick, deep red liquid akin to blood was dripping along the glass cylinder, monstrously staining the spot where, moments before, Naruto admired his image. *That was... very wrong.*

The young Captain immediately jumped back, spinning towards the center of the room with the fastest speed his reflexes could muster.

*Blood? How could that be blood?*

Ten Ten’s scream reached him before he could understand what happened. The remains of Shino’s body were silently slipping to the floor, his headless body painting a ruby, monstrous orchid to the once immaculate wall across the room.

Time slowed down, reality suddenly kicking in.

He exhaled, hearing his own heartbeat in his brain, hands instinctively searching for his weapon. Ten Ten’s utterly terrified expression was the last thing he saw before light went out again.

There was some scrambling, this time. Someone shot, the small explosions of the bullets briefly giving an orangish light shade to the room. Ten Ten screamed again. The table was pushed, then probably overturned. Metal on the floor, broken glass. Naruto made a small step back, resting his back against the firmness of the glass cylinder.

*What in the hell is happening, here?*

His bowel tightened. He couldn’t breathe.

Someone else was screaming now, and it didn’t sound terrified but in pain. More rattling of metals, a hard thud, thin glass shattered – a beaker? A test-tube? Naruto couldn’t be sure.

Little buzzing. Lightning on.

Naruto blinked, taking in the tattered room bathed in the aggressive light.

A body was dumped again the side of the upturned table, copiously bleeding to the tiled floor. *Was it Kankuro’s? Where were the others?*

Someone was sobbing, desperately. A metallic, high pitched growl covered all the other sounds, making the Captain pale.

It was coming from... above him.

The light blinked again before shutting off once and for all.

This time, Naruto *saw it.*

With pure adrenaline and panic, he managed to dodge the deadly blow aimed for his head, crouching down to the floor. His trained hands instinctively run to the metal of his faithful AK-47, and he pointed toward the ceiling. Then he pulled the trigger.

Another horrible roar echoed in the darkness, sounding like nothing Naruto had ever heard before. *Another scream, some soft clumps? He wasn’t sure, the sound of his gun too loud to hear anything except those feral growls.*

When his magazine clinked empty, all the bullets fired in the right direction, Naruto waited, fighting hard to steady his breath. He was holding his own thanks to pure adrenaline, ’cause his brain was currently completely off, too stunned by what his eyes saw.
Such a monstrosity couldn’t be from this world. Such a monstrosity shouldn’t exist at all! What the fuck even was, the thing he saw? Was it real?

He couldn't think properly. He just hoped with all he had that, whatever that thing which came at them was, he had killed it.

When Naruto was finally relaxing, after a full half minute of utter stillness, another rumble—quieter, closer—made his heart tremble in fear.

Something was thrown, and the crystal cylinder behind his back shattered in a million of pieces, fragments of glass raining on him from above. There was some collision noise - some fighting noise, maybe? - then Naruto got hit hard in the back of his head.

The biting of the pain, cold floor against his face.

Then black.

When he came to his senses, it took him a while to remember who he was, where he was and why he was there. Once recalled the last images his mind was able to provide, Naruto took in deep breath, almost not believing that he was still able to.

With trembling hands, he assessed the state of his body, immediately noticing a deep cut in his right shoulder and some minor injuries to his hand. He could move his legs and that was fine. His head hurt like a bitch.

His machine-gun was still hooked to the strap, laying in the debris and fragments of glass surrounding him. Patting the floor in the darkness Naruto collected it, running his fingers across the underside searching for the button to unload the empty magazine. Blindly, but used to do so as instinctively as he breathed, he loaded a new magazine in. Only when the first bullet clicked in place, the Captain went for the flashlight still attached to the cane of the gun. A pale beam of light allowed Naruto to see the bloodied ceiling, different stains and splashes adorning the once spotless paint.

Naruto forced himself to stand up, his legs unsteady under him like he was a toddler walking for the first time. He wavered dangerously once standing at full height, but he managed to get his equilibrium back before it was too late. Slowly, he turned around in the room, assessing the level of damage, searching for survivors from his squad.

The Kyuubi was gone. No Captain would like to see a day when he has to acknowledge the death of some of his men. Naruto was totally distraught at the simple thought. The Kyuubi had been his family for years. The only family he ever had.

Naruto felt tears collecting in his eyes, stinging to get free, but he blinked them away.

Not now. He still had stuff to do, now.

He walked towards the visible body laying slumped on the overturned table, crouching down to take a look at his features. He did saw right the first time, since it was Kankuro. Kankuro who also was his other best friend’s brother.

He wasn’t breathing. He was already cold, the pool of blood beside the table half clotted.

Naruto closed his eyelids with surprising gentle fingers.
He stood up, moving on to where he remembered Shino’s corpse was supposed to be. The half body was actually waiting for him there, crumpled to the floor now, head still missing.

Naruto bit his lower lip until his teeth cut into the skin, desperately forcing himself to grasp control. He leaned down, opened Shino’s backpack. He took out the DVDs, disbelievingly whole. He put them in a pocket of his body armor.

Seeing a leg in the corner of the area faintly lightened by his torch, he headed there, his heart heavy.

It was Choji’s. Or Naruto supposed so, since it was the only other man left in the room. His face was unrecognizable, a bloody mask Naruto refused to identify as his friend’s.

He shifted his torch, pointing the light to the only area he didn’t inspect up to now, the secluded space between the china-closets. It took him a minute to spot Ten Ten’s delicate hand coming out from under a big toppled bookshelf, red nail polish still in place.

Naruto reached it in a couple of long steps, stooping down to see if there still was something he could do to save her. Judging by the quantity of blood pouring out from under the wooden shelf, it was highly unlikely. Naruto sighed, shifting his fingers to caress Ten Ten’s colder ones. A wrenched, lone sob escaped his throat. He was trying his best not to break down, to keep on functioning, but it was proving harder than expected.

He should be used to death up to now. After all it was all he had seen his whole life.

When he was on the verge of tears once again, throat closing and eyes stinging, a shadow moving in the corner of his vision compelled his whole concentration back.

Naruto’s hands headed back to his weapon at lightning speed, immediately aiming for the dark corner formed by a reclined china-closet against the wall.

Come out motherfucker, if you dare. I’ll let you eat metal, fucking abomination.

Nothing moved, the light of his torch barely reaching half of the long lair.

Naruto stirred, shifting the light lower, a small white hand coming out from the darkness all in a sudden.

The Captain jumped, taken aback, but then he moved closer, his natural tendency to protect and his training kicking in full force. He crouched against the wall, angling his flashlight to better enlighten the narrow place.

Sat at the opposite end of the improvised shelter was the most stunning human-being he’d ever seen in his whole life. Big, black, liquid eyes were looking at him with wonder through shiny, dark tresses.

Naruto blinked three times, not averting his eyes, almost sure he was having hallucinations because of heavy distress. It simply wasn't possible that such an ethereal person existed, let alone encountering them in a place like this. Surely, the attractive face peering at him with undeniable interest was bound to disappear as soon as he relaxed and counted up to ten. He was simply going nuts, that was it.

Just be quiet, blink and start counting. One.... two...three...

But then the boy moved – or at least he looked like a boy -, putting his small pretty hands on the
tiled floor, he crawled slowly in his direction. Naruto just looked at him silently, still enlightening his way, incapable of tearing his eyes off him.

It appeared like the boy was feeling the same, because except halting a couple of seconds to brush his charcoal strands away from his unbelievably perfect features, he never stopped looking directly at Naruto, eyes in eyes.

When the strange, fascinating guy was barely a meter away from him, and he hesitated, looking torn about what to do, finally something clicked in the Captain’s brain – like the blunt fact that he was the authority here, and he was supposed to reassure his new companion.

Slowly, he extended his free hand into the narrow liar, aiming to help the younger boy out of there. However, the guy didn't seem to see the gesture as a friendly one, since he brusquely jolted several meters back, retracting from Naruto's offered palm.

"Sir?" the Captain cleared his voice, almost not used to hear himself anymore after all the silence.

"Sir please, stay calm. I am here to help you."

The boy looked at him with his incredibly expressive eyes, fluttering the long lashes but not moving. His snow-white complexion almost gleamed when directly hit by the light of Naruto's torch. His body language didn't suggest that he was scared; if anything, he looked incredibly shy and diffident. Naruto lowered his technical shirt's collar, disclosing his full face and angling the light so that it was visible. Maybe this way the boy would relax a bit.

He moistened his chapped lips, then tried again.

"Sir? Do you speak the Common Language?" he asked, putting some serious effort in sounding gentle and not commanding.

The boy opened his heart-shaped mouth, almost like he was going to say something, but then he simply nodded.

To Naruto, that was even more than enough.

"I am Naruto. Captain Uzumaki Naruto of the Union's Elite Forces. I will take care of you if you let me."

The boy didn't seem convinced, motionless in his position and now chewing nervously at his lower lip.

_Oh God. Those eyes._

Naruto took in a deep breath, putting an effort in filling his lungs completely. His nerves were shattering. He didn't know who the boy was or why he was in the depth of an evil scientist’s laboratory, but he wanted to protect him. He had already lost enough lives in a single day.

It was reasonably possible that the boy had been abducted from somewhere, and kept as a prisoner – maybe he was a subject for experimentation or maybe he was taken just for fun. Naruto wouldn't have left him there, either way.

"Listen," the younger boy looked troubled, having curled-up on himself in the meantime." I don't wanna hurt you, okay? I wanna save you. I am a friend. Would you please come out from under there?"
No way in hell Naruto would have fit in the narrow space between the china-closet and the wall, and he didn’t want to risk scaring the guy by moving it. He had probably gone through enough shit already.

The frightfully enthralling face still looking at him seemed to unwind, and the boy stopped chewing. He blinked another couple of times, tilting his head like he was assessing Naruto and his words. Finally, he placed his hands on the floor again, resuming his march forward. Naruto smiled at him encouragingly, this time taking a step back to leave some space to the guy if he wanted to poke out from his hideout.

The boy came out this time, revealing a lean body with long limbs, likely taller than the average teen but not as tall as Naruto was. He looked about sixteen or seventeen years old. He was dressed like a civilian, with a neutral white t-shirt too big for him and sweatpants. He wore a mismatched pair of ruined wool socks on his small feet.

"Can you walk?" Naruto asked him, newly focused, quickly checking the other guy’s body for eventual injuries. They didn’t have much time.

The boy didn't answer him an Naruto subtly checked his watch, noticing he had at best twenty-five minutes if he wanted to reach the rescue squad in time. That, obviously, if they managed to avoid whatever beast from hell, like the one which tore his squad apart.

"I know the way to get out of here, but we gotta be fast. . ." Naruto trailed off, noticing how close the boy came while he was assessing the situation.

His unblemished face was so close that, even in the dim light, Naruto could count the thick, individual lashes framing his eyes. And his irises weren't a dull black as he thought they were from the distance, but some weird shade of anthracite with other colors mixed in - was there some purple?

The other guy was focused on his left cheek, his expression serious and concentrated. Naruto felt something delicate and soothingly fresh touching the skin under his eye, and he realized it was the other guy’s hand. He stood still, glued on the spot, waiting for the boy’s next move.

Nothing weird happened.

The boy smiled a bit, something more similar to a small smirk actually, then slightly caressed the Captain’s skin before retracting his fingers. He didn't answer Naruto’s question, but the blond was already beyond it.

A screeching roar coming from the distance echoed in the still air, bringing back recent memories of death and devastation.

Naruto didn’t get the time to say a word; the other boy simply took his hand and started running towards the door of the laboratory, revealing speed and strength that were totally uncommon. Naruto let the guy drag him for the first few meters, taking the lead once they were out in the corridor, holding tightly onto his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, well. Hi! This story is actually an experiment. The original idea, conceived after a plot submission in the "NS Only" Discord, was
intended to be a one-shot, but while I was plotting it thoroughly it honestly acquired a life of his own. It's been ages since the last time I published something online, and I haven't been inspired in writing a long-fiction in even longer. However this thing happened (and it's probably 'cause I am growing old *sigh*).

I have been writing my whole life in my native language but, as you probably realized so far, English is another matter entirely. Therefore... I am kinda feeling self conscious, even more because the chapters are unbeted.

Feel absolutely free to point out everything that sounds weird. I need feedback like a stranded fish needs water!
Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Captain Uzumaki and his squad were sent for a blitz at Orochimaru's hideout. Their task was to find proof of a secret project Orochimaru was working on at Akatsuki's request. Despite a firefight with some Akatsuki guards, the Kyuubi seemed in control of the situation, until suddenly they got attacked by a mysterious creature looming in the darkness. Among the dead bodies of his companions, Naruto unexpectedly found a very alive civilian boy.

Chapter Notes

I am still without a beta. Since the chapter is really long, I might have missed some weird typos. Bear with me, please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They reached the upper level fast and, incredibly enough, unscathed. Despite the darkness, the boy seemed to know the place well enough to run at full speed without hesitation – or, maybe, he just trusted Naruto blindly.

The small light provided by the torch was barely of any help, but the Captain knew better than slowing down; a tumble was nothing compared to what was waiting for them in the depth of the darkness surrounding them.

He had completely forgotten all the pain his body was enduring minutes before, his legs moving like they were designed for speed, unmindful of fatigue.

The boy didn’t seem to put too much effort in keeping up with him; he was likely lighter than the blond, and surely in a good shape.

Naruto continued to run backwards until they reached the room where he left Kiba in Sakura’s care. He wouldn’t have stopped even there, if his flashlight hadn’t casually enlightened a mutilated body sporting his colors, slumped against the wall near the passage to the adjoining room.

The Captain’s halt was so sudden that the younger boy didn’t have time to register it before bumping into his side.

The remains were of a male – so Kiba’s – abused and unrecognizable like the ones of his other companions had been. He was sitting in the same position Naruto had left him, by the door, legs spread wide with confidence. This time there was no smile on his face, nor a grimace of pain, nor brotherly and encouraging words. Instead, a pool of deep-red blood encompassed him, his head monstrously tilted to the side, jaw disjointed.

Naruto exhaled, defeated, feeling suddenly energy drained. The boy at his side squirmed, grasping his body armor with his free hand, his chest still pressed against Naruto’s arm.
With a gulp, the Captain shifted the light, simultaneously hugging the smaller body to his chest, so that he didn’t have to witness that slaughter.

Even if he was a civilian, it was highly unlikely he hadn’t seen a dead body before this one, considering the time they were living in. But for some reason, Naruto didn’t like the idea of this young, innocent-looking creature facing how cruel life could be.

A hand pushed against his chest, the boy whimpering into his hold, and he tried to soothe him with small shushing sounds. But then he heard the roar, beastly and dangerously close, and got the message loud and clear.

‘Fly’.

“Fuck fuck fuck!”

He launched towards the exit, dragging the boy with himself, not even bothering to actually see where he was going.

He remembered the room where they fought the Akatsuki by heart, correctly picking the central, clear corridor between the shelves.

Glass was creaking under his soles and Naruto made a mental note to have his companion’s bare-feet checked, when and if they made it out of there alive.

A small orange blaze appeared right in front of them, closely followed by a clicking sound.

Naruto’s training and experience were thankfully eradicated enough to recognize the spark for what it was and make him duck instantly, forcing the boy to copy his movement. The next second sounds of gunfire erupted and bullets were raining upon them, causing a sharp, pained cry several meters behind their backs.

The Captain held still, crouched low to the floor, only his forearm moving to aim his flashlight in the direction the gunshots were coming from. In the threshold heading to the next room – and to the stairs for the ground floor – Sakura was embracing her machine-gun like it was a long lost lover. She was heavily wounded, bleeding copiously from a gash on her forehead, and her left knee looked like it had seen better days, but she was there. And alive.

The gunfire stopped, dulled noises of metal clashing against metal in the background – reloading – and Sakura's high pitched voice shouted “Whattafuck are you doing there, sleeping?”

Naruto jumped in motion, stupefied and filled with raw emotion, his hand still laced to the mysterious boy's. He had probably never run so fast his whole life.

Sakura stepped aside to let them pass through the door and into the next room, alert eyes still probing into the darkness for movements.

Only after a full minute of silent scrutiny did she dare adverting her gaze for a second, searching for a familiar face in the dim light of Naruto's torch. She smiled a bit when she recognized him, her features softening visibly.

Her lashes were moist.

“Naruto, thank God,” she murmured, shoulders slumping a bit in relief.

Naruto smiled back tentatively, unable to say a world, and watched as his friend's eyebrows
arched up in surprise when she finally noticed the boy accompanying him. She eyed him carefully, reasonably trying to assess why a young civilian like him was in a place like that, a vague hint of fascination looming in her gaze.

“Who’s h__”

A long, blade-like limb, similar to the claws of a mantis, lashed out from the darkness all in a sudden, piercing straight through Sakura's abdomen like a hot knife through butter.

Sakura's lips were still open, her eyes wide in disbelief, blood-drenched tousled hair adorning her pretty face.

“Sakura-chan!”

The blade-shaped limb hooked behind her back like a crude harpoon, lifting Sakura's body from the floor as if she was weightless. Naruto’s free hand immediately tried to catch her, desperately attempting to avoid the unavoidable, to help her, to do fucking something.

“RUN!” she yelled as she was yanked back into the darkness, roaring sounds mixing with her pained cries and echoing against the walls.

Naruto stood paralyzed, not even breathing, incapable to realize what just happened in front of his eyes. Another howl of pain pierced the darkness, Naruto instinctively moving a step toward his old friend, his heart screaming to save her. His mind was buzzing, uncomprehending.

Soft thuds were heard along with sickening splattering sounds, then a low, satisfied growl.

Naruto's right hand was pulled.

He slowly turned towards the boy who was holding it, almost mechanically, watching him like he was seeing him for the first time.

The boy pulled again, using all of his strength, planting his feet onto the floor with stubbornness. He was wearing a desperate expression upon his doll-like face, obstinately searching for Naruto's gaze. His eyes were enormous and pleading, lips trembling, movements urgent.

The Captain realized his job was not yet over; there was still someone to save, and he had been trained to protect civilians lives at all cost. He also registered that he was crying, his vision blurring and wet trails running down his cheeks to dampen the high collar of his uniform.

Naruto closed his eyes, mentally and physically exhausted, and when the boy tried to tug him again he let himself be dragged. Slowly at first, but then steadily faster; upon the stairs, along ruined, dirtied corridors, one foot after the other on the flaked wooden floor.

Stripes of dying sunlight intruded the darkness from under the charred, blown-up door that connected to the outside.

Naruto gathered all the strength he had left and hastened the pace, preceding the black haired boy along the hallway. He pushed the unhinged door open, putting all his weight on his good shoulder.

Together with the young boy, he rolled out onto the muddy road.

*They were two minutes late on the Rescue Squad.*

Luckily for them, General Sarutobi had delayed the team's departure, obviously only because he
needed a cigarette break.

The journey back to the headquarters was gloomy and silent. Asuma didn’t actually need to ask for explanations when he saw the Union’s best soldier come to the rally point late, alone and covered in blood. He already knew something went horribly wrong. He could wait for details until they reached the base, where they were granted to be far from possible prying ears.

A medic soldier put the time to use tending to Naruto’s most serious wounds – the cut behind his head where he was hit when he passed out and his damaged shoulder.

The Captain cried silently.

The rescued boy firmly refused to get his feet checked, curling up in a ball every time someone walked too close to him. He didn’t let go of Naruto’s hand.

Captain Uzumaki walked into the Intelligence’s secured room with the boy at his side. The security had tried to separate them when they were passing the check-in controls, but his new friend had put on a sizable fuss, hissing, thrashing, scratching and releasing small distressed sounds.

Naruto had simply told his fellows to let him be and that he would take full responsibilities, so after a brief exchange of puzzled gazes the guards had stepped back and let them in.

If he had to be completely honest, part of Naruto was glad; the small, white hand firmly held in his own was gradually warming up, and the boy's general presence by his side was strangely soothing. Plus, he got nothing to hide from him as he reported what happened and what he saw to his superiors. The boy was there with him when hell broke loose, afterall; he was going to be a key witness anyway.

In the small, functional room General Hatake was already sitting at the table, papers at hand, a troubled expression hardening his features.

Hearing footsteps coming in, he shifted his only eye to the newcomers, no further emotion showing on his face after he noticed Naruto's partner.

“Please, have a sit,” he gestured with his usual, relaxed timbre.

Naruto obeyed, drawing a chair from the opposite side of the table, he slowly bent his pained limbs to sit in it. The boy stood at his side, his curious black eyes shifting from Naruto's sitting form to the general's. Kakashi held the stranger's gaze unperturbed, black patch in place on his left eye and high collar of the uniform still covering the lower half of his face.

“Shikamaru and the others are going to be here soon,” he only said, his eye still focused on their guest's face.

Naruto unconsciously moved his thumb to caress the soft, so-impossibly-white skin of his new friend, pulling a chair for him beside his own. He smiled at those liquid, curious orbs and the boy gracefully sat down without the need of being told.

Shortly, the door opened again and the other generals came in, together with the Chief of the Intelligence Department.
Naruto stood up politely, bowing slightly as he greeted them.

“General Shiranui, General Sarutobi, Chief Nara.”

Shikamaru reached them first, slamming down a heavy-looking folder of files on the glass surface of the table.

“Fuck the formalities, Naruto!” he growled.

He looked concerned, angry and distressed. The wrinkles on his forehead and his pursed lips gave away his barely restrained tension.

Genma and Asuma sat at the table near Kakashi and Naruto took his seat again.

Shikamaru exhaled noisily, his right hand half covering his face as he tiredly massaged his lids and the bridge of his nose, likely trying to relieve some stress.

“Naruto.... What the fuck happened.”

It wasn't a question.

Naruto lowered his face, looking down at the material of his still bloodied trousers.

“Something was waiting for us,” he murmured, feeling tired.

Shikamaru bit his lower lip, nodding in understanding. He reached out to pull a chair for himself at the head of the table and dropped down on it.

“All dead?” he asked bluntly, his tone neutral despite his grieving expression.

Naruto got the meaning of the question and gulped, a knot instantly tying in his throat. He felt like crying again.

“Yeah,” he breathed, instead. The word came out broken, but Naruto didn't mind. It was the best he could muster in the state he was in.

Shikamaru sighed once again, longer and louder this time. He caressed his head, running a hand from his forehead to the band holding his hair in a ponytail.

“Tell us everything, from the beginning. Don't overlook details.” his brown, intelligent eyes shifted to the boy sat at Naruto's right side and lingered on him for a while.

Naruto nodded and did as he was told, starting his recollection from the moment the squad intruded the building, running smoothly through Akatsuki’s ambush, the bomb, the fact that Kiba was injured and stayed behind with Sakura. He described the rooms of the second level underground and handed over the DVDs they found in the info lab. As he reached the point when the lightning went off, he stopped for a second, suddenly overwhelmed.

The others patiently waited for him to recover, respectfully not pushing the issue.

The boy at his side shifted, his fingers tightening around Naruto's hand.

The Captain looked up to the ceiling, forcing the words out of his throat. It was painful, but it needed to be done.

“Something attacked us,” he managed to blurt out, voice raspy. “Something monstrous, ruthless
and incredibly strong. Creatures like I've never seen.”

Everybody's attention was on him and Naruto concentrated, trying to remember as many details as possible.

“As far as I could see in the poor light, those things looks like a strange mixture of different beasts living on Earth, but they have something human in them, somehow. They have as many limbs as spiders have, maybe more. The front limbs are longer and folded, looking like claws. Those are really sharp, cutting like well honed blades, two meters long or so. Their faces are horrendous, with a huge mouth with pincers and many rows of pointy teeth. But the crane is disturbingly human like.”

He took a break, searching for the faces of his fellows to see if they were following him.

Shikamaru looked completely disbelieving, ashen pale in the neon lights of the room. Genma and Asuma were strangely tensed, their back straight and shoulders squared, jaw tightened.

“They are really strong, nimble and fast,” the Captain went on, this time looking at them as he spoke. “They are likely intelligent, but I am not sure if they have any purpose other than killing. They totally can see in the darkness.”

“How many of those were there?” General Shiranui interrupted, his tone unveiling some poorly hidden concern.

Naruto tried to come up with an answer, quickly skimming through his memories.

“Not sure. I saw just one, but I am convinced they were more. Probably two or three at least. I could hear them moving and growling in the dark. They roar in a way that makes your skin crawl,” he provided, watching as a grimace appeared on Genma's face.

“Those beasts... Were they responsible of the death of all six the Kyuubi members?”

The Captain nodded.

“We tried shooting them but it didn't seem to kill them. We couldn't properly see in the darkness and they move at lightning speed. They came out all in a sudden and I just...” Naruto trailed off, licking nervously at his chapped lips.

“I just didn't know what to do,” he admitted, his blue eyes going wet.

He let out a trembling breath, concentrating on the shimmering glass surface of the table.

“At some point I got hit to the head,” he gestured vaguely for his wound with his free hand “And lost consciousness. When I woke up, Shino, Kankuro, Ten Ten and Choji were dead.”

General Sarutobi nodded grimly, fumbling in his uniform pockets and coming out with a pack of cigarettes and a zippo.

“You cannot smoke in here,” Shikamaru reminded him gently, voice weirdly drained and unsure.

“Do I look like I give a shit?” Asuma countered, his tone equally soft.

A corner of the Chief’s lips turned upwards with no amusement.

“Lend me one?” he demanded, and the General snorted, taking out a stick for himself and then throwing the package to the other man. He put the cigarette in a corner of his mouth with quivering fingers, then lit it with a couple of sharp drags. He slid the lighter on the table towards Shikamaru.
“Go on,” he invited Naruto, puffing out some smoke.

The Captain nodded, running his left hand through his dirtied hair as he worked out his memories.

“While I was checking the laboratory for survivors I found him,” he stated, indicating to the right with his head, toward the black haired boy. The generals' attention shifted to their unannounced guest, who silently sat in his chair with a neutral expression on his face.

“Does he speak our language?” Asuma inquired, and Naruto nodded once.

“So he said. And since he listened to me up to this point, I guess he wasn’t lying.”

“What's your name?” Shikamaru addressed the boy, tentatively.

His new friend blinked a couple of times, his doll-like face static except for the fluttering of his lashes. His big, clever eyes were focused on Shikamaru, a sign he understood he was the one called in. In any case, he did nothing but assessing him.

“He hasn't said a word since the moment I found him, actually,” Naruto filled in, his body leaning forward so that he could observe the boy's face.

Shikamaru nodded, his lips still tight.

“He's likely traumatized,” he offered as an explanation. “He's dressed like a civilian,” he tilted his head, watching the doll-face as the boy mirrored him, doing the same.

“It could also be that the Common Language is not his native tongue. You know, there are minorities who still speaks their old language as the first one, in their communities. Did he have any documents with himself?”

Naruto shrugged.

“Nah, nothing. The security searched us before coming inside, but he had nothing on him.”

Shikamaru wrote down something in his folder, eyes still fixated on the boy, inspecting him closely. Then his gaze shifted on the Captain once again.

“Please, finish your report,” he gently requested.

Naruto detailed how the boy and him had run backwards toward the exit, trying to escape the mysterious, deadly creatures. He outlined how he had found Kiba's lifeless body and how Sakura had died while saving them, giving them a chance to get away.

When he finished, the room went silent. The unadorned walls seemed to press in on Naruto, reducing the air flux to his lungs. Shikamaru's forehead was drenched in sweat, the pearly, round drops glistening in the artificial light. Even the stoic Kakashi looked perturbed, his only visible eye darkened. Asuma was smoking the umpteenth cigarette.

“I guess this is it,” Genma murmured, rubbing his mouth with the back of one hand. His eyes were unfocused. It wasn't like he was speaking to someone.

Shikamaru swallowed with difficulty and shook his head, his breath still irregular and loud.

“Somebody...” he started, clearing his voice before trying again. “Somebody have to tell Gaara about his brother,” he rasped, looking very uncomfortable.
“I will,” Naruto cut in, responsibility weighing on his already sore shoulders. "Gaara's a friend, Kankuro was one of mines." he voiced his his thoughts.

Shikamaru nodded shortly.

“Fine. Let's get a break, all of us. We have many issues to examine and it's no use trying to work things out in the mood we are in right now.”

Asuma was the first one to stand up, followed closely by Kakashi.

“What about the boy?” Genma conveniently pointed out.

All the heads turned towards Naruto.

It was pretty obvious that the boy didn't want to leave Naruto's side. When the blond tried to let go of his hand, even for a second, while he was discussing the situation with his superiors, the boy had clasped his shirt instead, hiding behind his back and pressing his face in-between his shoulder-blades.

Kakashi and Genma had insisted for Naruto to drop him to the Security Department, where he could be kept under surveillance in a room of his own, like the protocol called for. Anyway, the Captain had felt his stomach turn at the simple idea of leaving the boy there alone and coming back to his quarters solely with his thoughts.

His new friend was quietly hiding behind him, making distressed sounds now and then, and Naruto didn't have it in him to abandon him with a group of strangers.

Therefore he offered to keep an eye on him until he recovered from the shook he was likely coping with, and ready to talk with them.

Asuma and Genma's objections went to deaf ears; the Captain instinctively knew the boy wasn't dangerous and that he meant well. He looked so young, confused and naive.

In the end Shikamaru conceded, to the promise that Naruto wouldn't leave his guard down around the boy. *He might not be dangerous or menacing, but he could always be a spy.*

Naruto sincerely laughed at the Intelligence's suspicions.

The Captain knocked to Gaara's private room feeling like he was carrying the weight of the whole world on his back.

The door was brusquely opened, revealing the distraught face of his friend, red hair disheveled and eyes inflamed. Naruto startled, taken aback by the other Captain's broken appearance. He diverted his eyes to the floor, watching his stained boots as he felt the burden he was carrying almost choking him. He breathed shakily, then found enough strength to search for the green irises of his friend.

“You already know what I am here to tell you, don't you?” he whispered, his voice sounding pathetically weak even to his own ears.

Gaara's eyes moistened again, black kajal smudged along the lightly-colored skin of his cheekbones.
“Yeah,” he breathed, voice broken. He looked like he had been crying for some time already. “I saw you coming back without him. I know my brother very well, and there was no way he let the enemy take him alive.”

Naruto nodded, lips pressed together. His own eyes were going wet at the memories.

“I wasn't able to protect him.... I protected none of them,” he confessed, fighting down a sob that threatened to come out together with his words.

Gaara looked stunned by the revelation. He run the back of a hand under his nose, sniffling a bit, and he tried to read Naruto’s half-hidden expression. The blond kept his face lowered, not daring to look into his friend’s eyes.

“You mean you lost all of them?” the voice didn't hide his uneasiness and Naruto cringed.

He nodded.

“I am so sorry, Gaara,” he sobbed.

Gaara looked away for a minute, collecting his thoughts. He knew Naruto since they were children, he was perfectly aware of the kind of man he was and what he was able to do. They have grown up together in the army, challenging each-other, cheering together for successes and mourning together the losses. Naruto was the Captain of the First Squad of the Elite Forces – the Kyuubi – because Naruto was the fucking best first-line fighter the goddamn Union had ever seen. If Naruto had lost his men in battle, then is must have been a hell of a battle. As if to further confirm his train of thoughts, the blond looked wounded too.

“Don't be sorry, you asshole,” he managed to say, swallowing down the tears. “It's not like this is your fault.”

Naruto lifted his face slightly and Gaara could see that he was crying too. He opened his mouth to say something, but Gaara interrupted him.

“Cut it,” he hissed, feeling a warm, fond sensation stirr in his chest. “It's not your fault. My brother believed in you, your men believed in you. I do believe in you. Stop blaming yourself, I know who you are.”

Naruto wanted to smile at him for the nice words and the trust, but he only managed to grimace.

The redhead snorted, then he sniffled again.

“We are soldiers. We know the risks of the life we lead and we've already seen this happen in the past,” he added. “Don't be a dork.”

The blond blinked out the tears, and he must have heard enough because he took a hold of Gaara's shirt, tugging him out from the darkness of his room and in to a bone crushing embrace. The smaller man didn't resist him, hugging back his friend and patting his shoulders in a soothing way.

“I'll miss him,” the blond whispered and Gaara smiled a bit.

“We all will,” he mumbled.

Only the moment he stepped back to release the blond, he finally noticed they weren't alone.

“Who's he?” he wondered, stepping aside to take a better look at the boy hidden behind Naruto's
broad back. The blond turned his head, sharing a small glance with the guy who was clutching his shirt like a lifeline.

“I found him trapped in the Snake's laboratory,” he quickly explained, extending a hand backwards to pat the boy's side. “He doesn't talk, so I don't know a thing about him. But I am happy I could save him, at least,” he sighed.

Gaara quickly trailed his eyes from his friend's tired face to the curious, intelligent expression on the doll-like face of the guy grasping on him.

Something in that face was strangely off. Sure as hell the guy could talk. He looked like he understood everything about the exchange the two captains just had. The emotion of his face was not coherent with the situation, anyway. Why should the guy feel curiosity upon the other things, when he just saw people dying while rescuing him from imprisonment in evil hands? And why was he keeping quiet but at the same time observing all the things surrounding him like he was studying some weird specie in its natural habitat?

He wasn't showing any trace of fear, shock or dread. He didn't look wounded nor damaged either.

“Is he staying with you, now?” the redhead inquired, still not averting his gaze from the boy. The little bastard held the scrutiny, fluttering that unnervingly long lashes of his, his eyes almost looking amused.

“Yeah. He seems to be comfortable around me,” Naruto answered, and Gaara hardened his gaze. I wonder why he is.

“Be careful,” he just said, finally dropping his intense gaze and focusing back on his friend, instead.

“Will I receive a report about what happened?” he asked, back to business, bringing his emotions in check at surprisingly high speed.

“Of course,” the blond answered readily, slightly confused about the sudden attitude change of the other. “My team is no more, which makes the Sand the First Squad of the Union, now. Congratulations, I guess.” he tried to joke, but it didn't change how bad the whole situation hurt.

“I'd also be glad to tell you personally what happened, if only___”

“Not now,” Gaara interrupted him, offering a small smile. “Let's rest a bit, okay? It's late. It's been a very long day,” he suggested, and Naruto found it good advice.

“I am glad you came to me,” the redhead admitted affectionately, voice warm. “I’ll see you soon, my friend,” he added, quietly heading back to the blackness of his quarters.

He kept his eyes on Naruto as the Captain strolled down the corridor toward his own room, the weird rescued-boy obediently following behind.

He was almost closing the door, repeating himself that he needed to stop being so paranoid, when the boy turned, those big, black eyes pinning him down, checking him out the way a soldier would check out a potential enemy.

Gaara couldn't hide his knowing smirk.

*Little bastard won't fool him.*
The familiarity of his private space offered Naruto a little bit of comfort despite the grim situation. He'd been living in the headquarters his whole life, in this particular room for more then ten years.

There was a single bed in the right corner, closeby a large window overlooking the courtyard garden two stories down. A heavy-looking, old desk was on the other side of the window, together with a comfy, lived-in plush chair. At the foot of the bed sat a low bookshelf filled with Naruto's favorite titles, which he collected over the years. The wardrobe stood tall against the wall near the entrance, on the left. A small door in the left divider leaded to a private, tiled bathroom with a big bathtub-shower and basic, functional furnishing.

The Captain took off his boots before moving ahead into the room, peering curiously at his new friend's interested expression.

“So this is where I live,” he felt compelled to say, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. The boy followed him like a shadow as he went to the window, watching him as he opened the pane to put his dirtied boots out on the windowsill.

“I am going to take a quick shower now, okay?” the blond advised, instantly reaching down to take off his ruined uniform shirt, stained with sweat, blood and dust.

The action resulted in the smaller boy and a topless Naruto both holding the shirt in their hands, the soiled material acting as a link between them. The Captain let go of the clothing, focusing his attention in checking the wounds parading on his upper body, already savoring the calming sensation of warm water running on his tired muscles.

He headed into the adjoining room, moving confidently into his quarters, stopping himself in front of the mirror above the sink to inspect his shoulder’s injuries.

The medic had put several stitches into the cuts over there, and the area looked bruised and overall irritated. Even when he knew he was a quick healer, the wounds still looked nasty, and the Captain sighed, knowing that sleeping was likely going to be difficult that night.

His gaze run upward to his dirtied face, his eyes appearing even bluer because of the contrast with the filthy skin. He frowned, looking at his image; he was sure he had seen a gash under his right eye, the last time that he__. His scowl deepened. He bent to come closer to the reflective surface, his hands experimentally probing the unblemished skin in that area. The right side of his jaw was indeed stained with blood, but there was absolutely no trace of the cut that should have been there.

Was he even starting to see things?

The Captain remembered very well the moment he got hurt, and even the warm, wet sensation of blood gushing out from the laceration, drenching the collar of his uniform. He also had the occasion to see how nasty the wound looked, reflected in the glass cylinder down in Orochimaru's lair. But now the cut he was sure he had seen wasn't there anymore, and Naruto was left wondering.

Okay, people said he healed quickly, but definitely not this quickly. This was beyond miraculous. He didn't remember the medic from the Rescue Squad treating the wound either.

Confused, he stood up again, his brain providing no possible explanation for this mysterious occurrence.

He turned around, planning on opening the water and laze about in the shower, and he ended up bumping into his temporary roommate.
The boy’s eyes were laced on him, admiring him like he was the most amazing thing in the universe, the discarded shirt of Naruto’s uniform glued to his hands.

Naruto sighed, chuckling briefly.

“You don’t like being alone, mh?” he murmured, resigned to the fact that the boy was likely sticking with him regardless of whatever he decided to do.

“Give that one to me, it's dirty,” he gently demanded, touching the boy's hands to encourage him letting go of the shirt.

His new friend obeyed, allowing the cloth to be taken from him, but then stepped forward and pressed himself against Naruto’s chest, the soft skin of his face feeling strangely fresh against Naruto's shoulder. Naruto blinked stupidly, totally astounded by the gesture, and looked down to the closed lids of the other, whose face looked in a bliss.

He exhaled some air, hesitantly hugging the boy back, concluding that it was better – and probably easier – to let him have his way. The boy wasn’t the only one in need of some comfort, if Naruto had to be completely honest.

Smiling slightly, he picked him up like a child and sat him upon the bathroom cabinet, near the sink. He shifted backwards a little, so that he could properly see the boy's expression, and unconsciously he reached out to move some wild black strands off his face. As he realized what he was doing he retracted his hand as if burnt, his cheeks coloring slightly in embarrassment.

The boy's tresses were incredibly soft, cut short in the back but with long, voluptuous strands framing his face in the front. He didn't seem perturbed by Naruto's actions at all, his lips curved in a small, playful smile.

Naruto fought the strange sensation of intimacy that was warming up his chest simply from standing this close to the stranger. He had always been quick in bonding with other people, but this was utterly ridiculous. He should definitely get a grip.

He took another step back, the eyes of the boy immediately following, as if mesmerized.

He cleared his throat, inexplicably feeling self conscious.

“You said you can speak the Common Language,” he reminded, gently. “Can you understand me?”

The boy was still smirking but he nodded with his head. Naruto’s smile grew a bit, showing he was satisfied by the feedback.

“Can you tell me your name?” he asked, genuinely curious, his hands secured in the pockets of his pants.

The boy's smirk worsened, an amused grin now taking its place on the pretty face. Still, he said nothing.

Naruto sighed, partly disappointed, but he didn't let the silence discourage him.

“My name is Naruto,” he said, gesturing to himself, touching his own chest with both his hands and at the same time stressing the name. He then gestured towards his guest, touching the smaller chest the same way he did with himself. “What is your name?”
The boy fluttered his lashes, looking beyond amused now, almost like he was holding back laughter. Even this time, no answer came from him.

Naruto had had enough. He took a deep breath, calling for his patience to assist him, then he turned to the shower, newly focused in getting himself clean.

A soft, velvet-like voice stopped him mid turn.

“Sasuke,” the voice said. “That’s how they call me. And I wasn’t lying when I said I do speak your language.” there was a half hidden, delighted spark among the silkiness.

Naruto stared dumbfounded, warmth uncontrollably spreading to his face once again.

“Nice to meet you, Sasuke,” he managed to answer, acting like that weirdly calming voice didn’t affect him at all.

He shifted a bit, so that he could peer at Sasuke’s face without revealing his own completely. The boy was still sitting on the counter, looking at him closely.

“How old are you?” Naruto inquired, finding the boy’s manner of speech a lot more mature than his supposed age.

With the corner of his eye, he saw the lean figure shrug his shoulders.

“I am not sure,” he revealed, not seeming to care about it.

Naruto found he didn’t care this much either.

“Where are you from?” the Captain went on, sticking out his hand to turn on the water in the shower so that it could get warm. He was mostly asking questions because he honestly wanted to know the answers, but he wasn’t beyond his role in the Union’s army.

The boy looked genuinely surprised by the question, his long lashes fluttering repeatedly as his eyes searched for Naruto’s.

“I am from that place where you found me,” he declared in the end, at a loss as to why the Captain was asking him such an obvious question.

It was Naruto’s turn to blink away surprise as he turned to face the boy properly.

“The laboratory?” he asked, laughing a bit. “No, I mean before that,” he precised, positive there must have been a misunderstanding.

Sasuke looked at him like he didn't know what to say.

“This is all I can remember,” he mumbled in the end, almost sounding disappointed at himself because he wasn't able to provide further explanation. Naruto felt really bad all in a sudden.

Right. He was likely a prisoner. He had probably been tortured.

An image of all the strange instruments laying on the table in the room where Sasuke had been found flashed through his mind.

“I am sorry about that,” he murmured, averting his eyes from the black, confused ones.

He truly meant it.
Silence stretched, only the relaxing sound of flowing water in the background. Naruto was immersed in his own thoughts, recent, painful memories tormenting his soul.

“Weren't you going to take a shower?” the soft, lulling voice distracted him, those hypnotic eyes fixed on him again.

“Yeah... Right,” he mumbled, abruptly realizing he was supposed to undress.

Sasuke was smirking knowingly, his head gracefully tilted to the side.

Naruto swallowed audibly.

*Man. That boy surely was something.*

“I am sorry, but this is the best I can offer...” Naruto looked apologetically at Sasuke, a makeshift bed thrown together from a sleeping bag, extra cushions and blankets spread between them on the floor.

“Normally I would offer you to take my bed while I sleep on the floor, but today everything in my body already hurts, so...”

Comically dressed in one of Naruto’s long sleeved shirts, which looked huge on his lean frame, Sasuke leveled him a totally unimpressed glare.

“It's fine with me,” he reassured him, his eyes smiling.

They had both washed off the dirt and some of the tiredness in the bathroom, Naruto staying with Sasuke as he soaked into the water but politely not watching.

He had sat him on the drawer again once he had been wrapped up in a bath towel, checking on his pretty, small feet for cuts or bruises and finding them surprisingly uninjured.

The Captain watched as the boy nimbly knelt down and crawled to his improvised bed, patting the fluffy blankets and curling among them like a cat.

*So fucking cute.*

He sat down onto his narrow bed, most of his muscles sore, his shoulder already burning. He was tired but not sure if he was going to catch some sleep at all.

“Why are you so sad?” came the velvety voice, and Naruto looked down to the lump of covers that was Sasuke.

He sighed, combing his fingers through his still damp tresses.

“The people who died in the mission today... They were my friends,” he explained briefly, not feeling in the mood to dwell on painful details at the moment.

Sasuke stared at him from downward, the lights in Naruto's room making the streaks of gray and purple in his irises incredibly vivid. He seemed concentrated on a thought and unsure on how to express it, his cute, small nose scrunched up in the effort.

“Weren't they made with the purpose of dying?” he offered after some time, still looking unsatisfied about the way he phrased the concept.
Naruto couldn't manage anything better than gaping like a fish.

“...What?” he asked, unsure if he understood it right.

Sasuke blushed a bit, like he said something really embarrassing. He fidgeted under the blanket, lowering his gaze.

“I mean,” he tried again, not daring to look at Naruto this time. “Didn't they have to die anyway, sooner or later?” his voice was very small and uncertain.

Naruto scratched his forehead, at a loss. *What a nice way to see life's only truth.*

“I suppose so, but I didn't want them to,” he argued gently, attentively watching Sasuke's reaction. “I loved them. I just wanted them to be safe and by my side.” Naruto's voice saddened audibly.

Sasuke's mouth softly parted but he didn’t say a thing, looking in wonder. He balled his fists and curled up more under the blankets. Naruto could see his brain working around what he just said.

He smiled a little, feeling a bit broken inside, and lay down in his bed, pulling the comforter over his body.

“I believe it's better if we try to sleep a few hours,” he suggested, too exhausted do deal with anything at the moment. He put a hand on the switch, but then remembered.

“You scared of the darkness?” he had the kindness to ask, mindful of their experiences of the day.

He heard Sasuke shifting, then his soft voice lulled him.

“No. I like them.”

Naruto turned the lights off.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to thank all the kind souls that Kudo'd me, bookmarked the story and commented. Since Kudos seem to be a one time deal on this web-site, I would really appreciate if you let me know you are following the story in some other way - pm, comments, pidgeons, whatever. It would really help me, I swear!

Obviously, feedback is always welcome (and I am hyped at the idea of hearing your opinion on the story).

As for the updating time, I set my mind on uploading a new ch. EVERY 15-20 DAYS. I would like to do it more frequently, but I am working full time while writing my master's thesis, and I've already sold my soul to the devil in order to learn German. In case a chapter would be delayed (let's hope not), I will let you know either on my profile here on AO3 or in my shy tumblr blog (drop link -- >https://www.tumblr.com/blog/herja-k). Some of the story is already written and only needs to be revised, but it's still a long way to go!
Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Captain Uzumaki reported the disastrous outcome of Kyuubi's last mission to his superiors. Gaara proved to be a good friend, one who sleeps with both his eyes open. Naruto and Sasuke finally talked, and the broken-heart soldier decided to keep the mysterious boy.

Chapter Notes

As usual, unbeta'd. Feel free to point out eventual mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Naruto opened his eyes to the darkness, feeling warm and very comfortable. He blinked away a bit of the drowsiness, still half asleep, instantly realizing that he was laying in the quietness of his room.

He took in a lazy, deep breath, smelling the familiar scent of laundry from his sheets and a hint of sandalwood from the aromatic candle he kept on his desk, the one Sakura gave him as a present for his last birthday.

No sound of activity was coming from the base, the night utterly still.

Judging from the moonlight seeping in through the big, curtainless window, it was likely three or four in the morning, sunrise still hours away.

Frowning slightly, he wondered what had awaken him at such an early hour. His limbs were still sore, his body needing rest from the exertion of the day before. His shoulder slightly hurt, but by no means as bad as he expected.

Naruto tried turning onto his uninjured side to give his cramped back some relief, but something didn't let him.

The Captain's eyes shot wide open, confused and preoccupied.

If his senses weren't deceiving him, he wasn't alone in bed.

There was something – someone – very alive and breathing pressed against his right side. Naruto blinked a couple of times, fully awake now, trying to shift his legs a little and feeling them tangled with some other limbs.

*Other legs. Long legs. Long naked legs with soft skin.*

Okay, he must be fucking dreaming.

He didn't remember bringing a girl to his room the previous evening – nor any night in the past month, actually. Despite having things going on here and there, he wasn't exactly involved with
anyone, so it wasn't possible that the person laying by his side got there alone during the night. Furthermore, there were way fewer girls than boys in the headquarters, and most of them were already… taken. So the odds of one of them sneaking into his bed in the dead of the night were___

His train of thoughts stopped abruptly when his bed-mate drifted closer, silently cuddling under his arm and against his chest.

Then something in his brain clicked in place and his eyes went wider than saucers.

"Sasuke?" he whispered, attempting but failing to hide the surprise from his voice.

A soft, happy whimper was his only answer, and Naruto tilted his head, trying to find his bed-mate's face in the dim-light. Unluckily for him, the moonlight that night provided just a minimum glow which didn't fall directly on the mattress, so he was only able to spot the contours of the silhouette cuddled against him.

The body shifted again, smooth warmness now pressed in the crook of his neck. Naruto was partly thankful for the darkness, because nothing could have stopped the flush from spreading on his face at that point. Silky hair were tickling him, tantalizing, and he could perceive small puffs of hair bumping into his skin.

He made a huge effort to stay unmoving, trying to keep his breathing relaxed and under control. He didn't want to scare Sasuke.

He gulped, suddenly salivating. His heart-rate was increasing steadily, drumming into his chest.

His body was answering to the one curled around him in such an immoderate way that he almost felt ashamed.


Okay, he wasn't screwing around enough, point taken. But Christ, he wasn't fifteen years old anymore! Why the hell was he___

Something hot and moist suddenly disclosed against the skin right under his ear, soft breathing and kissing sounds clearly audible.

Fuuuuck. This couldn't be happening. This SHOULDN'T be happening.

Wetting his lips, the Captain squeezed his eyes shut, trying desperately to remain focused.

He wasn't getting excited. He sure as hell wasn't. Damn. He could control his damn body.

"Was it cold on the floor?" he questioned again, mostly to distract himself from the wet sucking at his neck, voice still gentle but huskier despite his many efforts.

A hand was placed onto his clothed chest and, as if called, a weird, hot emotion stirred savage into his stomach, like a burning, constricting fire.

Naruto took in a sharp breath, completely taken aback by his own reactions.

What the fuck was that? Why was his body answering that way despite his rational will?

His mate continued fondling, apparently unaffected. The digits of the hand placed on his heart spread, the palm moving in soothing circular movements. An unexpected sensation of calm and contentment added to the mix of confused, wild feelings inside Naruto's belly and his lids instantly
fell to a half mast, as if he was under a spell.

"You are so warm..." the velvet-like voice whispered softly into his ear. *Sasuke's voice.*

At that point, Naruto's hands were practically itching from the desire to do *something — to touch him, to embrace him, to ravish him* — and he just gave in.

His right arm wrapped gently around Sasuke's slim waist, holding him close to his chest.

The boy let out a warm breath against Naruto's skin, the hand he had on the blond's heart grasping the material of his shirt above his pectorals. He snuggled even closer — was that even possible? - letting out another of those happy little moans. Naruto's left hand caressed along the arm resting across his bust, up to the other boy's shoulder — naked, poking out from the collar of Naruto's oversized shirt — then down along his side.

There was a tender hand, now, trailing delicately through Naruto's blond tresses. It felt so unbelievably *good* and comforting.

He allowed his lids to fall closed, goosebumps forming on his skin in response to all the loving affection he was receiving. He couldn't recall anyone doing anything similar to him — ever. He felt so wanted, so whole and secure in their embrace.

His left hand reached the naked, smooth skin of Sasuke's hip and upper thigh and he stroke there, spontaneously attracted to the sensation of skin against skin, not really concerned about what he was doing anymore. Sleep was tugging at his consciousness once again and he was merely moving on instinct.

The air started vibrating in a pleasurable, low and rhythmic sound, similar to a cat's purr.

"So warm..." Sasuke mumbled again, his voice sleepy.

Distantly, Naruto realized that the purring was coming from him too, but he was already dozing off.

The awakening had been weird to say the least. Naruto wasn't new to waking up in a bed next to a half naked boy, that wasn't it. The disconcerting part of that morning's circumstances could be summarized with the million poignant reasons why Sasuke *shouldn't have been the happy half-naked boy* in his bed. In fact, the Captain was supposed to keep an eye on him, make him feel at ease and ascertain that he overcame the trauma he endured in the most proper way.

*Well done, Naruto. Seriously.*

He had felt more than flustered when those beautiful, black eyes had blinked at him an inch from his face in the unforgiving morning light.

The bright side of the whole experience was that he hadn't slept this well in what felt like ages, and his body felt incredibly refreshed and restored, which sounded about unbelievable considered the bad shape he was in barely hours before.

After the awkward morning disentangling — about which he appeared to be the only one concerned, anyway — he had convinced Sasuke to wait for him into his room *just a couple of minutes*, so that he could borrow clothes of his size from Sai.

He had to admit, Sasuke looked incredibly good in their uniform. Plus, he probably was a natural,
since he almost acted like he was used to wear one.

His feet were still too small to fit a pair of boots in the male size, but luckily Naruto had a spare of Sakura's combats in his wardrobe.

Besides, five minutes appeared to be the maximum amount of time Sasuke was willing to be parted from the Captain, considered the scene the boy made when Naruto tried to explain him that he was going to leave him alone for a few hours while performing his duties.

At least he didn't cry. Naruto suspected that his heart wouldn't be able to take it, if he did.

Sasuke’s cute stubbornness was the main reason why, at eleven sharp in the morning, Shikamaru was eyeing both of them dumbfounded as they entered together the Intelligence's room to attend the follow up briefing.

The Chief of the Intelligence kept an amused eye on them as they awkwardly took their seats at the table, joining the already present generals. He waited for the silence to be restored, then his eyes immediately found the Captain's.

"I believe my convocation was confidential?" the Nara stated matter-of-factly, even if there was no bite in his words.

Naruto scratched the back of his neck, unsure about what to say – and what not.

"I know Shika, I read that, but he wouldn't ..." he flushed a bit, embarrassment adding to embarrassment as he realized he had completely disregarded the formal protocol the situation called for. It was already trouble enough that he had not been able to... perform his duties properly, so he knew that he better watch his tongue, at least. Unusually mortified, he raised his eyes to Shikamaru’s, an helpless expression on his face, but he relaxed when his friend’s lips curved in a small smile.

Naruto cleared his throat, then tried again.

"I am sorry for the inconvenience, Sir, but I take full responsibility for my actions. I don't believe my guest would cause any problem, anyway." he declared, regaining a bit of composure. "Besides, he might have something to add to the recollection I made yesterday," he insisted, challenging Asuma and Kakashi's hard glares.

Shikamaru's eyebrows shot up in curiosity at that declaration.

"Does he speak, yet?" he asked Naruto, and the blond's head turned in his direction once again.

"His grammar is likely better than mine." he smiled, trying to break the tension in the room.

Shikamaru's gaze shifted toward those black, always attentive orbs, an open, welcoming expression softening his features.

"What's your name?" he asked for the second time in a few hours.

Sasuke kept on watching him, face unreadable, blinking at him like he was assessing him.

Naruto bit his lower lip, tensed, afraid that his friend would disregard the question and play the mute once again. He moved one of his hands under the table, subtly touching Sasuke's thigh in a small caress. The boy's eyes didn't left Shikamaru's, nor did he flinch upon the contact.

"Sasuke." he answered in the end, the smooth sound of his voice someway resonating in Naruto's
chest.

Shikamaru nodded, averting his gaze to write the information down in the notepad he held in his hands.

"Do you have a surname, Sasuke?" he questioned meanwhile.

The boy shrugged, seemingly unperturbed.

"Not that I can remember."

Shikamaru eyed him briefly, then wrote down something more.

"Age?" he prompted.

"Not sure." no hesitation this time.

"Where do you come from?"

"The laboratory where I have been found is all I can remember."

Shikamaru walked closer, pulling out a chair for himself on Sasuke's other side. He sat down, placing the notepad on the table, and immediately reached his arms above his head to stretch his back.

"Have you been tortured by Orochimaru and/or his crew?" he asked while toying with the pen he used for the electronic screen, his tone light as if he was questioning about the weather.

Naruto clearly perceived Sasuke's muscles tensing under his hand, his entire form going rigid. His body language was screaming how uncomfortable that particular question made him feel, but Shikamaru didn't relent.

"Were you a prisoner?" the Nara added, still refusing to look directly at him.

Sasuke's hands balled in fists under the table.

"Shikamaru!" Naruto intervened, his tone unconsciously carrying a warning.

The Nara looked at the blond captain immediately, a hint of surprise in his eyes for the harshness of his tone. Finally, he shifted his gaze back to Sasuke, taking in his stiff posture, then he shook his head.

Sasuke was still wearing the same, neutral expression.

"What's the name of the men who did things to you?" was Shikamaru's next question. The boy's thigh under Naruto's palm started trembling in the effort to keep the contraction and the blond stroked it slightly, gently trying to offer some sort of comfort. He could understand that the questioning was a difficult, painful process for him.

"It was mainly the one named Orochimaru." Sasuke affirmed after a full minute of tensed silence.

Shikamaru seemed interested in the response, because he tilted his head to look at Sasuke closely.

"Mainly...?" he hinted, waiting for the boy to provide further explanation.

Sasuke's fists relaxed, but Naruto didn't stop caressing him.
The velvety voice spoke again.

"Orochimaru didn't work alone. He had another person, a medic, supporting him in his researches. He used to call him Kabuto. Other people occasionally came to see what the two were doing. Some of them were dressed in black and red and had a cloak with a lousy cloud pattern; others didn't."

Shikamaru nodded, writing down Kabuto's name in his notes.

"Can you confirm the report made yesterday by Captain Uzumaki about what happened in the laboratory?"

Sasuke averted his gaze, tilting down his head. He hesitated, looking conflicted.

"I didn't exactly see what happened. I was hidden when the Captain found me." he mumbled.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed. Having known the guy for quite some time and considering him a friend, Naruto could see suspicion and doubt disguised behind his bored looking facade.

"Should I deduce that you didn't see what was attacking you?" the Chief insisted, not willing to drop the topic.

Sasuke turned his pained face towards Naruto, a mute request for help written clearly into his eyes.

The blond flinched, suddenly feeling the boy's distress into his belly like it was his own.

"Shikamaru," he called out again. The tone was friendlier this time, and less heated, but the subtle request to stop probing was there nonetheless.

"With all the respect, Mr. Nara," Kakashi interrupted with his usual relaxed tone. "I believe Captain Uzumaki has a point. The boy is obviously going through a difficult time. We'll have further opportunities to question him in the future. At the moment, I am convinced we've more pressing matters at hands."

Suddenly, Naruto sort of loved him. Kakashi rarely said something if he wasn't required to, and his opinion was always the most significant when important matters were discussed.

Shikamaru straightened into his seat, regaining his formal posture. He took a last look to Sasuke, who had his head tilted downwards and appeared like a kicked puppy, then to Naruto, who was glaring back at him in a silent scolding, reprehension leaking from him in waves.

He sighed, massaging his forehead with one hand. Sometimes his friend was such a drag…

"You may be right, General Hatake." he conceded, looking at Naruto, instead.

"The purpose of this meeting was actually to discuss about the nature of the creatures that attacked the Kyuubi, and eventually collect further details on them. Plus," he turned towards the generals who were sitting on the opposite side of the table  "We must make a point on what we know about Orochimaru, Akatsuki and their shared project."

Shikamaru extended his hand to grab the folder he’d previously abandoned at the head of the table, quickly flipping through the pages, searching for something in particular.

Naruto took advantage of the small break in the discussion and leaned down to peer at Sasuke's face, shyly concealed behind his luscious locks. The boy looked troubled, lost in thought. Naruto never interrupted their contact under the table.
The Intelligence's coordinator finally found what he was searching for among his many files and slammed a couple of drawings in the middle of the table, so that everybody could see them clearly.

"Captain Uzumaki," he addressed, gesturing for the papers. "Do those look coherent with what you saw yesterday?"

Naruto forced his concentration away from Sasuke for a minute and leaned on the table to take one of the papers, dragging it closer. He was highly surprised to see a sketch of the creature he described the previous day, with additional notes scribbled to the side. The monster was drawn seen from the front and from the side, its creepy, unnatural features portrayed in details.

‘Sees in the darkness. Bullet-proof. Pale, transparent skin. Razor-sharp claws and teeth. Poisonous. Human-like crane. Scorpion-like tail. Shark-like teeth. Mantis-like limbs. Spider-like appearance and abilities.’ Naruto wrinkled his nose reading the descriptions. He totally forgot about the tail. He grimaced, remembering the grim sensation that almost paralyzed him when he firstly got a glimpse of one of those monstrosity hanging from the damn ceiling. As much as the drawings were accurate, they lacked in rendering the terrifying killing intent that radiated from those damn beasts with overwhelming intensity.

"Yeah," he breathed after some time of silent contemplation – this look like one of the creatures that destroyed my squad. How did you manage to have such an accurate representation, considered that I forgot to tell you about the tail?- he demanded, voicing his thoughts out loud.

Shikamaru's expression was gloomy.

Naruto lifted his head to check on the faces of his superiors, finding them darkened by a similar mixture of dread and preoccupation. A glimpse of annoyance shortened considerably his patience.

Those bastards evidently knew something that he didn't.

The Captain leaned backwards in his seat, his arms crossing defensively at his chest. He didn’t like being left in the darkness.

"Would somebody please care to explain?" he inquired, annoyance laced in his tone. "Because I am getting kinda upset, quickly." he informed, his cobalt gaze shifting on the faces of his comrades.

Shikamaru wheezed, reaching out to collect the drawing in front of Naruto.

"I found those sketches in the Intelligence's archive after my routine night confrontation with Lady Tsunade Senju." he briefly explained, hazel eyes fixed on the paper.

"Your men and you weren't the first to be attacked by those creatures, Captain." he added.

Despite being a commander and therefore well trained at hiding his emotions, Naruto failed badly at controlling his shock, disbelief clearly visible on his face.

"This means that Orochimaru had invented them a while ago." he concluded, overwhelmed by the knowledge that, if it was true, somebody must have contributed in keeping the information secret.

Shikamaru snorted, shaking his head in denial.

"The fact is," he explained, trailing his eyes back to the Captain's. “Those monsters weren't made by Orochimaru. Actually they are not from our planet either."

Naruto blinked a couple of times, trying to process the new information.
Fuck. That was coherent with what he had first thought when fighting them. They were so weird and different from everything he knew because they were concretely alien. And Akatsuki had been trying to form an alliance with the Invaders for years. The matter appeared to be way worse than he initially thought, and it was already tragic enough to begin with.

"So... they are not part of the project Orochimaru was working on?" he asked a second time, just to be sure he understood it right.

"No, they are not." Shikamaru confirmed, turning to face the generals on the other side of the table. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped the drawing in his hands towards Kakashi, leaning back into his chair and mirroring Naruto's guarding pose.

"Explain." he simply commanded, his tone was steel stern and demanded quick answer.

"I did some research but my knowledge cannot compare to the recollection of someone who was there, you know." he added.

Genma snorted, reaching out to pick up the sketch that was still laying in the middle of the table. He looked at it in silence for several minutes, lips pressed into a thin, harsh line.

"I was hoping it wasn't what I thought," he eventually clarified, the toothpick he was nervously chewing on hanging low from his lips. "When yesterday you described what attacked you it was familiar, of course. But that familiarity was terrifying, like when you finally recall that nightmare that made you piss your pants the night before."

Years ago," he started, his eyes glazing off like he was trying to remember something remote that he fought hard to forget. "When the aliens firstly arrived on the planet, you probably know things were different from now. The Union didn't exist at the time, since it was formed as a military global government to resist the Invaders. But at the beginning, resistance hadn't been an actual preoccupation. Aliens didn't attack us right away. The war only started after the slaughter of the welcoming party, an encounter between the leaders of both factions that was originally conceived to be peaceful."

"I know that shit," Naruto interrupted abruptly, his patience now at the limit. "everybody does. Tell me something I don't know for a change!"

Why in hell was someone practical like Genma suddenly beating around the bush?

Genma looked at him, resigned, then run a hand on his forehead. He looked tired, dark circles clearly visible under his eyes and small wrinkles around his tightened lips.

"After the welcoming party was slaughtered, alien raids erupted into the main cities of the planet." Asuma continued, looking himself ashen pale. "More than a half of the global population was killed in that single attack. And those creatures," he pointed a finger to the drawing in front of Genma. "Were responsible of the massacre."

Naruto blinked a couple of times, growing more and more confused.

He had born within the Union, and the military government and the Big War were the only realities that he knew. He had been in the army since he could remember, being the orphaned son of a General. He had been fighting the Alien Invaders and Akatsuki for his whole life. How was it possible that, in twenty-five years of this life, he never came across one of those alien beasts before
now?

Kakashi seemed to read his thoughts perfectly, because he felt compelled to provide more details.

"Those creatures were used only in the main, devastating attack and in some isolated, ruthless raids during the first ten years of the occupation." he clarified, his only visible eye ice-stern.

"After the most of mankind was killed and the Union set off a strategy that was purely defensive, the creatures stopped coming. The following offensive actions coming from the Invaders only involved small bombs of concentrated energy. Then, in the last twenty years of the occupation, almost all the guerrilla actions have been coordinated by Akatsuki. But to quote your words, Captain, ‘You know that already’. ‘ Kakashi stopped, watching Naruto severely.

"That doesn't change the fact that those beasts were the beginning of the War, and that they exterminated our friends and families when Genma, Asuma and I were nothing more than children. This is the reason why nobody who survived their fury enjoys talking about them."

Naruto nodded, understanding. He was familiar with death and sorrow, and he had experienced the atrocious way those creatures dismembered their victims, tearing them apart. It didn't need an effort to relate to Kakashi's feelings.

He collected his thoughts, adding the new information to what he already knew about the Union's situation. Then he turned towards Shikamaru, finding his friend’s attention focused on some other paper into his folder.

"If this is how things actually are, then we have now two huge problems," the Captain declared, watching Shikamaru as he nodded tersely in confirmation.

"Actually we have three of them." the Head of the Intelligence politely corrected, inclining his face so that he was able to look directly at Naruto over Sasuke's limp form, and also to keep an eye on all the generals.

"One," he started, counting on his index finger. "The beasts responsible of the death of half of the human population are back at attacking mankind. And we don't know how and why."

The generals nodded, begrudgingly agreeing with his reasoning.

"Two," he lifted the medium, promptly going on. "We still don't have any idea of the subject of the project Orochimaru was working on, nor if that project gave some results of sort."

Sasuke shifted in his seat, folding his delicate hands in his lap. Naruto couldn't help but following the boy's movement with his eyes, while, at least, nodding at Shikamaru in understanding.

"Three," the Nara concluded, ring finger up to join the others and a concerned look on his features. "It is possible that Akatsuki finally reached an agreement with the aliens, and that the two fronts now concretely joined forces on the battlefield." he paused briefly, sighing. "We all know that Akatsuki's main purpose have always been to conquer power through the Invaders. If something that Orochimaru created helped them, which would explain why there were some alien beasts in his laboratory, than we must be prepared to face a new, more powerful enemy."

A taut silence followed. Not a single one of the eventualities sounded good in the slightest.

Naruto placed both his elbows on the table, hiding his face into his hands, feeling a headache threatening to take over his brain. This was a huge, horrible mess. As he exhaled loudly, a grim sensation clutching his stomach, he felt a small touch on his leg from under the table. Curious, he
glided his head slightly, resting his forehead onto his palms, and peeked to his right at Sasuke.

The boy's gaze was focused onto his own lap, his expression unreadable, but his left hand was sitting on Naruto's thigh, repaying him for the comfort he received before.

The blond smiled a bit, seriously appreciating his effort. A hint of that strange warmness which lulled him to sleep the previous night sparked into his chest.

"I suggest," Asuma broke the silence, searching into his pocket for the familiar packet of cigarettes. "We set up another interrogation for the Snake, to begin with."

"Agreed." Kakashi immediately confirmed, while all the others in the room simply nodded. "And secondly," general Hatake proceeded, "Genma and Asuma will help Chief Nara searching for all the information about the alien creatures secured within the Elite Forces." it wasn't a request, therefore Shikamaru respectfully bowed toward his acquired collaborators.

"A member of my team is already examining the DVDs that Naruto brought back from Orochimaru's lair." Shikamaru provided, turning towards Kakashi. "Most of them appear to be data of harmless medical research, but one of them, which is encrypted, seems to contain the identity-files of the current Akatsuki members. I'll share eventual information as soon as I know something." he promised.

"As for Orochimaru's further interrogation, I have to consult lady Senju before this could eventually happen." he ought to precise.

Noticing that everybody was fully absorbed in the discussion, and none was looking in his direction, Naruto let his left hand slip under the table, searching for the smaller one on his thigh. Sasuke didn't even flinch when Naruto intertwined their fingers, bringing their warm palms together. Only the left corner of his mouth turned slightly upwards as Naruto's thumb started caressing the back of his hand.

"You don't have to worry about Tsunade-Sama's approval." the Captain assured, shifting his azure eyes on Shikamaru. "I'll call her. There are things that I would like to discuss with her personally."

Shikamaru looked at him skeptically, trying to assess if Naruto's direct intervention was going to annoy Tsunade or to help their purpose.

Despite the two of them not being blood related at all, he knew that Lady Senju considered the blond Captain almost like family, and the same was truth on Naruto's part. He wasn't sure of what brought them together – he guessed it was something related to Naruto being an orphan raised within the army – but he knew for sure that affection and respect between them were solid.

Maybe they could overlook the procedure, just for this time.

Slouching his shoulders, he lowered his gaze, defeated.

"You are such a troublesome person." he murmured, knowing without needing to see it that Naruto was smiling for his small personal victory.

And then, under the glass surface of the table, he noticed the entwined hands.

*Such a troublesome person, indeed.*

"Dismissed!"
Chapter End Notes

So here we are again, and finally you have some background and a better view on Naruto’s life and what is happening in the world he lives in. I am aware that the narrative rhythm of this chapter is someway slow, but I needed to lay the foundations for the real plot... and I am happy to inform you that from know on, the latter is gonna thicken and get darker pretty quickly. I hope that the warm interactions between the boys in this piece gave you enough of an idea of how bad those two are going to fall for each other!

I would like to thank everyone who kudo'd and commented the previous chapters. Feedback is obviously super appreciated since it makes my shriveled writer-heart beat faster... it's always exciting to confront with the readers reactions. And ah: I love Gaara. Guess you noticed.

See you next time!
KT

NOTE IN THE NOTE: flu had totally destroyed me last week, and I am behind in writing both with this fic and my essay. I managed to pull out the chap anyway this time, but let's cross our fingers that this won't delay me on the long run! - flu sucks -. You can always come find me on my (unuseful) tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/herja-k.
IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER – Naruto and Sasuke shared a bed and got hot and bothered. Captain Uzumaki mentally reprimanded himself but still couldn’t say no to the cute-looking boy. Shikamaru realized that his friend is really troublesome, but at least now everybody knows the truth behind the attack that slaughtered the Kyuubi. Or so it seems.

Thanks to everybody who's following this story. It means a lot to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
and gave a meaning to his life despite not being in any obligation towards him. She looked exhausted, and Naruto obviously knew that the last, tensed years of war were starting to take a toll on her. But despite all that, he was still able to see in her the strength, the determination and the beauty of the young woman who took his hand and gave him sweets when he barely was six, and had nothing in the world. _And Naruto adored her_.

“Hi to you too, granny Tsu.” he answered, affection and amusement clearly noticeable in his tone.

Tsunade jumped slightly, recognizing the voice, her attention immediately focusing on the screen the sound came from.

“Brat?”

Naruto’s smile widened at the nickname, his blue orbs finally meeting the Commander’s hazel and surprised eyes.

Tsunade blinked a couple of times, as if she suspected her eyes were deceiving her, then moved closer to her screen and camera.

“How are you? Is everything okay?” her voice carried traces of poorly hidden concern. Evidently, Shikamaru had told her about what happened to the Kyuubi and to him in the last 48 hours. _Well, certainly he did._

Naruto’s smile slowly faded, his happiness at seeing the woman slightly shaded by the uncomfortable feelings of loss and failure that he was carrying.

His team was dead. Saying it out loud just made it more real.

“Yeah. ’m kay. I’ve seen better days, though.” he mumbled, one of his hands coming up to caress his chest in an unconscious, soothing movement.

Tsunade hardened her gaze, taking a handful of seconds to closely examine the Captain’s face and search his body for visible injuries.

She hummed, seemingly relaxing when she found none.

She reached out and pulled back the chair at her own desk, gracefully sitting down.

“I am really sorry for your loss.” she spoke quietly, her eyes newly focused on Naruto but softer, this time. - I promise they won’t be forgotten, nor dead in vain. -

The Captain shook his head in denial, a small sad smile reappearing on his lips.

“Nah. I know that Baa-chan.” it was his way to thank her for her preoccupation.

Tsunade nodded, remaining silent a bit longer in respect of the soldier’s memory.

“So, what is it?” she questioned in the end, joining her hands together in front of her on the desk.

Naruto’s smile became more genuine and his eyes sparkled again, looking at her with mischief.

“I called because I missed you. Is that reason not good enough?” he complained, pouting a bit like a small child.

Tsunade’s serious expression didn’t even flinch, her eyes severe and firm on him.
Naruto tried to keep the pout steady on his face as long as he could, but after a short while he was forced to give up his childish attitude. He sighed, laughing a bit.

“You’re no fun!” he affectionately scolded her. “You used to fall for my puppy eyes!”

Tsunade’s stern composure broke, a smirk appearing on her face as her features relaxed.

“Yeah, it used to be more effective when you were eight years old or so.” she pointed out, looking at her fingernails with nonchalance. “Besides, you know what they say about spoiling a trick…”

Naruto chuckled a little.

“Now that’s why I am no Tactical General… “ he defended himself.

The Supreme Commander tilted her head, a new sparkle in her eyes that made her look younger and a lot less menacing.

“Seriously Brat,” she went on after a small pause. “You know I am happy to hear from you, as well as I know that you are not calling only because you wanted to make small talk with me. Those are busy, gloomy days, so spit it. What is it?”

Naruto bit his lips, surprised – but not really – at how well the woman knew him.

“I am calling about Orochimaru,” he conceded, his expression back to business in a few seconds.

Tsunade's features tightened slightly upon hearing the name, but she didn't interrupt him.

“We need to set up a second questioning session for him. Immediately.”

One of the woman's eyebrows arched, underlying her perplexity.

“And how comes that you are the one asking me about this instead of Chief Nara?” she inquired, already smelling another implicit request.

“I need to be there.”

Naruto's gaze was unyielding, his expression definitive. He was asking for permission but at the same time he wasn't, and Tsunade perfectly knew this.

She sighed, closing her eyes for a couple of seconds and massaging the bridge of her nose with her right hand, looking distressed.

“Naruto,” she breathed, opening her eyes and focusing on the Captain yet again. “You know I don’t like to interfere with the System’s bureaucracy.”

The blond nodded, his expression not wavering.

“My friends died in an ambush that Orochimaru probably orchestrated. They were my men and my family,” he stated, apparently emotionless. It was all the clarification he had to give.

The Supreme Commander pressed her lips into a thin line, knowing how much truth was behind those cold words.

She had known Orochimaru for years, the Snake being one of her partners in the Advanced Research Center on Life and the Universe before the asshole decided to betray the Union, joining forces with the Akatsuki. She knew perfectly how shady, deceiving and ruthless the man could be,
and she was familiar with his apparent ability at manipulating people.

“I understand that you are hurt,” she allowed, feeling a sense of empathy for his protegee. “But it doesn’t mean that people in the Interrogation Department didn’t do their job properly in the first place. They are not the one to blame.”

Naruto shrugged, releasing a harsh breath.

“It’s not what I am saying,” he precised, nervously combing a hand through his messy hair. “But I feel like... I want to see him, look into his eyes. He destroyed my squad. He almost killed me, and he kept essential information from the Union. I know the Bad Guys can do their job perfectly, but I_______”

Tsunade lifted her right hand, holding up index and third finger in a halt sign, effectively stopping him.

“I will authorize a second interrogation of the Snake,” she declared, with the tone she always used when she took her final decision. “It will reasonably take place tomorrow, since the Department needs at least 12 hours to properly organize and set everything up.”

Naruto averted his gaze from the screen, defeated, knowing that despite the circumstances it was highly unlikely for Tsunade to override the legal procedure just to satisfy one of his emotional requests. The Captain didn’t belong to the Intelligence Department; he was supposed to be and act as a man of action.

“I will also let you have a permission to enter the Security Branch,” she added, right after the blond’s high hopes almost collapsed.

The Captain's head shot up at that, surprised blue orbs fixed on her.

The Supreme Commander was smiling a little, relishing in the fact that, regardless of his attitude, the Captain was still waiting to hear her final word.

“Thank you a lot, Baa-chan!” he cheered, genuinely grateful for her concession.

Tsunade halted him again.

“You won't participate to the interrogation personally,” she remarked, inflexible, before the Captain could get too hyped about the achieved permission. “This is Yamato's area of expertise, and I absolutely don't want to meddle with his methods or authority.”

Naruto blinked a couple of times, biting his lips. He was unsure about what she was actually planning.

“You are only allowed to watch the questioning from a separated room nearby, together with Shikamaru, the Generals and the Head of the Security. In case Yamato would ask for suggestions - let's say what he should focus on, or your opinion about the prisoner’s behavior and answers - only in that case you are allowed to provide your point of view. But Orochimaru won't know that you are there, and if you are not required to, you won't interfere in the normal interrogation process,” the Supreme Commander explained, her overall appearance subtly ordering complete obedience.

Naruto gulped, nodding faintly in understanding. This wasn't exactly what he had wanted, but at least it was something. He could work with that.

“Good.” Tsunade concluded, relaxing a bit in her chair. She leaned back against the seat-back,
crossing her arms under her prominent bosom. Her commanding aura was still there, but considerably less severe now that she got the promise of acquiescence from the Captain. She studied his appearance a bit more, taking in the curved shoulders and the tightened jaw – he wasn't completely satisfied with her decision. Finally, she noticed the silent presence hovering beside the man's hunched form.

“Soldier, what's your name?” she inquired, all her attention now directed to the black-haired, pale guy standing near Naruto.

The Captain couldn't stop himself from chuckling a bit, amused by the fact that Sasuke's haughty appearance in a uniform had been able to fool none other than the Supreme Commander.

“He's not a soldier, granny.” he rushed an explanation as an answer to Tsunade's death-glare. “He's the boy I found in Orochimaru's hideout, the survivor. Tsunade, meet Sasuke. Sasuke, this is Lady Tsunade Senju, Supreme Commander of the Union's Elite Forces.” he introduced.

Lady Senju blinked a couple of times, eyes focused on the pale, quiet figure. She assessed his expression and the way he carried himself, rooming her eyes from his lean, muscular body to his innocent-looking, attractive features.

The room went utterly still.

Sasuke countered Tsunade's gaze with his usual, entertained one, tilting his head and blinking his lashes as if he was unsure about how he was supposed to act. His face didn't say a thing about his emotions or feelings, but Naruto had somehow got used to read his odd demeanor at this point.

The moment the Captain opened his mouth to cut the raising tension between the two figures, Sasuke's velvety voice spoke, clear in the empty hall.

“Hail to your grace,” he said, bowing politely to the camera.

Tsunade's extremely surprised expression mirrored Naruto's, and the Commander couldn't stop the amused chuckle that escaped her lips.

“Hi to you, sweetheart,” she answered gently, reciprocating Sasuke's gesture with a small bow of her head. “I am glad I finally get to meet you.”

Naruto smiled encouragingly, reaching out to Sasuke and dragging him forward, closer to the camera, so that the Commander could see him properly.

“I am surprised he spoke with you,” he enthusiastically admitted to Tsunade. “Normally he's really shy.”

Well, that wasn't completely true. *He hadn't been shy in the slightest when he was alone with Naruto last night*, but Lady Senju didn't need to know that part, did she?

Tsunade's smirk widened and a hint of devilry sparkled into her cleaver eyes.

“He may be shy, but surely he's more polite than you will ever be.” she taunted, her gaze back to the Captain.

Naruto did his best to look thoroughly offended by her comment, happily playing her game.

“Guess whose fault is that!” he countered, the biggest pout ever playing on his lips.
Tsunade waved his outraged words away, still smirking, resting her chin on her left hand in mocked boredom.

"It wasn't my task to give you a proper education, Brat." she scolded him halfheartedly. "At least I did try!"

Naruto was now fully grinning at her, the playful atmosphere bringing back his initial good mood.

To her credit, it was true. Tsunade actually attempted to teach him good manners when he was a small, hyperactive midget nobody wanted around. Those were among the Captain's fondest memories of the woman.

"I get that Sasuke hasn't released an official deposition, yet?" the Commander asked, sticking to her formal role in spite of the friendly, unofficial conversation.

Naruto shrugged slightly.

"He answered some questions during this morning's Intelligence Meeting, but he didn't undergo a full check, yet. He still have some problems in talking about what happened."

He wasn't sure why, but the Captain felt the need to defend his new friend.

Tsunade nodded, quickly evaluating the situation and likely concluding that it was better for her to wait for further information from Shikamaru.

"So," she continued, still looking serious and focused on the task at hand. "Anything else that I should know? Perhaps something more captivating?"

Naruto looked at her dumbfounded, sensing the trick behind her questioning but not being able to pinpoint what exactly she was aiming for.

Tsunade rolled her eyes at him, now both her hands under her chin, elbows on her desk.

"New girlfriends, boyfriends, fooling around?" she suggested, tone serious, arching her eyebrows at him in an allusive way.

Naruto gawked, taken aback, fighting back the red tint that threatened to spread on his face. Sasuke was studying him, suddenly looking interested.

"Naaah, Baa-chan," he whined, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. "You know I am a loner! I am not interested in such things." he assured, trying to look innocent enough to fool her.

He managed not to screw Sasuke, after all. It wasn't like he had something to tell her!

Tsunade narrowed her eyes at him, clicking her tongue.

"Such a liar." she mumbled, her face making it clear she didn't believe a single word.

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand, her chair scraping against the floor as she stood up.

"As much as I would like for this entertaining conversation to last longer, I am afraid I have to go back to my duties, now." she cordially excused herself.

"Shikamaru will deliver your pass for the Security Branch before tomorrow morning." she assured.

Naruto nodded, standing up himself.
“Perfect. See you soon Baa-Chan. And thank you, again.” he spoke with a soft voice.

Tsunade smiled at him fondly, then she bowed slightly.

“Take care.” she recommended, before shutting down the communication.

Naruto's blue eyes lingered on the now black screen as the audio signal for the end of the call echoed into the room. He stood still, almost frozen, brain already projected to the following day, to the moment he would finally be able to look directly in the face the man who conspicuously contributed in making his life a living hell. One of the most dangerous enemies of the Union.

Mixed emotions were stirring into his chest, clenching his stomach painfully, but all together he was satisfied he had bribed permission to witness the interrogation from Tsunade in person. Her opinion was important to him.

In the isolated environment of the soundproof Conference Hall, Naruto and Sasuke's breathing were the only two patterns accompanying the Captain's thoughts.

That was, at least, until his stomach decided that musings weren’t exactly good nourishment.

The low grumble that broke the quiet not only served to distract Naruto from his grim speculation, but also managed to embarrass him thoroughly as soon as he remembered that he wasn’t completely alone in the room.

Sasuke’s pool of liquid obsidian were focused on his face, the guy completely into his personal space. That circumstance was strangely starting to feel familiar, and Naruto gulped, desperately trying to get rid of the odd sensation of deja-vu.

“Uhn,” he cleared his throat, regaining a bit of composure and doing his best to avert his gaze from the attractive, smooth features of the other male.

“I hope you are hungry, because I am starving!”

The canteen was empty at that hour, except for the two of them. Luckily, Naruto had been able to snag something to eat from the kitchen or he would have likely fainted, given that he hadn't eaten anything solid in the last two days or so.

They were sitting at a table in the corner of the wide room, Sasuke munching happily on a whole bowl of sliced tomatoes as if he never had anything tastier in his whole life, and Naruto trying to ignore how adorable the boy looked with his cheeks stuffed with red fruits. To be honest, the Captain had offered to make him a proper meal – scrambled eggs with bacon, or something else packed with proteins – but as soon as the boy had spotted the bag full of fruits hanging from the refrigerator he hadn't been interested in anything else.

Naruto was still wondering what did the Snake feed him during the years he kept him prisoner in that weird laboratory underground – or if he did feed him at all. Sasuke's body looked healthy, all considered; he was slim but not too thin, and he had on him a remarkable quantity of lean muscle that spoke of some form of training. Also, the Captain remembered that he hadn't been fatigued while running together with him at high speed, the day before, and all of that spoke volumes against undernourishment. From what he had been able to see in the bathroom – not that he had actually peeked, but Sasuke hadn't exactly been shy about his nudity, so... – there were no traces of injuries on his body. No fresh cuts, bruises or wounds – which was already unbelievable, considered he had run barefoot to hell and back – and no scars either. His skin appeared unblemished, pale like the
moonlight and soft as if it belonged to a child.

Naruto tilted his head so that it rested against his hand, elbow propped up on the table. This time he was the one doing the intrigued, stalker-like staring, their positions inverted, and it felt a bit weird. But as he watched Sasuke eat with appetite, bringing small tomato-slices to his pretty mouth with graceful movements of his sticks, he couldn't help but being curious about his new friend's personal history.

“Is Lady Senju your grandmother?”

Naruto blinked a couple of times, realizing he'd been spacing out.

Sasuke was looking at him with those intelligent eyes, chopsticks politely resting on the top of his bowl, his features lightened up with genuine interest.

The Captain's brain took a handful of seconds to recall the question that was spoken while he was lost in his fascination, and when it came through both his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Heh. She's not exactly blood.” he replied, trying to figure out a way to explain his unusual relationship with the Supreme Commander to a stranger.

“She's not a relative. But she raised me like she was my real grandma, and I suppose that she represents something like family, to me. The main reason why I call her granny, though, is because I like getting her worked up. She doesn't like when people make allusions to her age.”

Unconsciously he smiled a bit at the memories.

Sasuke was silent but he was looking at him like he had many other questions to ask. So Naruto simply waited, giving the boy some time to wrap his mind around the information he just offered him.

“Don't you have a family?” as if on cue, the black-haired boy inquired.

Naruto was actually glad that Sasuke finally seemed to feel at ease enough to make proper conversation with him.

He quietly shook his head as a preliminary answer to the question.

“Nooo. I was born within the army. My father was a soldier, and he died on a mission while I was still in my mum's belly. My mother died of hemorrhagic complications while giving birth, so nah. I never met my parents. And there was nobody else related to me who I could be entrusted to.”

Naruto wasn't ashamed of talking about himself; all of this was history. He got used to his situation as an orphan years ago. Truth to be told, given the fact that he was born during the most vicious war ever fought, his circumstances weren't even this uncommon.

Sasuke seemed a bit perturbed by the answer for whatever reason because he averted his gaze, fidgeting with his hands in his lap.

The Captain waited patiently, his expression warm, open and encouraging. He didn't want the conversation to be over, he wanted Sasuke to relax and feel confident around him. There was no such a thing as a wrong question the boy might ask.

Naruto watched as Sasuke's eyes met his blue pools again, the boy's lashes fluttering, his face shy. Some pink was spreading on his cheeks as an indication of his uneasiness.
“Are the other…” he paused for a second, apparently weighing his words. Naruto leaned a bit closer, his natural sociability pushing him toward his companion. “Are people nice with you?” Sasuke finally muttered.

This time as well, Naruto was completely unprepared for the query. The questioning pattern was undeniably unusual, but he tried to keep in mind that Sasuke was plausibly held captive for the most part of his life. Being a bit socially inept or unsure about social dynamics was for sure the least of his problems.

“Well, not all the time.” the Captain answered honestly. Partly because this was his normal way to approach a question, partly because he truly desired to connect with the boy.

“IT was more difficult when I was a kid, since there wasn't other children of my age within the army and the adults didn’t have time for me cuz, you know. War. That was kinda lonely period. But then Gaara came in with his brothers, and later Sakura and Kiba and Shikamaru, and it gradually went better. Now I have a lot of friends and I meet plenty of good people, most of the time.”

He watched as Sasuke drank from his words, looking absorbed, biting delicately on his lower lip.

“And what does it mean, being friends?” he spoke the last word like it was some magical spell that he was afraid to pronounce in the wrong way. Naruto couldn't stop the smile curving his lips, bringing further light to his eyes. The boy was so authentically naive that he almost felt like he was dealing with a child. Well, sometimes at least.

“You never had any? “ he countered, his tone gentle.

Sasuke shrugged, denying with his head.

“I have no practical knowledge of human relationships,” he mumbled.

For some reason, the choice of words made the Captain chuckle a little.

“A friend is someone not related to you who deeply cares about you, and who you like in return and enjoy being with.” he described, trying to keep it as simple as possible.

Sasuke stopped munching onto his lower lip, now reddish, his mouth disclosed. He blinked a couple of times, the red tint on his cheeks coming back with vengeance, making him look all flustered. Under the table, he was nervously scratching his thigh over the Union's uniform.

“You told me I was your friend, back at Orochimaru's lair.” it was barely stronger than a timorous whisper.

Naruto's breath got caught in his throat, suddenly remembering that yes, he actually did.

Sasuke was still looking at him all blushing, his big, liquid eyes filled with hope and something else the Captain couldn't recognize.

Nested inside his chest, the weird sensation of warm and intimacy accompanying him since the day before grew in intensity, making his stomach flutter strangely.

“Of course we're friends.” he reassured, his voice thick with an affection he wasn't sure where it came from.

His small admission only made the blush on Sasuke's pale skin even more apparent.
Naruto cleared his throat, abruptly abashed like he just confessed to a lover.

*What the hell were they even talking about, for real?*

“Did Orochimaru keep you in his lab against your will?” he queried, deciding for a rapid change of topic, back to neutral, safe ground. Sasuke had been asking questions about him, but Naruto himself wanted to know about the boy.

The subject change seemed to help Sasuke regaining his composure, as his eyes focused back on the Captain and the reddish color on his cheeks faded a bit. He nodded, confirming Naruto’s suspicions.

“And you were...completely alone, all the time?”

That would have explained why Sasuke felt like he lacked the basics of socializing.

The boy shrugged a little, and Naruto could understand that he wasn't fond of those memories.

“Most of the time I was left by myself in my room. There were others like me in the hideout, held captive like I was, but they rarely gave us the opportunity to interact with each other. When Orochimaru wasn’t running his tests on me, I was usually alone. At least he provided me plenty of books to help me killing time. Well, he especially gave me those to determine how fast I was to learn, if I am to speak the true.” Sasuke practically grumbled the last sentence, sporting an annoyed frown on his face.

The Captain was thoroughly amused by his friend’s funny antics.

“And how fast were you?” he teased, testing if the boy was willing to play with him a little bit.

“*Faster,*” the other bit back immediately.

*Oho. Proud babe.*

Naruto grinned as Sasuke looked at him with burning eyes.

“But you know, I guess it wasn’t actually nothing special, considered that I had literally nothing else to do.” he sounded honest about that.

Naruto tilted his head, wanting to ask another question but unsure if he should dare. In the end, his role as a Captain and his emphatic soul pushed him to try nonetheless.

“Orochimaru and his men,” he let out, testing the waters. “Did they...do bad things to you?” here. It was out.

Sasuke looked taken aback, his body going stiff in the chair. The Captain clenched his jaw in reflex.

“I believe I don’t understand the question very well…” the boy spoke with a soft, insecure voice, but he sounded sincere.

In the effort to come out with a sensitive rephrasing for such a raw, crude concept, the blond tensely gnawed at his inner cheek.

“Did they… hurt you? Did they force you in things you didn’t want to do?”

Sasuke’s figure became visibly smaller, his shoulders curving and his face tilting towards the table as the meaning clearly sunk in.
Naruto hesitated, almost avoiding to breathe so scared he was to increase Sasuke's evident distress.

The silence stretched, but Naruto never stopped searching for the boy's face.

“It was mostly Orochimaru.” Sasuke spoke eventually. His voice was low, concealing an intricate mix of feelings. *Anger, shame, loathe*.

“He also was violent when I refused to do things he asked me to do. All the others got tired of me with the time... especially since I was getting used to the drugs they gave me.” the confession was clearly painful to tell and equally painful to hear.

Naruto averted his gaze, both jaw and heart tightened. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together.

Pure, unyielding rage bubbled into his stomach as all his worst intuitions were confirmed. *That fucking bastard, son of a whore. How dared he touch him?*

Another dark feeling coiled into the mix, making his blood boil – *Jealousy? He would cut the man's balls off. Orochimaru's and all the Akatsuki's he could take.*

He forced himself to concentrate back on Sasuke, whose appearance still showed signs of tension and shame.

He reached over the table for him, and caressed the side of his still downturned face with gentle hands, breathing out a soft sigh.

“I am sorry about this, but I had to ask.” he tried to explain. He wanted Sasuke to understand the reason behind that painful question.

“They won't touch you anymore, now, I promise. I will protect you.” he softly vowed.

Sasuke tilted his chin up a little, enough for Naruto to spot a small, shy smile on his lips. It was really faint – a slight, insecure curve of his mouth – but it was a smile nonetheless.

The blond answered with one of his own, trailing one hand through soft black locks and waiting for Sasuke to tame the grim emotions accompanying his imprisonment memories.

“Hey,” the Captain asked, suddenly getting an idea on how he could provide a distraction. “Is there something that you always wanted to do but never could?”

He was willing to give Sasuke the world, if only he could.

The boy seemed to seriously think about it for a short while, then his eyes searched for Naruto's.

“Can we go outside, please?”

Naruto's heart-beat increased.

“My... Of course! We cannot go outside *outside*, since you know, it's pretty dangerous there. But the headquarters have a beautiful and totally safe inner garden, if you like to...” he didn't get to finish the sentence. Sasuke's smile was blinding him.

“You can sleep on the bed tonight, since my body is not that sore anymore. We'll take turns until you get your room, okay?”
Naruto turned to face Sasuke, a corner of the blanket that he was spreading on the floor still in his hand. The black haired boy was already wearing Naruto's old shirt, which he borrowed as a pyjamas, the uniform he had worn during the day neatly folded and draped over his arm. The Captain efficiently finished preparing his improvised bed near the window, throwing a fluffy, billowy pillow among the covers. Then he walked back to his guest, gathering the extra clothing from him and tidily storing it into the wardrobe.

He gently pushed a very hesitant-looking Sasuke toward the bed, paying attention not to make him trip on the bedding laying on the floor.

“Hop in!” he encouraged, coming as far as to tuck out the sheets of the bed for the boy to climb in. “We're gonna have a demanding day tomorrow, and sadly we must get up really early.”

Sasuke was still looking at him like he was crazy and suddenly speaking a different language, fluttering his long lashes as if he didn't understand.

Naruto sighed, one of his hands rubbing his head of thick hair.

He stepped back and squatted down, sitting in the nest of comforters that was going to be his sleeping place for the night.

For some reason, he felt anxious and tired.

Tsunade had been faithful to her reputation of being a woman of word, and Shikamaru had delivered the permission to witness the Snake's interrogation in the Security Branch.

Despite the relatively quiet afternoon he had spent wandering around the headquarters and talking to Sasuke, the simple thought of finally facing the monster who caused him and his loved ones many troubles was enough to put him on edge.

Sasuke finally seemed to understand that Naruto was in no mood for his I-dun-wanna-sleep-yet stubbornness and gracefully sat down on the Captain's bed, crossing his long legs in front of him Indian style.

Naruto gifted him with a small, grateful smile, and half-twisted his body to reach the switch, definitely turning the light off.

He struggled a bit to lay down in a comfortable position, cocooned in the messy combination of duvets and sheets.

A light breath of contentment and relief escaped his lips as soon as his head hit the softness of the pillow. He closed his eyes, willing his body to relax, forcing his muscles to release the tension. He tried to free his mind from all the bad thoughts, forgetting the anxiety, the anger and the sorrow at least for some hours. All the problems would have to wait until tomorrow; tomorrow was the day some of his questions would finally be answered.

He started breathing in a regular, slow pattern, the same way he used to do when he meditated. He could feel his body unconsciously humming, attuning with the slow rhythm and getting ready for the night.

As he was starting to drift off toward the unconsciousness of the dream world, his rational brain registered a faint rustle and some soft padding. A couple of seconds later someone was curling around his back, pressing against his body from outside the covers.

Naruto sighed, half delighted and half resigned to the fact that Sasuke didn't seem willing to separate
from him, not even while sleeping.

He slowly turned onto his back, mindful of the smaller body desperately trying to share his space, and spread his arms lifting the duvet, silently allowing the boy to slide in with him.

Sasuke didn't waste time in scooting closer, clinging to Naruto in such a way that it was almost impossible to distinguish where one finished and the other began.

“Someone really dislikes sleeping alone, mh?” the Captain asked rhetorically, a small hint of amusement in his voice.

Sasuke released a small puff of air against his neck, together with another of those happy moans that expressed his satisfaction.

Naruto chuckled lowly, tucking both of them under the blankets and wrapping his left arm around the boy.

“You little cat…” he mumbled, pressing his mouth and nose to Sasuke's silky hair. He knew perfectly that he shouldn't be this open or affectionate with his guest, but he couldn't really help himself. The warm feeling of belonging and intimacy was still there, stirring in his chest, and Naruto couldn't deny that the boy's presence was somehow comforting for his tired soul. He didn't know how to rationally explain it or to put it into words.

Sasuke smelled like his shampoo and like something sweet that he couldn't identify. He snuggled into the crook of Naruto's neck, breathing against his skin, his small hand caressing the plane of the Captain's chest and shoulder.

Naruto could feel his own heartbeat hammering into his ears, his breathing pattern relaxing but becoming rougher while he was cuddled. He perceived the tip of Sasuke's nose nuzzling under his ear, his soft lips meeting the skin.

Eyes closed in bliss, Naruto spontaneously tilted his head down, searching for more contact. Sasuke's mouth met his in a chaste touch, lips so soft and pliant against his own.

The Captain's eyes shot open in the dim light, his brain screaming for him to move, to interrupt the kiss and whatever it was they were doing.

Sasuke moaned again, his delicate breath hitting the Captain’s mouth directly. Both the boy's hands were gripping Naruto's shirt as if afraid of letting him go. He leaned up again, slowly, his pretty nose brushing together with Naruto's, their lips barely grazing together.

Something was tugging at the Captain's lids, making his eyes gradually close.

Warmness had practically spread all over his body at this point, a hotter, stirring sensation taking over in Naruto's belly. The blond pushed quietly against those gentle lips, Sasuke instantly whimpering and pressing back, air audibly catching in his lungs.

He drew back slightly, leaving Sasuke a moment to collect himself, then he brushed those lips again, gaining another keening moan.

Bolder, thirstier, and desperate to hear another of those sounds, he let his free hand reach out for Sasuke's jaw, stroking the skin there and angling the boy’s face up so that he was guaranteed a better access to his mouth.

He kissed him again, caressing those tempting, perfectly shaped lips, then prying them open tenderly.
The boy's cry was louder this time, head reclining back and mouth opening up fully to the other.

Something irrational, burning and possessive roared through Naruto's veins, his skin heating up, eyes instantly going lust-blown. He pressed into Sasuke, delving into his mouth, lapping his palate and searching for his tongue. Without his conscious mind realizing it, his grip on the boy's waist had tightened to the point he would likely leave bruises.

Sasuke kissed him back with all he had, like a starving man in the desert who suddenly found water. He whined, tugged the blond closer, tangled a hand in blond tresses. And they kissed, kissed and kissed, losing themselves to the other, breath mingling, tongue caressing and teeth scraping.

When they separated, only because Naruto was subconsciously searching for a more suitable position to dominate the other, the smacking sound of their moistened, bruised lips somewhat managed to bring him back to his senses. His breath was ragged and irregular, his skin hot to the point he was almost breaking a sweat.

A thin trail of saliva still connected him to the sweet mouth of his guest, and Naruto thanked all the gods he could recall for the blessing of the darkness. Had he been able to see Sasuke's face, he was sure as hell he couldn’t have stopped himself. The pull, the want, the longing that he felt towards the boy were almost unbearable already as it was.

Sasuke shifted under him, humming a low protesting sound that went straight to Naruto's groin.

_When had he rolled Sasuke under him, anyway? Fuckfuckfuck._

He took a deep breath, trying to detach his mind from the current situation and think straight, his brain mushy and drowning in lust.

It took him an unbelievable amount of inner strength to pull up from the boy sprawled under him, interrupting the almost full body contact between them.

_Holy shit._

Needless to say, he was half hard, his cock obviously feeling called to purpose.

_Why am I like this, why am I so helpless when it comes to him?_

"Sasuke." his voice was husky from desire but his tone was firm. "I think we should sleep..."

The boy lovingly trailed his fingers down Naruto's chest, starting near his defined pectorals and stopping in the appealing curve of the blond's hip bones, feeling the naked skin there. Goosebumps broke out on Naruto's tan skin, his arms abruptly trembling under his weight.

"Sasuke, _please._"

Yes, he was actually pleading. He didn't know how to name the overpowering, wild hunger for Sasuke that was taking the better of his body. The logical part of the Captain's brain was actually shit scared by his own helplessness in front of the uncanny desire to own the boy, to mix with him and claim him.

Sasuke must have perceived the preoccupied note in Naruto's voice, because he stopped his ministrations; he reluctantly removed his hands from the blond's torso, giving him the space he needed to get his instincts under control.

As soon as the Captain's mind finally focused back, he slipped away from Sasuke, laying down at
his side, careful not to touch him. He remained motionless, listening to their breathing patterns as they reverted back to lazy exhales in the stillness of the night.

“Naruto?” it was the first time that Sasuke called his name, his velvety voice caressing the consonants like he was singing. He sounded thoughtful, probably believing he did something wrong Naruto was angry for.

The blond sighed, massaging his tired eyes with a trembling hand.

“It's okay.” he reassured him, doing his best for his tone to sound warm and to keep the shaking from it.

“I am just tired.”

There was a barely perceivable swish, then Sasuke's small, pretty hand landed on the thin skin of Naruto's inner wrist, his fingers kneading a bit there. A fond smile tugged back at Naruto's lips, and he was powerless to do anything about it.

He returned the kind gesture in the form of a gentle stroke through Sasuke's luscious locks.

“G'night.” he whispered.

A happy little sound was his only answer.

Chapter End Notes

I have to be honest here: I struggled with this piece and I am not 100% satisfied with the result. Sometimes, especially when I have to deal with a lighter chapter plot-wise, the fact that I am not a native speaker becomes apparent. I unconsciously revert back to my normal way of thinking and since my language is more complex than English is – both in Grammar and Syntax – my writing turns sort of twisted.

I read through the chapter at least three times, making an effort to simplify whenever I could, but I am (sadly) persuaded that it still sounds... weird. Let me know about that, ‘cause I am always in need of good advises!

Anyway. They kissed – fucking finally – and I hope that it is now obvious how Sasuke feels about Naruto. Our Captain is still confused on the matter, but it’s only because ethic has a stronger grip on him. Also, I am happy I eventually introduced you to Lady Senju (gotta love her sass), and Sasuke’s creepy greeting “Hail to your Grace” comes from Shakespeare’s King Lear because I love Ol’-good-Will and I figured also our Sasuke would.

As usual, a penny for your thoughts! Feedback is obviously welcome.
Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Naruto introduced Sasuke to Tsunade and gained permission to be present at Orochimaru's interrogation. The boys shared some bonding time, the unruly attraction between them snapping when their lips connected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

An official authorization paper hand-signed by the Supreme Commander was mandatory to enter the Security Branch of the Union's headquarters. Even when you had that, you were still required to provide the original copy of your personal ID and forced to undergo a thorough shakedown, being stripped of all your weapons, potentially harmful objects, and any transmission apparatus.

Naruto deemed himself lucky enough that they let him keep underpants on, at least.

The funny thing about this severe procedure was that, even if Sasuke didn't have any document on him, he was allowed in without much thoughts when Naruto guaranteed for him as a refugee. Surely it was because of his damned pretty face but, in any case, the Captain was pretty fucking grateful.

As soon as they crossed the borders of the department, two masked soldiers silently escorted them to a small, impersonal hall, deep into the high-security zone.

The room was empty except for a couple of chairs and a small table, all of them facing a wall-wide window that allowed a neat view on the adjoining hall.

General Hatake was already settled back in one of the chairs, one ankle resting on the opposite knee in his habitual relaxed demeanor. He waved lazily to Naruto as soon as he spotted the blond into the door-frame, and his attitude didn't change when he recognized Sasuke trying to hide behind him.

“I'm assuming Tsunade relented.” the quiet statement was an end in itself.

Naruto hummed in confirmation, stepping further into the room.

Since he was feeling unusually naked – without his vest, his knives and his gun – he was keeping both his hands nested in his pants' pockets, at a loss about what to do with them.

He came to a halt in front of the glass-wall, the tip of his nose barely centimeters away from the cold surface, his warm breath lightly fogging it. His attentive eyes were taking in the furnishing of the adjacent room, still vacant.

In the middle was a metal, heavy-looking chair with squared armrests. A plush armchair in blue velvet, complete with a cushioned back, was placed in front of it, providing an odd, stark contrast. A flexible, adjustable angle-poise hanged from the ceiling immediately above the facing chairs, showering both of them in a bright white light that was disturbing for the eyes. White walls. White floor. No windows.

Naruto arched his eyebrows in a curious frown; he'd never seen a real interrogation room before but,
from the first glimpse of it, he deemed the austere setting hostile enough to live up his expectations.

“This is a mirror glass, isn’t it?” he questioned, inquisitive, tilting his face to exchange a glance with a bored-looking Kakashi.

The man shrugged, winking at the Captain in a supposedly flirty way.

“Playing voyeur is always exciting, isn’t it?”

Naruto couldn’t keep from making a disgusted frown.

The door of the privileged room with view opened again, and an attractive woman with long black hair and pale eyes came in, holding a notepad to her chest. She bowed politely to Kakashi and smiled fondly at Naruto, one of her manicured hands moving a strand of glossy hair behind one ear, exposing a small earwig.

Naruto returned the smile and swiftly moved towards her, finally removing his hands from the pockets and assuming a welcoming stance.

“Oh hi, Hinata!” he greeted, smile spreading to show his regular pearly teeth.

The woman giggled and blushed a bit, holding out a hand to shake, which the Captain took.

“Good morning to you, Captain Uzumaki of the Kyuubi,” she spoke softly, watching Naruto sympathetically as his face colored a bit in embarrassment, realizing he’d forgotten the formal protocol once again.

“What brings you here, Naruto?” she then inquired, noticing the presence of an unfamiliar third person standing right behind the blond.

“You probably heard about what happened to my Squad…” the Captain murmured, some hurt shading his eyes as he spoke.

Hinata nodded, not seeing the point of making him dwell on painful memories yet again. The news of the Kyuubi’s slaughter had spread through the headquarters like wildfire.

*Everybody knew what happened.*

“I wanted to see Orochimaru, personally. At least I deserve the pleasure to see him toyed with by the Bad Guys.” his expression was neutral, but the bitterness in his voice made the Captain's anger and his seek for revenge on behalf of his friends pretty clear.

Hinata rewarded him with a small, shy smile, patting one of his shoulders in a comforting touch.

“I cannot even imagine how you might feel,” she whispered to him, her eyes glimmering with admiration. “But I totally understand why you do hate this man. He hurt so many people... when I think about it I am so disgusted I cannot even look at him!”

Naruto let out a small snort, his right hand running up to capture Hinata’s and hold it into his own. He squeezed it lightly, appreciating her gentle words.

“Thanks,” he murmured, a kind smile back in place as he looked straight into her pale eyes. The woman blushed a bit, holding the gaze.

That was, until her attention was mysteriously drawn to the presence half hidden behind Naruto’s broad back, cold, adverse vibrations issuing from them with intensity.
She instinctively shifted her gaze above the Captain's shoulder, meeting pools of liquid anthracite burning on her like embers. The boy's features were sharp and stern, and his intent felt admonishing, maybe even menacing.

Hinata took a step back, her gaze bouncing from the boy's to Naruto and then back, confused about why the newcomer was looking at her like she just attempted to harm him.

“Naruto... Who's your friend?”

The blond smiled, his positive attitude kicking in, and shifted his body to include Sasuke in the conversation.

“His name's Sasuke, and he's even more reasons than me to hate that damn Snake!” he briefly introduced, not wanting to go into details. “Sasuke, she is Hinata, Head of the Security here at the headquarters.”

Sasuke's dark eyes hadn't left Hinata's for a second, boring into her, not even blinking. They were huge and terrifying, saturated with a silent warning.

The guy was observing her down his nose, chin upward, tightened jaw and squared shoulders. Without being conscious about it, Hinata took another step back, letting go of Naruto's hand. If it didn't sound that crazy, she would have sworn the air around her was heating up, trembling with sparkles of electric energy.

“Meh, Sasuke, you are supposed to say hi!” the blond scolded his new friend halfheartedly, poking his side with a playful finger.

That seemed to work as a distraction because those unrelenting eyes finally blinked, features softening, the boy's face turning toward the Captain like a sunflower to the sun.

Naruto was looking at him fondly, a small smirk playing on his lips, and Hinata watched dumbfounded as Sasuke's own lips curved, his whole attitude drastically changing.

She blinked a couple of times, insecure about what just happened. Unconsciously she hugged her bust in a protective way, trying to get a grip on the feeling of uneasiness that blossomed in her chest.

They didn't have time to further discuss the matter, anyway. Shikamaru walked in with a serious, all-business expression, exactly at the same time the door of the interrogation room creaked open.

“We're beginning,” Nara warned, and all eyes shifted to the glass-wall.

Karin was the first one walking into the room, carrying a metal trail full of weird-looking instruments. Her hair was so intensely red under the angle-poise light that it was almost painful to look directly at her.

Proficient, she walked to one of the darkest corners of the room, to the far wall from the entrance. Gracefully, she bent down, resting the trail on the floor there.

Then Juugo stepped in, back first. His form appeared enormous into the threshold, the nape of his neck visibly scarred. He dragged in a pale figure, dressed in a filthy, ruined violet kimono with a delicate pattern of white flowers. The person forcefully pulled in was keeping their head down, a remarkable mass of long, black and shaggy hair hiding their face. Their feet were naked and wounded, ankles in chains.
Naruto had seen him only in pictures before this moment, but he didn't need to be told that person was Orochimaru.

By his side, Sasuke himself had gone rigid upon the figure's entrance.

After Orochimaru, practically shoving the prisoner into the room, Suigetsu came to view.

The silence stretched as the Bad Guys dragged the stumbling scientist to the metal chair facing the entrance, manhandling him in a sitting position. When he finally was accommodated, face still tilted downwards, Karin came to him with several pairs of painful-looking shackles, helping his partners locking the Snake's arms to the armrests.

Shortly after, his feet suffered the same fate, secured to the chair's legs.

Done with the security procedure, all three stepped back, taking their assigned positions against three different walls. Suigetsu came to rest against the mirror-wall separating the interrogation room from the viewing room, and Sasuke eyed him with innocent curiosity.

Naruto leaned close to the boy's ear, providing some answers for his unspoken wondering.

"This is the Abduction and Interrogation Squad of the Union, aka the Bad Guys," he whispered against his skin, only for Sasuke to be heard.

The boy's eyes widened and he nodded in understanding.

The glass did nothing to hide the nasty looking blade Suigetsu was concealing behind his back.

The armored door of the interrogation room banged closed, Captain Yamato finally showing up. He had a folder in one arm and a bottle of water in the other.

With secure, ready steps he reached the comfortable armchair placed in front of the prisoner's chair and sat down with a soft sigh.

The folder was placed into his lap, his now free hand unscrewing the plastic bottle, from which he proceeded to take a sip.

"Well, well, well," he chanted, the open bottle placed down at his side. "It does look like you wanted to have another chat with us!"

His tone was casual, relaxed and without any particular inflection, as if he was talking with an old acquaintance.

Orochimaru didn't move nor he gave hints that he understood he was spoken to, but this didn't seem to perturb Yamato in the slightest.

"You see," the captain continued, fingers playing with the papers laying on his thighs. "Some of our men had been to your place to pay a visit, you remember when we talked about that?"

Again, the scientist only sat motionless, and a lazy smile slightly curved Captain Tenzo's thin lips.

"C'mon, c'mon," he incited, voice still gentle. "Don't play hard to get, now. You know, it's impolite to ignore when people are speaking to you. Perhaps you'd like Bipolar Juugo to help you with your hair a little bit?"

The quietness dragged on, but the chained figure started to tremble. Yamato waited patiently, the prisoner's trembling gradually growing in intensity until the air started vibrating in a low, disturbing
The Captain's smile widened, apparently pleased with the result.

“Be nice, Juugo, give him a hand,” he softly incited, the man in question immediately stepping away from the wall and capturing a handful of strands with one huge hand, yanking up the prisoner's head and effectively freeing his face from the tresses.

Orochimaru didn't flinch, his eyes still closed, his skin almost greenish in the bright light. He had a purple, painful-looking bruise on the left temple, and dried blood stained his chin and the area around his mouth. Smears of blood were visible into his robe and neck as well.

“So I was saying,” Yamato resumed his questioning like nothing happened. “Some of our guys went to check on the location of your laboratory, since they wanted to say hi. Only problem is that someone already was in there, waiting in the darkness for their assess.” he paused for a second, bending forward and resting his forearms on his knees, watching the scientist's face closely.

“This is not a nice thing to do, you know,”- he scolded, his expression neutral. “And since we're all friends here – because we're friends now, aren't we? – I believe you owe us some kind of explanation.”

Sasuke's shoulders curved and Naruto was already leaning down to suggest him Yamato was joking around, when the Snake's laughter erupted again.

“This sounds pretty fun, doesn't it?” he spoke, and his voice was like nothing Naruto had heard. It was raw, almost metallic, resembling a low hiss. Now the he better understood where “The Snake” nickname came from.

“I eventually decide to help you and you manage to mess it up nonetheless…” Orochimaru sounded cool and almost amused by the revelation.

Naruto's jaw clenched, rage immediately boiling into his stomach, but luckily Yamato didn't let the scientist's temper get to him so easily.

“It's not like we didn't expect some welcoming party to be there, politely waiting for us,” he clarified, eyes stern. “It's that we actually didn't expect your family to extend beyond human boundaries…”

The remark seemed to get Orochimaru's attention, because the creepy smile instantly dropped off his face.

The chief Interrogator patiently waited, nobody moving in the interview room.

In the end, Orochimaru opened his eyes and Naruto almost jumped back from the glass-wall, so taken aback he was. The man’s orbs were bright yellow – completely yellow, with no iris or whatsoever – a long slit pupil splitting them in the middle. Like a reptile's.

The dark circles surrounding the orbs as a consequence of the lack of sleep and mistreatment made the color stand out even more stunningly.

Those unsettling eyes blinked, face still expressionless, linking with Yamato's.

“How many of you died?” the scientist sibilated, an obvious taunt behind his words.

*That. Fucking. Bastard.*
Naruto balled his fists, willing himself to keep calm and not fall in the Snake's dirty tricks. Captain Tenzo must have been trained to maintain his aloof state of mind in every situation, because no emotion showed on his features.

“None.” he lied, and if Naruto didn’t know better he would have believed him.

Orochimaru's gaze narrowed, the crazy smile back on his chapped lips.

“Yeah, obviously,” he conceded, skillfully playing Yamato's same game. He slightly shifted his scrawny ass in the metal chair, as if searching for a more comfortable, dignified position to sit in.

“What would you like to ask me then, Tenzo, my dear?”

The Chief Interrogator slowly leaned back into his armchair, being careful not to break eye-contact. He fiddled with the papers in his lap, sorting out two pencil-portraits from the folder.

Naruto knew what they were; they had been drawn by Sai right after the Intelligence Meeting of the day before, and they displayed the likeness of the two Akatsuki soldier the Kyuubi had killed in the hideout, the third being unrecognizable after the explosion.

Yamato pushed the sketches into Orochimaru's lap, making sure the man could see them clearly.

“Who are they?” he asked, deciding for a simple start.

Orochimaru's golden orbs lowered on the papers for barely a second, then immediately pulled up.

“Sasori, “The Master of Puppets” and Hidan “The Undead”,’ he quietly replied, smirk still in place.

“May I presume they are dead?”

Captain Tenzo didn't answer him.

“There was another man with them. Blond, with a precision weapon. He carried explosives on his body,” he offered, waiting for Orochimaru to provide the information.

The Snake paused, his face still unreadable except for the creepy smile.

“Deidara,” he stated bluntly.

Yamato composedly collected the drawings, neatly placing them back into the folder.

He leaned down, collected the bottle of water, took another quiet sip.

“How long has Akatsuki been working directly with the Invaders?” he asked, looking like he wasn't paying attention.

Orochimaru snorted, his grin widening to the point his wounded lower lip started bleeding again.

“They aren't.” he simply rasped.

Captain Tenzo nodded, casually ducking to place his papers on the floor.

The next second Karin was pressing a thick rag on Orochimaru's face, forcefully tilting the scientist's head back, while the Chief Interrogator soaked the material with the remnants of his water.

The Snake was gurgling, his body tossing and squirming in the attempt to save himself from drowning. Yamato waited a for good minute, before gesturing for Karin to remove the soaked rag.
As the sodden hindrance was removed, Orochimaru immediately took in a deep, ragged breath, his eyes wide and crazy, almost popping out of his skull.

“Fuuuuck!” he screeched, his chest heaving in the effort to recover from the trauma.

“You know I don't like when you lie to me, Oro-kun.” Yamato explained unsympathetic, still standing besides the prisoner's sitting form.

Despite his inconvenient position, Orochimaru snorted a laugh.

“I wasn't lying, you cunt,” he precised, his head tilted to the side to look at the Chief from the corner of his eyes.

”Akatsuki never worked with the Alien Invaders. I believe they've barely even seen them.”

Yamato seemed to consider the statement, nodding for Karin to regain her position against the wall.

“So how comes that, after more than thirty years from their disappearance, we met the Alien Beasts in your hideout?”

The question must have shocked the Snake deeply, since a glimpse of surprise showed in his orbs.

“Were they still there?” he countered, his eyebrows crumpling into a thoughtful frown.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean!?” Yamato reproached him, a menace hidden in his tone.

Orochimaru merely arched an unimpressed brow at him, like he was trying to reason with a child.

“Troublesome to explain.” he spat, rolling the words slowly on his tongue.

Tenzo smiled at him, some tension seeping into his usually emotionless mask.

“Right.” he allowed, gently massaging his hands. “So let's start from the very beginning, okay? I'll keep it really, really simple, I promise.”

Slowly, he stepped behind Orochimaru, so that the Snake wasn't able to see him anymore.

“The fact that we found those Alien Creatures in your laboratory proves that they aren't extinct, is that alright?”

Orochimaru chuckled, doing an impressive job in keeping his nerves in check.

“Yes, Yamato. That's correct,” he confirmed.

The Chief Interrogator stood motionless, only shooting a look toward Suigetsu.

“Why didn't we see them for such a long period, then?”

Orochimaru tilted his head back awkwardly, trying to look at Yamato's face from upside down. The scene was rather chilling to look at.

“Are you stupid? They simply stopped sending them to us. That's pretty much all of it. We had been decimated in only few attacks. It's reasonable that they deemed it enough,” he snarled.

Captain Tenzo nodded, bending his bust just enough to fit in the scientist's field of vision.

“Didn't you find a way to control them?” he asked swiftly, abruptly changing strategy and stopping
beating around the bush.

Orochimaru fully laughed this time, and it was terrifying.

“Man, you flatter me!” he breathed, sighing in amusement. “I don't believe I would be here talking with your dickhead if I discovered a way to control them, don't you think the same?”

Yamato huffed harshly through his nose, resuming the walking until he was in front of his plush chair again. He sat back down, his hands stretching invisible creases on his pants material.

“Can you tell me something about the project you were working on under Akatsuki?” he prompted, neatly folding his hands together.

Orochimaru's grin was now practically splitting his face in a half, showing pointy, separated teeth.

“Ooh, of course I could, my dear,” he singsonged, swaying his head left and right, tauntingly. “Maybe if you had something nice to offer as an exchange, I would consider talking about that with you…”

Naruto had to take a deep breath, his irritation back full force. Sasuke beside him was doing amazing, instead; eyes focused on the Snake, he simply glared at the man with poised loathe.

Seated into his armchair, Yamato made a gesture barely perceivable with his index finger, and Suigetsu calmly moved from his observation place against the wall. Orochimaru didn't flinch, nor his eyes did leave the Chief's for a second.

“It's pretty useless, you know,” he advised, his tone quiet. “You can get your man jab me with that pointy thing hidden in his pants, if you really want to. However I am immune to poisoning. So, unless you're planning on killing me…” he trailed off, dispassionately tilting his head toward the now hoovering form of Suigetsu.

“And no, boy, I am not talking about your penis. You could hardly get a girl with that size.”

Captain Tenzo's raised hand saved the Snake from quick death of a sliced throat.

Suigetsu was visibly annoyed by the halting command, but he obeyed his boss nonetheless, stepping back to his guarding position yet again.

“What was the subject of your study?” Yamato didn't relent.

Orochimaru erupted in a second round of sniggers, his head hung low and his whole body racked with laughter.

“Oh man, this is so funny!” he squeaked, his breath wheezing in the effort to stop the giggling. “...You're still completely in the darkness!” he chuckled a bit more, evidently finding the implications amusing. “Lost amid the fog like the worst of sailors!”

Clearly, Captain Yamato didn't find the circumstances amusing in the slightest.

“What. Was. The. Subject. Of. Your. Study.” he repeated, making sure to spell clearly every single world. “What were you working on? Where can we find data on your research?”

Orochimaru collected himself, his lower lip still bleeding and his eyes shimmery.

“All the existing notes were at my laboratory, which location is now well known. If you couldn't find them, it means that they have been destroyed. Which, automatically, suggests that I am currently the
only living person who could tell you something about that project.” his elaboration was slow, derisive, as if he was explaining a difficult concept to a person with a cognitive disability.

Yamato tightened his lips, his patience seemingly running short.

“Here’s my proposal for you,” the Snake chanted again, his pointy teeth glimmering, threatening in the bright light.

“I am willing to exchange information for something else, if information is what you really want.”

The Chief’s nostrils flared, visibly disappointed at the outcome of the interrogation.

That smug motherfucker! How dare he? Laying down propositions while being held captive!

Yamato stood up, fists clenching, and paced reflexively around the room.

“Well, of course,” Orochimaru continued, forcing his hand now that the tables had been turned. “You don’t have to accept my settlement on the spot. You could always think about it for another week or so, the required amount of time for another bunch of your soldiers to get killed in vain…”

Naruto's jaw was so cramped that his face was seriously hurting. He’d had enough of that bullshit. His friends had died because of that man, in an ambush the bastard wasn’t taking responsibility for, and here he was bargaining his conditions with the Chief Interrogator like he owned the fucking place.

The blond stepped back from the window, walking with a stride out of the viewing room.

Everybody tracked his exiting figure, but only Sasuke immediately followed, falling in step with him. He didn't ask any question, and Naruto was grateful for this.

If he had observed right, the Captain had an idea of where the entryway of the interrogation room was located.

With a couple of sharp turnings along the aseptic corridors of the Security Area, he managed to find a door which seemed to match the one he had noted from behind the glass.

He tried to pull it, not really confident to find it unlocked. To his extreme surprise, the armed gateway promptly opened.

“And what would you deem worthy of your contribution?” Yamato was asking, standing with his back to the door-frame.

The Snake's eyes shone in victory, his devilish smile widening and becoming monstrous.

“Freedom,” he spelled.

Naruto saw red.

In less than two seconds he was already on the prisoner, his right fist connecting with the scientist's jaw.

Karin, the only member of the Bad Guys that was facing him directly, only had the time to widen her eyes in disbelief.

The force behind the blow was so strong that the chair Orochimaru was chained to reclined backwards, losing grip on the floor and overturning together with him. But Naruto didn't stop, blind
rage taking over his body, clouding his rational thought.

This was the bastard that was putting the whole mankind in danger because of a gamble, pushed by his selfish thirst for power. This was the man that plotted his friends' murder. This was the man that almost killed him. And furthermore, this was the man that abused Sasuke and deprived him of freedom.

How many blows he landed on that asshole's face, he was unsure of.

He only was certain that Juugo had stopped him at one point, putting his whole enormous body at work to restrain the Captain. There was frenzied talking into the room, Yamato giving orders to his guys and Hinata speaking into her earpiece while standing into the entryway, her face paler than usual and obviously preoccupied.

Naruto looked at Orochimaru's bound form, laying upside down on the pavement like the cockroach he was. Blood was spilling profusely from the man’s nose and mouth, his left eye closed and swollen.

“You piece of shit, you should be ashamed you are still breathing, embarrassing failure of mankind!” Naruto roared, gathering some spit and quickly spewing to the scientist's face. His words were dripping with despise.

“You don’t get to trade for your freedom until I breathe, have I been clear?”

The Snake tiredly lolled his head, trying to direct his functioning eye toward the howling Captain.

“What the fuck was your damn project about, you disgusting son of a whore?” Orochimaru blinked, his brain likely struggling to connect Naruto's face to someone he already knew.

He gurgled something, spitting some blood onto the floor, and Suigetsu and Karin gripped his chair and pulled him back into a vertical position, afraid he might drown into his own blood in the meantime.

“Infirmary, we have a man down and bleeding. We need immediate aid at interview two…” Hinata was commanding.

“What about your damn project!” Naruto insisted, not really struggling against Juugo's hold anymore, but still extremely angered.

“What... my project…” the Snake mumbled, but then he saw him. He saw Sasuke peeking from the door, his pretty white face all afraid and troubled. And despite the pain, the broken nose and the various injuries, he found the strength to laugh again. But not a small chuckle or a giggle, no. A satisfied, terrifying and delighted laugh.

Naruto followed his line of sight and spotted Sasuke entering the room, a weird mix of emotions playing on the boy's features, making him unreadable.

“You son-of-a-bitch, don't you even lay your eyes on him, you foul, perverted motherfucker!” and the more the Captain rumbled, angered and sickened by the fact that Orochimaru was likely only finding a new way to abuse Sasuke more, the louder the Snake laughed.

Under the Hyuga's direct order, Juugo fiercely dragged a full-on-rage Uzumaki outside the interrogation room.
Sasuke watched helplessly as they pulled him outside, the room turning instantly quiet after their noisy departure.

Orochimaru had stopped snickering, reasonably because he realized he was going to bleed out on the tiled floor if he didn't get a grip on himself quickly.

Yamato was busy talking with Karin into a corner, and Sasuke took this opportunity to meet the Snake's functioning eye dead on, his own coal depth burning with disdain.

“Where is my brother?” he only asked, his voice firm and fierce.

Orochimaru bore his gaze without giving in, a bloodied, teeth-broken smirk making his face oddly similar to a cubist painting. Green and red and purple and black.

“Answer me,” Sasuke urged, his velvety voice attracting the attention of everyone in the room.

Orochimaru's grin fell, his nose, mouth and ears suddenly beginning to bleed profusely.

Somebody screamed for help, probably Karin.

“Fuck! You don't need to be this pushy, sweetie…” the Snake stammered, his voice low and broken. Blood was drenching the fabric of his robe and spluttering on the floor.

Sasuke's gaze was still fixed on him, unavering.

“Your brother is likely coming for you. You'll see that!”

A medical team run in from the door, a stretcher and some first aid kits in their hands.

The black-haired boy finally blinked, his pupils averting from the Snake's as Orochimaru's eyes rolled back into his skull and he went into a seizure.

Out in the aisle was still chaos. A patrol of Protection Soldiers had been called to secure the area and check on the situation, granting none else got hurt or missing in the confusion. Shikamaru and Kakashi were jogging towards Naruto along the corridor, the blond being cornered against a nearby wall by Juugo and Hinata. Some more medics were coming to the interrogation room, provided with resuscitation equipment.

Sasuke stepped out with nothing in his mind other than being together with Naruto again, ascertain that he was okay and seek for some comfort.

Juugo was not physically restraining the blond anymore, but didn't trust his temper enough to leave him alone.

Hinata was hugging him with her arms around his neck, trying to shush calming words into his ear. Despite the Captain being sagged against the wall, resembling a lifeless puppet, she had to lean on him standing on her tiptoes to come somewhat close to his shoulders’ height.

The black-haired boy stopped in the track, assimilating the image of the security woman intimately holding his friend, her body pressed closely against him, face hidden in the man's neck.

Naruto looked unusually drained, eyes closed and face tilted downwards. His golden locks were messier than usual, sticking in every direction, and his uniform all twisted and out of place. He still had his hands balled into fists, knuckles scorched and bloodied.

“What the fuck was all that?” General Hatake's voice was quiet but reproachful, his only eye stern
and glued on the Captain's tensed figure.

Naruto breathed out noisily, indicating that he was listening, but he didn't come up with an answer for the question.

“I have to apologize with Captain Tenzo and his Squad…” he mumbled instead, his eyes finally opening to reveal conflicted, swirling depths.

Kakashi shortly nodded, his stern face not cracking.

“You better.” he only confirmed, arms crossed in front of his chest.

“I guess I just lost it,” Naruto cheeped, barely a breath of sorry air. His eyes had dropped to the floor yet again, making it impossible to read what was going on in his head.

Anyway, Kakashi didn't need any hint to imagine it. He had known the Captain long enough to understand the man had a really energetic personality and, despite being generally kindhearted and well-disposed, he was likely to snap if rubbed the wrong way. He was positive that, now that the cloud of red fury eventually dissipated, the blond was already feeling mortified for his display of violence and his blatant disrespect for the legal procedure.

However, it was fine; Naruto was young and really committed to the Union's purposes. Nothing irretrievable had happened.

“What exactly did you mean, saying that you have a brother?” the question came from Shikamaru, and the fact that Naruto couldn't grasp its meaning pushed him to pay attention. Chief Nara was not-so-subtly checking Sasuke out, leaning his back against the wall on the opposite side of the corridor.

Naruto's blue eyes immediately darted to his new friend's face, finding pleading, confused black orbs stuck on him.

The Captain was clueless about what the Intelligence's Head was questioning, but disliked the helpless expression on the boy's face nonetheless.

“Sasuke?” he queried, touching Hinata on her lower back to encourage her letting him go. The boy's mouth disclosed and his eyes averted, as if he was feeling very uncomfortable about something.

He focused on his boots for a short while, still looking insecure, then he turned-over to face Shikamaru.

“The reason why I asked about my brother is because I have one,” he simply stated, chin up and straight back, as if to prove he had nothing to conceal and he didn't feel like he should justify himself.

Chief Nara didn't look convinced. He held Sasuke's gaze, face skeptical and arms still crossed, trying to read the boy's intentions.

“Was your brother a prisoner like you?” he insisted, refusing to back down from the topic.

Sasuke was stoic, holding his ground.

“He was.” he bluntly declared.

Shikamaru lightly nipped at his lips, reflecting on the new information and the events recently occurred in the interrogation room. Being the last one to leave the viewing room, he had been able to see everything of the hostile interaction between Sasuke and Orochimaru.
“I want you to release an official, detailed deposition about your time in captivity. We need to know everything; from what you were feed, to your shitty daily routine, to what happened to your family and other captives like you.”

“Shikamaru!” Naruto chided, but his implied menace didn't hinder the man, not this time.

“After that, I want you to undergo a series of medical check-ups to verify your health and collect medical data about you. This cannot be delayed anymore.”

Sasuke's impassive mask was still in place, but Naruto wasn't able to see it from where he stood behind the boy. Feeling protective and called upon, he finally broke free from the Hyuga’s embrace, stepping forward at alarming speed.

With only mild surprise, Shikamaru watched attentively as Naruto's ominous form reached Sasuke and pulled him closer to his body. His icy-blue eyes were practically daring the Nara to do something and try to separate them, if only he wanted troubles.

Sasuke's steel gaze sweetened right away upon being touched, and his visage instantly tilted up toward Naruto's, affection and vulnerability back in place as If they've always been there.

Shikamaru's lips curved in a tight, unamused smirk.

*Little-One seems to know perfectly how to play this game.*

Already upon tossing him the first bland gaze, Shikamaru had known their guest was extremely clever and cunning. And now the little bastard managed to get Naruto hooked, which was going to be a pain in the ass as an understatement.

Chief Nara blinked lazily, shifting his eyes to his blond friend and pondering him in the usual, quiet and caring way he used to approach him.

*Relax, I am not a menace. I am not against you.*

The Captain seemed to calm down slightly, the threatening aura around him diminishing in intensity. He was still possessively holding Sasuke to his chest, his fingers wrapped around the boy's wrist in a tight grip.

“We'll run the first tests tomorrow,” Shikamaru asserted calmly in the couple's general direction. “This way you both have time to unwind a bit, get some rest and come to terms with the idea. I promise it's nothing dangerous or too unpleasant,” he reassured.

Neither of the men seemed to agree with what he said, either way.

“Isn't the guy already checked?” Hinata's usually sugary voice had an uncommon edge of discomfort and irritation.

Shikamaru spared her a look, denying sharply with his head.

Hinata's mouth opened in a show of pure outrage, her gaze stern. Her pale, lavender pupils landed on Naruto, annoyance seeping from her pores.

“And you did bring him here?” she scolded, completely in disbelief. “This is supposed to be the most secluded, secret and guarded area of the quarters!”

Naruto hardly turned his face to look at her, not really affected by her words nor her tone.
“He's a refugee and he's under my protection,” he simply stated, Sasuke still standing against his body, discretely clutching on his uniform. “It's your people who let him in,” he countered.

The Hyuga grimaced, her demeanor going stiff. She looked at the couple in front of her, the Captain's body language screaming protectiveness for the smaller boy standing silent in his arms. Naruto's features were hard, his normally welcoming blue eyes ice-stern. Naruto had never looked at her that way. Ever.

All in a sudden, she felt like something important had happened while she wasn’t watching.

Breathing harshly, he let her gaze wander to the pale face of the newcomer, finding the forewarning onyx orbs fixed on her, ablaze.

At this point, It was pretty obvious the guy didn't like her, even if she couldn't point out the exact reason why.

She was long past caring, anyway, since for personal reasons she detested him with the same intensity.

“You better get out of here before I lose my temper,” she warned all the men around her, her voice actually coming out broken despite the implicit command.

She turned on her heels and stomped to the interrogation room number two, yanking the door open and disappearing inside.

The Captain sighed, his warm breath shaking the black strands covering Sasuke's forehead.

“I have to go fix the mishap I made...” he gently mumbled, his hand opening to release the boy's wrist but lingering on his skin. His attitude was tired and faintly beaten.

“I'm coming back soon, uh?”

Sasuke's face tilted up to look at Naruto's eyes, reading the worry and the affection in there. He mustered a small smile at him, an understanding one, and reluctantly pried his fingers open to let go of him. He comprehended really well that the blond had gotten in trouble, and that he was partly responsible of this.

Naruto managed to curl a corner of his lips, returning the gesture.

After a small, parting touch at Sasuke's side, he followed Hinata's steps to the questioning room.

Sasuke stood unmoving in the middle of the corridor, in the same precise spot where Naruto left him, obediently waiting for his return.

Both Shikamaru and Kakashi's eyes were on him, studying him, but his own were glued to the door that just closed behind the Captain's back.

“Is Mrs. Hyuga Naruto's friend?”

The boy's velvety voice spoke, crushing the thick, uncomfortable silence swiftly enveloping them. His orbs hadn't moved from the armored door.

Shikamaru shifted his gaze to meet Kakashi's, noticing that the man was equally bewildered by the question.

He cleared his voice, reverting back to Sasuke in order to take note of his reactions.
“No, not exactly. They have known each other for a while, but they don’t have much in common except the Union’s affairs and... other affairs .” Shikamaru trailed off, aiming to give the boy some information but not too much of it.

Nothing in Sasuke’s expression changed, his face neutral, his stance waiting.

He tilted his head in Shikamaru’s direction, smart black orbs meeting the Nara’s just for a second.

“Thank you,” he spoke, and someway the Chief knew he meant it.

Hands behind his neck, Shikamaru laid down on the comfy mattress, eyes distantly roaming around the immaculate whiteness of the ceiling in Gaara’s room.

His head felt heavy, stuffed with plenty of small, apparently meaningless details, his brain already running at lightning speed, trying to transform them into useful information.

Something weird, foreign and scary, but also oddly stimulating, was mercilessly chewing at his stomach.

Despite having known the Sand’s Captain for years now, Shikamaru couldn’t say he was friend with the man. He’d had something going on with the redhead’s sister for a while and he regularly met him since the man shared a strong bond with Naruto, but that was pretty much all there was to say.

Gaara, anyway, was one of the most attentive and perceptive people Shikamaru had ever known. And that was the fundamental reason why he was lying on the man’s bed at three in the morning on a week night; he needed the Gaara’s skills.

The redhead had been visibly surprised when he had found the Chief of Intelligence politely knocking at his door in the dead of the night. However, he’d let him in immediately as soon as Shikamaru mentioned Sasuke.

As Chief Nara both expected and hoped, during his brief meeting with Naruto’s new friend Gaara noticed things . Things that, combined with what Shikamaru himself had observed and personally witnessed during the previous days, depicted a rather weird and confusing picture.

It was like a riddle, and the Chief was determined to solve it. He couldn’t remember the last time when he felt so compelled to find the key and solve a mystery.

Gaara was standing a meter away from Shikamaru, his teal, kohl-lined eyes wandering lazily out the window. His posture was confident, but the crossed arms in front of his chest suggested that his mind was musing on uneasy thoughts.

“I feel like there is something we are missing,” Shikamaru murmured after a while, not bothering to move from his sprawled position or to search for the other man’s eyes.

He heard Gaara shifting, then felt the redhead’s attention focused on him.

“Yes, I think so,” he quietly confirmed, not changing his stance either. Shikamaru liked that about the man; he was always calm and considerate.

“As I already told you, I’d bet my right arm that the boy is trained to fight. But this information doesn’t match well with his apparent hate for Orochimaru.”
Shikamaru exhaled through his nose, closing his eyes for a second.

“His interaction with the Snake, today, spoke of loathe and disrespect. There was no way I could mistake the killing intent seeping from him as he questioned the man.”

He let one of his hands slip forward, swiftly caressing his sore neck. “He says he was Orochimaru’s prisoner, and that's one thing I strangely don't doubt.”

“...So you don't think he could be a spy or a traitor.” it wasn't a question, and Gaara's tone carried some polite reprimand, making the Chief well aware of the Captain's opinion on the matter.

“I didn't say that,” Shikamaru replied, feeling compelled to explain himself. - I just said that I don't believe his loyalty lies within the Snake.” still calm.

“...But?” the redhead prompted in a low voice.

“But there is definitely something shady in him. I don't trust him either, if that's what you wanted me to say. I wouldn't be here speaking with you at this ungodly hour if I did.”

Gaara grunted, to some extent satisfied with Nara's admission, but at the same time displeased to be indulged like a little kid.

“Honestly,” Shikamaru started, opening his hazel orbs and rousing his head a bit to meet the Sand Captain’s. “I always thought that there was something... off to the boy. The combination of his appearance, his demeanor and the way he drastically changes attitude when he is interacting with Naruto is totally weird. I could tell he was able to hold his own in a battle even before you confirmed my suspicions... but when Naruto is around, he always looks at him like a scared puppy that needs to be cared for.”

The redhead shrugged.

“I saw that myself. But I think the reason why he does it is pretty obvious; it's just another way to lure Naruto in, gain his trust, distract him and persuade him he isn't dangerous. But I know he is.”

Shikamaru's lips curved in a bitter smile upon hearing the harsh tone; as much as he hated admitting it, he was sure enough that Gaara was right.

“You should have seen him today,” he chuckled lowly, not exactly amused. “I wasn’t in the same room as him, when he threatened the Snake, but simply looking at his eyes from behind a window... I swear, all the fucking hair on my body subconsciously stood up in alarm.”

“The fact that he is against Orochimaru doesn't mean that he sands with us, does it?”

Chief Nara arched his eyebrows, his expression puzzled.

“I cannot imagine him being part of Akatsuki but against Orochimaru,” he stated, his brain running.

“Maybe he's a repentant? That would explain why he is trained to fight. Akatsuki is a military organization,” the Sand's Captain suggested, trying to help the Intelligence sorting things out.

“There aren’t many associations that provide the kind of fighting skill I believe he has, nowadays. He could only be raised by Akasuki or...” Gaara paused.

The sudden break in the discourse piqued Shikamaru's curiosity, and the man lifted his head lazily to take in the redhead full figure.
“Or...?” he aided, waiting for the former sentence to be completed.

Gaara's eyes refocused on him, almost shocked by the revelation just occurred to him.

“… by the Union. He could be one of us.”

Shikamaru frowned and seriously took a minute to reflect on the likelihood.

The possibility actually made some sense; Sasuke's training seemed similar to the military training the Union provided to its Elite Forces. If he had been one of them and lately he was kidnapped, it would explain why he hated Orochimaru so much and why he was kept as a prisoner in the first place. After trying to sort information out of him, the Snake could have easily brainwashed him, with his creepy techniques and unusual instruments, and that would explain why he didn't remember a thing about himself or his past.

However, overall something didn't click.

Shikamaru couldn't forget Sasuke's gaze as he bored into Orochimaru's.

It was nothing he had seen before and nothing he would tell expecting people to believe him.

Sasuke's eyes weren't normal eyes.

“Could be, but there's a part of me that in not convinced,” he finally said out loud, breaking the silence.

Gaara walked calmly to the bed, lowering his body to slowly sit down beside Shikamaru.

“Tomorrow I'll have his DNA tested, just to be sure. If he really was one of us, we will know it, then.”

The redhead sighed, leaning back to stare at the ceiling in a position that mirrored the Chief's.

“I know there's an ‘however’ coming together with your statement, so just spit it already…”

Shikamaru smiled, genuinely this time, pleased by the other man's perceptive wit.

“He looks younger than we are, and admitted he has a brother. His face is already difficult enough to forget by itself, don't you think? I seriously doubt we could meet and forget not one, but two of those pretty faces.”

Gaara smirked, chuckling a bit.

“Fair enough,” he conceded, reading without problems between the lines.
My apologies for the short delay, but I had a hellish friday filled with plenty of (unwanted) drama.

I believe many of you were eagerly waiting for the moment Naruto and Orochimaru finally came face to face. Does the outcome actually meet your expectations? Personally I was super happy to write our Captain beating the shit out of that jerk (LOL).

This chapter is particularly plot heavy, even if it might not seem so. Everything that happened in here - even the small, apparently insignificant interactions - is gonna be relevant for the plot.

Shikamaru and my man Gaara are now joining forces, trying to figure out the shady boy that Naruto practically adopted. Hinata is obviously displeased by Sasuke's appearance. And Yamato and his guys finally came into the picture (gotta love the Bad Guys!).

Comments, opinions and feedback are super super welcome (and cheers me up, especially hearing your theories!). Chapter is unbeta'd.

Thanks for reading this (and put up with me), people.
**Crimson tears**

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: The Snake's questioning didn't go as smoothly as planned and Orochimaru had a taste of Captain Uzumaki's temper. Hinata was all but happy about having an intruder in her branch, and Sasuke had questions he wanted to ask. Shikamaru and Gaara teemed up and shared their suspicions about the rescued boy's shady behavior.

Chapter Notes

Man, I am nervous.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was an incredibly peaceful winter night, a full moon shining above the east block of the headquarters, the courtyard almost glimmering in the slanting pale rays of silver light. Every now and then a light breeze delicately caressed the leaves of the many trees crowding the secluded inner garden, their silky rustling inexplicably soothing to Sasuke's ears.

He was sitting on the windowsill of Naruto's room at the second floor, window wide open, one leg hanging over the edge – giving him some pleasant, thrill sensation – and the other extended high to rest his bare feet against the opposite side of the window frame.

His overexposed milky skin was completely covered in goosebumps, being him clad in his custom nightwear consisting of Naruto's oversize t-shirt and nothing else, but he didn't have the will to retreat inside. His eyes were inspecting the depth of the night sky, such a beautiful and shiny wonder, with the numerous visible stars blinking back at him.

He felt so little and so exposed, perched on his private observation point on a world that was mostly foreign to him. However, the sensation didn't feel bad in the slightest. It felt strangely calming but energetic at the same time, and it was extremely welcome after the chaos of intense and anxious emotions that had outlined his last few days.

Quietly, he let out a deep breath, puffs of steam immediately dancing in front of his face and raising high in the air.

Without his conscious mind realizing it, the corners of his lips had turned upwards.

Since the moment he'd met Naruto – Captain Uzumaki – inside the prison that he had called “home” for his entire life to this point, he had felt like being on a roller coaster. For some reason, the man's presence seemed to stir a multitude of powerful and unknown emotions inside his chest.

It was kind of scary, the way he had little to no control on them. And also the other people surrounding him, Sasuke wasn't ready, he had never seen so many all together. It was difficult to keep track of all of them, to read them, to weigh them.
He sighed, chin now tilted completely upwards in awe, his body trembling in a full shiver because of the chilly air.

*She's not a friend.*

He blinked, his gaze concentrating on the window frame above his head.

*Not a friend.*

His belly cramped painfully at the uncomfortable thought, his chest filling with a red, hot and scorching feeling with a dark undertone. An obscure, bodily beast clawing at his insides. It was the same raw emotion he experienced earlier that day, since the moment at the Security Branch when he met her and had the occasion to size her energy.

Sasuke wasn't sure how to name the thing that he was feeling, and he didn't like it to say the least. But he was sure that it was related to *that woman*, and the way she had looked at and touched Naruto like the Captain belonged to her.

The evil beast in his ribcage clawed harder when Sasuke's mind provided an image of how intimately she had held the Captain to her chest.

He softly touched his stomach, helplessly hoping to soothe the almost physical pain.

Everything felt like a mess, the world he knew slowly falling apart in front of his eyes, but Orochimaru had told him that Itachi was still alive and that he was likely searching for him, so everything was going to be alright for sure in the long term.

For the time being, staying with Naruto felt so intrinsically good and right in so many ways that he didn't even question it.

As for the unpleasant sensation clenching his heart, despite being annoyed by the fact that he wasn't able to name it properly, Sasuke wasn't too concerned.

*She's not a friend.*

*How dared she?*

It was a problem with a very easy solution.

Relaxing, he let his head loll to the side, his orbs newly focused on the breathtaking sky.

He allowed his eyes to fall half mast and then gradually close, his long eyelashes gently tickling the high cheekbones.

The mindless swinging of his hanging leg stopped, his whole body now perfectly unmoving.

After a handful of quiet seconds, when his eyes opened again, the usual grey-black of their irises was replaced by a vivid blood red. He blinked once, lashes fluttering, vision gradually sharpening, and a series of three small commas appeared on each iris, adorning the unfocused gaze. The black commas seemed to swim in the redness, weightless, pulsing slightly before starting to spin around the pupils at maddening speed.

During the whole process, Sasuke kept his very still mellow stance, face completely expressionless. His mind was elsewhere, out of its material shell, a dozen hundred of meters from there, searching the headquarters for the frequency of one person in particular.
He blinked lazily, his eyes yet opening to reveal pupil-less irises decorated with an intricate pattern in black and red, making them more similar to precious cameos than to orbs of a normal living being.

The intense ruby-red of the motive glimmered in the dim light, like a gem possessing a brightness of its own.

Sasuke stopped blinking.

Hinata was tired. She'd had a hellish, busy day at the S-Branch after the unfortunate accident involving Naruto and Orochimaru.

The medical team intervened on the scene had been forced to perform resuscitation on the scientist, who appeared to have suffered some unknown kind of hemorrhagic outbreak. It seemed like all the minor blood vessels in his body had collapsed all at once, causing the men to bleed conspicuously, but the doctors hadn't been able to identify the cause behind the occurrence.

Attributing the damage to Captain Uzumaki's brutal beating, though sort of tempting, didn't sound very probable. Even if it was true that Naruto had acted on impulse while overwhelmed by blind rage, and thus his fists had hit the Snake's face pretty hard, it didn't appear like it was the beating that almost put the man into a coma. Anyway, the broken nose and swollen features hadn't made the medical team's job any easier for sure.

Hinata was at a loss. She had been the Supervisor of the Security Branch for five years in a row, since the day she turned twenty. She'd had under her responsibility the safety of the whole headquarters and the people living within, as well as the lives of hundred of despicable war criminals imprisoned in the building.

Not many of them had been much better men than Orochimaru was, to be honest.

Nothing had ever gone wrong, before. Tenzo and his guys had always been so clean, methodical and organized. Barely any blood had been shed in the various interrogation rooms in the basement but everyone talked, sooner or later.

Nobody managed to escape or get hurt without Hinata's direct authorization.

None of the generals or the executives assisting the interrogations had ever dared to mess with Hinata's authority or the Bad Guy's policy.

And then, Naruto came and completely disregarded both.

Of all the people that could have done something similar, Naruto was probably the last in Hinata's guessing list. She had known him since they both were teenagers, and the Hyuga family – once upon a time a powerful clan of noble lineage, involved for centuries in diplomatic relationships – had been wiped away in an Akatsuki bombing, leaving her and her cousin Neji as the only survivors.

Naruto had always been a smiling boy with a cheerful personality, ever positive, incredibly energetic, perpetually trying to do the right thing. He had been raised within the army, and therefore he had always shown the strongest respect for military hierarchies, never meddling with other people’s authority. He knew where his boundaries laid.
Hinata had instantly took a liking on him the very moment this blond, sunny boy had welcomed her in his extended family, despite how grim that period of her life had been.

Her liking had grown together with her and matured over time, fueled by Naruto's gentleness and his kind heart, to the point when she was almost sure that she wanted him to be her companion for life.

He was brave, driven and strong but soft, easy going and warm at the same time.

And, well, to be completely honest with herself, Hinata couldn't deny that he was also kind of handsome, with those hypnotizing azure orbs, the blond mass of hair framing his fascinating features and his body sculpted by endless hours of physical training.

But his best asset, the small little thing Hinata had actually fallen for, was his signature smile, all white teeth and cute dimples in his cheeks, which instantly triggered a mirroring one on the lips of whoever the Captain met.

Naruto had been friendly with her, encouraging her in pursuing her career within the UEF, complimenting her, and generally brightening her days with cunning humor and his amiable attitude.

That had been, at least, until a couple of months ago, right after the small impromptu party that Shikamaru had arranged for Naruto's 25th birthday.

Hinata's face colored slightly as she remembered the events of that night.

The blond's skin had felt like fire against her own, scorching hot and impossible to forget. His mouth had been demanding, his body firm but molding into hers.

After that mesmerizing first time together, which had made Hinata nothing short of euphoric for a good couple of weeks, there had been a second one, rushed and more like a quickie, in the men's changing room behind the training grounds. Then, their encounters had stopped as bluntly as they had started.

Naruto had never changed his general behavior toward her, and the whole situation left Hinata a little baffled. Either way, she was sure that she was compatible with the blond Captain, and that there was some low key attraction between them.

But this conviction just made the events of the day even more inexplicable.

Today, Naruto had openly disrespected her and the authority she embodied, getting to the point of interfering in the interrogation. He had made her look unreliable with her superiors, because she hadn't been able to protect a prisoner who was also a key-witness in the anti-Akatsuki campaign. He had made her look helpless to Yamato, since she hadn't been able to control the situation or to foresee what the Captain was planning in the first place. He had sneaked in an unchecked civilian in her high-security, confidential branch without giving her a warning or asking her permission, putting the whole base at risk. And, worst of all, he hadn't apologized with her for any of his actions – but he'd gone to say sorry to Yamato and his team instead.

Considered the fact that it took her the last six hours and a whole lot of her diplomatic abilities to fix the mess he made, she didn't believe she was wrong in feeling slightly pissed at the Captain.

Sliding her delicate fingers through her long, inky locks she exhaled slightly, trying to work some of the tension off. She adjusted the spaghetti straps of her nightgown, quietly making a beeline to the small vanity in the corner of her bedroom. She graciously sat down in front of the mirror, her hand automatically finding the brush to take care of her hair before going to sleep.
As if the careless behavior of Naruto wasn't enough of a nuisance, she couldn't bring her mind off the weird boy that the Captain had brought along to witness the Snake's questioning. The disturbing depth of those black orbs, and the way he they had been focused on her as if she was his enemy, almost like she had personally done him wrong, was seared in her mind. And in a way, something in her subconscious had reacted to that scorning gaze, mysteriously making her feel like she had actually something to apologize for.

She knitted her eyebrows in thoughts, frowning lightly. She had never seen the strange boy before, so the very thought of deserving the negative energy oozing from him was simply ridiculous.

In any case... the way Naruto had defended and comforted the stranger, the subtle touches between them, those gazes toward each other... all the small details spoke of intimacy between them. And Hinata absolutely hated it.

Was it possible that this guy was the reason why Naruto had stopped reaching out to her? Highly unlikely.

Was he the Captain's current romantic interest?

She gritted her teeth, her features hardening in the mirror of the vanity. Her memory recalled the way Naruto had possessively held the boy against his chest.

Extremely probable.

The brush she was combing through her hair got stuck in a knot at the end of one of her back strands forcing a grimace on her face.

They hadn't said or done anything obvious to make it clear they shared a relationship that went beyond companionship, but all the subtle gestures had spoken volumes. They could have been able to fool Kakashi, Shikamaru and all the others, but Hinata was a woman and she was trained to focus on details.

She was sure that the pair had something going on behind closed doors and, damn, she hated admitting it, but the thing didn't sit very well with her.

That unknown boy had practically stolen away her chance to be with Naruto as a pair.

How in hell could that even happen?

She stopped her grooming, resting the brush in its place on the dressing table.

The sex together had been great, and also the harmony between them; they had already a long history of common memories linking them.

She raised her eyes, effectively looking at her image in the mirror. She was a fine woman, with a pretty, heart shaped face and nice, outstanding eyes. She was really good looking, and thus familiar with people complimenting her physical appearance.

She was also considered competent, well mannered and somehow smart.

What had Naruto seen in that boy that she hadn't?

She leaned toward the mirror, delicately massaging her temples in the process. Her head felt heavy as well as his heart, but the last word hadn't been said, yet.
Eyes in eyes with her image, she promised herself that she was going to fight for what she desired.

As the oath sank in like some sacred formula, a stinging pain in the back of her head forced her to close her eyes, lids suddenly heavy. A small hurtful moan escaped her lips.

She felt like something was pulling sharply at her consciousness, a hot yet cold sensation sitting in her brain and squashing her logical thought. Then it was silence.

Shortly after, when she managed to open her lids, her irises were red and black, patterned like a cameo jewel and reflecting their sinister light into the mirror.

She looked at her image, eyes unblinking and wide open, expression perfectly neutral, resembling a human doll. Her right arm shot forward abruptly, at such a high speed that her fist was barely visible before shattering the vanity mirror in a thousand of shiny pieces with a harsh crash.

Shreds of broken glass rained down from the wooden frame to the dressing table, while some of them remained embedded in the skin of Hinata's right hand, now completely ruined and bloodied.

Her expressionless face didn't waver.

Drops of red, vivid blood were starting to fall on the vanity's surface, accompanied by a rhythmic dripping sound.

Unhurriedly, Hinata lowered the extended arm, her wounded fingers opening up gently to reveal the full extent of the damage inflicted upon them. Without flinching, she lowered her hand on the table surface, skimming through the various fragments of mirror to collect a sharp, slim-shaped one.

She toyed with the shred for a while, testing how sharpen it felt, and how good she could grip it with her palm, almost as if it was a big, rudimentary blade.

Then she lifted it up above her right shoulder, orbs still empty, gaze directed in front of herself, and abruptly lowered the fragment down, with the pointy side aimed to the curve of her neck right above the intersection with the left shoulder.

Blood immediately squirted out from the deep wound, staining red the wooden floor, the wall and the table.

The shred penetrated seven or eight centimeters into her soft neck, boring itself into her flesh, inflicting irreparable damage to her jugular vein.

Blood poured out from around the corners of the enfolded glass-blade, running down Hinata's shoulder and chest and soaking her vest, hitting the floor like a controlled flood.

The woman didn't even make a noise, her body jerking uncontrollably in the comfortable chair she sat in, undergoing a series of desperate spasm as if run over by electricity. Her muscles were starving for oxygen already.

Twelve seconds later, when a pool of blood had almost swallowed all the pavement around her, her shimmering patterned eyes faded back to their normal pale gray, but they rested forever open and unfocused.

Naruto came out of the shower considerably refreshed, the warm water working wonders in washing away some of the tension he had accumulated over the day.
Opening the bathroom door, he was presented with his bedroom softly lit by a combination of the natural moonlight and the warm, orange light of the aromatic candle sitting on his desk, clouds of steams seeping out from the bathroom and moistening the room's chilly air.

He still had his hair wet and his chest bare, barely making the effort of putting on some sweatpants before coming outside, a bath towel hanging loosely around his neck to collect the drops running down on his skin.

His room smelled pleasantly of the exotic aroma of sandal and of the familiar scent of home, but it was unexpectedly cold, triggering goosebumps on his exposed skin. Rapidly searching around the apartment for his guest, Naruto was quick to pinpoint the reason why it felt like the heating system suddenly got broken. Sasuke was sitting on the windowsill of the large window overlooking the courtyard, panes wide open, his snow-white skin almost glowing in the moonlight rays. His silhouette stood out in an outstanding contrast against the darkness of the night sky, making him look like he was an ethereal creature not belonging to this world. Despite the sharp chill of the December air flowing inside, Naruto spent a good five minutes silently worshiping the boy's fine beauty with hungry, enamored eyes, before forcing himself out of his tempting reverie and heading to the window.

“Hey,” his voice came out low and hoarse, giving away his most secret, dirty desires, and he scolded himself inwardly because of that. “What are you doing perched over there?... it's full-on winter. You're gonna get a cold!”

He was quietly rubbing his own hair in the towel as he walked forward.

Sasuke didn't answer nor he turned his head confirming that he'd heard him.

Naruto got closer, taking in the way Sasuke's gaze seemed to be trained on something far away in the garden, the curve of his slender neck so terribly appealing as he kept his head tilted against the window frame. Naruto leaned down slightly, one of his hands lowering to rest on the windowsill as he tried to get a glimpse of the boy's expression. His normally very lively eyes were strangely unblinking, focused nowhere in particular. Looking closely, Naruto almost had the impression they were glimmering with a mysterious red light.

He blinked a couple of times, seriously doubting what he was seeing – or most likely what he thought he was seeing.

He got even closer to Sasuke's maddening beautiful face, paying attention to the smoothness of his skin and his completely relaxed features.

The boy’s long lashes fluttered when the tip of the Captain's nose almost made contact with his cheekbone, a glimpse of genuine surprise showing on his face.

He angled his head in Naruto's direction, eyes shining with curiosity and slight amusement, searching for familiar blue irises and the possible reason of their sudden proximity.

Naruto jumped back a bit, blushing despite himself, embarrassed at being caught shamelessly ogling from such a short distance.

“Oh, hey...” his voice was slightly high pitched due to his inner turmoil, but he immediately relaxed as the corners of the fascinating dark-gray eyes turned upwards in happiness. Before he knew it, Naruto found himself smiling back at him.

A blow of cold winter wind hit both of their figures mischievously, scrambling Sasuke's long hair and reminding Naruto how inappropriate was for them to be exposed to such a chill.
His fingers instinctively reached forward and combed through Sasuke's now disheveled locks, tugging the rebellious front strands behind his left ear.

“Are you contemplating the night?” he asked, affection inadvertently dripping from his tone. Sasuke nodded curtly, his lips still invitingly parted since his dumbfounded reaction before, eyes locked with Naruto's as if he was waiting for something.

“You okay?” the Captain had to make sure, before holding out a hand and reaching for his side of the open pane. “I think we should close the window, now, you know. December's breeze is kinda freezing my ass, and you are...ugh.” He paused for a second, running his eyes along the seemingly endless length of Sasuke's exposed legs. He licked his lips, unsure about how to convey the concept without unveiling his poorly hidden attraction.

“...rather underdressed,” he blurted out in the end, still feeling self conscious.

He dared to seek for Sasuke's eyes to see if he had caught him drooling again, and the naughty sparkle of mirth within the boy’s depths confirmed Naruto that he had. He sighed, feeling sort of helpless and at the mercy of his raging hormones as if he’d reverted back to his teenage years.

As Sasuke stared at him with a knowing smirk forming on his lips, Naruto decided to take matters into his own hands – but obviously only because he was seriously freezing to death.

He reached out to the boy and picked him up bridal style, the boy’s smooth skin deadly cold against his own.

Curling up to his chest, Sasuke’s body felt solid and fit while he obediently let Naruto carry him to the bed close-by.

“Eh... you were almost turning into a giant snowflake, over there!” the blond chuckled, sitting Sasuke down on the mattress. He went back to close the window, then stopped to run a hand through his half-dry tresses, just to buy some time before focusing back on his new friend.

Sasuke’s eyes were still lingering on him, ardent on his skin, and the sensation was quickly becoming part of Naruto’s everyday routine – which was actually alarming.

He had shifted backward to lean his back against the wall beside the Captain’s bed, long limbs half bent, his pretty, small feet sticking out from the edge of the mattress. Naruto spontaneously knelt down in front of him, mindless of the hard surface against his knees, to catch them in his hands and warm them up.

He was still feeling ashamed for totally losing his temper in front of Sasuke earlier that day, and guilty of forcing him to behold the unpleasant situation. The worst side of Naruto had been triggered by the Snake’s disrespectful behavior, and Naruto wasn’t proud of his violent and feral reaction. Furthermore, because of the scene he made, Sasuke was now forced to undergo a session of thorough questioning – which Naruto knew it was super draining even for a sane person, despite what Shikamaru tried to sell them – and some physical exams that sure as hell were going to dig in the boy’s privacy in more that one way.

“I am sorry, you know.” the words escaped his lips without control, his tepid hands still rubbing the soles of Sasuke’s feet reverently. “I am really sorry about what happened today,” he muttered.

The boy tilted his head, shifting his weight forward to lean slightly toward the Captain. He seemed confused about what he’d herd.

“You are...sorry?” he inquired, insecure.
Naruto quietly smiled at him, hearing the unspoken “what for?”.

“Yeah. I made a mess,” he explained, lowering Sasuke’s feet into his lap as he subconsciously run his palms up the boy’s calf. “I shouldn’t have reacted that way.”

His thoughts immediately run to the reprimand letter from Tsunade he had received as soon as he got back to his quarters – well, if an officially stamped note with ‘you asshole’ written on it could be considered as one.

“I thought I could keep my calm in front of Orochimaru, despite all the bad things he did. But… I guess I was wrong. Knowing that he’d hurt you didn’t help my temper either.” the last sentence was mumbled, the Captain’s gaze firmly avoiding the boy’s.

He felt a soft caress of gentle fingers running through his hair, then a light tug was given to his locks. Finally raising his eyes to meet Sasuke’s, Naruto obeyed the boy’s silent request and went sitting beside him on the bed.

They sat in a companionable silence for a while, then Sasuke shifted closer, snuggling up to the Captain’s side.

“I can swear he deserved every punch he got,” the boy’s voice spoke softly. “However, I understand that you got in trouble because of that... and because of me.”

“It’s not your fault!” Naruto’s response had been so quick that he almost didn’t let the other finish. He flushed a bit, flustered by the vehemence of his reaction. He stopped for a second to collect himself, moistening his lips nervously.

“It’s not your fault,” he repeated, quietly. “At all, really.”

He tilted his head down to look at Sasuke’s face, spotting a little smile on the boy’s mouth. For some reason, he felt a bit lightheaded knowing he was the one who put it there.

“And because of my short temper now you’ll be questioned, and I understand the reason why you hate it, even if you can trust Shika, I promise. He’s a friend!” he babbled on unable to rein himself in, picking at the callousness of his fingers to distract himself from the guilt settled on his chest.

Sasuke rubbed his cheek against Naruto’s shoulder, his warm breath hitting the bare skin of the blond’s rib-cage in small puffs. He didn’t comment on the Captain’s blurting, and the room went back to comfortable quietness.

“I… was surprised to hear you have a brother.” Naruto’s admission was barely louder than a whisper.

“Given the fact that there are many things you don’t remember… I just assumed your family had been killed, or that you forgot about them entirely.”

He looked closely at Sasuke’s visage, genuinely interested in his reaction.

The boy appeared thoughtful, eyes lowered and teeth nipping at his bottom lip.

Naruto didn’t press him, giving him some time to let the question sink in and eventually elaborate an answer.

“Itachi is the only family I have…” Sasuke declared in the end, and his voice was coated in a warmness that the Captain instantly recognized as affection.
He smiled encouragingly, glad that Sasuke trusted him enough to spontaneously share a part of himself.

“_Itachi, mh?”_  
Sasuke nodded, his vibrant eyes finally raising to meet Naruto's. They were glimmering, so full of emotion and unspoken words.

“He's my older brother,” he added, smiling slightly. “Orochimaru kept both of us.”

Naruto was quick at reading all the small changes in Sasuke's features, subtly hinting at the fact that he _wanted to tell Naruto about his brother_, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate.

He grinned inwardly at the boy’s odd demeanor.

“Would you like to tell me something about him?”

The boy's face practically brightened at the question. His smile grew wider, the fingers of one hand playing giddy with a long strand of hair.

“He's…” he hesitated, mouth still wide open and face captivated, as if he was trying to remember something and put the concept into words at the same time.

“...nice,” he concluded, seeming satisfied enough with the adjective he chose.

“He always wants to protect me,” he added, mind skimming through the memories. “He's really...strong. And smart,” his voice trembled a bit, filled with raw emotion. “He's everything I have.”

Naruto found it difficult to believe that this sweet, naive kid was the silent and wary boy of just a couple of days before.

“Well, it must be great,” Naruto reasoned, letting Sasuke know that he was listening to him. “To have someone who feels like family, I mean. And your brother seems really cool! I am happy you have him, at least.”

Sasuke curled up more against Naruto, releasing a small moan of contentment. The blond reached down to pat his head, ending up trailing his fingers through the silky locks, instead.

“Where is Itachi now?” he dared to ask, trying to make the best of their moment of intimacy.

He felt Sasuke shrug against him.

“I don't know. That's why I wanted to ask Orochimaru-Sama about it. Things weren't going very smooth for him, lately…”

The boy's small admittance triggered an alarm bell in Naruto's brain, and the captain leaned forward to look at him directly.

“What do you mean?”

Sasuke seemed taken aback by the blond's utmost interest in the matter, but he answered nonetheless.

“I was talking about Orochimaru. Someone broke into the laboratory, a week or so before he was captured by your fellows. I haven't seen my brother since then.”
The Captain blinked, dumbfounded, processing the new unexpected information.

“Are you telling me that someone, that obviously wasn't us, forcefully entered Orochimaru's liar way before we even found it?”

The boy nodded, frowning in concentration. He was seriously making an effort to catch on the Captain’s train of thought.

Naruto caressed nervously his own jaw, his mind running a thousand miles per hour, pondering possibilities, searching through memories, speculating on various scenarios.

“Did you see or hear anything during that blitz?”

Sasuke's expression drastically changed, closing up and shading. He looked distressed and ashamed, maybe a little guilty. Naruto wasn't blind to his sudden attitude change.

“Sasuke?” he prodded softly, his tone more gentle than demanding.

The boy shook his head in denial, keeping his eyes stubbornly averted.

“No. I was still... out. High on the drugs. I barely registered the unexpected noise and the sound of the alarm going off. I have no idea of what happened. I heard some screaming but...I wasn't in my usual quarters. I___” he trailed off, jaw tightened.

A powerful wave of sympathy run through Naruto's consciousness, making him hate the Snake bastard even more.

He reached out to cup Sasuke's face and let him know that it was okay, that it wasn’t his fault, but the boy resumed talking.

“...And then your comrades caught Orochimaru before that bastard could tell me anything about what happened, and it didn’t matter how hard I tried but I couldn't escape... at least until the day you found me in his hideout. Someone broke me free, then.”

He took another small break, inhaling sharply.

“And I know I shouldn't be preoccupied for my brother, 'cause Itachi... He can hold his own, and he is probably fine. But I.”

His voice broke, eyes quickly filling with withheld tears.

Naruto caressed him, trying his best to soothe him, mindful of being respectful of this proud creature that had actually been strong enough to survive the cruelty of the world. He run a hand through Sasuke's hair, stroking down along his neck, and then he embraced him around lean shoulders.

“He's your brother. It's okay that you miss him and worry for him,” he reassured, holding him close. The boy's back was stiff.

“I will help you to find him, okay?” he offered, resting his head above Sasuke's. “If he's a good fighter, he might be alive and hiding somewhere. He probably is.”

That was half a lie, but Naruto was desperate to bring a little happiness back to Sasuke's face.

In the end, his dedication seemed to pay back because a corner of the boy's lips twitched upward.

“Thanks,” he murmured, raising his arms to hug Naruto back. “He would really like you, you
Naruto blinked in stupor, not immediately placing the information together. When he realized what Sasuke meant, he couldn't keep from blushing a bit.

“Yeah?” he breathed, stroking along Sasuke's arm.

“Mh-hn,” the boy purred, one hand slowly sliding up to brush the Captain’s chest in a sensual caress that had nothing to do with comfort anymore.

Naruto stupidly held his breath, his bare skin tingling under Sasuke’s palm.

“He won’t have any other choice,” the boy added, his velvety voice low, a vibrant whisper that charmed the Captain’s brain. “Because I do like you a lot already.”

Naruto’s eyes shot wide open, adrenaline running in his veins from the confession. His heart was beating so hard in his chest that he could actually hear the sound.

_Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum._

He took in a ragged breath, forcing his mind to maintain control over his body, the effect of those few words absolutely devastating.

Sasuke was shifting closer, still purring – _yes, like a satisfied cat_ – his pale hands calmly kneading tan skin, tracing the contour of the blond’s pectorals, the lines of his chiseled abs, the little dip between each rib.

Goosebumps broke out wherever his magical fingers went, Naruto’s breath becoming more and more ragged after each enraptured touch.

“So I was nothing more than an exhale, a sigh of pleasure as Sasuke’s hands found their way around the curve of his exposed hip bones, following them, memorizing them, and always running down.

Naruto’s body was practically humming at the physical closeness, warming up as unruly, mind-numbing desire coiled in his belly. He was peering at Sasuke’s loving expression with lust-blown, heavy lidded eyes, and the boy had barely touched him, yet.

Sasuke turned his body so that he was properly facing him, his chin tilting up to reveal pitch black irises that seemed to swallow him whole.

Naruto could relate to the sentiment: he wanted to eat him. There was a part of him, roaring from the deepest of his consciousness that was screaming for him to own the boy, to claim him.

_He’s yours. Take him. Take him. Take him._

Naruto parted his lips, the tip of his tongue subconsciously poking out to lick the bottom one, Sasuke’s eyes immediately latching to the movement.

The boy shifted closer, smoothly sliding in the Captain’s lap, straddling him.

His left hand run up the blond’s chest in a languid, feather-like touch, fingers following the shape of the muscles, then the strong line of the shoulder and the curve of the Captain neck, to end up tangled in the golden locks at Naruto’s nape.

Naruto sighed, his body shivering in response, tingles spreading on his skin. He watched as Sasuke
leaned closer, the elegant curve of his cheekbones slightly colored, eyes half closed and chin tilted up, searching for his mouth.

Before his coherent mind registered it, he was already angling his head down to kiss him.

The boy’s lips were soft and pliant as they parted for him, letting his tongue slide in and explore the hot wetness of his mouth.

Somebody moaned, but Naruto wasn’t sure who, since the sound was trapped in the limbo where the two of them mingled. He pressed harder against Sasuke, his arms coming to life and circling the boy’s slim waist, hands massaging his lower back.

The kiss was intoxicating, bruising Naruto’s mouth and burning in his chest, sending a wave of arousal down his body. His hands gripped narrow hips, forcing Sasuke to arch up and bring his other arm behind his neck, clinging on him for his dear life.

“Naruto,” the boy mewled, leisurely rolling his hips against the other, his inner thighs tightening around the Captain’s. “...you are so warm.”

His blunt nails scratched the skin of Naruto’s shoulders, the sensation shooting down to the blond’s groin and making his hips buckle involuntarily. He hissed at the friction, a strangled sound escaping his throat as he came in contact with Sasuke’s growing arousal.

Oh gods. He was so doomed.

“Sasuke. I don’t think we should...” he tried to reason, his mind pleasantly clouded, his voice coming out like a panicked breath against the boy’s moistened lips.

Sasuke chuckled softly, his raw voice vibrating in Naruto’s chest and sending a shiver down his spine.

The Captain had to make an inhuman effort to keep his rational side connected, clinging to his convictions as a man and as a soldier with desperation. He couldn’t take advantage of a civilian teenager he saved form a grim situation.

“Oh I am serious,” he managed to blurt out, his tone a bit less shaky. “I am not... and you...” ignoring him, the boy breathed on his lips and tilted his head to resume the kissing.

Naruto pulled away (hardly) and that seemed to catch Sasuke’s attention.

“We shouldn’t do this. It’s better if we stop,” he commanded, and it was the first to be surprised at how convincing he sounded.

Sasuke’s body instantly went stiff in his arms.

The boy pulled back a little, until he was able to take in the expression on Naruto’s features, his eyes wide and watery, looking.... scared?

His lips were still glistening in the orange candle-light, red and swollen from their making out. So tempting.

The captain tried his best to keep his straight face as Sasuke weighed him up, but all his hard-grasped resolve crumbled to pieces as the boy’s eyes went even wider and sad, a choked sob escaping his sinful mouth.
In short, Sasuke’s lids were filled with scantily restricted tears, his expression completely and utterly dejected, and he started to tremble in Naruto’s lap, his body still rigid.

No. No no no no no!

Alarmed, the blond’s hands went up to cup Sasuke’s face gently, his heart shattering in pieces at the sight of the first tear rolling down from the boy’s eyes and streaking his skin.

Don’t cry please.

“Sasuke, don’t…” he rasped, feeling miserable, sad and guilty.

He realized he was shaking too. This wasn’t the reaction he expected when he tried to do the right thing for both of them.

He lowered his head to rest his forehead against the boy’s, trying to look into his glazed eyes.

Sasuke sniffled and finally allowed eye contact, the emotion in his orbs swirling like a typhoon.

“I just want to be with you so much,” he sobbed, his small hands closing into fist to repress frustration.

The sudden, sharp pang at the Captain’s chest hit so hard it almost made him nauseous.

“It hurt. Why don’t you want me too?”

He had never seen Sasuke distraught before, nor had he thought he would see him broken because of him, but now that the boy was crying into his lap he knew he couldn’t handle it.

Everything hurt, and it was so fucking painful.

What was the purpose of all this?

Defeated, Naruto tilted the boy’s chin up and kissed him, Sasuke hiccuping into his mouth and immediately clinging to him. He kissed him with everything he had, pouring his feelings and his raging emotions in the contact, not minding when the boy’s nails dug into his skin, drawing blood.

“I am sorry I am sorry I am stupid,” he breathed into his mouth, breathed him in, and realized he had likely never wanted anything as bad as he wanted Sasuke now. And so he told him that.

“I want you. Of course I do want you. Christ. I want you so bad I___” am going crazy, but he couldn’t say that, because Sasuke was kissing the living hell out of him and everything started to spin, words no longer needed.

It wasn’t just about physical attraction; the desire between them run deeper, and it was about claiming and owning the very soul of one another. Previously, Naruto had never experienced anything similar with anyone even if, being a people person, he had taken many lovers over the years.

Sasuke had phrased it right: he wanted to be with him, and it was unexpected and absolutely frightening.

He was completely bewitched when Sasuke’s fingers tangled in his hair, the boy’s body arching up and his head lolling backwards as he offered himself to him. Naruto’s lips immediately made contact
with the milky, exposed skin of the boy’s neck, his teeth biting down in possession as their hips rocked together, the room’s temperature rising steadily. Sasuke smelled like a rainy day, fresh, nostalgic and soothing, and the Captain licked up a patch of skin, kissing a sensitive spot behind the boy’s ear.

He paused, taking a deep breath, burying the tip of his nose in soft, dark strands. His arms lowered, allowing his palms to explore the polished smoothness of Sasuke’s thighs, running along the skin to reach the hem of the shirt he was wearing and swiftly sinking under the material.

The boy wasn’t sporting any underwear, and the sensation of his fingers hugging naked hip bones fueled the blond’s desire for him.

Sasuke had started to ride him slowly, the thin, elastic material of Naruto’s sweatpants a minor hindrance between them. The Captain could clearly perceive the firmness of the boy’s ass-cheeks as his erection slid back and forth within them, the sensation forcing a moan out of his throat.

He let his hands caress the small of Sasuke's back, following the natural curve of his spine with adoring fingers.

Sasuke's gentle pads found a sensitive, stiffened nipple, the delicate stimulation eliciting a new wave of goosebumps on Naruto’s skin, and the boy’s mouth laced on the pulse point on the left of the Captain’s neck, lightly sucking on it.

Naruto reached down to cup the boy’s ass hungrily, groaning in appreciation. He lifted him up a bit, twisting both their bodies to lay the boy down on the bed.

Sasuke released a small, pleased sound, his legs parting automatically to welcome the heavier body of the other man between them.

Naruto immediately lowered himself to kiss those lips again, hands propped up on the mattress to the sides of Sasuke’s head, body hovering above his.

The boy didn’t seem wholly pleased by the lack of proper contact, because he rebelliously pushed up to caress the Captain’s contracted abs, his other hand gripping a shoulder and trying to force the man to lie down on him completely.

Naruto smiled onto his lips, his chest weirdly filled with an unknown mix of contentment and vibrant tension.

He tentatively pressed his pelvis down, eliciting a keen moan from the beauty in his arms, and he heart-to-heart decided that both common policy and his imparted moral could politely fuck themselves.

_Sasuke wanted him and he wanted Sasuke._ There was no reason to bear this frustration any longer.

Using his arms as a leverage, he shifted his weight back into a kneeling position, his dark eyes devouring the attractive body sprawled in front of him.

Sasuke’s too-big t-shirt had ridden up, exposing more milky skin to ogle at and putting the boy’s balls and his puckered hole on display.

The Captain couldn’t stop his hands as they wandered down, gripping half covered hipbones and kneading them, memorizing their shape under his palms.

He trailed his hands along endless, lean thighs that felt soft and silky against his calloused pads. He
kept exploring, hungry eyes lingering on every detail.

His palms reached solid, half bent knees, and followed the shape of the bone, fingers curling behind it to press in the crease there.

Sasuke tried to sit up, eagerness visible on his features, but Naruto pinned him down with a lustful gaze that was nothing short of a command.

The boy released a frustrated, needy sound that had the Captain leaking in his pants, but obeyed nonetheless, allowing him to keep on with his pleasant torture.

Naruto’s hands went back to their task, dancing on the muscles of Sasuke’s calves, seizing his ankles, and ending their appreciative path kneading the boy’s pliant soles with his thumbs.

He raised his eyes, admiring Sasuke’s debauched expression, the boy’s flushed face and lust-blown eyes, black strands spread wildly on the sheets like a corolla.

“Oh gods, you truly are beautiful,” he whispered, so desirous to border on helplessness.

The corner of Sasuke’s lips twitched up, his face gaining even more color, and he grinned playfully at the Captain. Graciously, he rolled on his stomach, presenting Naruto with his naked behind, mischievous eyes glued on the man’s above a shoulder.

“Fuck!” the blond groaned, unable to sit on his heels anymore. He crawled up, his palms on the back of Sasuke’s legs, stroking along them to reach his toned butt-cheeks and grip them, parting them slightly.

Sasuke released a guttural moan, pushing his ass up for him, silently begging to be touched more.

“So fucking perfect,” Naruto breathed, leaning down to bite the unmarred flesh of one cheek, making his lover gasp and giggle.

_He loved that sound._

He kissed the mark left by his teeth and trailed his lips against soft skin to the small hole, lapping it teasingly.

Sasuke trembled visibly, his legs spreading wider and his ass pressing against Naruto’s face. Naruto took it as good sign and repeated the action, this time applying more pressure with his tongue and closing his mouth around the entrance, lightly sucking on it.

“Oh!” Sasuke moaned and he was breathless, his full body shivering under the bond’s ministrations.

He brought his knees under himself to open up more, face and upper body still laying down on the mattress.

The Captain growled lowly, still kissing the boy’s pretty ass, tongue lapping mercilessly at the muscle, prodding inside every once in a while.

Small, ardent sounds, escaped from the younger’s lips, goosebumps breaking on his skin.

“Oh, Naruto!” it was like a desperate call, and the blond released the abused hole, now wet and reddened, to lick down the boy’s crack and kiss his sac, one hand reaching around him to gently circle the throbbing erection. Sasuke was already leaking heavily, and the Captain stroke him up and down a couple of times, stopping to spread pre-cum on the head, stimulating the slit with his thumb.
His other hand slid between Sasuke’s butt-cheeks, first finger gently massaging the entrance.

“Like this?” he inquired, lips still grazing the boy’s perineum. He was unsure about what would make Sasuke more comfortable, given the fact that he had been abused in the past. Naruto only wanted him to enjoy their time together thoroughly.

“Yes, yes!” Sasuke crooned, wiggling his hips encouragingly.

The blond smiled, sucking on his fingers and lubricating them properly, resuming his slow stroking of the boy’s arousal.

He chastely kissed Sasuke’s entrance before pressing the first finger inside, surprised at how easily he took it in.

The boy pushed himself back against the digit, his inner walls eagerly contracting around it, a sound of approval resonating from his chest.

Naruto drove it slowly back and forth to relax him, adding a second one when the boy squeaked in impatience. He scissored the fingers and put some pressure to the pads, prodding down for Sasuke’s prostate. He was sure he had found it when the boy sobbed – for a good reason, finally – his hips bucking.

Subconsciously he started to rock them, fucking himself on Naruto’s digits, breath coming out ragged and irregular.

Damn!

The Captain was forced to let go of the boy’s erection and grip his own to keep himself from coming just from the sight. He noticed that the gray material of his sport-pants was yet visibly stained by his own arousal.

“Sasuke,” he called, removing his fingers from the hole to caress along the boy’s back.

Sasuke answered him with low hum, forcing himself on his hands and knees to look at Naruto from above a shoulder.

The Captain snatched his wandering arm around Sasuke’s waist, helping him up on his knees and caressing the boy’s chiseled stomach with enamored fingers.

“Take it off,” he rasped, and the boy nodded, clutching the hem of his shirt and pulling it up and over his head.

Naruto released his own crotch to circle the boy with both arms, caressing up to his chest and rolling a hardened nipple between a thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger.

Sasuke pressed back against him, teasingly rubbing his ass against his groin.

“Ohhhh yes…” it was Naruto’s time to moan, his head lowering to kiss Sasuke’s shoulder and the side of his face, licking the shell of his ear.

“Hold on a sec.”

He lowered his sweatpants, allowing his slick erection to spring up freely. With a small shift of his hips, he nested it in between Sasuke’s buttocks, watching as Sasuke arched his back and rocked his ass up and down the length, allowing the blond to fuck his crack.
“Na-ru-to.” the boy shivered, lolling his head back and resting it on the Captain’s shoulder.

Soft strands of hair added a feathery stimulation to the blond’s sensitive skin and it was like pouring oil on the flames.

Naruto blindly searched for Sasuke’s mouth, lacing on his tongue and kissing him breathless, drinking him like a starving man desperate for water.

He removed one of his arms from around the boy, guiding the tip of his erection toward the twitching entrance already stained with his pre-cum.

“Take me,” Sasuke urged and Naruto’s hips sprang forward as on command, the head of his arousal breaching the tight muscle ring.

“Oh dear lord!” the blond squeezed his eyes shut, overwhelmed by the mind-numbing pleasure. Sasuke was breathing harshly from his mouth, the tip on his nose pressed to Naruto’s jaw-line as both of them regained control, bodies joined but motionless.

It took some time before the blond was able to push himself further in Sasuke’s heat, a sigh of pleasure escaping his lips as his hip bones made contact with the boy’s round cheeks.

Sasuke swallowed the sound, one of his hands resting on Naruto’s arm around his waist, the other blindly tugging at blond tresses.

He rocked his hips tentatively, enjoying the sensation of being finally filled, memorizing Naruto’s thickness inside of him.

The Captain pried his lips open in another fervent kiss, breaths mingling, as he obliged Sasuke’s movements with light thrusts.

As they both gained confidence, Naruto drove in faster and harder, taking pleasure in the small spasms that he managed to trigger in his lover’s body, in the lewd moans that he forced from his throat.

He kissed his jaw and his ear, licking down his neck as the boy arched in pleasure, asking for more.

He gripped a hipbone, angling his pelvis so that the tip of his erection brushed against the sensitive tissue covering Sasuke’s prostate.

The boy cried out in pleasure, releasing Naruto’s hair and losing his balance, catching himself on the mattress on all fours. Enticed, the blond almost roared, gripping slim hips with both hands and shoving his dick harder, watching the boy’s flexible back as it curved, allowing him to take him at the right angle.

“Damn, Sasuke…” he praised, voice completely enraptured.

Sasuke squeaked, his thighs trembling, and Naruto pressed his thumbs in the cute dimples right above the boy’s ass, smearing the sweat that collected there.

In a few minutes at this rhythm, Sasuke’s legs were shaking so hard that he could barely hold himself up, the sheets under his belly stained with pre-cum.

Naruto bent down to place an open-mouthed kiss at the nape of the boy’s neck, licking away the saltiness from the slight sweat, then he pushed him down to lie flatly on the bed.
His own breath was ragged as he pulled out of him, raising to his hands and knees and flipping him over with unsteady hands.

*And oh God. He was a dream.* All flushed, lips red, swollen and parted, his moisten skin shining in the dim, orange light.

Their eyes met, hungry black in dark blue, and it was as if a lightning suddenly struck Naruto’s body.

*He felt him. In his heart. In his head. Everywhere.*

Sasuke’s arms were reaching up for him and the Captain kicked off his pants, unable to part from him as if his body was made of metal and Sasuke’s a magnet. He kissed him until nothing made sense anymore, grinding between his legs.

Distantly, he realized that Sasuke was angling his hips up to encourage the penetration and, sneaking a hand between their sleek, burning bodies, he helped his erection in. They moved together in languid waves, Naruto pushing down and Sasuke rocking up, their bodies never separating.

The Captain ate up as many lusty moans as he could, relenting when breathing became difficult, pleasure shooting up his body from his groin, balls clenching in a telltale sign that he was reaching his limit. His chest was heaving, filled with a warm, raw emotion that made him feel light headed.

He forced his weight on his arms, looking down at Sasuke as he came undone, an endless streak of pleasured-sounds streaming from his lips. He angled his thrusts better, conscious of the weight of Sasuke’s thighs around his rib-cage and of his ankles laced behind his lower back to keep him close.

He managed to curl his fingers around the boy’s erection, stroking clumsily but well enough to send him over the edge.

Sasuke arched up impossibly, his hands gripping the sheets so tightly that his knuckles became even whiter, head tilted back and red mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure. His body shook under Naruto’s as strings of cum stained his stomach, his muscles clenching down rhythmically around the blond’s cock, forcing Naruto to grit his teeth to suppress the embarrassing sounds that tried to escape his mouth.

The Captain’s brain was far from coherent at that point but, as he came into the boy, somehow he knew that there was no way back from this.

Chapter End Notes

Now that you are reading over this notes, you probably understand why I was absolutely nervous (terrifyed, actually) about posting this chapter.

First thing first, there are hints to a past NaruHina "relationship", which is always something nasty. Second thing, all this chapter is a sort of turning point for the plot: from now on, it's gonna be a harsh ride (both for you and for me). And third thing (least but not last!), last time I published a smut scene was in 2013. Five years ago. And it was in my native language, so I at least didn't have difficulties in conveying concepts.
I am not sure about how it came out in the end - emotionally I was happy once finished the draft of the sex scene, but the more I read it through the less sexy it seemed (typical).

Also, I am taking advantage of this notes to share with you my happiness about being in time with both the draft and the editing of this story, this time. The project has come to a point where I’ve realized the thick plot will likely require 1/2 chapters more than I expected in order to fully unfold. But I guess we will see that together when the moment comes!

Plus, I noticed that the story reached (and surpassed) 100 Kudos! Thank you so much for your support, it really means a lot to me! (Just imagine a happy cat-face and that is me right now).

As always the chapter is unbeta'd.
If you spot anything that sounds weird or is incorrect feel absolutely free to point out.

I live on your feedback more than on food. Guh. It's so good to hear what you think about the story, so drop a line if you feel like it!

See you next time
KT

P.S.: Told ya that Sasuke got sharp teeth!
Here comes the cavalry

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Sasuke got rid of a love rival and Hinata faced an odd death. Naruto listened to Sasuke talking about Itachi and realized that there was no way back; the attraction between them was too strong to be denied.

Chapter Notes

I received kind concrit about the format; as you already pointed out in the comments, I have been writing with Latin layout, and I guess it might have looked weird to native English eyes. Therefore, from this chapter on, I decided to adopt the English correct punctuation for dialogue and quotations and as soon as I have time I will proceed correcting the previous chapters. Thanks for all your precious feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto trailed his fingers through long, black strands that felt as soft as silk, leisurely curling one of them around his index finger.

Enlightened by the pale light of the first morning rays, Sasuke’s face seemed even more stunning, distantly reminding him of the subject of a baroque painting. He was so aesthetically perfect that it was difficult to believe he was made of flesh and blood, every feature a harmonic brush on canvas: a straight line for the nose, a v-shaped, gracious jawline, the stark contrast between the boy’s hair color and his complexion, the shape and the rosiness of his mouth, the elegant arch of his dark eyebrows.

The Captain delicately traced one of them with reverent fingertips, Sasuke’s long lashes subtly trembling against high cheekbones, sleep disturbed by the caress, but his lids stayed closed. Naruto couldn’t stop looking at him, imprinting every detail of him into his brain. Sasuke was laying on the Captain’s chest, quietly resting, head tilted up and lips lightly parted. His warm, regular breath hit Naruto’s own lips in comforting waves.

It was a weird situation. The Captain had tried so hard to resist the unruly attraction that drew him to the boy, doing his best to keep some distance between them, despite his inappropriate desires. Last night, before miserably succumbing to the temptation that was Sasuke, he had been sure he was going to regret his actions come morning. After all, for many different reasons, they actually shouldn’t be doing what they were doing, whatever it was called – bonding, screwing, lovemaking..?

But now that they were bathed in the morning light, fitting together in a loving embrace like puzzle pieces, the guilt that Naruto expected to feel wasn’t there, self-condemnation nowhere to be seen. His emotions toward Sasuke hadn’t changed one bit after the night they spent together; the desire was still there, combined with that wild warmness that eased Naruto’s heart and made him feel connected to the strange boy. He was content and calm, his body humming with positive energy, refreshed, his mind incredibly clear.

Sasuke moved slightly in his sleep, snuggling his face into Naruto’s bare chest, and the Captain
couldn’t keep his lips from curling into a fond smile.

He felt oddly at peace, a sensation that was completely new and intoxicating for his strained soul.

He allowed his own head to loll backwards on the soft pillow, lids softly falling closed. It was still early, the base slowly waking up from the night slumber, quiet little noises coming from the rooms nearby as the inhabitants fell into their morning routine.

For once, Naruto simply conceded himself to let go and *breath*, momentarily pushing aside his heavy responsibilities.

The air in the room was still permeated with the pleasant smell of sandalwood, now mixing with the scent of sex and the dim musky odor of their naked skin. The combination was oddly comforting to Naruto’s nostrils and the Captain inhaled deeply, basking in their private warm cocoon a while longer.

The uncommon tranquility was brusquely interrupted by a loud banging at Naruto’s door, so sudden and unexpected that it almost made the Captain jump out of his skin.

Who the hell could it be, searching for him at such an early hour of the morning?

Normally he wasn’t expected to be alert before seven, unless something relevant happened during the night. Naruto frowned, his mind already operative and running, making up possible scenarios for the unexpected visit. He didn’t like any of the outlooks his brain provided, therefore he shifted Sasuke from his chest and delicately laid him down on the mattress, intending to get up and find out what he was up against.

Trying not to disturb his lover’s sleep he slowly sat up, blindly searching the floor something to wear before heading at the door.

Despite Naruto’s mindfulness, the insistent noise awoke Sasuke, his coal, sleepy eyes fluttering open accompanied by a small whine of disapproval.

Naruto turned to look at him from where he was sitting on the edge of the bed, offering a small smile as an apology for the blunt waking.

Sasuke’s eyes immediately brightened when he spotted him and he quickly scooted closer, curling his naked, slim body around the Captain’s hunched form. The simple contact of skin against skin was enough to send a tempting shiver down Naruto’s spine and the blond chuckled of his weakness, defeated, caressing the boy’s milky thigh with his free hand.

The thunderous banging didn’t cease, the frequency of the knocking increasing by the minute since nobody was answering the call.

“I am coming, I am coming!”Naruto shouted, hoping that whoever was on the other side of his door took pity in him and all his neighbors and relented, waiting for a bunch of seconds more.

He managed to catch the gray sweatpants he discarded earlier that night and stood up to pull them on, frowning in disappointment at the slightly visible stain of dry cum parading on his crotch.

Ignoring (with difficulty) Sasuke’s upset moan at being left alone in bed, he sighed and walked to the door.

Standing in the hallway was a fully dressed Shikamaru, his expression unreadable and his hands hidden in the pockets of black pants.
"About time!" the Nara quietly reproached, but there was relief in his hazel eyes as they focused on
the blond’s face.

"Hey, Shika!" Naruto acknowledged, dimly surprised to see his owl-friend already out and about this
early in the day. "What is it?" he asked, his voice laced with suspect. Normally, the Nara preferred to
work late at night and, unless he planned some operation, he wasn’t available till ten or so in the
morning.

Shikamaru’s neutral mask cracked at the question, his features showing traces of restrained tension
and preoccupation clouding his orbs.

He exhaled, likely making an effort to collect his many buzzing thoughts in a single, straightforward
sentence. The Captain waited for him to come about, familiar with the man’s quirks.

"Hinata was found dead in her apartment." the Chief stated bluntly, watching as Naruto’s expression
changed completely, from open and friendly to wary.

"What?" the Captain mumbled, but Shikamaru knew the man understood it perfectly without any
need to repeat the words.

"A squad is on the spot right now, trying to figure out what happened. As far as we know, we might
have been attacked at our very core in the dead of the night."

Naruto’s eyes were wide in shock, his lips slightly parted, but words were not coming to him. Even
if his orbs seemed alert and focused on the Intelligence Chief’s face, it was pretty obvious that his
mind was in another place entirely, thoughts traveling fast as he tried his best to digest the grim news.
Shikamaru respectfully gave him time to collect, perfectly aware that, even if the Hyuga Lady wasn’t
exactly a close friend of the blond, there had been some kind of affair in a recent past between her
and the Captain.

When Naruto closed his eyes, his left hand running up to caress troubled lids, Shikamaru knew that
Naruto had adjusted and was ready to hear the rest of the confidential communication.

"How did it happen?" as if on cue, the blond demanded.

The Chief lowered his gaze to check the wrinkled leather of his boots, evidently upset by the whole
situation.

"We know nothing for sure, yet. Actually, I am getting there in a few minutes to collect data and
supervise the investigation. I believe you should come along too."

Naruto nodded, chewing his lip in an unconscious manifestation of his inner turmoil. One of his
hands was scratching his neck nervously, the other arm half hugging his chest as if he hoped to
shield himself from some sorrow.

His body language was screaming how much he was disturbed by the unexpected circumstances,
and Shikamaru was willing to bet that he was also feeling miserable for the harsh confrontation he
had with the dead girl just the day before. The Chief could understand. Naruto wasn’t the only one
feeling like an asshole right about now.

As he was opening his mouth to say something comforting to his kindhearted friend, gaze still
lowered where the blond’s fingers kept on scratching the skin as if guilty of something, he
inadvertently spotted a telltale trail of purple marks marring the curve of the Captain’s neck.
Even for a person with an IQ score lower than Shikamaru’s sensational 200+ the realization would have hit hard at that point. The Nara’s hazel gaze narrowed and he prudently bent his body to the left, so that he could discretely peek in Naruto’s room through the door the blond was still holding wide open.

To confirm his suspicions, a very naked and utterly disheveled Sasuke laid curled up in Naruto’s rumpled sheets, milky skin gleaming in the increasing brightness, long legs and the appealing curve of a pretty ass shamelessly on display.

Shikamaru’s jaw clenched, his hardened gaze quickly moving back to his friend’s face. He reminded himself that this wasn’t the moment nor the place to loose patience and yell, mentally counting back from ten in the effort to tone down his first, visceral reaction.

“How have you gone completely crazy?” he inquired quietly, the reprimand clear as day despite the polite tone and wording. It made Naruto blink back to attention in an instant, even though the blond seemed confused about why he was suddenly being scolded.

Shikamaru begrudgingly gestured towards the bedroom, his gaze shifting once again to find dark mysterious orbs staring back at him, on guard.

The Captain caught the hint and tilted his head to follow his friend’s gaze, only then realizing that Sasuke was completely awake, naked and visible, engaged in a heated glaring contest with the Chief.

Instantly, color flared on the Captain’s face, his back stiffening in embarrassment at being caught red-handed. In a smooth, instinctive movement he closed the door slightly, effectively blocking the Nara’s view inside his apartment.

As Shikamaru’s disapproving frown disappeared behind the polished wood, Sasuke’s attention shifted on Naruto, his eyes big and shining in worry, confirming that he was perfectly aware they were now in serious trouble.

The captain gulped, slightly smiling at him in reassurance before concentrating on the problem at hand and turning to face the Intelligence Chief.

Shikamaru’s orbs were practically burning holes through his head – if looks could kill… – arms defensively crossed in front of his chest. His silent reproof and the collected demeanor suggested that he was waiting to hear some kind of explanation from the Captain.

Naruto cleared his voice, feeling self conscious all in a sudden.

“Listen, Shika, I know this might sound absurd to you, but it’s not like… it’s not a whim. I___”

“He is unchecked, Naruto!” Shikamaru’s angry voice cut him off abruptly, the guy apparently failing in keeping his disappointment in check. “We don’t even know where he stands! He could easily be a spy, or crazy, or sick!” the Chief’s voice was raising dangerously with every word and Naruto cautiously stepped out in the corridor, alarmed, inviting him to shush with frantic hand gestures.

“And on top of it, the odds are that he is even a minor!”

Okay, that kinda stung. Not the possibility of Sasuke eventually being underage in itself, but Shikamaru’s subtle implication that he would take advantage of the situation.

The Captain lowered his gaze, trying not to show the hurt in his eyes, but his defeated attitude gave him away nonetheless.
The Chief’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, Naruto’s reaction looking completely wrong on the confrontational, hyper-energetic man. He wasn’t trying to defend himself, nor was he getting back at Shikamaru for his aggressive tones. He only stood there, half naked in the middle of the corridor, looking faintly battered and submissive.

Shikamaru took in a deep breath, willing himself to calm the fuck down, because clearly there was something weird in this whole story that Shikamaru couldn’t pinpoint, and the thing was starting to rub him the wrong way.

He patiently waited for Naruto to find the nerves and raise his head again, only to meet nervous azure eyes that still held the flame of his regular fiery attitude, even if blurred by some foreign insecurity,

“I know all of that, Shika, you really think I am stupid?” he muttered, his tone calm but steady, grounded. “But somehow, even if I am pretty sure it sounds crazy, I also know about his good intentions and, sure as hell, I know that I want to be with him. I can feel him. Does this make any sense to you?”

The small sparkle of vulnerability that appeared in Naruto’s eyes definitely cooled down any remainder of fight in the Chief and Shikamaru sighed, relenting.

Of course, the blond’s words didn’t make any sense to him, even more because Naruto wasn’t a sappy romantic. But the fact that also the Captain appeared extremely confused about this...this sort of feelings that he developed for the boy over a short time paradoxically reassured him. Shikamaru hated not knowing things, but he could work with ignorance, since there always was a way around it. It was stupidity that he feared, but the blond has been his friend since forever and the Nara knew really well that he was no stupid.

Obviously, the fact that Naruto wasn’t fighting against his supposed “feelings”, but had instead embraced them and seemed perfectly content to enjoy his new partner – even when everything was screaming how bad of an idea it was – that was indeed disturbing.

But Naruto wasn’t crazy either, Shikamaru knew this much, so there must be a logical explanation for his decision to keep the mysterious boy.

“He must have brainwashed you.” the Nara concluded aloud, watching as Naruto’s forehead wrinkled in a perplexed frown, his face breaking into a grin when he realized Shikamaru was totally being serious.

“Oh, c’mon. You know that this is not possible!” the Captain defended himself weakly, grateful that his friend had dropped the topic for the time being.

Shikamaru smirked at that, his eyes filling with mischief and his lips curling into a smirk.

“Yeah, alright. It’s apparent, since there was no brain to wash to begin with.” he teased, his sour mood half-forgotten.

Naruto scowled, but the Chief didn’t gave him time for a reply.

“Look, I don’t wanna argue about this right now. We gotta move fast. Get dressed, both of you. I’ll meet you in the main hall of the residential building in the security branch within ten minutes.”

The Captain shut his loudmouth and nodded, recognizing an order when he heard one.

Shikamaru eyed him strangely for another bunch of silent seconds, before smoothly turning on his
heels and disappearing along the corridor, leaving Naruto to his thoughts.

The atmosphere in the Security Branch was grim, the place swarming with activity as many S-Guards scouted the area in regular rounds.

Faithful to his word, Shikamaru was waiting in the hallway, his spiky ponytail easy to spot even in the crowd, busily talking with a masked soldier.

Walking past the entrance, Naruto took a chance to check on Sasuke’s expression, concerned that the multitude of heavily armed men scattered around could elicit a negative reaction or trigger painful memories from the boy.

Sasuke hadn’t said a word since the moment the two of them had left Naruto’s room on the other side of the headquarters, and even before that he hadn’t been particularly talkative. The thing wasn’t strange per-se, since Sasuke clearly wasn’t the definition of a chatty person, but after everything that happened during the night and early in the morning, the blond sort of expected – of maybe hoped? – to hear his two cents on the whole situation. Was it that bad that he needed reassurance?

Sasuke’s face was perfectly neutral and devoid of emotion, his cleaver onyx eyes quickly skimming around the building, shining with their usual wonder.

He had insisted in wearing one of Naruto’s civilian sweaters, the bright-orange one, even if the clothing was clearly two or three sizes too big for his slim figure. The Captain had allowed it only because the boy had asked politely while sporting one of his adorable small smiles, and there was no way in hell that he could say no to one of those. In retrospect, the choice happened to be a fortunate coincidence, since it made Sasuke easily recognizable among hundreds of men clad in black uniforms.

“Good to see you made it.” Shikamaru’s all business voice greeted them, and the Captain shifted his gaze to meet his friend’s. “We have to reach the fifth floor.” the Chief informed, quickly dismissing the guard he had been speaking to.

Both Naruto and Sasuke followed him as he started walking in long strides towards the elevator shafts. Since the Captain didn’t want to risk another outburst from Shikamaru about their inappropriate relationship, he and Sasuke weren’t holding hands anymore, but he would have been a liar if he denied that he missed the physical contact between them.

The Nara promptly swiped his magnetic badge in the elevator controller, the metallic doors immediately sliding open, welcoming them.

Beside Naruto, Sasuke hesitated, his posture stiffening as he glared suspiciously at the small cabin.

“You afraid of enclosed places?” the Captain softly asked, perceptive of the boy’s discomfort. It wasn’t like he was doing it on purpose but, since the very first minute they met, Naruto had been unable to completely detach his attention from Sasuke for long periods of time.

The boy’s eyes shifted to meet concerned blue orbs and he quietly shook his head, a corner of his mouth curling slightly.

“I have never seen a working elevator before.” he briefly explained, carefully stepping inside to join the other two men.

The ride was uncomfortably silent.
When the doors opened again on the correct floor, Shikamaru stepped outside first, leading the way along an unfurnished long corridor with black marble floor.

Some talking was audible in the distance, but it was faint, and no other sound of life was coming from the rooms they passed by.

Outside the last apartment on the left two armed masked guards were standing at attention, a white felt carpet laying between them in front of the threshold.

“Nara.” Shikamaru shortly introduced himself to the men, who checked his badge and nodded in greeting. “Clean your soles on the carpet, Sir, before heading in.” one of them commanded.

Naruto peeked inside the room and spotted an elegant living area with a white fluffy carpet and a matching sofa, and a high canopy bed towering in the distance. He had never been at Hinata’s residence before, despite their involved meetings.

He searched into his back pocket and retrieved his own badge, showing it to the same guard that checked Shikamaru’s.

“Captain Uzumaki of the Kyuubi.” he rasped, his voice almost breaking when naming his deceased squad. The man shifted his gaze from the ID to Naruto, his barely visible eyes lingering on the blond’s face. He nodded, giving him a full salute in sign of respect.

“Clean your shoes, Captain, then you can follow the Chief inside.” he instructed.

Naruto moved to do as he was told when a whimper coming from Sasuke halted him in his track. The guard had his right harm extended to stop the boy from following, and panic was already visible in Sasuke’s eyes.

“It’s okay, soldier. He’s with me.” he reassured, encouraging the guard in letting the boy step through.

“No, he isn’t.” the unexpected rasp of Gaara’s voice made Naruto turn his head so fast that his neck cracked.

“Gaara!” the Captain acknowledged, not completely surprised by the fact that the redhead’s squad had been given responsibility to investigate on a murder case possibly related to an intrusion.

“Naruto.” the other Captain politely answered the greeting. “Please, follow me.”

Naruto didn’t move, as if rooted to the spot by some kind of invisible force.

“Let Sasuke inside.” he simply demanded, his azure orbs glued to the already turned back of the other commander.

Gaara’s head twisted slightly, allowing their eyes to met.

“No, -” the decisive tone of his denial let Naruto know that there was no point in trying to argue for a different outcome. “This scene is confidential. I am accountable of who gets in and who gets out and I won’t take responsibility for someone outside the UEF.”

The blond Captain gritted his teeth, clearly displeased by his friend’s decision. He was in no position to argue with the man in charge, anyway, so he merely shook his head in disappointment.

“As you wish.” he conceded, turning towards the entryway to look at Sasuke’s alarmed face. “You
have to wait for me there,” he gently explained, forcing a smile on his lips to reassure his agitated lover. “I promise it won’t take more than ten minutes and you’ll be able to see me the whole time, so you’re sure I am not going anywhere.” affection dripped from his words and his gaze was tender. Sasuke relaxed his shoulders and quietly nodded, his gaze lacing to Naruto’s as if he was bewitched. The Captain’s smile became genuine, reaching his eyes.

Gaara, who’d been watching the whole interaction, snorted in mild disbelief.

*Naruto had it bad.*

It wasn’t something that he had taken into account when he had firstly been introduced to the rescued boy, barely few days before. To be honest, such an open display of fondness coming from the Captain *while he was on duty*, would have left Gaara completely baffled whoever was the recipient. But judging from Sasuke’s reaction, the involvement was actually mutual, and this was surely going to over-complicate things from now onward. How did this even happen? And just an inch from his nose, on top of all that.

“Come.” the redhead called his friend to attention for the second time, moving toward the most secluded area of the apartment.

This time Naruto followed, falling into step with the other man.

Shimmering fragments of what looked like silver glass were scattered everywhere on the floor around the bedroom area, reflecting the slanted rays of the winter sun. Naruto paid attention to where he put his feet, cautiously trying not to mess with the scene.

The empty frame of a mirror hanged above a slinky vanity, basic beauty products and toiletry neatly placed on the surface. Everything was dotted in red, included the walls and the ceiling, and a deep-red pool of dried blood surrounded the chair in front of the toilette, almost completely hidden under a white sheet.

“Shit.” the captain exclaimed under his breath, estimating that probably all of Hinata’s blood was currently decorating her bedroom. “What the fuck happened in here?”

Gaara came to a stop beside the closed window that shed light on the horrific scene, arms crossed in front of his chest.

“She bled to death.” he stated noncommittally, as if the evidence wasn’t speaking loud enough.

“Yeah I can see that.” Naruto remarked, slightly annoyed.

Shikamaru joined them, his loyal notepad clutched in one hand.

“The only hypothetical scenario, so far, is that she committed suicide.”

Both Naruto and the Chief turned sharply to look Gaara in the eyes, disbelief written all over their face. The redhead's pale green orbs didn’t waver under the glares.

“As unlikely as it sounds, in the apartment there are no signs of intrusion whatsoever, and her injuries matches the theory of self-stabbing with a long piece of broken glass.” Gaara clarified, updating the other men on his squad’s discoveries.

“There are no other signs on her body, as far as we can tell, but we’re still waiting for the coroner to say his piece. She has been found around half past five in the morning by one of her collaborators, which she was supposed to join for an early breakfast at five. Only Security members have access to
this building. Moreover, to enter someone else’s room you need an arranged authorization of your badge, which means that the owner of the room must agree to let you in in advance. Nothing seems missing or out of place in the room either.”

Shikamaru scratched his forehead, his features tight. He wasn’t here to question the Sand’s expertise, but the general idea of Hinata Hyuga committing suicide didn’t sit well with him. It didn’t make any sense.

“It only sounds sudden and unmotivated to me.” he dared speak his thoughts aloud.

Gaara’s jade orbs locked on him, his expression stern.

“Nobody thought that she had it in her to do something similar.” he confirmed, silently agreeing with the Chief’s suspects. “Neji is completely distraught.”

Captain Uzumaki distantly listened to his friends’ exchange, eyes focused on the white sheet splotched in dark reed that covered a vague form sitting in the chair.

“Is her body still here?” he asked abruptly, interrupting the ongoing conversation.

Gaara and Shikamaru eyed each other, but the redhead’s attention shifted to the blond Captain.

“Yes.” he just confirmed.

Naruto squatted down beside the covered silhouette, careful not to step in the dried blood. He reached out a hand and took a hold of a piece of the cloth, slightly lifting it up to peek under it.

Hinata’s pale thigh was revealed to his eyes, covered in pink satin and blood. The Captain exhaled soundly, raising his arm higher to expose more of her body. A flat abdomen striped in red. A prominent, round bosom soaked in blood.

Naruto stood up slowly, sheet still in hand as he uncovered her completely. Hinata’s light-colored eyes stared back at him, lifeless; there was still a huge shred of glass embedded into her delicate neck.

The Captain squeezed his eyes shut, a knot forming in his throat. He remembered her. Everything about her and especially everything about her body – a body he had desired and owned. It never worked out between them – Hinata wasn’t his type personality-wise, really – but Naruto had shared nice moments with the beautiful young woman. And yet here she was, dead by her own hands, only a few months after they’ve had an affair.

He opened his eyes, respectfully hiding her body under the soiled sheet once again.

He was counting losses since the day he was born, the weight of that number heavy on his conscience. It was draining.

He had been rude with her the day before. Who knows, maybe if he had acted less like a dick, both the previous day and when they tried to be together, now she would have still been alive.

“Naruto.” Shikamaru’s grounded voice halted his painful train of thoughts.

“Yeah.” the blond breathed, gaze still lowered on the covered copse.

“I refuse to believe that she killed herself.” that was Gaara’s voice.

Naruto chuckled darkly, not bothering to search the man’s face.
"You sound like Neji, you know? The prick always demand things his own way."

The redhead didn't reply to the halfhearted insult, and the silence stretched, the only sounds in the room coming from the quiet mumbling of the two men guarding the entryway.

"Things never go the way we want them." Naruto continued, voice low, devoid of color. "Hinata wasn't the kind of girl who makes enemies, and her real identity was a closely guarded secret of the UEF. You have been the one claiming that everything hints about suicide." he reminded.

Gaara shrugged, his eyes narrowing as he took in Naruto's slouched form.

"What I said is that all the evidences collected so far seem to support the hypothesis of suicide. I don’t remember agreeing with that conclusion, though."

Naruto's eyes finally met the other Captain's, weighing the man's words.

"Is that why you are having the whole building searched?" Shikamaru added to the heated exchange, effectively managing to break the rising tension.

"Yes." the redhead briefly smirked, but it was just a shadow on his tired face. "I was sure you would notice."

The Chief's lips imperceptibly curved at the implied compliment.

"About one thing, Naruto's right." Gaara went on, trying to explain his reasoning to the other two. "Hinata's real identity was top secret and revealed only to those who live in the headquarters."

"This fact, combined with the difficult access to this particular building, probably excludes an eventual involvement of some outsider." Shikamaru considered, catching on.

Gaara nodded his approval.

"Contrary to what you seem to believe," he went on, addressing his blond friend, "Hinata had many enemies, and all of them live inside this walls."

The Chief's eyebrows shot up, his eyes brightening with understanding.

"Everyone related to Orochimaru and the Akatsuki project had something to earn from her death."

The redhead merely gestured Shikamaru to continue.

"Hinata was responsible of all the prisoners. If someone was planning an outbreak or wanted to aid a captive’s escape he necessarily had to pass through Hinata."

"Precisely."

Naruto chewed on his inner cheek, his mind running through the memories of recent events. His friend's suspicions actually made some sense, and the blond had to admit that he hadn't considered the possibility of the murderer being one of them. Either way, he couldn't recall a single moment when something weird or insurrectionist had happened, and he knew all to well how strictly the security quarters were guarded. The possibility of Hinata being murdered in an attempted break still sounded distant to the logical part of his brain.

"Which leads me to what I am gonna say right now, Naruto." Gaara's voice interrupted his musings, and the Captain listened attentively. "The boy that you saved. He must be taken in to custody, immediately."
Naruto’s eyes widened in disbelief, his shoulders instinctively squaring in defense.

“Excuse me?” the Captain demanded, glaring the redhead commander straight in the eyes. He must have understood wrong. It was obviously like that.

“The boy was one of Orochimaru’s. You found him in his hideout, wandering freely, and escorted him here. He never underwent a full check, but he had the opportunity to meet Hinata while she was working, since you irregularly brought him to the Snake's questioning.”

The Captain’s face went from disbelieving straight to enraged in the blink of an eye.

“What the fuck are you implying, exactly? Sasuke did nothing!” he practically growled to the other man’s face, baring his teeth like a beast.

Gaara snorted, not backing down an inch. Naruto’s antics were nothing new to him.

“I don’t know what happened to you exactly, but you cannot ignore the truth when it's standing in front of your eyes.” the redhead snapped back, chin raised in an attempt to reach the blond’s impressive height. “You are blind and biased, my friend. You let him fool you with his attractive, innocuous appearance, but actually he is a viper in bosom!”

The Captain stared down at the other man mercilessly, flaring glares meeting, unable to believe that Gaara - his friend Gaara! - was accusing him of bringing a spy into their quarters.

He took a reluctant step back, but only because he needed to calm the fuck down fast, or the situation was likely going to slip from his rational control. The last thing he needed at the moment was receiving a second reprimand for his reckless behavior in two days.

“This is bullshit, and you clearly don’t know what you are talking about.” he stated, voice stern.

“You are the one who's being ridiculous, Naruto!” the redhead practically roared, throwing Naruto off for a second. He had never seen Gaara raise his voice like that in almost a lifetime spent together. The redhead was breathing harshly and took a moment to collect himself, trailing a nervous hand through unruly locks.

“He is obviously a fighter, Naruto.” he muttered, when he had his temper under control yet again. “I know you couldn't miss that. I am pretty sure you had the occasion to observe his body up close.”

The Captain's hand balled into fists at the subtle implication, his icy eyes still pinning Gaara down.

Shikamaru followed the exchange close by but didn't dare speaking a word in fear of accidentally breaking the thin resolve that was keeping the commanders from punching each other into next week.

“Did you persuade him in telling me this?”

He didn't expect Naruto to address him, and he nearly jumped at the harshness of the tone. Things weren't going well. They were quarreling like kids in a situation where they should have been cohesive and lucid.

Shikamaru opened his mouth to defend himself and point out this much, but Gaara didn't gave him time.

“You cannot deny this, Uzumaki. The way he moves, the way he observes. Everything about him screams of military training and experience!”
The redhead’s voice was cold, matter-of-factually.

Naruto's attention shifted back to him, and Shikamaru was now fully aware that the situation was bound on going down soon.

“You're babbling.” the blond snarled. “He's just a kid! He may be fit, but he's surely not strong enough to be a fucking stormtrooper!”

Gaara laughed, and it was a dark, sharp sound completely devoid of amusement.

“Ooooh right,” he teased, walking up close to Naruto as if he was taunting him. “I forgot that you were too big and too loud, so you didn't qualify for the hit-man training...”

The captain snapped, his hands meeting the solidity of Gaara's chest at lightening speed and roughly pushing the man away. His brain was actually fuming, clouded by undiluted rage.

_Gaara. Gaara! Of all the people, Gaara had always understood him and trusted him!_

“Fuck you!” he spat on the other man's face, trembling in the effort not to hit him. “Whatever. If in your sick head you're suspecting Sasuke to be responsible of this, then you are very wrong. He was with me last night.” he stopped, smiling at his supposed friend as if he'd completely gone crazy. “The whole night. And that's a fact.”

Gaara grimaced, the innuendo hitting him hard and not helping his displeasure in the slightest.

Chief Nara arched his eyebrows, watching the two Captains stare each other down in fighting stance, like male lions dueling for territory. He sighed, perfectly knowing they where headed nowhere.

“Well, he even has kiss-marks to prove his point.” he sarcastically mocked them both, utterly annoyed by the idiotic situation.

Gaara's deathly glare made him feel like he was being chocked, but luckily no physical violence followed the threat.

The loud scream of a triggered alarm distracted all of them from the upcoming brawl.

Surprised glances were briefly exchanged before, on silent agreement, Naruto run up to the window of Hinata's apartment, looking downward to see several armed squads running toward the building at speed.

“This is the intruder's general alarm.” Shikamaru efficiently informed, while Gaara was already reaching the entryway to check the situation in the corridor.

Naruto nodded in understanding, his tensed argument with Sand's Captain momentarily pushed aside.

“Many soldiers are running to the security area. The call must have been made from this branch.” he stated, instinctively running a hand on his weapon holster to check on his rifle.

Shikamaru tensed but followed the example, ditching his ineluctable notepad for his compact semi-automatic gun.

“Let's get the hell outta here. Noises are coming from the lower floors!” Gaara yelled at them, and neither Naruto nor Shikamaru questioned his orders.

They promptly run to the door, marginally hearing Gaara imparting orders to the guards not to allow
anyone into the place.

Naruto immediately joined Sasuke, who also looked confused and slightly nervous, catching his small wrist to get his attention.

“Someone is breaking in the quarters,” he briefly explained, tugging the boy along the corridor behind his two friends. “I want you so keep your eyes open and stay glued to my side. I'll keep you safe, okay?”

He didn't loose time waiting for Sasuke’s answer, too concentrated in descending the stair two steps at a time, his heart beating like crazy at the idea of facing a conflict that would put the boy's security at stake.

From somewhere close by, sounds of shotguns were already coming and people could be heard messily shouting orders.

Naruto stopped at the next sharp turn of the stairway and extracted his small Beretta 93R, fluently loading in a full magazine. Gaara leaned forward to quickly check the next ramp heading to the ground floor, already embracing his weapon.

“What do you see?” Captain Uzumaki inquired, readying the first bullet in the chamber and lacing his free hand to Sasuke's, squeezing tightly.

“Don't understand. People are running in and out, armed, but I cannot see the reason why.”

Naruto squeezed rhythmically on Sasuke's fingers, briefly turning to look in his eyes. The boy seemed bothered but not scared nor panicked.

Good. He needed him alert.

“Ready?” Gaara demanded, waiting for his companions. “My squad should be somewhere here around already.”

“Lead the way.” the blond encouraged.

They nimbly descended the last few steps, diving into the raging confusion of the hallway. They stuck to each other like honey and bees, marching with some difficulty towards the entrance, dodging bloodied soldiers heading in the opposite direction with pure panic in their eyes.

What the fuck was even happening out there?

People were used to war. What could possibly be able to crack a veteran’s self control, at this point?

The echos of a metallic roar made the hair of Naruto's neck stand up, and his skin crawl.

He knew that sound. He had heard it already, once, immediately before his whole team had been butchered at Orochimaru's infernal lair.

“Gaara!” he screamed, perceiving the rise of his body temperature as he fought against the grim sensation clawing at his stomach. “Gaara, don't get out!”

But they were already on the threshold, and above the redness of Gaara's rebellious locks, Naruto could see them.

There were three of them, those alien beasts from hell, jumping around the green area in front of the residential building, clawing at platoons of men and slicing them apart as if they were made of paper.
One of the monsters had the lower half of a soldier hanging from his fangs-filled mouth, the deep red of fresh blood staining the green grass and dripping along its pale, muscular neck.

Despite the several shotguns aimed at them, nothing seemed able to stop the creatures’ fury. They mercilessly crushed a man after the other, the hiss of their scorpion-like tails still audible above the chaotic screaming and the gunfire when they flipped them like whips.

The closest creature to the entryway finally noticed Naruto and his comrades and opened its huge, terrifying mouth in a menacing growl, shifting its weight on the flexible legs and getting ready to jump at them.

Captain Uzumaki acted on pure instinct, immediately catching the collar of Gaara's shirt and tugging him inside, as he simultaneously pushed Shikamaru and Sasuke behind the first cornerstone near the doorway. The creature leaped and landed heavily a few meters from the redhead's feet, the ground trembling under its weight and concrete shuttering for several meters into the building. In the confusion, Gaara lifted his rifle to aim, and fired the whole magazine right into the beast's grinning face.

The gunfire's bangs resounded unpleasantly in the half-empty, space of the hall, but Naruto didn't let it distract him. He kept on pulling Gaara until they were both hidden together with Sasuke and Shikamaru, right in time to avoid being caught by the beast’s deadly claws.

-Whatthafuck! - Gaara cursed, but he was paler than usual and visibly shaken. Naruto briefly peeked out from their improvised hideout, fighting hard against his own building panic. He needed his brain to concentrate and work faster than lightning speed.

“That's what killed my squad.” he bluntly informed, watching as Gaara's eyes went wider than saucers.

“It wasn't in the report they gave me!” he countered, but only because he wanted the blond to be aware.

“I figured. Shika and I already went through troubles because we uncovered confidential info.” Captain Uzumaki shortly murmured. “Besides, we gotta move our asses outta here, and do it now!”

The Sand's Captain opened his mouth to disagree, his expression clearly telling Naruto how outraged he was by the simple suggestion to flee and abandon all the fighting soldiers out there to their grim destiny.

Naruto simply unarmed his weapon and put it back into the holster, gesturing for Shikamaru to do the same.

The unusual action, deeply in contrast with the blond's habitual fighting ethic, apparently muted Gaara, who bounced his teal gaze between the two men.

“You have to trust me, man,” Naruto’s tone was secure and his gaze determined. “Those things can’t be gunned down. Running is our only chance.”

Gaara licked his chapped lips, evidently disturbed by the news and by the knowledge of what they where about to do. He leaned back and peeped behind the corner, spotting the creature he shot only a minute before running about like nothing happened despite the bullet-holes in its crane, slicing people in a half with monstrously sharp claws.

Yells of panic and pain were now the only background noises of the massacre.
“Fine.” he gave up, reluctantly applying the secure to his machine-gun. “I know a way out from the basement.”

Naruto released a breath he didn’t know he was holding, and gave him a small, tight, smile as a silent thanks.

He tilted his head to look at Sasuke, who seemed baffled by the whole situation but mainly looked fascinated. He squeezed his hand.

“Now we run, ‘key?’” he whispered to him, and the boy readily nodded.

Gaara eyed a second time behind the corner to ascertain that their way was free.

”Let's go!” he ordered.

The four men bolted out from behind the cornerstone and toward the stairs, Gaara leading the group and Naruto and Sasuke closing it. They literally jumped down the stairwell, uncaring about the steps, narrowly avoiding getting hit by the lash of a scorpion tail.

”Go go go go!” Naruto spurred, the group picking up speed as they rounded the second corner and reached the basement, running madly along the narrow, dimly lit corridor. The sounds of the battlefield gradually faded in the distance, only the high pitched roars reaching their ears every once in a while.

When the only noises accompanying them became their harsh breaths and their soles hitting the floor, Gaara stopped brusquely, leaning against a wall to resume his regular breathing.

Shikamaru followed suit, bending over with both his hands on his thighs, completely winded.

Naruto spun on himself straightaway to check the empty hallway behind them, almost fearing to see one of those horrible monsters about to maul them. But the basement appeared to be completely empty except for the four of them, so he allowed himself to breath a sigh of relief.

Beside him, Sasuke caressed the backside of his hand with warm fingers, apparently unfazed by the daredevil run.

The unexpected buzzing sound coming from Gaara's walkie almost made all of them shit their pants, but the voice coming from the speaker was one that both Captains were more than happy to hear.

<Captain Sabaku, Sir, if you hear me please answer the call.> the frequency was lightly disturbed, but not enough to mess with the meaning of Sai's words.

Gaara exchanged a brief look with Naruto before picking up the radio.

“Gaara here, I hear you loud and clear.” he replied into the microphone.

A few seconds of silence followed, before Ino's voice cut in.

<Holy shit Captain, that's a relief! >

Naruto smiled faintly at the genuine enthusiasm of the girl and even if the Sand's Captain was going to deny this to the very end, he was actually doing the same.

“Shikamaru and Captain Uzumaki are also with me.” he provided, only causing Ino to squeak louder.
<Where are you, Captain?> Sai must have regained control on his walkie, his collected voice equally soothing.

“In the underground passage of the S-branch.” Gaara informed, gesturing for the other men to resume walking.

<We are currently heading to the Core of the Security, Ino, Konohamaru and me. We've been informed that a breakout is taking place. It's unclear if the attack and the jailbreak are related but let's hope to survive today and find out.>

Gaara’s jaw clenched and he breathed loudly through his nose.

“We’ll be on the spot too in eight minutes or so.” he confirmed, seeming perfectly aware of their current position. Naruto sort of admired him; he had absolutely no idea where this path underground was leading them.

From the radio came Sai’s roger.

“What about my sister?” Gaara eventually inquired, his voice hardly keeping from shaking.

The few seconds of silence that followed the question were likely the longest of their lives, and Naruto could tell that his friend's heart was clenching. Losing two siblings the same week... that was a pain that the Captain hardly imagined.

<She's fine! - Ino cheered, her voice like a shot in the arm. - She went to the executive's to check on Neji.>

The relief that washed over both Gaara and Shikamaru was so evident that Naruto would have teased them – especially Shika – if only they were in a different situation.

“Okay, thanks Yamanaka. We're moving.” the redhead breathed into the speaker, closing the communication.

Naruto expected him to be in need of a couple of minutes to collect himself and slow down his hammering heartbeat, but Gaara surprised him.

“Let's drag our asses outta here.” the man mumbled, inciting them in resuming their pace.

After a few minutes of constant running they emerged into a file archive located in the basement of the S-branch Core Building. The door of the room was closed by a plain key lock and a single shot from Gaara's rifle was more than enough to open their way for the second checkpoint prior the prisoner's area.

Naruto realized that they were closer to the breach location than he imagined when he identified a couple of minor prisoners – which he had personally captured – disappearing at high speed behind a corner of the hallway.

Nobody was here to check on them when they reached the access of the UEF high-security prison, the bulletproof glass of the surveillance room shattered and a body with unrecognizable features laying lifeless on the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood.

The Sand’s captain seemed to hesitate in front of the mutilated corpse, halting on his feet a few meters past the check-in zone.
“Where do you think everybody is?” Shikamaru murmured, capturing both the Captains attention.
“Normally this place is heavily guarded. Six to eight men at time, in quiet periods. I can only spot a dead body.”

Nobody had an answer for his question but they all knew the Chief's observation was correct. The situation was strangely suspicious.

“They might have been called in some other place.” Naruto guessed, but there was no way he could be a hundred percent sure about that.

Gaara's walkie's buzzed to life yet again and the frenzied voice of Sai distantly echoed through the loudspeaker.

<Cap___n, ground floo___v'e been attacked. Oro____is escaping. Need____help! >

Naruto's hand preceded Gaara's on the radio and the Captain pressed the button for the connection.
“Sai! Where are you?”

There was some scratching and then a frightening human scream in the background of the communication.

“Sai!”

Some other undefined sounds as an answer. Shikamaru was visibly blanching and both the Captains stared powerless at the walkie, as if their lives depended on that.

<Ground floor, S-Core building! >

Naruto didn't bother to answer the plea vocally. He knew the way there, only a couple of stories above his head.

He didn't realize he had started running until Shikamaru yelled at him about the punishing pace he'd set.

“How do we even kill those things if we can't shot them?” the Chief pointed out, chest heaving, doing his best to keep up with the group.

Naruto slowed his march down slightly but didn't stop to think about it.

“We'll find a way.” he only answered, finding comfort and strength in the warmness of Sasuke's palm against his own. Despite the confusion, the panic and the desperate situation, the boy’s presence beside him was enough to keep him grounded.

They turned left, then right, then run up a long staircase with white walls and immaculate floor. Sounds of gunfire, yelling and fighting started to be audible in the distance.

Naruto sped up, hearing Gaara curse right behind his back and Sasuke's feet beating the tempo on the steps at his same exact rhythm.

The noises got louder and frightening, speaking about death and destruction. Captain Uzumaki could see the natural light filtering into the staircase from the many windows of the lobby at the ground floor.

He would never know how he managed to dodge the remains of a human body that were thrown in his direction at unbelievable speed as soon as they emerged in the hall.
The dismembered body landed with a sickening thump on the stoop behind their back, marring with red the previously spotless pavement.

The whole lobby was a living hell, dead bodies scattered everywhere on marble floor, some lone survivors bravely trying to gun down the four horrendous creatures jumping around the room as if gravity was an opinion. Armchairs were ripped and overturned, desks broken, pieces of furniture and papers thrown everywhere.

Revolting blood sketches adorned the walls and a great portion of the visible floor, giving the impression that the world was painted in vermilion.

Some people were trying to run or to hide, not many of them managing to succeed.

And then Naruto spotted Sai, crouched behind a heavy looking flipped sofa, his gunfire aimed to the back-head of one of the monsters in the room. He was alive and Ino with him, even if she was half laying on the floor pressing both hands to her abdomen, her long blond strands partially tinged in red. Together with them a third figure, with long black hair and arms still chained together, was taking advantage of the improvised hideout, wearing the yellow uniform of the prisoners.

*So it's fucking true that the devil never dies!*

It was a distant thought, because the Captain was called back to reality by Sasuke's sharp pull on their joined hands, which actually saved his head from being split in a half like a melon.

“Shit!” the blond cursed, focusing on the creature that just attacked them and trying to figure out how to avoid its claws and reach his companions to offer some help.

He patted his thigh and extracted his ass-saving Bowie Knife from the sheath, figuring out that if gunfire couldn't damage those monsters, maybe a blade will. Either way, it was still better than feeling vulnerable and unarmed and at this point Naruto was desperate enough to give it a try.

The creature in front of them bared his teeth and quietly roared, warning them, but Naruto didn't back down this time. He lowered his center of gravity in a fighting stance, squeezing Sasuke's palm.

“When he attacks me,” he murmured, taking advantage of the monster's indecision, “I want you to run and hide in a safe place.” he commanded, orbs still fixed on the eyes-less face of the creature. The beast sniffed the air, sticking out his long, viscous tongue to lick its bloodied snout.

“No.”

Sasuke's denial came together with the monster's violent charge, and Naruto rolled to the side, bringing his lover with him on the floor. Sasuke was the first one to regain footing, jumping up on his feet in the blink of an eye, hand still holding on Naruto.

“They don't want to harm me, don't you see?” the boy's voice was calm and untroubled.

Captain Uzumaki looked at him as if he'd said he could fly.

...*They don't what?*

Around them the combat still raged on, soldiers being wounded and murdered and aliens roaring in victory on their corpses.

Naruto opened his mouth to gave Sasuke a piece of his mind, but the boy turned to look at him, and the light in his eyes stole the Captain’s words away.
There was just love in those black orbs. Anger. Preoccupation.

The boy's lips faintly parted.

“They don't want to hurt me, but they want to kill you and your friends.” Sasuke added, as if that was enough of an explanation.

*What the actual fuck... what does it even...*

“And for this reason they become my enemies too.” the boy’s last sentence came as a whisper, and Naruto wasn't sure if it was actually spoken or if he simply heard that in his head.

A moment after, Sasuke was jumping away from his side and toward the monster targeting them and – *man, it was a five meter long three meter high jump.*

Captain Uzumaki watched with wide eyes as the boy landed gracefully on the beast's wide back, startling it enough to stop its attempts at eating off Shikamaru's head.

The creature immediately started bucking, jumping around to throw off its undesired passenger, but Sasuke stuck to it, simply with his soles, even when the thing made a full back flip and then jumped up to hang from the ceiling.

At that point, Naruto could have sworn that his jaw was hitting the floor in disbelief, but the whole situation turned out even better.

A weird, blue creaking light, reminding the blond of electricity, enveloped Sasuke's left hand as he walked – *yep. Walked.* The next second a blue blade of what looked like pure energy emerged directly from the boy's palm and trespassed the monster crane, digging a hole the size of an orange through the bone and causing brain material to pour to the floor.

The monster didn't even get the time to growl as it fell on the ground with a heavy smash, Sasuke jumping off it and landing silently by the huge carcass.

The boy was still in fighting stance, his long legs flexed and his hands ready for another attack.

When Naruto met his eyes, they were glimmering red.

“Sasuke.” the Captain mouthed, and the boy actually grinned.

*Those eyes. I have seen those eyes before! Yesterday it wasn't my imagination playing a trick on me!*

The hooks of a second creature flashed in Sasuke's direction from the blind zone at his back but the boy was already in the middle of another spring, flipping midair above the monster and moving his hands at impressive speed in a hypnotic dance. His rosy, oh-so-kissable lips parted cutely and he breathed fire – a gigantic, kick ass ball of scolding fire – downward to his attacker. The beast screeched horribly as it literally melted on the expensive marble floor. Sasuke's back jump landed gracefully behind the dying monster on the other side of the large lobby.

“Holy Christ and Virgin Mother!”

Shikamaru wasn't one for cursing out loud, normally, but given the situation Naruto could very well share the sentiment.

The remnant two creatures attacked the boy at the same time, effectively starting to consider him like a threat. Sasuke dodged four claws, two legs, a tongue and a tail as if he was walking through the
park, his body elegantly twisting, his legs steady in his somersaults. The blue sword of energy reappeared in his hand like it was some kind of magic, and the boy flipped his wrist to cut off the tail of one of the monsters when it got stuck to the solid wood of a desk. The creature screamed horribly and jumped backwards, scrambling and slipping on his insect-like limbs.

Sasuke promptly spun on himself, catching the other beast mid charge, and held his energy-sword – or whatever that thing was – up to pierce smoothly under the running creature's chin and through the crane. Like for the first killing, the monster simply collapsed without a sound, leaving Sasuke with only one opponent.

The boy drew the blade back and turned to face the last creature, which was still licking his wounds from the previous clash. The beast roared, menacing, trying to intimidate him and discourage the attack, but Sasuke replied to the threat baring his own teeth, his ruby, predatory eyes focused on the pray.

Naruto couldn't stop looking at the boy's maddeningly beautiful face, the same face that he had been admiring for hours that same morning as Sasuke slept peacefully on his chest. The same face that he had seen twisted in pleasure and glowed in affection as they made love.

Sasuke's red orbs changed back to black and a red, fascinating flower bloomed slowly in the middle of the iris, like a gem in spring. Captain Uzumaki kept on looking, mesmerized, as long lashes stopped fluttering, Sasuke's porcelain face unmoving, those jewel-like eyes focused on the beast. The roaring from the monster gradually changed in tone and frequency, transforming into the whine of a wounded animal.

The creature tried escaping, scrambling away from the room, away from Sasuke, uncaring of the other men still surrounding it. It's legs gave out under the weight of its muscular body, and it crumbled to the floor as if some invisible force was crushing it. Cornered, the beast raised his own sharp falciform claw and chopped its own head off in a single, fluid movement.

Distantly, Naruto heard Gaara's sharp exhale, but in face of the carnage all he could think about was his lover.

The Captain stayed focused on him until the boy’s irises reverted back to their original anthracite color and his lashes fluttered, pupils shifting to find the Captain's.

I am in love with him.

It was a quiet, almost soothing realization for Naruto, devoid of shock and special effects.

Mesmerized, he started walking in the boy's direction, carving the physical contact between them.

After a small initial hesitation Sasuke practically rushed to him, throwing his arms behind the Captain’s neck.

Naruto held him close, pressing his nose in the crock of the boy’s neck, breathing his scent in. Nothing was relevant but the fact that his lover was alive and well at the moment – and he had also saved their lives. Sasuke curled his fingers into blond locks, trembling in the embrace.

Unfortunately, the joy of being together didn’t last long.

The window suddenly exploded in a million pieces, both Naruto and Sasuke automatically ducking to protect themselves from the debris, still clinging to one another. A gigantic, terrifying creature jumped in through the bulletproof glass, fangs menacingly exposed as it roared furiously.
Straddling the monster’s huge neck as if the killer beast was merely a trusty steed was a pale, long haired young man.

Upon meeting the mysterious rider’s ruby eyes, Naruto definitely lost his breath.

Chapter End Notes

So guess who’s joined the party, mh?
Believe it or not I have been waiting to write the final scene of this chapter since the very moment I started the story.
(P.S.: at the time of plotting I actually drew a sketch of my baby being cool - wanna see it? Just pls remember that I am no artist and I was so enthusiast that I drew it on my phone with my bare fingers *add here evil laughter*).

And ugh. Action action action!
This chapter is shamefully long, I know, and many things happen. I am trying to unfold the complex plot and this was the only way to set up the proper pace. Needless to say, drama is on the way!
I kinda pitied poor Shika in this chapter, at a certain point. He was stuck in a very complex situation between Naruto and Gaara, forced to act as "the voice of reason" LOL.

As a side announcement I have to tell you that shit had hit the fan and my Uni had the brilliant idea to move up my graduation date, so yeah. Not a nice situation, considered that I work full time already. Be aware that next chapter is likely going to be delayed two or three days because I will be away for business and I am not sure to have the time/connection to reach you.

This chapter is still unbeta'd but a kind soul offered to beta for me from the next chap on (yey!).
Feel free to point out eventual mistakes and be sure that concrit is welcome.

Also, If you have some spare time let me know what you think about the story so far: hearing your theories gives me energy! (I know some of you already guessed some things!

Thank you for supporting my madness and well... see you next time! :)}
The truth named Uchiha

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Shikamaru had something to say about Naruto and Sasuke's relationship, Gaara wanted Sasuke out of the way. The investigation on Hinata's death seemed at a dead end even before the Alien's Cavalry attacked the Union's Base. Sasuke fought alongside the UEF soldiers revealing his real abilities and Naruto realized he couldn't help how irrationally he loves him. Badass Big-Bro Itachi barged in ruining the happy ending.

Chapter Notes

I know I am late. I am sorry. But cheer with me: this chapter is beta'd by kind soul sasu--hime! Yey!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto couldn’t even think properly. A high pitched whistle had taken over his brain, clouding his hearing ability and severely hindering his concentration. He had the odd sensation of watching himself from outside his own body, comically paralyzed and wide eyed in the middle of a hall filled with corpses.

The threatening beast standing several meters from him had his fanged jaws wide open, a trail of sticky drool dribbling steadily on the bloody pavement.

But all of that was trivial when the ruby irises of the stunning young rider straddling the monster’s neck where focused on him. The alabaster, smooth face of the elegant man gave away no emotion, his sharp chin tilted up with pride, fine lips lightly curved downwards. The slight breeze seeping in from the broken windows ruffled his coal, waist-length locks, messily collected in a low ponytail.

Naruto didn’t need to be told who this man was. Despite the stronger jaw and the broader shoulders, the resemblance was uncanny.

“Itachi.”

Sasuke’s whisper managed to break through the haze in the Captain’s mind, the red eyes trapping him finally relenting their invisible hold and shifting to the boy in his arms.

The rider’s expression didn’t change as he observed his brother’s face, shoulders squared and those big, hypnotic eyes stern.

In the quietness that had fallen over the room, Orochimaru’s manic laugh echoed like a ghastly snarl from hell.

Itachi’s eyes fell to half mast, thick long lashes almost concealing the red-glint from the haunted irises. His jaw tightened, the neutral expression on his face breaking in a frown of disgust.
Naruto was panting, his heart slamming like crazy against his rib-cage, adrenaline running in his veins. Peeking subtly to his side, he noticed that Gaara and Shikamaru also seemed affected by Itachi’s powerful presence, their expression constipated as if they were holding their breath, faces ashen pale even under the dirt marring them from the battle.

In the blink of an eye, the enormous alien creature and its rider jumped to the other side of the room in the Snake’s direction, barely avoiding crushing Sai and Ino in the process. The monster’s long claws bolted forward with brute strength, neatly slicing in two the upturned furniture hiding Orochimaru from sight.

Being exposed and within reach of deadly fangs didn’t seem to unsettle the Snake in the slightest. He kept laughing, slumped on the floor with his dirty hair hiding the beaten face.

It took more than a minute for the disturbing hoarse laugh to die down in a soft chuckle, the Sannin’s body visibly shaking from the exertion, winded.

The beast, crouched in front of him in a predatory stance, held its ground in perfect stillness, its rider’s attention completely focused on the hunched form of the Sannin.

Finally, the Snake managed to tilt his lolling head up, exposing his swollen cheekbones and a heavily bruised eye.

“Ita-chi, Ita-chi...” his raspy voice chanted mockingly. His chapped, thin lips stretched in a creepy grin. “It’s been a long time, my babe.”

Naruto couldn’t tell if Orochimaru was extremely brave or extremely stupid. He couldn’t see Itachi’s expression from where he stood but he could hear clearly Sasuke’s repulsed grunt at his side. Almost subconsciously, he tightened his hold on the boy’s wrist.

The creature’s claws rose again, the monster quietly growling, already foretasting fresh blood. Before it could lower them down to put a well deserved end to Orochimaru’s miserable life, out of nowhere Sai found the strength to throw himself in between, shielding the scientist with his own body. They had been instructed to protect the Snake’s life at all costs until all information was extracted from him.

“No!” Naruto heard himself screaming, his body instinctively jumping in action, spouting toward the deadly creature.

It was too late as one of the beast’s sharp sabers sliced through Sai’s left shoulder with disconcerting easiness, knocking him over and impaling him to the ground right beside the Sannin.

Ino screamed, a squirt of blood from the hit on her companion dotting her face in red. Naruto didn’t know what he was doing, but he knew that he had to do something to help his friends. Still running, he threw his fighting knife at the monster, landing a hit on the belly’s side. The beast howled, taken by surprise, and released Sai’s heavily injured body to turn and face the Captain’s unexpected charge. Naruto miraculously dodged the blow thrown in his direction, lowering his body to slide on the floor propelled by his run up. The move worked and Naruto drifted on the pavement under the monster and reappeared behind it, nimbly jumping on his feet. The creature was faster though, and in a second it had a counter-move ready. It jumped on the ceiling, changing its direction midair, then immediately leapt down on the Captain, throwing him off-balance. Naruto fell back with his ass to the floor, the monster immediately taking advantage of the opening and aiming a mortal hit at the blond’s chest.

The Captain saw it coming, but he knew very well that there was nothing in the world he could do to
prevent being cut in a half this time. He had lost. He had miscalculated the creature’s speed.

He clenched his eyes shut as the adrenaline peaked, waiting for the unavoidable pain to come. Only, it never did.

Naruto exhaled shakily, brows furrowed in surprise. He opened his moistened orbs to spot Sasuke’s form crouched in front of him, the claw that had been directed to the Captain’s bust firmly held above his head.

Naruto’s eyes widened. He had seen up close the devastating effects of those creatures strong blows, and he had seized the sharpness of their blades. Sasuke had stopped the stroke with only his bare hands and he wasn’t bleeding nor bending under the brute strength or the monster.

The blunt sound of gunfire partially forced him out of his stupor, and the blond shifted his gaze to find Gaara embracing his rifle, intent at firing his whole magazine at the menace that was Sasuke’s brother. The Captain realized that this was not a very smart move on Gaara's part, but he couldn't find the strength to shout out some halting command, his brain lost in the chaos of the unprecedented events unfolding.

In any case, it didn't look like Sasuke's brother needed much of his support. All the bullets fired in his direction stopped exactly a foot from Itachi’s head, suspended in the air as if held there by an invisible magnetic force, leaving him unscathed.

Slowly, Itachi turned his head in Gaara’s direction, regarding the exploded bullets fluctuating mid air with curiosity, as if he had never seen a gun before in his whole life.

Gaara’s magazine clicked empty and the noise of gunfire stopped, only the soft panting coming from the Sand’s Captain now audible in the wide hall. Itachi’s eyes focused on Gaara’s challenging expression and the small black commas in his ruby irises started spinning around his pupils.

“Itachi, don’t!”

Sasuke’s scream gained his bothers attention, the suspended bullets immediately falling harmless to the ground as soon as the man’s concentration shifted.

The stern-looking rider of the horrible mother-of-all-beasts turned his pale face in the direction of his sibling.

“Sasuke.” he spoke, his head tilting to the side. His voice was soft and pleasant, holding a different undertone compared with his brother’s, but with a similar velvety texture. “Why are you protecting these abhorrent creatures?”

He didn’t sound angry or reproaching. His attentive red eyes were solely for his brother.

Sasuke pushed on his legs for leverage and put to use the grip he still had on the creature’s claw to unbalance the monster, forcing it to bend his limbs and kneel meekly onto the floor.

He did all of this while holding his brother’s stern gaze, but he didn’t offer him an answer.

Itachi’s face, now several meters lower since his charger had been forced into submission, wrinkled in perplexity, a strand of silky hair falling on his face, carried by the wind. One of his delicate white hands moved graciously to pin the rebellious lock behind one ear, nothing in his godlike appearance wavering despite the humanity of the gesture.

“Brother,” he spoke again, one brow arched. He tilted his head, briefly glaring at the curled up
form of Orochimaru, still on the floor. The man had at least the common sense to keep his seething mouth shout, now.

“If I remind you what this repellent man did to you when you couldn’t defend yourself?”

Naruto audibly gasped, surprised by the older sibling’s bluntness, but the sound was covered by Sasuke’s outraged voice.

“Itachi, please!” the younger reproached, glaring daggers at his brother.

The tension between the two of them was so obvious that it could be cut with a knife.

Itachi was still looking at Orochimaru as if he was a disgusting cockroach swimming in his soup and, for a minute, Naruto was sure that he was going to kill the man on the spot with another one of his impressive superpowers – eye lasers or whatever.

Instead, the man’s gaze slowly and gracefully skimmed across the room, taking in the faces of the other people surrounding him, before concentrating on his brother yet again.

“I sense that you are distressed, Sasuke, but the reason why you’re suffering such a negative emotion is beyond me.” the older’s voice was calm and neutral, but to Naruto, who somehow had learned to read Sasuke’s own oddity, he genuinely looked at a loss.

Sasuke seemed to become smaller under his brother’s concerned scrutiny and Naruto felt for him.

Surely Itachi was imposing.

But the Captain remembered very well his own position and wasn’t willing to leave his lover alone in this confrontation. With a desperate effort, he collected his latest energy and forced his aching body in a vertical position, slowly standing up tall behind Sasuke, paying attention at keeping his hands in sight during the whole painful process. He wanted Itachi to realize that he wasn’t a menace, but that he wasn’t defeated either.

Once stable on his own two feet, he softly touched Sasuke’s lower back, letting him know that he was there for him, his blue orbs focused on Itachi, who had still not deigned him of recognition.

Sasuke shook his head faintly, lowering his gaze to the floor. He was gnawing nervously at his bottom lip, now reddish due to the torture, and looked on the verge of a nervous breakdown. It was very obvious that he intended to say something to explain his position to his sibling, but words were failing him and the frustration built.

The older waited patiently, very likely aware of the inner turmoil his brother was going through. He fluttered his long lashes quietly and his irises reverted back to a more human-like coal black, possibly even darker than Sasuke’s.

“Come with me, little brother.” he called after some time, and his voice sounded different, affectionate and understanding despite the man’s austere appearance.

Naruto’s gaze shifted to Sasuke, who had tilted his chin up and looked directly at his brother’s face.

“Will you spare him if I do?”

His lover’s words sounded surreal. Naruto heard Sasuke’s soft voice repeating them in his brain hundreds of time like an echo.
...Spare? Did that mean that Itachi had actually been sent to kill them?

The Captain’s eyes bounced back to the older sibling, who looked at least as confused as Naruto was by Sasuke's request, his fine eyebrows arched in surprise.

*Thank God.*

“...him?” the older demanded, his baffled eyes blinking repeatedly.

Sasuke only released a small moan, his cheeks dusting in pink.

That seemed to be a good enough answer for Itachi, who still looked surprised but definitely not oblivious anymore. His coal eyes abandoned his little brother to wander among the soldiers in the room, halting a handful of seconds on every tensed face as if he was subtly trying to read what was in their minds.

Naruto was the last one to endure the scrutiny, Itachi’s eyes insistent on him, but devoid of any malice. The captain did his best not to waver under the weight of his gaze, proudly keeping their eyes locked, his jaw squared in tension.

The older sibling tilted his head, an odd light softening his glare – *was that a small smirk on his face?* *Naruto wasn’t sure.*

“He’s mine.”

Sasuke’s voice cut the silence, filled with so much raw emotion and possession that Naruto couldn’t help but break the eye contact he had fought to keep in order to take a glimpse of his lover’s face. Sasuke’s cheeks were still tinged in deep pink, making him look really young and cute, but his eyes were glimmering red in warning that he must be taken seriously.

But the reason why Naruto was so taken aback by the boy’s reaction was that he could actually feel him, he could perceive the pull of Sasuke’s private emotions in his own chest as if the two of them were somehow connected. And dear lord, *maybe he wasn’t the only one helplessly in love.*

Sasuke’s feelings felt like a ball of molten lava in his chest, affection, lust, hunger, loyalty, respect and preoccupation stirred together.

The Captain’s azure orbs moved back to Itachi, who now looked amused, his attention equally distributed between both of them.

“...Yours?” he demanded and, if anything, it sounded like a brotherly tease.

Sasuke’s eyes faded to their usual dark gray and the redness of his face intensified.

“Mine.” he confirmed, softly.

The faint shadow of a smile appeared on Itachi’s face, but it disappeared as quickly.

“I see.” he conceded, throwing one last, curious glance in Naruto’s direction.

Then, his demeanor was back to business at lightning speed, any trace of emotion concealed from his face.

“Come then.” he urged, extending a delicate hand in his brother’s direction.

Sasuke stood unmoving for a couple of seconds, his expression hidden from Naruto’s eyes. The
Captain could feel it within himself that his lover was relaxing, part of the tension and the fear he had felt disappearing from the coiling mix in his belly. Still, the other part of him was torn.

The boy tilted his head in Naruto’s direction, allowing their eyes to meet briefly. He didn’t say a world, but Naruto perceived a hot flicker of undiluted devotion caressing his heart.

Then the boy jumped, mounting on the knelt beast together with his brother. He swiftly accommodated himself behind his sibling, holding fondly at the older’s narrow waist.

The monstrous creature straightaway spurred in motion, standing on his long, deadly limbs.

Both the men sitting on its back were looking down at Naruto with expressive eyes, and the Captain suddenly came to his senses, realizing that Sasuke was leaving him and unable to contain the emotions exploding on his chest.

“Itachi!” Orochimaru’s hoarse voice barked, filling the room with an angered cry. “This was not the original arrangement, Itachi!”

Naruto was too gone to care about him.

“Sasuke!” he breathed, and his lover smiled at him reassuringly.

The next second, the monster sprang away at surprising speed, both brothers riding the irregular gait as if they were born on it.

“We need medical help over here, immediately!” Shikamaru screamed, kneeling down between the damaged bodies of Sai and Ino. The girl had lost consciousness a while ago from blood loss, the wound on her side and lower belly looking worse than expected up close.

Gaara exhaled shakily, walking to Sai's other side on unsteady, quivering legs. He reached for the radio in the pocket of his military vest and automatically dialed the emergency number to get help. He wasn't sure about the state of the base after this last attack, so he didn't take an answer from the other side for granted. Merely judging from the destruction he had witnessed, they could all be dead in the central department too, if the alien creatures had reached them.

After a handful of seconds of dull screeching from the walkie's speaker a feminine voice answered the call, demanding their code-name and position. Gaara provided her with the needed information, soliciting their intervention. Sai was still conscious, but the pool of blood spreading under his body didn't look comforting in the slightest.

Sasuke had left him – no, he had been taken from him. The feeling of loss from the forced separation was so sharp that it was numbing.

As if the intense, confusing emotional pain wasn’t enough of a burden, a storm was raging in his head, thoughts chasing after each other and memories tangling in a confused mess. Too many questions were still without an answer, the recent happenings severely underlying how little their actual knowledge of the situation was. They had so many blind spots regarding the Akatsuki, the
alien invasion, Orochimaru and how all those things were related. And also Sasuke, the sweet boy that had nested in Naruto's heart, now looked more like a walking enigma than a familiar reassurance.

Naruto was sick and tired of all of it: of the war, the death, the pain. Tired of living in the darkness, of having information kept from him, of being lied to. Tired of not knowing who he could trust or if his loved ones would make it past tomorrow.

Despite being used to put his life on the line to protect the Union, now he needed some answers, he felt like they owed him.

_Someone in this fucking, messed up world must know what the hell was happening precisely._

Captain Uzumaki turned, his face an emotionless mask, his blue eyes ice-stern. His gaze pierced through Gaara of the Sand, sending a cold shiver down the man's spine, and stopped on the crawling form of the scientist whose ambition had put mankind's very existence on the line.

The motherfucker was subtly trying to take advantage of the chaos and the disarray following the unexpected attack to cut and run undisturbed.

Naruto's well-trained hands moved so fast that Gaara realized what was happening only when he heard the sound of a fired shot and the whispered whoosh of a bullet passing close to his left ear. His widened, astounded eyes remained hooked to the fuming muzzle of the blond's shotgun, the weapon still aimed in his direction, but his brain registered the pained grasp coming from several meters behind his back, signaling that the appointed target had being hit. Only because it was Naruto, the man he considered a brother, Gaara refrained from pulling out his own gun and firing a reprimand grazing shot to the other man.

Instead, he slowly tilted his head to peek above his shoulder, noticing the curled up form of Orochimaru whining, his bloodied right hand held tightly to his chest.

“Next time you aim a gun at me, you might want to warn me.” Gaara admonished his friend, his tone devoid of actual venom.

Naruto's stern expression didn't waver, his arm quietly lowering the Beretta.

“I wouldn't have held it against you if you fired back.” his tone was purely informative.

The Sand's Captain arched an eyebrow.

Naruto holstered his weapon and walked in long strides to the Snake's crouched form, knees bending to lower his massive form at the scientist's eye level. The man's yellow, serpentine eyes were seething at him from behind a curtain of black, oily hair, the air around him almost vibrating in a low hiss. Naruto took a single look to the wound he had inflicted to the Snake's palm, noticing how it was perfectly round shaped and exactly where he had wanted it to be.

_he could have easily hurt him more. he probably should have._

His own right hand reached out for a handful of the man's black strands, forcing him to properly expose the battered up face.

“Gaara.” the Captain called, icy glare still focused on Orochimaru's hateful eyes. “Fetch Yamato and Kakashi, if you can. I don't know about you, but I am tired of beating around the bush.”

The redhead pondered his friend's words for barely a second, his teal eyes bouncing from the
prisoner in Naruto’s grasp to the harsh lines of the blond’s tensed features.

“Gaara of the Sand to Central Kommando. I need to speak to General Hatake with extreme urgency, please advise him to call me back immediately on this frequency. Also, I need to attune my radio to the Bad Guy’s private network, so please report the access key.”

Naruto sighed lightly, at least relieved that Gaara was with him in this circumstances, in spite of the tension growing between them. He spared a glance to Shikamaru, who was pressing a piece of clothing to Sai's open gash in order to slow down the bleeding, and found his hazel eyes set on him. He nodded and Nara nodded back, lips pressed together tightly and a bit of uncertainty in his orbs.

Then Naruto stood up, dragging the fuming scientist in a standing position.

Orochimaru was slammed in an armchair in the first room of the security department Naruto found devoid of dead bodies and debris. The scientist didn’t really resist being hauled around but the Captain was in no mood for good manners.

Shikamaru and Gaara were following the blond close by, having left their comrades to medical care, accompanied by a limping Kakashi – who caught up on them pretty quickly despite his wounded leg.

Yamato was still missing, his squad being caught in the blunt of the attack. He seemed fine enough though, so they were confident he was going to join them as soon as possible.

The office-chair creaked sharply as the Snake was accommodated, not really because of the man’s modest weight but mainly due to the brute force Naruto was unconsciously using to manhandle him.

Kakashi closed the door behind their back. A moment of tensed silence followed the soft click of the knob.

Naruto took a step back from the curled up form of the man that he loathed with all he had, gazing down on him, face contorted in a disgusted frown. Orochimaru returned his glare, chin high in pride and golden, snake-like eyes arrogant and glinting in mild amusement. Despite his situation as a cornered prisoner, his attitude exuded confidence, and he didn’t look intimidated in the slightest.

Captain Uzumaki had to keep his hands in his pants pockets to resist the itchy urge to punch him in the face yet again for the second time in twenty-four hours.

He took in a deep breath and reached for a simple chair abandoned in a corner, setting it upwards and dragging it in front of the scientist’s armchair.

Still silent, he slowly sat down, mentally repeating himself that he had to stay calm and keep his nerves under control, because Orochimaru concretely was in possession of some vital information that they desperately needed.

The delight in the Snake’s eyes became more evident as they followed the Captain’s restrained movements, the shadow of a smile faintly curling his chapped, thin lips into a smirk. He corrected his posture in the chair, elegantly sitting properly with his back straight, one hand comfortably resting on the recliner’s metallic armrest.

As much as it irked Naruto, he had to recognize that the man actually knew what he was doing – and had enough guts to keep his nerves at bay. Orochimaru was the one holding the best cards in this game, and his attitude only told the Captain that he was perfectly aware of this simple fact.
The blond’s nostrils flared in annoyance and he curled his fingers in the pockets material, afraid he might slip up and lose his temper. Nonetheless, he kept his azure gaze on his opponent, trying to figure out how to loosen the scientist’s tongue without risking killing him or making promises he couldn’t keep.

“Speak.” was the only command Naruto could think of, and he marveled at how difficult it was to keep his tone civil while a hurricane of emotions was swirling in his chest.

Orochimaru only arched an unimpressed eyebrow at him, almost mocking him. His small smirk stretched into a full grin.

“Oh Captain, my Captain!” his raspy voice chanted, as if he was reciting a dramatic piece. “The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won, the port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting…”

Naruto’s shoulders tightened imperceptibly, but he didn’t move nor showed his discomfort on his face. The Snake’s grin widened creepily, exposing his broken, pointy teeth and the swollen gums, his long, flexible tongue poking out to wet his upper lip.

“While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring,” he continued, his gaze taunting “But O heart! heart! heart! O the bleeding drops of red, where on the deck my Captain lies, fallen cold and dead.”

The man’s hissing and metallic voice would have probably made Naruto’s skin crawl, if only he was in a different state of mind. As things were, he didn’t have time nor patience to fuck around, and he definitely had enough of the scientist’s bullshit.

Calm, at least apparently, he reached for his second knife he kept stripped to his left tight and unsheathed it, his cold gaze never leaving the other man.

“You know,” he stated casually, pulling up the knife between them at eye level. “In a time almost forgotten, people used to get the scalp of their enemies to remind them they had been defeated. It should be a really painful experience, if you ask me, having the skin ripped off your head while you are forced into submission.”

Orochimaru’s gaze hardened and he chuckled lowly in his throat.

“I am wondering if this might help reminding you the risky position you are currently in.” the Captain went on, not relenting or lowering his weapon.

Orochimaru licked his ruined lips again, his snake-like eyes boring intensely onto Naruto, seemingly looking into his soul. He gently tilted his body forward, leaning closer to the blond, who fought against his instinct not to back off or display uneasiness.

“Do you love him, my Captain?” the Snake asked, whispering each world slowly, as if it was a secret between them.

Naruto couldn’t conceal the breath catching in his lungs, taken aback by the question and its unspoken reference. He figured that his hesitation had been answer enough for Orochimaru, since a hearty laugh escaped the man’s mouth immediately after.

“Oh man… that’s too good to be true!” the Snake cheered, his head tilting backwards in an abandoned bundle of laughs.

Naruto’s patience snapped and he leaned in to rest the sharp tip of his knife against the thin skin of
the scientist’s temple.

His features were squared in barely restrained anger, his eyes several shades lighter, menacing, digging holes in Orochimaru’s skull.

“Careful.” he only warned, muttering under his breath through clenched teeth.

The Snake stopped laughing, but his chest kept on shaking in a silent chuckle for a while. Once he collected his breath, he raised one of his chained hands to softly touch the Captain’s wrist where the knife’s handle rested.

“No need for bad manners, my dear.” he cooed, his putrid breath hitting Naruto straight in the face. “I will be glad to talk with you, since we’re all friends.” there was mockery in his tone, but at the same time he sounded sincere enough about his intentions. In any case, Naruto kept the knife against the skin where it was, barely easing the pressure on the blade. He figured this could always provide a valid incentive, in case the Snake was only trying to fuck with them.

“Please, enlighten us.” the Captain forced himself to say, the strained muscles of his upper back were starting to hurt due to the effort of maintaining control.

The Snake smiled another one of his creepy smiles, the thick crust of blood in the middle of his lower lips making it even more difficult to watch it.

“I would like to tell you a story,” he started out casually, his gnarled hands joining leisurely on the armrest. “About the slaughtering of a welcoming party and a greedy government with plenty to hide.”

Naruto took in a deep breath, reminding himself for the umpteenth time to be patient and to pay close attention to every word and gesture, even if all he wanted at the moment was pretty much to slit the motherfucker’s throat and leave to his comrades the pleasure of disposing the body.

“How does this have to do with your projects and Akatsuki?” Naruto couldn’t refrain from asking, knowing that his tolerance time was in an unstoppable countdown.

Orochimaru looked at him patronizingly.

“This has everything to do with my projects and Akatsuki.” he explained patiently, treating the Captain as an insolent child.

Naruto could hear the click of his teeth from his jaw clenching, but he didn’t interrupt, leaving the Snake freedom of speech.

“As I was saying,” Orochimaru resumed, taking pleasure in having all the men’s attention focused on him, together with their leniency “I am sure you have been told that forty years ago, when the Invaders arrived on our loving planet, a welcoming party was organized to meet their leaders and discuss their intentions peacefully. During the meeting, for some unclear reason, it's been reported that the aliens had attacked the humans’ party, killing several men and forcing mankind to answer the violence, starting the Great War.”

“Yes, we’ve been told.” Shikamaru remarked harshly from someplace behind Naruto’s back. The Captain was grateful he didn’t have to be the one playing that part. He wasn’t sure if he could manage to be diplomatic while playing along the Snake’s slimy game, after all.

Orochimaru smiled, his eyes shifting briefly to make an appreciative face at their Intelligence Chief.
“See? You are obedient, good boys raised by the Union! Such a miracle for mankind’s sake!” the Snake was smiling again, his words sharp and dripping with mockery. Shikamaru was too smart to waste his breath trying to counter him.

“Have you ever wondered about the trustworthiness of the information that was fed to your awaiting mouths? You know, someone could have lied to you from the high ranks of your own faction, just for saying...”

At the implication, Naruto’s hand slipped, his knife opening a thin cut into the scientist’s skin.

“Cut the crap, Orochimaru. You don’t want to risk Captain Uzumaki slicing half of your face off, do you?” Kakashi’s composed, almost casual reprimand stopped Naruto’s hand from carving the wound deeper.

Orochimaru giggled a bit, still looking thoroughly entertained in spite of the blood gushing from his temple and dripping down his gaunt face.

“You guys never appreciate the value of suspense!” he reproached, his inhumanly long tongue coming out to lick at the blood that had stained his lower cheek. He frowned a bit, looking disappointed, his yellow pupils losing focus.

Naruto groaned.

“Anyway,” the Snake resumed talking as if nothing happened. “The point is that you have been actually lied to, since the very very beginning. The Union is nothing more than a fake government built upon lies. Honestly, I find your blind obedience to a supposed authority really fascinating.” he clicked his tongue, his slit pupils shifting back to the Captain.

“The welcoming party was never meant to be pacific in the first place, at least not on our part. Half of our commission consisted of mercenaries bought directly from Akatsuki lines. The original idea was to kill the Invaders’ delegation and gain material to ensure advanced research on their keen. The intention was to study them and discover their weaknesses, so that mankind could gain the upper hand in a future conflict and force them into submission.”

“Stop saying bullshit!” Shikamaru cut in abruptly, anger and annoyance apparent in his voice. “At the time Akatsuki didn’t even exist. And the commission was organized by Lieutenant Sarutobi, so___”

Another burst of laughter erupted from Orochimaru, his whole body shaking and his eyes watering, apparently finding Shikamaru’s remark nothing short of exhilarating.

Wary gazes were exchanged in the few minutes that it took for the Snake to calm down, the man practically weeping by the end of it, his chest heaving.

“You sure are fun, young man!” his hissing voice complimented Chief Nara. He moved his chained hands to whip away a lone tear rolling down his cheek. “Sarutobi!...As if!” he chuckled under his breath. “Sarutobi is nothing more than a puppet in Danzo’s hands. He wouldn’t be able to rule over a kindergarten, how in hell do you believe he could lead a global organization?”

Shikamaru frowned, his features contorting in a disapproving grimace.

“Hiruzen Sarutobi has been the Union’s political leader in the last forty years.” he ought to precise, fiercely meeting the Snake’s golden gaze.

Orochimaru rewarded him with a pitying smile, his arrogant attitude coming back full force.
“Nara, I have read and heard things about you,” the Snake stated quietly, his joined hands composed into his lap, reminding Naruto of the position dead bodies were arranged in for the requiem. “According to my sources, you have an estimated IQ of 216. So how is it that you are not following the musings of a humble 188?”

Shikamaru simply eyed him gravely.

“Who’s been Sarutobi’s Executive and adviser, during all this years?” the Snake demanded, opting for a change in his approach.

“Shimura Danzo,” Shikamaru answered bluntly, waiting for Orochimaru’s next move.

The scientist nodded in compliance.

“Very good. And who was Sarutobi’s best man, when the sweet-grandpa only was Representative of Defence for the five continents?”

Shikamaru arched his brows, but decided to play along.

“Danzo.”

“Did Hiruzen ever operate without Danzo, or does he have another adviser aside of him?”

Chief Nara stopped for a second to think about it.

“Not that I am aware of.”

Orochimaru’s face looked oddly obliging, now, his hands lifted to show his palms as if he wanted to prove his supposed good intentions.

“There’s a legal technicality that forces Sarutobi to consult with Danzo and gain the Executive’s approval before taking an important decision. But I am confident that you already knew this.” he suggested, leaning back into his chair.

Truth to be told, Shikamaru was aware of the fact, but he didn’t like the way in which the Snake was running his discourse nor the direction that it was taking.

“Well, now I am telling you something that is likely unfamiliar, so you may want to sit down and prepare for a little shock. The Akatsuki group is actually older than the Union is; it was founded by a young radical-supremacist known as Dashi, more or less fifty years ago, as an organization specialized in international espionage.”

Naruto could hear Shikamaru’s surprised gasp and turned his head slightly to take a glimpse of the man. His friend’s gaze was unfocused, hazel eyes wide open, face pale and expressionless. A light sheen of sweat moistened his forehead, making the skin glitter under the neon lights hanging from the ceiling.

“See? now the boy got me!” Orochimaru applauded, sounding like he was having the time of his life.

The Chief gnawed at his bottom lip, his face gradually shading and his features hardening, making him look more mature than his actual age.

“Is Dashi still the Akatuki’s acknowledged leader nowadays?”

Orochimaru’s grin widened, clearly pleased by the way Shikamaru’s mind worked.
“Obviously.”

Shikamaru cursed loudly, caressing his wrinkled forehead with small circling movements of his still bloodied fingers.

“Shit! This is… not good. So how did it go exactly?”

The Snake opened his mouth to answer the question but Naruto preceded him, interrupting their private conversation.

“Wait wait wait! Slow down for a minute.” he exclaimed, half twisting his body to properly look at the Intelligence Chief. “What the fuck does this all mean? I scored 137 for fuck's sake. Help me out!”

Shikamaru let his gaze shift from the scientist's annoyed face to the troubled expression of his friend and he exhaled slowly, realizing that the other people in the room were likely missing some information.

“Danzo's radical past is well documented, despite his many attempts to bury the information. But I was convinced that he had been forced to give up his extremist position when he finally managed to enter the government.” he briefly provided, sharing his personal knowledge.

Orochimaru clicked his tongue, the oblique, creepy grin now growing bigger than ever.

“This means you believed in fairy-tales, young man. For your personal information, real people don't change.” he hastily provided.

And like that, the confused mess of information squeezed in Naruto's brain magically clicked in place.

**Da-Shi. Danzo Shimura.** The timeline was perfectly coherent with Orochimaru's statement. And if he had always been the leader of Akatsuki, the tables turned completely.

“Danzo would obviously never accept to open a dialogue with an ‘invader’ from another planet. Furthermore, he saw the aliens' arrival as an occasion to gain the power and the knowledge to finally control mankind and bring all the nations together under a unique perfect government that he intended to lead.” Orochimaru finished the recollection, filling them in.

What remained unspoken, silently floating in the air, was the knowledge of having seen things from the wrong perspective this whole time.

“We were actually the ones attacking, dishonoring the promise we made.” Naruto's voice sounded distant, almost as if he wanted to call himself off the conversation entirely.

“We were the ones starting this war.” he concluded.

Understanding weighed upon his conscience like a ton of bricks.

His stomach was clenching, his heart heavy. He had to concentrate in suppressing the subconscious retching, breathing deeply. **All his dead friends. His dead family. His dead comrades. All the innocent people who died in the Great War. All of this was the simple consequence of the greed of a single man, a man he had indirectly trusted with his life.**

“I don’t think that Shimura had predicted the devastating outcome that his non-diplomatic, selfish decision was going to have. In any case, the damage was done, and he decided to keep on with his
“You mean that old man Sarutobi knew about this?” Naruto interjected, gaining another disapproving glance from the prisoner.

“Naturally. Hiruzen is a good man, but totally unfit for the command. He trusted Danzo blindly, letting him take the most important decisions. Since the incident that started the war he’s been living his life in fear of being held responsible of what happened.”

Well, this brought a new light on the expression “being in deep shit” as a figure of speech .

Naruto couldn’t believe that he had sacrificed his whole life serving the wrong cause, putting his life and his heart on the line for a corrupt, evil government, an authority that didn’t represent him.

“So this was the confidential project you were working on at Akatsuki’s request,” the blond Captain forced his raspy voice past his itchy throat, knowing fairly well that this wasn’t the time to let his guard down and succumb to a mental breakdown.

“Yes, the Uchiha project .” Orochimaru confirmed, an expression that almost seemed proud smoothing his features slightly.

“Did it bring some concrete results?”

A predatory light sparkled in Orochimaru’s golden eyes at the question, grin widening and his long tongue poking out to moisten his lips in an excited, involuntary lap.

“Of course it did.” he declared smugly, his gaze locked with the Captain’s. “Sasuke Uchiha is lively proof of that.”

Naruto felt like his breath was suddenly knocked out of his lungs, his body temperature spiking and his palms immediately breaking a sweat. His heart started beating like crazy and he had to take a moment to loosen the tight knot in his throat. He could taste bile raising up his esophagus.

He worked some saliva into his abruptly dry mouth, concentrating in keeping eye contact with the scientist; he couldn’t show how much a simple reference to Sasuke affected him.

“What did you do to him?” Naruto demanded, just an edge of discomfort showing in his voice.

Orochimaru tilted his head to the side, his golden eyes intense and almost crazy. His black, oily strands wrapped around the Captain’s raised hand at the movement, eliciting a disgusted frown.

“Oh, nothing. I simply made him . He, his brother and three others like them.” the Snake hissed tauntingly.

He… made him?

“. ..How?”

“Uchiha are a eugenetic experimentation of DNA blending. With my knowledge in genetics, medicine and biology I combined the samples of alien DNA that Danzo obtained through the committee slaughtering with some human DNA that I acquired during my other studies. My goal was to perfect the imperfections of mankind, therefore I sought both the best form possible and the
best applications for our brain’s abilities.”

Naruto was having trouble keeping his concentration.

“It’s nice to see that somebody appreciated my creation this much…” the Snake’s voice mocked, but the Captain’s mind was already gone.

*Sasuke isn’t human.*

It should have been pretty obvious after the show the boy put on against the alien creatures that attacked them, but hearing the thing confirmed out loud was nothing short than a metaphoric slap in the face.

“So you are saying that you created human/alien hybrids born in a laboratory. How is it that they look completely human, though?” Shikamaru took the reins of the conversation, sensitive enough to figure out that his friend probably needed some time to digest the revelation.

Orochimaru’s attention shifted on Nara, his face open in a pleased expression.

“The Invaders don’t have a physical shape unless they want to. They are creatures of pure energy and their body is fluid, allowing them to take the most convenient form according to the situation. Unluckily, human DNA didn’t allow me to recreate all this variability, so I had to provide my babies with a stable body. And since I was at it, I simply thought ‘why not make them beautiful?’ Nobody wants ugly children, I am sure you get me. Plus, I found a pleasant irony in breeding flawless, handsome killers.”

Shikamaru was blinking rapidly, his expression a mixture of admiration and disbelief. He had his arms protectively crossed in front of his chest, his body language stiff.

“So Sasuke said he had a brother, not four of them. How is that possible if they were all born in a tube?”

The Snake tsked, making a dismissive gesture with his chained hands.

“Those brats! I particularly liked a human DNA string that I put together, so I used it twice, changing only minor details. Somehow the little beasts instinctively knew that they shared a part of their genetic material and started bonding like standard human siblings would do. To me, personally, it only provided an additional nuisance.”

Silence followed the scientist’s explanation, the soldiers in the room trying to add all the earned information to their personal baggage, and finding it both difficult and painful.

“How comes that Captain Uzumaki was only able to find Sasuke when he raided your laboratory?” it was Gaara speaking, his tone admirably stern.

Orochimaru’s forehead wrinkled, his grin comically down-turning.

“I am not sure how all of this happened, but the Invaders found out about my project and visited me a couple of days before you *kidnapped* me. They came with the whole cavalry and demanded that my experiments stop,” he paused mid-recollection, just about pouting. “They managed to be sufficiently pervasive, actually. I accepted their condition and relinquished property on my babies too, with the promise that they weren’t going to be winded up against me once in their custody. Fortunately, I was able to hide Sasuke from them, and that’s why he was still at my place when you found him.”
...Fortunately?

Naruto’s attention snapped back, his eyes narrowing into menacing slits.

Fortunately my ass.

An image of Orochimaru’s corpse-like hands touching Sasuke, drugging him and forcing him into sex took over his mind for an instant.

“Why are you happily spitting out all of this?” Kakashi made him snap out from his rapidly mounting fury.

Orochimaru shrugged, leaning back to sit comfortably in his armchair, both hands returning to the armrest, mimicking the composed position of a royal in throne.

“Why not?” he countered smugly, one of his tattooed eyebrows arched. “Considering how things appear to be right now, I am going to be dead soon, doesn’t matter what I do or if I try to avoid it.” he made a distasteful face, his posture still composed and pompous. “Might as well let the world know who fathered the most powerful creatures ever born… before mankind is whipped away completely, that is.”

His words held a genuinely amused undertone, raising further doubts about the man’s mental sanity.

Naruto had heard enough though, not exactly interested in further details about monstrous experiments and genetic engineering.

He slowly lowered his armed hand, eyes distant, and forced his body in a standing position, needing some time by himself to collect his thoughts.

Sasuke was no man, but a killing machine designed to destroy and force every other being into submission. The truth was bold, screaming loudly to be considered.

But I still do love him.

He turned, intending to get out of the room before one of his friends could catch a glimpse of his inner turmoil.

Orochimaru’s hissing voice called him back.

“Leaving the party already, lover-boy?” the question was dripping derision and Naruto stopped, paying attention without turning. “But you’re the one who needs my advises the most here!”

Captain Uzumaki barely blinked at the implication, resuming his march toward the door.

His open disregard apparently didn’t sit well with the impudent scientist.

“But for your your information, he definitely enjoys the most when you take him from behind!” the man hollered, a predatory grin literally splitting his face in a half. “If you press him face-down into the mattress he’ll push his pretty ass up to take you deeper!”

Naruto moved so fast not even Gaara was able to see him coming.

As soon as the lewd, jeering suggestion was out the Snake’s mouth, the Captain was on him, jumping down from nowhere, his fighting knife raised. He lowered the blade to the metallic armrest in a single, fluid movement, cutting off Orochimaru’s right hand neatly, with apparently no effort.
The scientist roared out in pain, instinctively withdrawing the offended limb to his chest, causing the now useless shackles to slip out the stump, dangling uselessly around his left wrist. Blood splattered around the room in messy droplets.

“This is for what you did to Sasuke.” the captain hissed through gritted teeth, eyes ablaze in blind anger, as he leaned closer to meet the Snake’s tearful eyes. “And the only reason why I let you live is that I won’t deprive my lover of the pleasure of ending you.”

Orochimaru’s face was distorted in a grimace of pain and surprise, but Naruto was close enough to spot the shadow of fear passing through his eyes.

The rare expression of vulnerability managed to cool down the Captain’s roaring fury and he gradually retracted, throwing Orochimaru a last spiteful look before quietly walking away, as if he hadn’t just mutilated a man.

Nobody tried to stop him as he made his way to the door and disappeared along the corridor in suspiciously calm strides, Orochimaru’s whines and sobs being the only sounds accompanying the other soldiers’ thoughts.

The air smelled heavily of the metallic, stinging scent of blood mixed with cold sweat.

“What the hell happened, here?” the disappointed question coming from the thresholds announced Yamato’s too late arrive on the scene.

Suigetsu walked into the room, his right arm hanging from his neck in a fling. He approached the curled up, crying form of the bleeding prisoner, noticing the severed hand resting in a pool of blood right beside the Snake’s chair.

Before he could catch himself he was smirking approvingly, his mind caught on what must have happened.

“Man, I do like that raging kiddo!” he breathed mischievously.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so. About me: sorry again for the lateness but life is conjuring against me. My recently re-awaken ulcer says hi. My thesis is almost finished. Business trip went well.

About the chapter: so now you know. Not everything, but a big part of the conspiracy Danzo orchestrated is now out in the open. Naruto obviously is not going to take the truth well, especially because he doesn’t have Sasuke with him to lighten his mood anymore.
I am so cruel separating them now that he admitted his feelings!

Itachi made his proper first appearance, and I am unsure if you will love him or hate him (I love him), but I promise I will try to keep him as close to canon as possible. Meaning: control freak, totally devoted to his baby bro, smart and sensitive. And a total badass, obviously.

Orochimaru probably had some taste of what he deserves. I am kinda proud of Naruto
for keeping his calm until the very end, even if the Sannin was totally having fun being an asshole.

Anyway, the lyric Orochimaru is reciting to Naruto was composed by Walt Whitman after Lincoln's murder.

Please, if you have a couple minutes drop a line letting me know what you think about the Chapter. It would make my day better!
See ya next time!
KT
IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Naruto finally had the pleasure to meet Itachi but the man took Sasuke away from him. The desperate situation loosened Orochimaru’s tongue and some hidden truth about the Union was revealed. The Akatsuki evil project actually was called “The Uchiha project” and consisted in breeding alien/human unstoppable warriors. The Snake paid for his insolence with his right hand.

Naruto was dead to the world as he walked outside the S-Branch core building. He was only walking because his legs, in a sort of ghost memory, were carrying him spontaneously away from there.

His mind was overcrowded, buzzing and screaming, his head hurt. Same could be said about the suspicious tightness in his chest and stomach.

_He was tired, oh so tired._

People jumped out of his way upon seeing him, like birds that spotted a cat going for a hunt.

Naruto didn’t see them, nor registered the troubled expressions on their faces, the half-dried blood on their skin and clothes or their open wounds.

They were his men, his pals, his comrades. Having fought along with him, helping the same cause. The Captain’s spirit wasn’t really there, though. In the chaos that followed one of the worst attack the Headquarters had ever faced, despite the fullness of his strained mind, all that Naruto could perceive was an odd sensation of emptiness.

His legs guided him into the garden among piles of lifeless bodies and ruby pools reflecting the lowering sun. They carried him along a familiar path, through a crowded boulevard and over the raging activity of the Emergency Center. They stopped when his feet stepped on a very familiar tiny piece of land, the well-maintained grass soft under his soles. Only then Naruto’s eyes focused, noticing that, somehow, he had reached the secluded garden visible by the window of his private apartment, the same garden where he had recently spent a blissful afternoon in Sasuke’s warm company.

Even in the heart of winter, the place was perfectly trimmed and thriving, almost challenging mother nature. That was one of the reasons why Naruto quite liked spending his lone time in here, even before Sasuke tenderly nested by his side. This place reminded him never to lose hope, proving that a strong will could always gain the upper hand even when beaten down.
The Captain pressed his eyes closed, taking in a deep breath of cold air that burned in his lungs. The gesture didn’t help ease the headache that was hammering on his temples, but did something to bring a little of Naruto’s concentration back into place.

When he allowed his eyelids to slide open again, the sun was disappearing behind the soldier’s dormitory, the building’s impotent shadow throwing the curt in mid-darkness.

Naruto realized that his right hand was still clasped around the handle of his military knife, his knuckles white and red and his fingers hurting in the constricting hold. With a conscious effort, he loosened his fingers’ grip, peering down to look at the threatening blade still covered in fresh blood.

He was feeling no regrets for his barbaric action of revenge, but no satisfaction either.

Licking his roughened lower lip, he sheathed the knife in its scabbard.

Naruto’s bleary eyes moved slowly across the small park, spotting a stone bench under a tall, bushy willow. Without even taking a conscious decision, he was already moving to sit down under the fronds.

The absolute quiet coupled with the impending darkness was soothing both for his body and soul. A light breeze was blowing through the leaves, making a delicate rustling sound.

The Captain let his tired limbs sprawl onto the bench, trying to absorb some calmness from the natural environment.

He was afraid of his emotions and thoughts, deathly scared by what was bound to happen as soon as he forced his full consciousness to reflect on the recently acquired information, setting the emotions free.

He was delaying the unavoidable and he knew, but he really was unsure if he was able to deal with himself at that point.

Sighing deeply, Naruto joined his calloused, bloodied hands in between his parted knees, kneading on his fingers. The hands he was watching were the hands of a fighter. The hands of a killer.

What purpose did his battle actions serve, up to this moment?

He tightened his jaw. Naively, stupidly maybe, he had been convinced he was bravely putting his life at service for a lofty ideal, a noble purpose. He had been convinced he had been fighting on the right side, against injustice, dishonor, tyranny and death.

Man, had he been wrong.

Angrily, he chewed at his inner cheek.

Orochimaru’s long awaited confession had completely overturned his world.

Naruto couldn’t believe… he couldn’t accept he had killed innocents, sacrificed comrades, nourished a war that only brought ruin on his kin and his planet, only because… He brought the back of one hand to his mouth, almost choking on his own spit. He coughed, trying to regain his wheezing breath.

His actions seemed unforgivable under the cruel light of the truth.
His whole career in the military, the Captain hadn’t stopped for a minute, not even for a millisecond, to doubt the ideals and the stories he’d grown up hearing. As much as he regretted it and resented himself about it right now, there was nothing that he could do to change that fact.

_We started the war. We dishonored a promise of peace._

Everybody used to tell Naruto how stubborn and idealistic he tended to be, and if there was something that the Captain valued more than anything, that was honor.

_Honor, rightfulness, perseverance_. His beliefs were all he had, in the end. As a son of the Great War, honor was the only thing he could pride himself of possessing.

Or so he used to think, _but that was before_. Now that he’d been exposed as a defender of a corrupted government, an authority that didn’t even understand the notion of virtue, could he really keep on thinking of himself that way?

His abdomen tightened and the sensation of disgust was physical and painful. Bending his bust between his parted tights, Naruto gagged and threw up, helplessly failing to keep down the meager content of his stomach.

_Do we even deserve to be saved?_.

The thought appeared on his scattered mind menacingly, like a beast escaped from its cage.

Naruto took in a sharp breath, messily cleaning his mouth with the back of his hand.

Mankind was on the verge of extinction, it was a fact. More than three quarters of the eight billions of people living on the planet forty years ago had been wiped away. Those who remained were mainly soldiers, cultures, cities and institutions reduced to a pile of rubble. Rarely a child was born. Even more rarely an adult lived past his fortieth birthday. What if this was what they deserved? What if this was payment for their past mistakes?

Mankind had been greedy, that was sure. Naruto wasn’t there to see it personally, but he’d been told stories about success, avarice and a relentless quench for power. This was the humankind that Danzo stood for, the values he represented. He was no dictator, no exception to the rule. He had been elected and people had wanted him to be their guide.

_Selfish. Selfish. Selfish. I should allow myself to be selfish, then._

He closed his eyes, body trembling faintly.

An image of a smiling Sakura flashed across his mind. Naruto’s lids shot open.

He hadn’t thought about his best friend since the day of her death; somehow, Sasuke had managed to keep his mind enraptured and sane. Naruto frowned, massaging his brow. Sakura had died in the supreme act of selflessness, sacrificing herself to save his and Sasuke’s life.

Unwillingly, a corner of Naruto’s lips twisted upwards. He missed her. It was a weirdly nostalgic feeling. There was no insurmountable sorrow, though. His friend had gone as a hero, being herself until the very end. She had perished convinced of doing the right thing.

The Captain sighed. For some reason, his mind wandered to Tsunade. Willing to admit this much or not, Tsunade was the woman who raised him. Possibly, she was the closest figure to a mother Naruto had ever had. He remembered how he used to cling to her – her fingers, her pants, everywhere his little hands could reach – when he was a small kid, starved for love. Tsunade had
taught him all he knew, including the values and convictions that made him the man he was today. He refused to believe that she knew something about the rotten reality of the facts; for sure, the Supreme Commander must have been deceived exactly as they all had. She would have never allowed something similar to happen otherwise. Naruto was sure about that.

He couldn’t give up on his convictions and be selfish though, not even now that he had been exposed as a fool. She owed her this much, at least. Her, and Sakura and all his comrades that had believed in him even for a while. The Captain couldn’t stain their memories.

A surge of warmness and comfort spread suddenly into his chest and Naruto’s eyes opened wide in stupor, his head shooting up. His orbs quickly scanned the expanse of garden around him in the dim light, finding none there except himself. It was… disappointing. Normally that tender, soothing sensation that he was experiencing accompanied his shared time with Sasuke.

The Captain bit his lower lips, hurt suddenly mixing with the affection swelling in his heart.

_Sasuke is not human._

His companions had tried to warn him against his lover even before Orochimaru gave away the boy’s lethal nature, but nothing had worked. Actually even now, after he had seen Sasuke’s deadly skills with his own eyes and been given the truth about his creation, Naruto still found himself inexplicably drawn to the boy. He had only received positive vibrations, acceptance and fondness from Sasuke. The boy had warmed a previously dark place into his heart, asking only affection in exchange. He was small, and pretty and naive, and oh-so-smart. Sarcastic, sharp, clever.

The Captain’s lips curved into a tender smile.

A memory of how Sasuke had clung to him when they made love the previous night – concretely less than twenty four hours before, but apparently more than a century – the way the boy had kissed him, caressed him, whispered his name.

Naruto felt his chest tightening.

_I am in love with him and he loves me back._

He had never felt this way towards another being before; it hardly mattered if Sasuke was human, alien or the surprising hybrid that he actually was. Naruto felt connected to him as if their souls had find a way to secretly speak to one another. He could share the pain, the love, the anger, the happiness. Every emotion, every occurrence felt doubled in intensity when he was with Sasuke. Naruto had never even dreamed that he could experience a similar connection with someone, laughing in the face of romantics like Kiba, stubbornly pursuing only the physical side of his relationships. Maybe he had been able to act as an asshole because he hadn’t meet the right person, then. Yet Sasuke entered his life and somehow, Naruto knew, he was meant for him.

_There is no way back from him._

Also, he was aware that the feeling was mutual. He had read it in Sasuke’s expressive eyes, shared his conflicted feelings of longing before the boy departed with his brother.

He wasn’t willing to let him go, their time together had just begun.

As long as Sasuke wanted him, he would have been there for him.

_I have to find him, I have to bring him back._
Naruto couldn’t give up, he couldn’t let his soul fall prey of doubts and dejection. He had too much to loose. *Mankind had too much to lose.*

*Among the corruption, there are people worthy of being protected.*

The Captain rubbed his face, filling his lungs with fresh air.

*What is wrong could always be fixed.*

His gaze focused on a round camellia bush, its red and white puffy flowers dancing in the wind, perfectly visible in the darkness.

*I have to try fixing this, even if it costs me my own life.*

Captain Uzumaki stood up.

Gaara and Shikamaru were standing in the hall of the Executive Building, their expressions grim, faces still covered in dirt and blood. Gaara was trailing his injured hand through red unruly locks, posture stiffened, while the Chief was busy talking on the radio, eyes skimming a pile of papers in his arms.

The Sand Captain’s attentive orbs spotted Naruto as soon as he appeared into the room and he excused himself from the small group of battered soldiers that were surrounding him, providing reports and waiting for orders. He strolled toward his friend, his fair complexion appearing even paler due to the contrast with the streaks of dirt marring his cheeks, and his troubled eyes stood out, circled by smudged black kajal.

”Naruto.” he only called. The blond stopped quietly, waiting.

Gaara was watching him with utmost attention, as if he was trying to figure out if the Captain was fine and where the hell he had disappeared during the last hour.

“Messenger soldiers couldn’t find you.” he spoke, as if to justify his inquisitive gaze.

Naruto tilted his head to the side and allowed Gaara’s silent inspection without objections. The redhead’s teal orbs lingered on the blossomed camellia that the Captain was delicately holding into his left hand. He didn’t comment upon it.

“Everything okay?” he asked instead. His tone was neutral, polite, but his eyes betrayed his actual preoccupation.

Naruto swiftly nodded.

“Roger.” he confirmed, calmly resuming his walking toward the central stairs. “I have to talk with the Supreme Commander.”

Gaara remained rooted to the spot, eyes widened in surprise. It wasn’t Naruto’s place to contact Tsunade directly and they both knew it really well.

“What are you planning to do?” he questioned, already suspicious. He knew Naruto as well as he knew himself. There was no way, after the bomb Orochimaru just dropped, the blond was willing to keep this aloof state of mind and act cold and disinterested.

“Fix this shitty situation.” was Naruto’s short answer.
Gaara didn’t relent.

“For your information we are all working on that,” he bluntly remarked, annoyed by his friend’s oddly gelid demeanor. “My real question was: what do you need Tsunade for?”

Naruto stopped mid stair, one hand gripping the banister. He tilted his head slightly so that he could meet Gaara’s determined glare.

“I intend to visit the Alien Camp near the Capital and prove that we are not the way they believe humans to be.”

The redhead’s jaw fell and he was left gaping like a stranded fish.

He blinked his eyes several times, apparently at a loss of words. Had Naruto gone entirely crazy in the last few hours or something? He forced his mouth closed.

“Going to the Invaders’ Camp?” the redhead’s voice was barely a broken whisper, his tone carrying mockery. “What the hell is wrong in your head?” the sour remark was uttered in a low voice as well, but it cut Naruto with its sharpness anyway.

The blond fully turned to face his friend but didn’t bother to reply.

Gaara realized that the Captain was being completely serious and his jaw tightened. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Naruto, seriously!?” he roared, his gaze carrying a severe reprimand. “What the hell are you planning to do exactly, get there and tell them how sorry we feel for the misunderstanding?”

Gaara’s words were like venom, disbelief, worry and bitterness laced in them.

“As if they will even let you get close to their camp! They have killed thousands of us, raided entire cities. And you think you could go there and reason with them?”

The redhead snorted. All the soldiers in the hall had stopped dead in their assignments and were now watching the heated exchange with badly concealed interest. Even Shikamaru, his left ear still pressed to the walkie and feet surrounded by fallen documents, had stopped talking.

Naruto’s blue eyes were still fixed on Gaara’s, answering the man’s scornful glare with a controlled, stern gaze. ‘Yes this is exactly what I plan on doing, and you are making a scene over nothing’ his attitude conveyed.

The Sand Captain grumbled, a tight hurricane of emotions stretching his tact and patience. Naruto had always been impulsive, prone to act according to his gut. His instinct had always proved trustworthy up to this moment, so Gaara had actually nothing to reproach him, but this... this idea was simply crazy. That boy, Sasuke, had changed his childhood friend, he had made him reckless and gullible. Gaara was scared shit.

“Man, you must be fucking kidding me.” he mumbled, rubbing his dirtied forehead. “We may have been wrong, Naruto, we may have acted in a dishonorable ways in the past. But that doesn’t change the fact that those Invaders are ruthless killing machines. They had exterminated our keen: women, children, old people. They slaughtered everybody, guilty or not. Even today, we only have been spared because that freak of nature inexplicably took a liking on you. They are going to___”

“That freak of nature, as you call him, saved the whole base!” Naruto practically yelled, standing above Gaara’s voice. His jaw was tightened and his shoulders squared, face ablaze in fury. Slowly,
he descended the few steps he had climbed and reached ground level, stopping his threatening march twenty centimeters from his friend’s nose.

“In my presence, don’t you dare talking about Sasuke in those terms ever again.” the Captain hissed through clenched teeth.

Gaara’s back grew stiff. He perceived the honesty of the implied menace loud and clear.

He countered Naruto’s icy glare for a handful of seconds, then something in his chest shifted and he backed off the challenge, dropping his eyes to the floor. Undiluted anger was radiating from Naruto’s body, and many in the room had taken a step back from the scene, afraid of being involved. Gaara didn’t. Hanging his head, he proudly stood his ground, willing to be beaten if necessary.

Some tensed seconds later, Naruto sighed deeply, his warm, shaky breath hitting the redhead’s lowered face.

“I had him in my arms, Gaara. You may not believe me, but I do know who he is. That’s why I intend to fix this.” his tone was low, slightly beaten. Concerned, even. But his words were unavoidable; Naruto had made up his mind already.

The redhead didn’t answer nor moved, and forced himself to hide his worry and disappointment.

When the air shifted, signaling his friend’s departure, Gaara pressed his eyes closed. They stung.

“Naruto!” Shikamaru caught up with him as he reached the third floor. “Give me a minute?”

The Captain stopped and turned toward the Intelligence chief, subconsciously crossing his arms over his chest. He had a feeling he knew already where this conversation were going to lead them, and he didn’t like it – he was still feeling shaken after his confrontation with normally stoic Gaara. In any case, Shikamaru’s opinion was valuable – both his advice as a friend and as a tactical general, so Naruto would listen.

The Nara immediately registered the stiffened posture and the reluctance Naruto was showing in locking eyes with him, but he didn’t let this faze him.

He crossed his arms himself, quickly searching for a way express the rational worry that he currently shared with Gaara and everyone else in the quarters.

“Listen, man. I want to apologize, okay?” the informal tone took Naruto by surprise and the Captain shifted his vivid orbs to meet his friend’s. He shuffled a little under the gaze.

Shikamaru almost flinched at the sight of the hurt in those absorbed blue eyes, and was only happier about his choice of wording.

“I shouldn’t have been that blunt about your relationship with Sasuke. I didn’t mean to offend you this morning and even Gaara, right now… I believe that wasn’t his intention either, actually.”

The Captain said nothing, but his attention didn’t shift. That was victory for Shikamaru; he didn’t expect Naruto to give him freedom of speech and be willing to listen.

He scratched his elbow, finding a small crust to toy with, providing a distraction from the tension that was threatening to snap him in a half.
“I get that you like him, okay? And I get that you two got somehow close in the last few days, complicit the turbulent events that you faced together. I don’t think you are shallow nor stupid, and I do remember that you are well past the age of reason. I am not here to mother you or to judge you.” he made a small pause, licking his arid lips and pondering his friend’s reaction so far. Captain Uzumaki stood unmoving, imposing in his muscular frame, and Shikamaru gulped slightly. Differently from Gaara, he wasn’t sure he would be able to survive one of Naruto’s angry hooks, if things unluckily came down to that.

“We are just worried for you.” he blurted out, attempting to keep his tone neutral. “Sasuke also saved my life, which I am beyond grateful for. But Naruto… even if you like him and you believe that he can be trusted, I need to be one hundred percent sure that you thought things out thoroughly before making a stupid move that might as well kill you.” he took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for Naruto’s wrath to invest him with the force of a tir.

He felt the air shifting, and a heavy but completely friendly hand landed slowly on one of his shoulders.

Relieved, Shikamaru opened his eyes finding sparkling, stubborn blue. He recognized Naruto in that gaze; his friend was hurt, confused, angry and a bit sullen. But he wasn’t defeated. Naruto was still a man with a plan.

“I guess you have to trust my guts on this.” the Captain murmured, his lips slightly curving upwards. The Chief released a breath he didn’t know he had been holding and lowered his lids yet again. Obstinate asshole.

“Even if it wasn’t our direct responsibility, we’re at fault. I feel like I have fix that. I must, Shikamaru, or I will go crazy under the weight of guilt. You understand that?”

Shikamaru nodded slowly, feeling discomfort stirring in his chest. He understood it perfectly.

“This is no excuse to get yourself killed.” he countered, voice calm but firm.

Naruto sighed dramatically and retreated his extended hand.

“If I get killed attempting peace, then I will die for a purpose.”

The Chief pressed his lips together into a thin line, not having words to counter that selfless remark.

“Sasuke seems able to control actions and minds of living beings, do you realize that?” he muttered instead.

Naruto almost jumped for the abrupt change of topic. He raised both his eyebrows, wrinkling his forehead.

“Why are you telling me that?” the blond demanded, something foreign and shady showing up in his tone.

Shikamaru nipped at his inner cheek.

“I am telling you because I noticed, not because I am implying anything.” he paused for a second. “Not yet, at least.”

The crust on his elbow gave up and came away, staining Shikamaru’s soiled pads with fresh blood.
“He forced the creatures to obedience without any need of physical strength. He extorted a confession out of Orochimaru. His eyes… they aren’t human eyes. There is power in those orbs, I hope you understand this.”

Naruto averted his gaze, his left hand balling into a fist. He forced his mind to recall recent memories of his lover. He remembered the mesmerizing ruby orbs with the three spinning commas inside, the same eyes even Itachi sported. Sasuke’s irises were also able to take an ulterior form, black with an intricate red glowing pattern similar to a blooming flower. With those eyes, Naruto had seen him scare a ruthless monster into annihilation.

The captain clenched his jaw and returned his gaze to Shikamaru’s face.

“I know there is something else that you want to tell me.” he incited, voice low but steady. Shikamaru cleared his throat and put a conscious effort in keeping the eye contact.

“If Sasuke’s eyes can mess with the brain of living beings, I can only presume that the more complex a brain is, the greatest his power over it becomes. Therefore, his possibilities of control over a human brain are virtually unlimited.” he took a break, working some saliva into his suddenly dry mouth.

“Are you sure that the feelings you are experiencing for him are really… yours?”

Naruto’s eyes grew bigger in surprise. Exactly as Shikamaru suspected, the Captain hadn’t considered the possibility of being externally influenced. He licked his lower lip, unexpectedly at a loss.

A part of himself – his rational brain, likely – was seriously considering Shikamaru’s words and quickly weighing the eventual consequences, trying to remember every unusual detail of his interactions with Sasuke. The other part of him, though – his soul, his heart, his consciousness, whatever the fuck people called the place where instincts and feelings bloomed – was completely averse to the Chief’s hypothesis. The idea sounded so absurd, in fact, that he almost wanted to laugh.

He recalled Sasuke’s smile, the weight of his delicate hand into his own. Sasuke’s long, fluttering lashes, and how strongly the boy had reacted when Naruto desperately attempted to put some distance between them.

He had been drawn to Sasuke since the very first moment he saw him, in that fucking hell on earth that was Orochimaru’s lair. The pull he felt toward the boy was unbreakable and unavoidable, and it didn’t go one way. It was mutual, acting like a link between them. In the same way he felt like he needed Sasuke, the boy desired to be with him. There was no way that something similar could be forced.

“Nah, Shika.” he mumbled, a faint smile finally curving his lips. “He never used his eyes on me, he didn’t need to. Plus, I don’t believe that he would have bound himself to me, if he really had a choice on the matter.”

Shikamaru arched an eyebrow, looking surprised.

“...Bound?”

Naruto’s smile grew bigger.

“Yeah, that’s how it feels. I can feel him and he can feel me. It’s like a sort of spiritual contact. I wouldn’t know how to describe it in a scientific way.”
The Chief blinked a couple of times, apparently astonished. One of his hands came up to scratch at his cheek.

“Well, I don’t believe that anything similar had ever been recorded among humans. But he isn’t fully... ugh. He is not. So, well. I dunno.”

Naruto had never seen his genius friend in such a tight spot before. Not having a rational, plausible explanation for a fact seemed to short-circuit the Nara’s supersonic brain. The blond couldn’t help but chuckle a bit in face of Shikamaru’s apparent helplessness, which earned him a sharp scowl from the other man.

“Cut it!”

But Naruto kept on giggling, warmhearted.

“I am serious, Naruto! I mean. I dunno, obviously I don’t, I have never faced an alien-human hybrid before!... But please, I beg you, keep that in mind.”

Naruto caught a breath and fought to regain a bit of his composure.

“Keep what in mind?”

“He is not human and he believes he owns you.”

Naruto blinked, lips slightly parted.

“You heard him. It was impossible to miss the possessiveness in his voice. He practically menaced his brother when he threatened you, and also with Hinata, who obviously was sexually interested in you, he was...”

The Captain remembered.

‘He’s mine.’

He couldn’t blame him for the possessive feelings, though. That was exactly the same way Naruto himself felt about the boy. The simple thought of someone else, a man or a woman, touching Sasuke, hurting him or owning him in any way made his blood foam.

He shrugged his shoulder, completely unconcerned.

“Yeah, I’ll do my best to keep that in mind.”

Shikamaru’s face looked unmercifully unconvincing, but he didn’t retaliate.

He figured this was as far as he could go.

Itachi entered the room silently, his eyes instinctively adjusting to see in the thick darkness.

Sasuke was curled upon a tatami mat in the far corner, snuggled among several colorful blankets.

Without demanding permission nor giving away his position, the older sibling stepped further into the room, not even sparing a glance to the remnants of the intricate human decorations adorning the walls.
In front of Sasuke’s nest Itachi could see the trail of food he had brought in for his brother several hours ago, fruit and milk still untouched.

Surprised by his brother’s weird behavior, the older sibling frowned, arching up an eyebrow. He was pretty sure Sasuke must be hungry after the difficult day he experienced. So why was he stubbornly laying in the gloom and refusing to eat?

“Brother.” he called, voice a soft whisper. He knew that Sasuke was perfectly aware of his presence already, but oddly he felt uninvited in the boy’s personal space.

Sasuke shifted slightly among the covers, kicking out his long bare legs. Itachi realized that Sasuke’s attention was now focused on him, and that his brother was mutely inviting him to come closer. Satisfied, he took the bidding and closed the distance between them, kneeling graciously in front of Sasuke’s torso.

One of his hands reached affectionately for the luscious black strands hiding his brother’s face from sight. Delicately, he caught a lock between his fingers and pinned it behind the shell of Sasuke’s ear, running his hands forward to sink his pads in the thickness of hair at the back of his brother’s head.

Sasuke drew a deep, content breath, thoroughly enjoying the affection and the precious closeness between them. He had missed his big brother, coming as far as being worried about his well-being.

Back at Orochimaru’s place, they rarely were given time or space to be together, simply cuddling and bonding like this. Especially after Itachi found out that the Snake had taken a liking in Sasuke’s young body, the scientist had been giving them less and less occasions to be together in the same room, avoiding it even when they were completely knocked out by the drugs.

Itachi’s lips gently curved upwards as a steady, low purring reached his ears. He could feel Sasuke’s energy attuning to a more relaxed frequency and a bit of his own tension disappeared consequently.

His brother was pressing the side of his face into the weird orange-colored garment that he was wearing when he rescued him, kneading it with his fingers as if it was something extremely precious.

Normally Itachi wasn’t much of a talker, being used to understand those similar to him based on the perceived frequency of their emotions and feelings, and not being interested in bonding with humans. Currently, however, his brother was emitting a foreign, ample vibration that Itachi wasn’t able to decipher, and since the boy’s unusual behavior was making him sick with worry, he didn’t see any other chance than resorting to words.

“Sasuke, I am concerned.” he confided, not stopping the soothing movement of his fingers. His brother didn’t answer, but Itachi knew he was listening attentively.

“Doesn’t matter how bad I rack my brain about it, I cannot seem to understand what is happening to you.”

Sasuke moved his head backward a little, leaning in Itachi’s caress. He parted his lips as if he was about to say something, but then changed his mind and pressed them together again.

Itachi sighed.

“Why are you not eating? You need food, you know. Shamefully, our human components don’t grant our surviving only by absorbing pure energy.” the reprimand was empty and devoid of venom. He knew that Sasuke was aware of that information already and he wasn’t disappointed in his
misbehavior. He only was at a loss about his reasoning, honestly.

Sasuke’s hand closed around the orange material of the sweater under his head. He was wearing a pitiful expression, half sad – or maybe nostalgic –, half confused, his fine eyebrows drawn together in a harsh line.

The older sibling tilted his head, wanting to help his brother but not knowing what to do.

“I miss him, ‘tachi.”

Sasuke’s voice was a shy whisper. It was Itachi’s turn to wrinkle his forehead in bewilderment.

“What does it mean?” he demanded, curiously leaning down to peer closely at his brother’s face.

Sasuke curled up more on himself, as if he wanted to hide from the gaze. He was feeling embarrassment, Itachi could perceive that – and see the redness on his cheekbones as a confirmation – but the unusual emotion affecting his brother made him all the more baffled.

“I long to see him again. Every moment I live away from him seems intolerably painful to me.”

Itachi fluttered his lashes, his mind working to pull the information together, but he came up with empty hands.

“Are you hurt?” he questioned, unsure if he understood it right.

Sasuke denied with his head.

“No, not physically. But it still hurts in some other way.”

Itachi scratched his head.

“Is this about that human with blue eyes?” he inquired again, attempting to narrow his guessings.

Sasuke bit his lips, longing becoming visible in his eyes.

“Yes. I miss him. I want to be together with him.”

The explanation was clear enough for Itachi to understand the implications, this time, and a spark of realization brightened his features. He was surprised that a simple human had been able to gain this much regard from his brother.

“I fail to see what is interesting about mankind…” he voiced his thoughts out loud, waiting for Sasuke to provide his own version.

The visible corner of Sasuke’s lips curled slightly upward, amused at the older antics.

“I did fail myself.” he confirmed, his voice relaxed. “But he is different from all the other humans we met. He is so warm, ‘tachi. And even all his… friends feel nice.”

Sasuke had never seen his brother’s face this puzzled, and he could perceive the older boy energy tangling in confusion.

“He is…warm?” he repeated slowly, savoring the word on his tongue. His gaze was unfocused and his mind working a mile a minute.

Sasuke nodded.
“Yeah. He’s so warm I can barely refrain from touching him all the time. Also my tummy always feels hot when I am with him.”

**Oh. So it was that kind of warm!**

Itachi straightened his back, still surprised but more serene know that he figured out the meaning of his brother’s weird words.

He smirked slightly, trailing his fingers in Sasuke’s longer locks.

“I see. I didn’t think it was possible for this to happen with a simple human.” the older sibling commented softly.

Sasuke hunched his shoulders.

“I am not sure what you are talking about.” he sounded curious.

You’re resonating, Itachi wanted to say, but he was pretty sure that this explanation was going to be meaningless for his brother. *He has always been the one feeling the strongest.*

“I am not sure what is the human term for that.” he answered instead, collecting an apple from the food trail nearby with his free hand. Delicately, he pressed the fruit against Sasuke’s chest.

“Eat up. I promise I’ll find a way to protect your matching one... and I’ll also research on how this whole thing is called in the Common Language.” he gave an encouraging smile.

Sasuke tilted his head up, attracted by the positive changing in his brother's energy.

...Matching one?

“ You’ll keep him safe?” he questioned instead.

Itachi tilted his head.

“I’ll do my best”

It was no promise of reunion, but certainly it was a relief. Also, in Itachi’s language, that simple acknowledgment actually meant that he was giving Naruto a chance.

Gracefully, Sasuke detached one of his hands form Naruto’s shirt and he brought it down to gently cup the apple that was offered to him.

“Thanks.” he mumbled, pressing his face in the sweater to hide the color on his cheeks. “I really like him, ‘tachi.”

*I do believe that.*

Itachi chuckled softly and nimbly stood up.

“Does this human have a name, at least?” his tone was playful.

Sasuke fidgeted a little.

“Naruto.”

The older sibling repeated the name aloud, rolling it on his tongue.
The loading bar filled with green and an image of a hunched Tsunade took over the whole screen. If she had looked tired a couple of days ago, today she appeared a complete wreck. Bold, black circles adorned her normally lively honey-colored eyes, her skin seemed pale and dull, deprived of its habitual glow, and she wasn’t even wearing her official commander garments. Her hair was half pulled in a messy bun and she overall looked unhealthy and unkempt.

This time like the last one, she didn’t detach her gaze from the papers she was reading at her desk to look in the camera.

Behind her, her office was a complete mess, with papers scattered everywhere, overturned furniture and objects spread over the floor.

“What again, Shikamaru?” her voice was a raspy, tired sigh, and Naruto felt for her.

“Baa-chan.”

The nickname made her rise her eyes faster than an order.

“Naruto.” she acknowledged, one of her delicate hands shifting loose blond strands from her face.

The room relapsed into silence.

It was the dead of the night by now, and simply judging from Tsunade’s untidy and defeated appearance, Naruto could guess that she had been updated about their unpleasant discoveries already.

Unsure about how to bring up the topic, he scratched his left shoulder to quieten his uneasiness.

He didn’t remember Tsunade looking this beaten in the past, not even when important battles were lost and citizens decimated. Not even when Akatsuki bombed and destroyed one of their outposts, killing everyone in there.

“You didn’t know it, right?” Naruto’s question wasn’t exactly a question, but he needed to hear the answer out loud. He desperately needed to be reassured.

A spark of anger shaded Tsunade’s eyes, and the Captain drew a relieved breath.

“Of course I didn’t know.” she confirmed in an outraged voice, punctuating each word with a short pause.

Naruto rewarded her with a sad smile.

“I was sure about that. I never doubted you.” he confided, and Tsunade’s insulted scowl relaxed back to her tired, lifeless expression. Slowly, she massaged her wrinkled forehead.

“Well thanks for your trust boy, but to be honest I am not entirely sure I deserve it. I feel a lot like a failure right now.” she breathed, averting her gaze from the camera.

“I don’t see how you are the one to blame.” Naruto tried to reassure her, not really sure how to go about it.

Tsunade sighed, hiding her face behind both her palms.
“In those long years of war, there have been things that didn’t add up. Weird happenings that should have made me suspicious. I am not telling you that I didn’t notice those, but I didn’t give the command for this oddities to be investigated. This is how much I am guilty of this situation.”

She parted her fingers, peeking through them at Naruto on the other side of the screen.

“At the same time, I decided to trust blindly a man advised by someone with a well known criminal past.” she added, her mouth tilting in a disgusted grimace. “I don’t really believe there’s an excuse for being this reckless.”

The Captain snorted, shaking his head.

“Danzo did plan this out thoroughly. He never lost track of his lies and made up appropriate proofs to support his false truth. If someone is to blame about this whole mess, it’s probably Lieutenant Sarutobi. It’s only because he loaned Danzo his face that the questionable man managed to cut a political career in the first place.”

Tsunade sighed again, seemingly unconvinced by Naruto’s words. She looked down to her desk, fumbling with something that the Captain couldn’t see in the screen.

“Why are you calling, by the way?” she demanded in the end, still refusing to meet the camera with her eyes. “Save wanting to be reassured of my good faith, obviously.”

Naruto took a deep breath and thought that he had to speak now or never.

“I want to fix this situation and I have a plan to do this.”

Lady Senju’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and her eyes raised to finally meet the Captain’s.

Naruto kept his mouth shut and his expression determined, knowing very well that Tsunade was weighing him and his resoluteness and trying to assess if he was fucking with her.

He wasn’t.

He couldn’t have been more serious about this.

Likely, the Supreme commander came to the same conclusion, because she sat straighter at her desk, squaring her shoulders in her usual dignified posture. He was now giving him her complete attention.

“I am listening.”

Naruto combed a hand through his rebellious blond locks.

“The damage is done and there’s no way to turn back time and erase our mistakes. Who’s dead will be forever dead. The wrongness is going to be remembered. The only logical thing that we could to do at this point is getting there and apologize, explaining that we’ve been betrayed from the inside. This War has no point to exist anymore.”

The Captain words were firm and confident. They also had some logical sense in them, if taken out of the grim context that reality provided.

Tsunade wasn’t one to be easily persuaded by nice, idealistic words, anyway. She knew really well how a conflict worked and she was aware that, at the point they reached about now, Naruto’s naive proposal was simply unfeasible.
If someone belonging to the Union tried to reach the Alien Base for whatever purpose, they were surely going to be taken down on the spot. There was no more room for dialogue between the parties. Naruto’s supposed plan simply equated to an empty suicide.

“Not to rain on your parade, kiddo, but how exactly do you suggest we’ll do this?”

Naruto shrugged, smirking a bit.

“I intend to reach the Invader’s Base near Capital City and surrender in the UEF’s name. I am doing it today.”

Tsunade snorted, moving her hand in a dismissive gesture.

“Don’t you dare bullshit me, kid! As if they will let you and your team in and politely listen to what you have to say!” her tone was stern and slightly annoyed, as if she was trying to reason with a stubborn child.

“There’s gonna be no team.” Naruto ought to precise, an icy fire burning into his orbs. “I am going alone.”

Lady Senju’s right eyebrow arched up in a derisive wink.

“Do you have a death wish, perhaps?”

The Captain smiled at her antics, unfazed.

“Nope. Actually, I am pretty sure they would at least let me in. All by myself and disarmed, I won’t be seen as a threat. Plus, Sasuke is there with them already, waiting for me.”

Tsunade blinked her eyes in disbelief. Was Naruto really serious about this madness?

“You mean Sasuke the hybrid-boy?” lady Senju asked, steady in stating things bluntly as they were. “How do you know where he is? Shikamaru only told me that he flew with a supposed sibling of his.”

Naruto smiled a real smile. It was full of affection and tenderness and Tsunade stiffened, taken aback.

“I do know, Baa-chan,” he reassured her, eyes sparkling. “But I have no words to explain it.”

The Supreme Commander sighed loudly. She remembered Shikamaru’s concern about Naruto’s relationship with the boy, preoccupation that was already strong even before the truth about the boy’s nature was discovered. ‘They are becoming strangely close,’ the Intelligence Chief had informed, barely twenty-four hours before. ‘I think Captain Uzumaki might have a crush on the boy’.

“Naruto.” Tsunade planted her elbows on the desk’s surface, joining her hands. She leaned towards the screen, face serious. “I’ve heard things about that boy and they weren’t exactly flattering. Do you really trust him with your life?”

Naruto averted his gaze, eyes landing on the camellia he collected in the inner garden, which laid abandoned on the desk of the conference hall. The pink-red hue of the inner petals was the color of Sasuke’s lips when they were bruised from prolonged kissing.

He brought his open palm to rest on his shoulder, caressing down the plane of his firm chest, lips still smiling. When his eyes met Tsunade’s again, she was left speechless by the emotions swelling
“I can feel him here, Baa-chan.” Naruto confessed, allowing his hand to linger above his heart.

Tsunade hastily bit her lower lip. She didn’t know what to say.

“Besides,” the Captain kept on, tone firm. “Even if I am telling you what I plan on doing, you know that I am not exactly asking for permission.”

The Supreme Commander suspected as much. Naruto was informing her out of the affection that tied them, but he had already made up his mind.

He was going to stick with his decision, whether she gave him her blessing or not.

She pressed her lips together, tightening her jaw. Even in the unlikely eventuality that Naruto was right and the hybrid-boy was willing to help them building a new peace, sending Naruto unarmed to the Invader’s Camp sounded like a vain risk that she didn’t feel like taking. Still, she didn’t really have a voice on the matter anymore.

“You are so fucking stubborn, my boy.” she complained, unable to hide the affection from her words.

“If we want mankind to survive this war, we must surrender and take our responsibilities as soon as possible.” Naruto’s voice was low and incredibly controlled. He looked like a man who knew what he was doing.

“Have some faith in me.”

The Captain’s blue eyes were glimmering.

Tsunade’s heart ached; she was so proud of the man he’d become.

_I do have too much faith in you, the problem is._

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am late yet again but fear no more, for I am bringing good news.

First thing first, I graduated (again) so a huge weight actually dropped from my shoulders. Consequently, if Karma protects me, all the following updates are going to be in time every 15 days sharp.

Also, I reflected upon the plot and figured out some minor details, so I can now tell you that chapters are probably going to be 15 and not 13 as I initially thought. Hope you like this story enough for this revelation to sound good!

About the Chapter: writing it was honestly difficult because it is a full piece of introspection – basically nothing happens action-wise. It was important though, and I couldn’t skip through. I had to give you a glimpse on people’s feelings, and I hope that Sasuke regained some trust in your eyes now that you know how miserable his feelings are making him. He is not used to this human things! He was raised to be a functional killer!
I cannot wait to hear your feedback on this one, and your expectations. I am kinda nervous actually because, even if nothing happens, this was the second turning point of the story.

Next chap, we will be on the (battle)field.

Thank you for your patience and your lovely contribution. Knowing that you are here makes me want to write faster :3
Stitches on a festering wound

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Naruto had to swallow the sour taste of betrayal. Gaara and Shikamaru tried to reason with him with scarce results, even though Shikamaru had some enlightening thinking to share. The Captain took upon him to fix mankind’s past mistakes and, obviously, he set on bringing Sasuke back.

Chapter Notes

The chapter is now beda’d by sasu–hime!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The armored truck quietly came to a halt about two and a half kilometers from the walls of the Alien Outpost, early in the morning.

Captain Uzumaki sucked in a ragged breath, nimble fingers blindly moving to unhook his faithful AK-47 from the strap that secured the rifle to his bulletproof vest.

The weapon was gently laid down on the dusty surface of the cargo bed, barely visible in the dim light filtering into the truck. Naruto took a good minute to say goodbye to the trustworthy companion of a lifetime of battles; he was well aware that, one way or another, this was going to be their last farewell.

He closed his eyes and ran his right hand on the rigid surface of his jacket, stopping the palm above the pocket that contained the Union’s Elite Forces official declaration of surrender. He prayed that his desperate plan was going to work, that he was at least lucky enough to make it alive to the Invaders Base.

Nervous but knowing that there was no point in delaying the inevitable, he stood up and turned the door handle.

He jumped down from the cargo bed to an unnamed gravel road in the northern periphery of the cemetery once known as Capital City, the light of the still rising sun barely reaching the ground because of the thick evergreen forest that was trying to claim the path.

From this point on, he was going to proceed on foot and alone. He was already surprised enough that their convoy could make it this close to the outpost without being attacked, and he wasn’t going to risk the lives of his fellows for his personal reckless plan.

Quickly, he patted his thighs checking for the military knives strapped there, then he signaled the driver to return to the base.

The engine of the military track hiccuped then roared to life, and the vehicle moved in a swift about-turn, swaying lightly on the unkempt road, heading back in the direction it came from.
Captain Uzumaki stood rooted to the spot until the cargo disappeared from sight and the engine’s murmur wasn’t audible in the morning stillness anymore.

He licked his chapped lips, the cold morning breeze ruffling his naturally savage hair. To be honest with himself he had to admit he was feeling naked, completely exposed to the attack of a possible enemy and at the mercy of his swirling emotions. He was feeling weak and vulnerable and he didn't like it in the slightest.

He lowered his lashes, tilting his chin up to catch a lone ray of sunlight seeping through the luscious willows. A familiar, warm pull in his chest made his lids promptly slid open.

Sasuke was waiting for him there. It didn't matter if it was the last thing Naruto got to do in his life, but he would reach that fucking base.

Itachi’s ruby eyes were scouring the perimeter of the post from his advantage position at the top of the western tower. Despite the floaty layer of fog enveloping the surroundings and the still weak sunlight, he could make out the shape of every object in the clearing up to the border of the forest with deadly accuracy.

The figure sitting down back to back with him in the cold morning stirred slightly, the other man’s head shifting, black curls tickling the sensitive skin of Itachi’s neck.

A corner of Itachi’s lips curved upward and his lashes fluttered, eyes sparkbling.

“Good morning prince charming,” he muttered, not bothering to hide the amusement from his tone. The man at his back shifted again, tilting his head on Itachi’s shoulder. He grunted something intelligible as an answer but his inner-energy told Itachi that he was totally fine with the taunt, sharing his own serene state of mind. The next second, a pair of very sharp and very possessive canines grazed the delicate skin of Itachi’s neck, followed by soft and moisten lips.

Itachi instinctively tilted his head to the side, giving the other man more room and allowing the claim.

A little chuckle against his skin and the sudden change of frequency in the well-known energy pulsing at his back made Itachi aware of his companion’s dirty intentions.

Itachi sighed, knowing that he had to stop the other man immediately if he hoped to keep him at bay.

“Shisui,” he called, and it was a warning.

The man sighed dramatically and lifted his head from Itachi’s shoulder.

“You are no fun!” he wined, his arms raising above his head, stretching out his spine.

Itachi’s grin grew wider.

Shisui proceeded at flexing his shoulders muscles as if nothing had happened.

“You slept soundly for the whole guard shift, leaving me all by myself at night. If I were you, I would start thinking of a way to beg for my forgiveness…” Itachi’s tone was playful as well as his energy.

Shisui chuckled.
“As if you would need my help...” Shisui praised, his eyebrows lifting.

He focused on the distance and his dark eyes bleed red.

The outpost they were currently protecting was the oldest, the one claimed by the Jumala upon their arrival on Earth, and it was set in the remaining of an ancient human shrine of sort, in a tactic position upon a hill. The airships in which the Aliens arrived were still methodically parked in the backyard, their sleek, metallic forms concealed from indiscreet eyes by lush vegetation.

The balcony where Shisui and Itachi were curled up together gave them a perfect view on the whole top of the hill, towering twenty something meters above the ground.

“Ugh. Frost's completely covering the lawn this morning.” Shisui commented noncommittally, his powerful eyes running smoothly along the southern border.

Itachi was tempted to point out that the frost was also covering their clothing and hair, but he didn't deem the countering worth of wasting words.

“Hey,” Shisui's voice was urgent and immediately caught Itachi's attention. The man's energy had suddenly shifted to alert. “There is someone coming out from the forest, south.”

Itachi frowned in curiosity.

“Someone?” even if he hadn't turned around, his frequency reassured Shisui that he was listening closely.

“Yeah. A lone young man with blond hair. He seems built and trained to fight and he is marching toward us.”

Saying that Itachi was surprised would have been an understatement. He would have never expected a human to possess enough guts to attempt getting this close to their outpost on his own.

Shisui's eyes gave them at least one kilometer of advantage on the stranger, but Itachi could perceive that his companion was becoming nervous.

He twisted and crawled beside Shisui, focusing his eyes in the direction the intruder was coming from.

When he spotted the very familiar blond man in uniform, his heart skipped a beat.

“I don't think he is dangerous but I'll notify the Murhaaja. They'll get rid of him in a minute. Better be safe than sorry, mh?” Shisui was already standing up, ready to jump down from the balcony and set the alarm off.

The abrupt change on Itachi's energy stopped him in the track as he was leaping over the wooden railing.

“Don't.”

Shisui leaned back to look at his companion's face and found Itachi nimbly standing on his feet, swirling red eyes still laced to the approaching stranger.

“Let him come.”

Shisui arched one eyebrow and searched the intruder with his own orbs. He didn't understand what was pushing Itachi to override the standard procedure, and he was overall confused by the odd,
fascinated vibrations his partner was releasing.

The physical appearance of the man walking steadily toward the temple didn't ring any bell in his brain, except that he couldn't remember someone with eyes quite as blue like the ones focused on their base.

“Itachi,” Shisui shifted elegantly to sit above the balustrade. “Do you know him?”

Itachi shrugged calmly and walked closer to Shisui, resting his palms on the parapet.

“Not exactly, but I met him before.”

His short explanation didn't seem to satisfy his partner, who turned in his direction with a questioning scowl.

Itachi was silent for a second, thinking about the proper words to use.

“I saw him at the human headquarters. Apparently, he is Sasuke's.”

Shisui's expression became earnest, then his eyes widened.

“You serious?” he demanded, clearly in disbelief.

Itachi nodded.

“Yeah. I didn't think it could happen with humans either.”

Shisui merely blinked, his attention reverting on the figure walking closer.

“To connect with your brother, he must be a handful!”

Itachi could perceive that his curiosity was contagious and now affected his companion too. He grinned for the truthful comment and spotted the corner of Shisui's lips tilting upwards.

“He took care of my little troublemaker while I was away. Let's see what brought him here before alarming anyone.”

Saying so, Itachi was already jumping down from the balcony.

Shisui tsked but followed suit. Man, he seriously needed to see this!

Naruto could feel his own tension rising every step he walked toward the ancient building. To house a powerful army like the Invaders’ was, The place seemed completely deserted and half in ruin, not at all the super-modern, technological and high security outpost that Captain Uzumaki expected. Ivy was claiming the temple’s old walls, already marred by the signs of the passing time, and the vegetation surrounding the building was left untouched and seemed to flourish freely.

Still, Naruto was sure that the coordinates he received from the UEF satellite marked exactly this secluded location, so there wasn’t much to doubt about it.

The most disturbing thing, anyway, wasn’t the disappointing run-down appearance of the Alien’s main hideout, but rather the fact that the location appeared completely inhabited. Where the hell was the whole army hiding?
Naruto knew for a documented fact that there were at least several thousand enemy-units around Capital City... So why did this place look like a haunted house? Where were the guards? How could all the Invaders fit in that simple temple?

Sure, the building was big – and Naruto was still unsure which was its purpose before being occupied – but its extension paled if compared to the UEF’s own headquarters. Captain Uzumaki frowned.

The frozen grass creaked softly under the soles of his combat boots.

Abruptly, he got the pungent sensation that someone was following him, his skin immediately breaking a cold sweat. He stopped his march, muscles tightening in anticipation for a possible attack, but he didn’t immediately turn to watch behind his back. He took a deep breath instead, trying to slow down the maddening pace of his heart and focusing on the small sounds resounding in the clearing.

His ears caught the chirping of the birds awakening and the gentle whisper of the light morning breeze, but nothing seemed out of order.

Licking his cold, dry lips, he tilted his head backward, taking a look behind himself without risking any inconsiderate movement.

The path he had come from was perfectly visible, his boots leaving traces on the slumped, frozen grass. No living being was in sight and Naruto imperceptibly relaxed.

His newfound calm was short lived, in any case, since the second he eased his stance he felt something really cold and really sharp delicately pressing against the vulnerable spot beside his jugular.

Blonde lashes fluttered and the Captain’s jaw clenched. He recognized a blade when he felt one at his neck.

He fought against the instinct to gulp down the knot in his throat and tried to maintain his breathing pattern regular. He redirected his gaze without changing the position of his head and his chin.

In front of him stood a man in his twenties, athletic built, with an impressive mop of curly black hair. Except, he was no man. His ruby red eyes were swirling, and zeroed on Naruto’s face.

Naruto bit his lower lip, distantly recognizing a certain resemblance between his aggressor and Sasuke. This man’s jaw was more wide and squared and his eyes more slanted, but he had Sasuke’s high cheekbones and similar lips.

Despite the solemn expression on the stranger’s face and his not-indifferent height, he didn’t seem particularly threatening. Well, obviously Naruto could say that if he ignored the blade pressing against his sensitive skin.

“You lack manners, Shisui.”

The amused voice came right behind Naruto’s back, freezing blood in the Captain’s veins.

The apathetic mask of the man in front of him broke and he smirked slightly.

Naruto blinked, unsure if he should feel relieved or offended that his attackers were having a good time.
He heard the man behind him move and a second figure promptly came in his field of vision.

The long black hair and that pretty face made the man immediately recognizable. Basically it was the same face as Sasuke’s, but older and less polished. Plus, the line of the man’s jaw was shaped differently, with Sasuke’s being more narrow and delicate.

“Itachi,” he breathed, and surprise was visible on the attractive face of the man in question.

“You remember my name?”

Naruto’s lashes fluttered and he struggled to keep perfectly still.

“Sasuke told me about you.”

Those mesmerizing red eyes sweetened, but nothing else in Itachi’s face gave away his thoughts.

“He also told me about you, Naruto.”

Captain Uzumaki almost choked on his own spit in surprise, with the result that the blade at his neck managed to cut the skin.

“Shisui.”

The man who had Naruto immobilized with his knife shifted red irises on his companion, then slowly lowered the weapon. He still seemed deeply amused for reasons beyond the Captain’s comprehension.

One of Naruto’s hands immediately ran up to cover his injured neck, testing the extent of the damage there. To avoid any possible future misunderstanding, he raised the other palm in the universal sign of surrender.

Both the curious, red gazes were still locked on him, unrelenting, and Naruto couldn’t find his voice. He bit the inner side of his cheek nervously, trying to loosen his tongue.

“What brings you here, Naruto?”

The Captain was grateful for the little nudge from Sasuke’s brother.

He cleared his throat.

“I am here as an ambassador-at-large of my faction and I wish to talk with your spokesperson.”

Itachi and Shisui exchanged a quick glance.

“What about?” Itachi inquired, one of his elegant eyebrows raised.

“Peace. And surrender. My keen’s surrender.”

This time, there was no way the men in front of the Captain could manage to hide their stupor, even if Itachi did a slightly better job at recovering.

Sasuke’s older brother seemed torn, his eyes scrutinizing Naruto as if he was trying to read the blond’s intentions and his soul. He tilted his head to the side, some luscious locks slipping out from the ponytail that was keeping the long hair out of the man’s face. The mundane gesture was the spitting image of Sasuke’s and the Captain unconsciously relaxed, recognizing the curiosity in the other man’s demeanor.
“Shisui,” Itachi called, without dividing his attention. “Go inside and announce Naruto’s arrival. See if Madara is willing to talk with our guest.”

The man called Shisui turned completely toward Itachi, obviously unsure about the command he received. The two men didn’t speak nor lock eyes but in a matter of seconds Shisui’s stance mellowed, his attitude drastically changing. He shot another glance in the Captain’s direction – eyes sparkling with something that looked like mirth – then back-flipped with the lightness of a butterfly and started running back to the temple.

And fuck, he was fast. Naruto’s eyes went as wide as saucers.

“May I escort you inside, Captain?”

Itachi’s voice managed to draw him out of his shook and Naruto turned his head toward the other man.

“No pat down or restraining?” he asked incredulously, wearing a skeptical frown.

Itachi’s lips curved in a barely perceivable smile. It would have been difficult to notice it for a casual stranger, but Naruto was well accustomed to Sasuke and all his micro-expressions so far, so he was able to spot it.

“There is no need for it,” Itachi’s voice reassured. “It would have been extremely stupid of you to come to our camp armed. We can see everything, for your information. You would have likely been dead already.”

The Captain gulped and thanked all the gods he could remember that he decided to ditch his combat knives before coming out from the forest.

“Cool,” he rasped, trying not to give away how nervous he actually was. “I almost forgot about your magic all-seeing-eyes. Not that coming at you with a weapon would have given me a chance in the first place, with or without your x-rays.”

Itachi stopped mid turn and blinked at Naruto, apparently at a loss.

Then he chuckled softly.

Naruto felt some warmness spreading on his cheeks.

Amazing. Even the almighty and imposing big brother seemed to have some sense of humor, at least when the joke was at the Captain’s expenses.

Itachi gave him his back while he was still giggling warmly and started walking to the Outpost’s monumental entry, thankfully at average human speed.

Naruto followed meekly, surprised – but not really – that the other man felt comfortable enough to expose a vulnerable spot to an enemy.

They walked in electric silence up the impressive stairway, reaching the ornate portal that opened at the top.

Itachi pushed the massive door with one hand and the thick wood creaked open, revealing an ample hall dimly lit with torches and candles.

Even if the brightness outside was still modest due to the slanted rays of the pale winter sun,
Captain Uzumaki had to squint his eyes to make out the details of the biggest, most impressive room he had seen in his life.

From up close, the building appeared more like a palace than an ancient place of cult. The golden decorations of the majestic high ceiling faintly glimmered in the flames light and another royal wooden stair started from the middle of the hall, leading to the upper stories. The walls were richly decorated with intricate patterns in bas-relief and colorful frescoes, and one squared arch opened in each of them, leading to connecting hallways.

Naruto had never seen anything similar his whole life. He recognized that the building was the work of many expert human hands, not Alien built nor foreign. But being born in a time of war, when practicality and efficiency were always preferred over beauty and luxury, he never really had the occasion to see a manifestation of the artistic side of mankind.

In awe, he quietly walked to the closest wall-painting, touching a representation of animals and wild flowers with reverent fingers.

“I thought that all this kind of buildings had been destroyed, by now.” he muttered to himself.

Itachi said nothing, but Naruto could hear him walking closer. The Captain was no fool; he fully realized that he was able to hear the other man moving around in the shadows only because Itachi wanted him to. Somehow, he was grateful for the curtsy.

“You are a weird human, Captain.” Itachi’s voice softly spoke right behind Naruto’s shoulders.

The Captain tilted his head back to meet the familiar pair of glimmering red eyes. If possible, Itachi’s lashes were even thicker than Sasuke’s.

He offered him a small, tired smile.

“I cannot decide if that’s a compliment or an insult.” It was the truth, but Naruto’s voice wasn’t bothered.

Itachi actually answered his smile.

“My brother really likes you.”

It was a sharp turn in the discourse and Naruto’s lips disclosed before his brain wrapped around the concept. He lowered his head and turned around to properly face the brother of the man that in a short time had been able to dig a place for himself in the Captain’s heart.

“This is nice to hear, Sir, because the feeling is honestly mutual.” Naruto’s voice was low but steady, distinctly coated in fondness. There was no point in denying it. The simple thought of Sasuke deeming him worthy enough to be mentioned to his brother made his chest swell in warmness.

Itachi’s gaze was piercing him, his eyes clearly scrutinizing him. His lips were still curled in a little knowing smirk, though, and that gave Naruto the strength to stand in front of him a little taller.

Calmly, Itachi raised one hand and reached out toward the captain.

Naruto stiffened but didn’t move, and the man earnestly poked him in the belly with his forefinger.

Naruto had to make use of his honed self control not to squeal indignantly because of the tickling.

Seriously?
“Your inner energy has an interesting base-frequency,” was Itachi’s thrifty comment.

Right, thank you so much for the explanation.

“ If I closed my eyes I could almost mistake you for my brother.”

What?

Naruto blinked, eyes wide. He wrinkled his forehead in perplexity, trying to give a meaning to the other man’s words. Itachi was smiling for real, by now, and the way he was looking at him made the Captain feel a little self conscious.

His uneasiness must have been pretty visible in his face, because Itachi took pity on him.

“Every living being possesses an inner energy that is basically unique.” he explained patiently. “This energy is shaped as a wave, oscillating at a peculiar base-frequency, and is perceivable by other living beings. The base-frequency is altered by mood swings, emotions and your physical state, but fundamentally it’s the energy-rate an organism will always spontaneously revert to. You appear to share your base-frequency with my brother.” Itachi made a small pause. “That’s why you two resonate.”

If Naruto was confused before Itachi’s supposed clarification, now he was completely disoriented. He licked his lips, trying to coerce his brain into cooperating, a thousand of questions swimming in his head.

Then he remembered something that Orochimaru had said and the roaring of his thoughts disappeared in the background.

The Invaders are creatures of energy.

Was it possible that Itachi, Sasuke and all the others, being Alien-human hybrids, could actually… perceive and read and maybe even shape pure energy, somehow?

He opened his mouth to blurt out the question, anxious to finally receive an answer, but Itachi’s raised palm stopped him.

“Coming here was extremely reckless, Captain. What are you exactly hoping to achieve?” The other man’s expression turned severe all of a sudden and Naruto was left wondering why and if he was being scolded by an opponent. “My brother doesn’t need a dead mate.”

The last comment felt like a fist in Naruto’s stomach. ... My mate?

He sighed, his heart clenching painfully and the gravity of the situation hitting him right in the face like a train.

He didn’t want to lose Sasuke.

But he had to do something to stop this conflict if he wanted to be together with him and keep him safe. Naruto was a child of the War and he was sick and tired of it; almost everything he had loved he had lost, stolen away from him, but he wasn’t willing to take the risk this time. The time had come to stop this madness.

I love him.

“I am trying to do the right thing.” his tone was tired and his voice a whisper, but his eyes burned
with determination.

Itachi's expression remained neutral, those big red eyes weighing him.

“Madara is willing to receive you, if you really want to negotiate.”

The voice came from far in the dark hall, but Naruto was the only one jumping for its sudden appearance.

A pair of glimmering red dots advanced slowly in his direction, and the Captain was able to make out Shisui's features.

Collecting himself, Naruto nodded to the other man.

Shisui threw a glimpse in Itachi's direction and Sasuke's brother sighed quietly.

“Madara is one of us, the older. He will act as a legate for the Invaders. Sadly for you, the Jumala's high commanders had sworn they were never going to personally confront a human ever again after the results of their previous attempt.”

Itachi's voice was explanatory, but it was laced with a well concealed pained note.

Naruto raised his brows.

“This way, please.” Shisui instructed.

The Captain threw another look to the almighty hybrid, then obediently followed.

Shisui led him to the threshold of a spacious, rectangular room in a more secluded area of the building. Itachi walking behind them in silence. The hall was even more heavily decorated than the previous one, colorful motives inspired by the nature practically crowding every centimeter of the walls and the ceiling, which was remarkably lower than the one in the stair hall. Red and orange paper lanterns were hanging from the beams above, throwing the room in a comfortable warm light. On the other end of the hall a tall, pale man dressed in black was sitting on a high table that resembled an altar, his shoulders squared and his posture regal.

Naruto took in a deep breath and calmly walked forward.

Despite having some creepy similarities with the bastard who was responsible of many of their shared trouble, any step Naruto took in his direction made it pretty obvious that this man had nothing in common with Orochimaru. His long, thick hair was black as the night and shimmering, his skin fair and unblemished. The man was at least twice as tall as the rat-lab scientist, his shoulders as broad as Naruto's, and like any other Uchiha he was incredibly good looking. His red, inquisitive eyes were focused on the Captain.

When Naruto came close enough to allow a verbal exchange, he stopped and bowed gracefully. Madara didn't as much as flinch, and the blond took it as a cue to start conversation.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Sir. My name is Captain Uzumaki Naruto of the Kyuubi, and I stand in front of you as an emissary of the Union Elite Forces.”

Madara arched a fine eyebrow, not looking impressed in the slightest. He elegantly crossed his arms in front of his chest, tilting his pointy chin up with pride.
“Uchiha Madara, son of a Snake and a Test Tube and long time oppressed by your keen.” his voice lacked the velvety texture that characterized both Sasuke's and his brother's.

Naruto gulped at the blunt introduction and respectfully bowed again.

“My pleasure to meet you.”

Madara grimaced, clearly displeased by the exchange of pleasantries.

“Make it quick, human. I am not fond of formalities.”

Naruto wasn't either.

He opened the chest pocket of his bulletproof vest end extracted the documents sporting Tsunade’s official seal.

“I am here as a humble emissary to bring your faction mankind's best apologies for our inexcusable behavior before and during the War. Those apologies come together with an immediate declaration of surrender and a heartfelt plea to stop this prolonged conflict.” Naruto’s voice was steady, convincing and warm. By talking in the name of the UEF, concretely his own family, he was also getting a huge weight off his own chest.

He took a look to the neatly packed papers in his hand, then his eyes shifted to Madara again. Bowing his head slightly, he extended the documents with a slow, controlled movement.

Madara eyed the offering with a slightly surprised scowl, but didn’t make a move to retrieve the parcel.

He squared his shoulders, his glimmering eyes pinning the Captain to the spot.

His lips curled down in a disapproving snarl.

“Apologies, uh?”

Naruto did his best not to waver, his dominant hand still sticking out.

“How convenient for your kind. Apologizing meekly the moment it becomes obvious you are losing.”

Madara’s words stung in their indelicate truthfulness, but the Captain pretended not to be touched.

“In my hands are the official documents released from Lady Tsunade Senju, Supreme Commander of the UEF, and they fully explain the situation. I understand our change of heart might seem rushed, but we have reasons for reaching out to you in this precise moment of time.”

The Captain gathered up his courage and walked calmly toward the man that represented his opponents, the man that held in his hand the power to stop this war of extermination.

“We have been deceived from the inside, Sir,” Naruto’s voice was soft, his eyes sincere. Madara tilted his head to look at him, but he didn’t seem affected by the Captain’s bold move. Naruto kept on. “The UEF hereby denies any affiliation with the Akatsuki Organization and Orochimaru. Our government hid from us the real reasons behind this conflict; up to this moment, we were persuaded we’ve been acting in rightful defense of our planet and our keen.” he paused, by now so close to Madara that he could touch him.

“We have been betrayed and deceived in acting against you. And now that this fact became
apparent, we can’t do nothing but surrender.”

Madara’s eyes were burning embers. He was smiling an arrogant and completely unamused smile.

“Mankind truly is disgusting...” his comment was soaked in restrained venom. “You cannot even manage to be loyal and rightful to one another.” it was a taunt that hit too close to home for Naruto to counter.

“But honestly I love the irony, you know? You were the ones starting this conflict, bloated in arrogance and godly self-confidence, but not even half a century later you are already on the verge of extinction and begging for mercy.”

Goosebumps broke Naruto’s skin. Madara’s voice was icy, loathe swimming in his red, scorching irises.

*It’s too late.*

“You said it yourself: your keen is corrupted, untrustworthy and wicked. Your actions during the Great War proved over and over again how selfish, greedy and ruthless humankind is.” Madara stopped, resting his palms on the table he was sitting on. He leaned slightly toward the Captain, his jaw clenched and subdued rage boiling in his eyes.

“You humans don’t know the meaning of compassion and are unable to experience sympathy for those outside your pathetic race. Honestly, why should I favor your supposed search for redemption, now?”

Naruto’s fingers clenched around the official documents and he lowered his arm. Drowning in shame, he averted his eyes.

He ultimately noticed that Shisui, Itachi and another man with similar features were also in the room, listening quietly to the exchange.

Uchihas were mere instruments created by men to satisfy a preposterous thirst for power. *How could he convince them to change their mind?*

Sasuke’s eyes blinked open in the pale morning light.

His cheeks were feeling strangely hot and a peculiar, swirling emotion was inexplicably spreading into his chest.

He pushed with his hands against the tatami mat, forcing his still slumbering body in a sitting position in the middle of his nest of colorful blankets.

The fluttering sensation in his chest intensified, hundreds of butterflies suddenly taking wing into his stomach.

Then he felt him, and perceived the pull.

A delighted moan escaped his lips and in a second he jumped to his feet, sleepiness entirely forgotten.

He was close, he had come for him.

*Naruto.*
Before another thought could shape in his mind, he was already running out of his bedroom’s door.

“With all due respect, Sir. The betrayal was a mistake, but it was a mistake made by a restricted group of men. I cannot deny the thing you said about them, but not all humans are that way.” Captain Uzumaki was trying his best to keep his cool and argue his position methodically, but the truth was that he had already played all his trump cards and he was reasonably starting to panic.

Madara was stoic and resolute, his demeanor subtly suggesting Naruto that anything he could possibly say was going to fall to deaf ears.

Whatever Orochimaru and his horror crew had inflicted upon him, it had fueled Madara’s rooted despise for mankind.

“Many innocents had been killed during this conflict: young men, women and children. My whole keen had also been cruelly slaughtered.”

At that, Madara chuckled darkly. Naruto stepped back, taking in his whole, stiff figure.

“According to my personal experience, there is no such a thing as an innocent human,” Madara countered sharply.

Naruto bit into his lower lip and called for patience. And for a miracle, while he was at it.

All of a sudden, he perceived a strong pull into his chest, a stirring of emotion – or energy? - so strong that it almost unbalanced him. He could feel his muscles relaxing, endorphins running into his system without an apparent reason.

Dumbfounded, he turned toward the room’s entryway, his gaze passing through Itachi, Shisui and the other man standing in the middle. There was nothing there, but something was calling to his core from that direction like the singing of a mermaid.

The next second, a painfully familiar figure appeared in the threshold.

“Sasuke.” Naruto spelled the boy’s name, the longing that he had been able to suppress under duties coming back full force and mixing with euphoric happiness.

Sasuke was barefoot, clad in some sort of silky kimono-robe that exposed both his thighs and part of his shoulders. He was ruffled, almost as if he just woke up from a night of troubled sleep, and his cheeks were tinted in deep pink.

The Captain didn’t have time to take in more details, because Sasuke started running toward him at full speed and the only thing he could do was open his arms to catch the deep blue flash that barreled into him. The boy’s enthusiasm was so great that his momentum threw Naruto off balance, sending both of them tumbling onto the ground.

In any case, pain be damned, the Captain’s arms instinctively closed around the boy’s lean waist, and Sasuke shuffled a bit above him, re-positioning his long limbs to sit into his lap. His arms were tied in a knot behind Naruto’s neck, his face pressed against Naruto’s skin. He was trembling, breathing heavily. As the Captain opened his eyes and focused on the starry blue and silver pattern of Sasuke’s robe, he realized he was doing the same. He shifted his arms, completely oblivious of the four pair of scrutinizing eyes fixed on them, and tangled one hand in the boy’s silky locks, pushing him even closer.
His chest was exploding. They have been without each other for less than twenty-four hours and it felt like an eternity.

Sasuke whimpered and pressed his lips against Naruto’s jaw. The Captain was embarrassed to admit that he could have sobbed when many other kisses followed the first one, landing across his face. He gently tugged at the hair at Sasuke’s nape, wanting to see his face. But the boy followed the movement only enough to tilt his chin and join their lips.

Before his mind could even connect, Naruto was fiercely kissing back, relishing in the scent of his lover and the purring sounds coming from the boy’s chest.

Somebody cleared their throat not too far from them and a shred of the Captain’s rational side kicked back in. Reluctantly, he did his best to tame the passionate kiss into something more proper.

Sasuke seemed to take the hint himself because he went along meekly, leaning back slightly in the Captain’s lap to look at his face, still purring in contentment.

“Sasuke! What is this inexcusable display of weakness?” Madara’s angered voice resounded in the hall, but the pair curled together on the stone-cold floor didn’t hear him.

Naruto couldn’t stop smiling stupidly at his lover and Sasuke, all dazed eyes and flushed cheeks and messy hair, was smiling back to him. The Captain caressed him wherever his hands could reach, squeezing the boy tightly, his gaze openly adoring. He leaned back to pin a strand of rebellious hair behind Sasuke’s ear.

“It’s not like I want to ruin the moment, but we are supposedly in the middle of a formal military council...”

Oh. Right. Thanks for the reminder, supersonic hybrid named Shisui.

Naruto made a move to stand up and only then realized that it was full on winter and Sasuke was half naked and exposed to the freezing temperature of the hall.

“Jeez. Why are you always wandering around without clothes, mh?” he cooed, trying to adjust the fabric of the boy’s kimono such as to cover as much milky skin as possible. The result was kind of meager.

Huffing in mock disappointment, he readjusted his arms around Sasuke and stood up, holding Sasuke in his arms as if he were a child. The boy cooperated happily, squeezing the Captain’s waist between his strong thighs, his naked feet hanging thirty centimeters above the ground.

“You’ll end up getting sick with this cold,” Naruto murmured, shifting Sasuke’s weight until both of them were comfortable.

“We are immune to human illnesses, Captain,” Itachi provided, and even if Naruto heard him perfectly he didn’t make a move to put Sasuke down.

The older sibling was examining the couple with curiosity, both his eyebrows raised. Naruto had sensed Sasuke before he and Shisui could pinpoint the precise location of his brother’s energy. Plus, Sasuke was lean and cute, but he certainly wasn’t light, and the Captain seemed able to mold with him effortlessly. Frankly, Itachi was impressed. A weird human, definitely.

Naruto turned toward Madara yet again, Sasuke steady in his arms and clearly thrilled about it.

“I came to you seeking for help, hoping that it wasn’t too late to speak about peace,” the Captain
resumed his discourse, trying to concentrate on the main reason why he risked his life coming there. “Madara, I can understand why you don’t feel compelled in helping my keen but I invoke your common sense and your mercy. We both have to earn from putting an end to this bloody conflict. Mankind is willing to do anything to fix its past mistakes and regain honor to your eyes.”

Sasuke must have realized the graveness in Naruto’s words, because he stopped moaning happily. He lifted his head from the curve between the Captain’s neck and his shoulder, his eyes searching for Madara.

Madara was looking at both of them wearing an evident, disapproving frown. His lips were pressed together into a thin line and his face was ashen, paler than usual.

He caressed his pointy chin with one hand, eyes shooting unfavorable glares.

“This War will be over soon, whether or not I decide to do something about it,” Madara’s voice suggested, incredibly controlled.

“Your keen is going to be wiped away completely in a handful of years, and that’s a fact. As for me, this is exactly what I deem you earned for yourselves. Mankind deserves to perish.”

Naruto’s mouth fell open, panic rapidly mounting. He took a step forward, noticing the officially stamped document that lay on the floor, ditched to make room in his arms for his lover.

“There is no need to ignore this. Read the official documents, at least. Or maybe just take them and pass them on to the__”

Madara moved to stand up, shutting him down with a lethal glare.

“This meeting is over, human,” his strong voice was definitive. “I have no interest in pleading your cause. Your keen must die, and die it will.”

That said, the man practically disappeared, dissolving into thin air as if by magic. He didn’t even spare the Captain one last glance.

Naruto stood there, eyes wide in disbelief, head buzzing. The situation had gone down so quickly that his mind refused to acknowledge it.

Madara was gone. He had failed badly, likely throwing away humankind’s only chance at survival.

Only upon hearing Sasuke’s distressed whimper he realized he was crying in silence.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ta-da!

Were you expecting to meet all the Uchiha in one chapter? I am so glad I am getting to toy with all of them from now on!
Also, I felt like dropping some hints of an implied ShiIta (hope you don’t mind), but I
promise it will only be in the background.

Naruto and Sasuke finally were reunited! I’ve had that scene in my mind for a long time, I swear. I really wanted them to look helplessly drawn to each other, oblivious to whatever surrounded them.

And Sasuke doesn’t like shoes (you probably guessed this so far). Afterall, Orochimaru never preoccupied himself enough to give him a pair (asshole) so my headcanon is that they just look weird to him.

Anyway! I leave the rest of the commenting to you if you feel like it (it will make me squee with happiness :3).

Thank you for following my little story, I really appreciate all your kudos, amazing comments and feedback.

See you soon!
KT
IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Captain Uzumaki reached the Alien Base and was welcomed by Itachi and Shisui. He managed to get a meeting with Madara and argued passionately for mankind’s salvation. Sasuke joined Naruto as soon as he perceived the familiar energy closeby, but despite the Captain's best efforts, his pleas went unanswered.

Sasuke’s delicate fingers were on his cheeks, collecting hopeless drops of sorrow. Naruto honestly didn’t know what to do with himself.

He had tried and failed. Which was still better than the perspective of surrendering without trying, but among the many things he was prepared to face as the outcome of his desperate mission, failure wasn’t exactly taken into consideration.

Sasuke was shivering in his arms and the waves of sadness and panic coming from him weren’t helping to ease Naruto’s own feelings of grief. It was like a wicked loop of suffering suffocating them.

The Captain sniffed, leaning his head to the side to touch his forehead with his lover’s, unable to find words to reassure him.

The weight of the guilt on his shoulders was so heavy that he could barely stand up straight.

Sasuke encouraged the contact, his watery eyes filled with preoccupation and focused on the Captain’s face. His delicate hands moved quietly, caressing blond hair and tan skin, trying to soothe and take the pain away.

As much as Naruto appreciated the attention and was incredibly grateful for it, he didn’t know how to fix that part of his heart that had just been broken.

“Captain.”

Naruto’s eyes left the stone floor where they’d been glued in shame since tears had started falling.

Itachi was standing close to his side, mid concern showing on his normally stern features.

The Captain gulped, trying regain a semblance of composure. He took a couple of deep breaths,
forcing himself into a regular breathing pattern and hoisted Sasuke higher in his arms, straightening his back.

Itachi watched him attentively, respectfully waiting for him to recover.

Gracefully, the haughty man crouched down and collected the discarded official papers still laying abandoned on the pavement. The way his eyes lingered on the sealed envelope in his hand made him look like he was conflicted.

When he stood tall again, he searched for the Captain’s gaze, his dark irises glimmering with resolve.

“I will do this.”

Naruto blinked rapidly, feeling Sasuke’s arms tightening around his neck.

“Excuse me?” he demanded, his brain feeling tired and sluggish. He wasn’t sure about the implication of what he just heard.

The older sibling tilted his head to the side, his gaze briefly switching from Naruto to Sasuke and then finding blue eyes again.

“I will take responsibility of your official declaration of surrender and bring it to the Jumala Executive Commanders.”

Naruto’s breath hitched, his lips parting in surprise.

“Itachi!” Shisui’s voice cut in, sounding adverse to the older sibling decision.

The man in question just ignored him.

Naruto had completely forgotten about the other people in the room so far, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from the handsome face of his lover’s brother.

“This whole situation is completely wrong and pitiful, hence I refuse to support it.” Itachi spoke out to none in particular, his attention still on the Captain.

“Itachi. Madara is not going to approve this,” Shisui warned again. He sounded distressed, his voice urgent, almost pleading.

“I don’t care. Despite what you might think, I am not doing this as a favor to my beloved brother. It’s not only about that.”

Itachi’s calm and reasonable argumentation seemed to satisfy the other man, because he didn’t try to counter him anymore.

“I honestly believe the human here has a point. I don’t remember a single time in history when a war actually managed to solve anything – and I researched a lot during my captive years.” the Uchiha’s lips curved in a sour smile.

“We all have something to earn from peace and I don’t see why we should keep on with this nonsense, especially not when one faction is actually surrendering and favoring the cessation of hostilities.”

Naruto was speechless, mouth still open in stupor.
A light tug on a tuft of hair at his nape helped him back to reality.

He frowned, comically closing his lips and wetting them, his heart beating furiously against his ribcage. His palms were ridiculously sweaty because of the tension.

“Thank you, Sir,” he forced the words out of his throat, voice shaky and raspy from crying. “This would mean everything for me and my brethren.”

Itachi’s eyes were so intense that Naruto felt his face burning.

“Don’t thank me yet, Captain. I will speak on behalf of your keen but I cannot promise you a better outcome than the current one.” his voice was relaxed, devoid of emotion. “As you likely noticed, mankind hasn’t truly forged a nice reputation among us.”

Naruto felt shame for that last comment but he refused to lower his gaze.

“I can understand it. I’m just hoping we’ll get a chance to demonstrate not all of us are like that.”

Itachi nodded curtly, the two men confronting each other in silence.

“Well, this will take a while.” Itachi advised in the end. “Sasuke, why don’t you show our guest around, in the meantime? I believe he could use a distraction.”

Sasuke nodded enthusiastically, like an obedient puppy.

“I will find you when I am done,” the older sibling assured. Then, he turned his back and quietly walked to the door.

Sasuke squeezed Naruto’s neck, the Captain clearly perceiving the boy’s gratefulness toward his brother and his newly found enthusiasm of having Naruto for himself.

He wiggled a little in Naruto’s arms and the Captain delicately let him down, reluctantly putting space between their bodies.

Sasuke’s hands caressed down the blond’s arms till his fingers found Naruto’s palms and he squeezed them softly, reassuringly.

“Give me a minute,” he whispered, his rosy lips only ten centimeters from the Captain’s, corner slightly tilted up.

And like that he disappeared, leaving an astonished Naruto standing in the middle of a cold hall under the scrutiny of two overpowered alien-human hybrids who looked at him with a mixture of pity and amusement in their eyes.

“‘Tachi__”

“...I don’t need to hear that.” the older sibling cut Sasuke short, keeping up his quiet strolling without even turning to look at his brother.

Sasuke scowled and pouted cutely, following the other closely.

“I know you don’t. I just want to say it!” he precised, voice shy.

Itachi stopped in his track abruptly, causing Sasuke to bump against his back. He tilted his head
back to peer at the younger one’s face, one eyebrow arched tauntingly.

Sasuke’s cheeks colored slightly, but he didn’t let his brother’s condescending attitude discourage him.

“Thank you for what you are doing, brother. I am beyond grateful.”

Itachi tried to hide the smile pulling at his lips, blatantly failing.

“Told you I knew that,” he muttered cheekily.

Sasuke scoffed but reached forward, awkwardly hugging him from behind.

Itachi’s features softened, his haughty mask dropping.

He let Sasuke hold him for as long as he wanted, basking in the happy and affectionate buzz of energy coming from him.

“Did you feel how warm he is?” Sasuke’s voice was small and embarrassed, causing Itachi’s smile to grow into a smirk.

The older sibling twisted his bust to look at the smaller figure hidden between his shoulder blades and playfully flicked the boy’s forehead with a forefinger.

Sasuke didn’t look too pleased by the gesture but before he could verbally express his disappointment, Itachi silenced him.

“You are warm too, Sasuke.”

The affirmation, coupled with the loving gaze Itachi reserved for him, had Sasuke’s face turning deep red.

Itachi chuckled, delicately detaching from the boy’s hold and pushing him gently along the corridor.

“Go to him,” he encouraged, and Sasuke didn’t need to be told again.

“Is this your room?” Naruto demanded, his eyes curiously taking in Sasuke’s modest apartment.

The boy nodded, quietly squeezing the blond’s hand where they were joined.

Naruto smiled lightly, returning the gesture.

Sasuke’s quarters were situated two stories above the monumental entry hall in one of the towers, and consisted in a half-empty room with cozy wooden floor and walls embellished in ancient paintings.

One lean window let the natural light filter in from outside, the pale sun-rays hitting a colorful pile of blankets and fabrics amassed messily on a tatami-mat in the corner.

A lone candle sat right beside the rainbow mountain of cloth, barely consumed, and a low, red colored ottoman was placed against the opposite wall.

“It’s nice,” he commented, somehow appreciating the simplicity.
Sasuke tilted his head toward him, kissing his shoulder above the uniform in a gesture so intimate that made Naruto’s heart melt.

The Captain let his lover drag him toward the tatami corner, his relaxed smile turning into a fond, full smile as soon as he spotted the orange hoodie Sasuke borrowed from him on top of the pile of fabrics.

Sasuke gracefully knelt down accommodating in his warm nest, tugging at Naruto’s hand with surprising strength, suggesting he wanted him to follow. Naruto accomplished his lover’s wishes, sitting down on the mat beside him, their shoulders touching.

He had barely settled among the soft materials when Sasuke’s mouth surprised him, landing an ardent wet kiss to the side of his exposed neck.

Goosebumps immediately erupted on Naruto’s skin in response to the passionate affection, the fine hair on his arms standing. His blond lashes fluttered, lids falling half mast, a pleasant warm sensation spreading from his chest to his lower belly.

“Hey,” he rasped, his voice inadvertently showing how pleasantly he was affected.

Sasuke answered him with a soft purring noise, his warm hands caressing Naruto’s chest and his forearm. The Captain sighed, relaxing into the touch but making a conscious effort to remain focused on the present situation.

“Are these guys treating you well, at least?” he murmured, his own palms finding Sasuke’s body, affectionately stroking the boy’s sides.

Sasuke smiled shyly and nodded, his cheeks faintly colored. Naruto unconsciously inclined his head to give him easier access to his neck.

“I have never seen them, but I like their energy. I feel welcome here,” Sasuke spoke softly while twisting his body, lips grazing Naruto’s skin.

The statement spiked the Captain’s curiosity, his eyes searching a contact with his lover’s.

“Can you seriously feel them all?” the blond questioned, suppressing a groan when Sasuke smoothly slid in his lap, straddling him with his long toned thighs.

Sasuke leaned in, tenderly touching the tip of their noses together.

“Yes.” it was the answer to Naruto’s question but somehow, as Sasuke’s firm weight shifted into his lap, their bodies drifting even closer, it assumed a totally different undertone.

Reasonably, the Captain should have taken advantage of Sasuke’s unconscious knowledge, asking primal information about his keen’s supposed enemy. As things progressed and the boy’s hands sensually slid up his biceps and behind his neck, though, he found those thoughts drifting away.

Being in Sasuke’s presence again after the forced separation, even if it was only for a small amount of time, was doing strange things to his body and brain.

 Apparently equally affected by their rediscovered closeness, his lover ducked down, searching for his mouth.

Naruto didn’t even consider denying him what they both were desperately longing for, tilting his
chin up and capturing Sasuke’s lips in a heated kiss.

He heard Sasuke’s sigh of contentment, the boy’s pelvis shifting again and his fingers curling delicately in the golden hair at Naruto’s nape. The Captain relaxed, endorphins running through his body like a shot of drugs, and he allowed himself to forget about the tensed situation for a while.

God, it was unbelievable. He had missed Sasuke so much it was difficult to put into words the void created by his absence. He knew his reaction wasn’t probably normal nor healthy — especially considering that, altogether, they had been knowing each other for less than a week – but he didn’t know what to do about it. He was helpless, totally at bay of those urgent feelings of belonging.

His arms automatically circled Sasuke’s waist, caressing a hipbone and the curve of the boy’s lower back. Sasuke moaned in appreciation, lapping along the seam of the Captain’s lips and then pressing in to deepen the kiss.

The small keening sound stirred a savage hurricane of hot emotions in Naruto’s belly and the Captain held Sasuke tighter, afraid of the urges that the boy seemed to stir in him.

The desire to possess him and own him was mind-blowing, totally uncommon from his part.

They cut apart to breathe, lips shiny and wet, still parted, barely millimeters apart.

One of Sasuke’s hands slid down the front of Naruto’s torso and flames of desire arose at the touch. Naruto pressed his eyes closed, overwhelmed.

“Sasuke,” he called him only for the pleasure that came from being allowed to caress the boy’s name with his tongue.

Sasuke’s body was growing hot in his arms, unblemished white skin seemingly caught in a fever.

The boy scooted slightly back with his pelvis, firm ass grinding teasingly against Naruto’s thighs, and he sneaked the other hand in between them, palming the Captain’s forming erection through the fabric of his uniform pants.

Naruto hissed, partly taken aback from the bold gesture, partly from the wave of stunning pleasure that raised in his belly from the contact.

His own, bigger hands moved to hold the boy’s narrow hips, enjoying the silky texture of the kimono Sasuke was wearing.

“Sasuke, your brother...” he managed to whisper, before the boy stole his breath away with another scorching kiss, his demanding hand not moving from the Captain’s crotch.

Naruto groaned, breathing in Sasuke’s scent, tilting his head and delving deeper in the boy’s mouth, trying at least to quench his desire to devour him.

Sasuke released a satisfied guttural sound and Naruto could perceive in his own soul how much the boy was excited and treasured their passionate exchange.

With difficulty and painful restraint the Captain tamed the kiss, breaking it in small wet touches of hungry lips.

“You drive me crazy,” he half whispered half moaned in between the kisses, Sasuke answering with a joyful, condescending sound.
He took a handful of seconds to admire his lover’s flushed features, mesmerizing eyes half lidded and pitch black from desire, lips red and swollen.

“I am dying to have you,” the blond admitted, too caught up in the moment to feel embarrassed about his weaknesses. “Can you feel that?”

Sasuke nodded dazedly, lips parting and breath hitching.

Naruto kissed him chastely, heart suddenly full.

“Your brother could come back anytime.” it was a roundabout way for asking Sasuke to take pity on him and be a little more patient, regardless of the burning need that was building between them. He didn’t think that being caught in bed with the 'enemy' during a supposedly life-changing negotiation was a good way to make a positive impression.

Sasuke exhaled a warm breath, trying but failing to suffocate a frustrated moan of protest.

He took one of Naruto’s calloused hands in his own, bringing it to his half exposed chest and pressing the palm against his heart.

“I miss you,” he said in a small voice, but Naruto heard the desperate cry that it actually was.

Breathing harshly, the Captain pushed the ample v-neck of the blue kimono out of the way, fondly caressing tender skin that was even softer than the silky fabric.

Sasuke’s heart was beating a booming staccato against his ribs, giving Naruto the impression of holding it into his hand.

Delicately, he cradled Sasuke’s neck and brought their faces together so that he could kiss him again, slow and sensual.

He had been in a similar situation already, he knew he wasn’t able to resist the boy’s wishes, especially not when they needed each other with such raw desperation.

Sasuke responded to the kiss with enthusiasm, his warm palm rubbing small circles on Naruto’s crotch, hips quietly rolling back and forth.

The Captain breathed through his nose, reaching behind Sasuke to undo the sash holding the silky robe together. The fabric loosened completely in the front, sliding down the boy’s shoulders to reveal the milky plane of his toned chest adorned by rosy, perky nipples.

With a gentle stroke the Captain’s rough pads circled one of them, eliciting a visible shudder in his lover.

Naruto leaned back slightly to admire the surreal perfection of the beauty in his arms, his eyes sliding down the elegant, lean body reverently. He noticed how the kimono was opening also around the boy’s hips, putting in display a taut, tantalizing navel and allowing him to see the tip of the boy’s already leaking erection.

“Dear Lord, you’re so beautiful...” the Captain murmured distantly, his voice low and raspy with arousal.

He moved to push the fabric out of the way, eager hands tracing the curve of Sasuke’s hip bones. There was a small mole to the left of the boy’s belly-button, a minuscule flaw that somehow made him more real, human despite what Naruto had been told about him.
Without giving his urges a second thought, the Captain bowed his head and kissed the beauty mark, his mouth opening to lap at the skin.

Sasuke squirmed, goosebumps erupting on his skin, his whole body curling to cling on Naruto. His nimble fingers found the button of the Captain’s pants, blindly pushing it through the eyelet.

He choked on a moan when Naruto’s tongue delved into his navel, strong fingers curling around the base of his erection at the same time.

Sasuke’s desire became frantic, his free hand tugging blond locks and forcing Naruto’s head up so he could kiss him, the other aggressively wrenching the Captain’s pants and briefs to get them out of the way.

The blond chuckled softly in the boy’s mouth, amused by his lover’s cute antics and feeling lucky, honored and wanted. He raised his hips to help getting the unnecessary clothing out of the way, and both he and Sasuke moaned the moment the boy’s fingers made direct contact with heated skin.

Sasuke promptly slid forward into his lap, moving his hips in a circle, their slicky erections touching together. The Captain had to clench his teeth to hold back a curse from how damn good it felt.

He slid his palms up Sasuke’s smooth, milky thighs, aiding his movements, kneading the straining muscles.

The boy angled Naruto’s cock so that it slid under his pelvis, tip caressing the crack between his ass-cheeks.

Despite the drunken pleasure clouding his mind, the Captain took the hint immediately and his hands shot up to grip Sasuke’s hips, halting the boy’s movements and holding him in place.

He pressed an apologetic kiss to his the boy’s sternum, ignoring the disappointed whimper coming from him. Mouth still grazing skin, Naruto looked up in search of coal gray eyes, perceiving that his lover was being conflicted and aiming to reassure him.

“I don’t wanna hurt you, love,” he explained, shifting faintly to lace his mouth on a rosy nipple.

Sasuke’s whimper held a completely different meaning this time, erection openly leaking as Naruto’s tongue toyed with the hardened nub.

The Captain sensually slid his hands behind Sasuke’s back, lowering them to knead hungrily at the boy’s round ass. He slipped his longest fingers in between the ass-cheeks, teasingly brushing against the dry puckered hole. Sasuke pressed his ass into the touch, eager for more, rolling his hips in a seductive movement.

Naruto’s fingers circled the entrance, thumbs caressing the sides of Sasuke’s cheeks, purposely refraining from breaching inside.

The action was repeated several times, until Sasuke was practically sobbing in frustration and raw need, clinging to the Captain’s shirt like a lifeline.

Then something probably snapped inside him, because his thighs squeezed Naruto’s waist with a strength that forced him to attention, the blond’s chin instinctively tilting up to lock eyes.

Under his obedient, reverent blue gaze, Sasuke’s black irises bled red, the pupils still blown in desire. Ironically enough, the sudden, dangerous change didn’t scare the Captain in the slightest, the
possible threat only managing to turn him on even more.

He must have gone crazy for sure.

*Crazy in love*.

Sasuke’s weight shifted, the boy climbing off Naruto’s lap, blue eyes following every movement, hypnotized. He knelt on the tatami mat beside the Captain, the tip of his pink tongue poking out to lick sensually at his upper lip, making it glossy.

His hands found Naruto’s neglected cock and he bowed, swallowing him whole in a smooth movement.

The blond cursed, air abruptly leaving his lungs, his fingers gripping the colorful fabrics of Sasuke’s bedding to keep himself from swooning.

Sasuke’s tongue expertly lapped the underside of his erection, head slowly bobbing up and down as his lips closed tightly around the girth, driving him wild in pleasure.

Struggling slightly, the Captain shifted his balance backwards so that he was able to admire Sasuke’s focused expression, fascinated by how his now shiny erection slid in and out the boy’s hot mouth.

Red eyes locked on his yet again, a spark of mischief shining in them before Sasuke hollowed his cheeks, sucking the Captain’s soul out of him.

“Holy damn!” he choked, a long moan wrenched from his throat against his will.

Sasuke made a small noise that was half-pleased-half-smug and then relented, releasing Naruto’s cock with a lewd pop.

His smiling eyes were still drowning in blue irises as he opened his sinful mouth, saliva forming shiny strings between his red lips.

Naruto blinked, captivated by the weird sight, and reached down to cup Sasuke’s face, running a thumb along the perfect heart-shape of his upper lip.

The saliva covering it was unusually thick and slippery, like a gloss, and Naruto dipped his pad in the wetness of Sasuke’s mouth, watching as the boy closed his eyes in delight and sucked on it. The thumb came out with a kissing sound, covered in the same, viscous substance that now coated the boy’s lips and Naruto’s cock.

Dumbfounded, the Captain rubbed his thumb together with his forefinger, testing the slickness of Sasuke’s weird saliva, and his mind finally caught up with what was actually happening.

Sasuke was lubing him up.

“Oh God,” he groaned, a wave of heat coursing through his body at the realization. Carefully he reached for Sasuke’s chin and lifted the boy’s head up, offering him his second and third fingers to suck on. His lover happily took them in his mouth, tongue lapping in between the two digits and lips sliding up to the base knuckle, lashes fluttering open to stare at Naruto.

The Captain observed with fascination, his cock twitching in interest.

As soon as Sasuke deemed the fingers sufficiently coated he retreated, kissing the pads.
affectionately, returning his attention to Naruto’s swollen cock.

Naruto gasped as he was swallowed again, his lubed hand finding Sasuke’s ass and coating the twitching hole with the slippery substance. He maneuvered Sasuke’s body so that he was on his knees pushing his ass up, upper body and head lowered, and delicately pressed his fingers inside to stretch him.

The boy accepted two fingers without complaining, lewdly moaning around Naruto’s girth, sending pleasurable shivers up the man’s spine. The improvised lube was working wonders and Naruto pressed his fingers deeper inside, scissoring them and caressing Sasuke’s smooth walls, letting him get used to the intrusion.

He experimentally pressed down on the boy’s prostate and Sasuke cried out, legs trembling.

Naruto smiled, his thumb caressing the boy’s perineum as he kept kneading his pleasure spot, watching with satisfaction as Sasuke came undone, mewling and pressing his flushed face against his thighs.

Arms shaking, Sasuke forced himself into a sitting position, compelling Naruto to cease the mind-numbing stimulation. Looking the Captain dead in the eyes he leaned down to lay on the bedding face up, spreading his thighs wide in a clear invitation.

Naruto bit his lower lip, enthralled by how sexy his lover appeared when disheveled, his instinct telling him to get a move and take him already. Unfortunately, his mind chose that perfect moment to cut the pleasure haze, reminding him of Orochimaru’s taunting words.

Heart clenching, Naruto silenced the nauseating memories, caressing along Sasuke’s endless thighs and slowly hovering above him.

Sasuke was used to being fucked without having any say in the matter, but Naruto wanted him to know that it was different between them.

This wasn’t selfish sex nor something Sasuke had to feel forced to do. They were making love and Sasuke’s pleasure was Naruto’s own.

Lovingly, he collected the boy in his arms and sat back on the tatami, encouraging Sasuke in straddling him again. The boy seemed a bit taken aback, confused by the sudden change of position, but Naruto kept on smiling affectionately, sending off excited and encouraging vibrations.

He kissed the boy’s cheek and pecked his lips, holding him around the hips and making him rise on his knees. With his other hand he took a hold of the base of his angry erection and brushed the tip against Sasuke’s lubed hole.

His lover whimpered, undulating the pelvis slightly to create more friction. His red eyes were still focused on Naruto, hungry and questioningly, and the Captain kissed his chest, inciting him in lowering his hips.

Sasuke’s mouth fell open as Naruto’s erection breached in, eyes clouding. He exhaled brokenly and lowered himself to take it to the hilt, seemingly catching up with the Captain’s suggestion.

Naruto gave him a minute before moving his own hips tentatively, hands lowering to grab a handful of Sasuke’s spread ass.
He kissed the boy's chest, helping him when he started to rock above him, his thighs flexing. It only took a few seconds for the boy to understand the basics and find his equilibrium, sensual movements gaining confidence and grace.

“Yes... Like that,” Naruto praised affectionately, lifting Sasuke up and rocking with him, their bodies complementing as they found their rhythm.

Sasuke moaned appreciatively and bowed, searching for a kiss, and Naruto’s mouth met him halfway. They kissed deeply, Sasuke clinging to the Captain with a hand plunged in blond hair.

Naruto aided Sasuke’s hips down to the right angle, at the same time rocking up to hit the boy’s prostate dead on and Sasuke all but cried out in his mouth, full body shivering.

The blond did it again and again, causing his lover to sob. Sasuke’s blunt nails dug into his back and shoulders as he tried to follow Naruto’s silent instructions.

The boy leaned back, pushing his ass down then rocking up, allowing Naruto to admire all of him as he chased after his own pleasure.

Naruto gripped on a hip tightly, clenching his teeth against the sensory overload and focusing on holding back his release, the view of Sasuke enjoying himself and riding him almost too much to handle.

He laced on a sensitive nipple and sucked, Sasuke moaning wantonly in response and tugging wildly at his hair.

He felt the boy clenching around him, knowing he must be close, and slid a hand between them, circling his leaking cock and stroking, dipping his thumb pad in the slit.

Sasuke whimpered and sobbed, clenching his muscles and arching his back. Naruto released the nipple to look up and watch his lover come, shots of warm seed hitting messily both their bellies. He slid his free hand up the boy’s curved, sweaty spine, tangling his fingers in black tresses and cradling Sasuke’s head as he milked him, the pressure on his own cock becoming nearly unbearable.

“Sasuke,” he called, and the boy tilted his head to meet Naruto’s eyes through lowered lashes, his wanton and sated expression destroying the blond’s attempts to delay his own orgasm.

Pressing up in Sasuke’s heat one last time the Captain came, air completely knocked out from his lungs.

He held the boy close with both his arms as they regained their breath, face pressed against the warm skin of Sasuke’s shoulder. The boy’s fingers started running through his locks in a soothing massage, and he closed his eyes to treasure this precious moment of intimacy.

When he came back to his senses enough to lift his face from the warm cocoon created by their joined bodies, Sasuke was still watching him with his gleaming ruby-red eyes, a small, fond smile stretching his reddened lips.

“Well, I’ll be,” the Captain informed him, a smile both in his voice and on his mouth as he leaned up to share a kiss. Sasuke hummed, prolonging the contact and caressing the strong shoulders of the man holding him protectively.

“What is the secret of those eyes of yours?” Naruto murmured on the boy’s lips, only half serious, as he basked into the post coital affection.
Sasuke leaned back enough so that they could look at each other, his expression lightening up.

“It’s called Sharingan,” he smiled, the small black commas around his pupils spinning tiredly, as if they felt questioned. “At the stage I am currently using them, my eyes record everything I see in my memory like a videotape, making it impossible to forget.” Sasuke’s tone wasn’t intentionally seductive but affectionate and playful. Still, Naruto thought it was probably the most erotic thing that had been said to him.

“Does it mean that you just taped us while we had sex?” he asked, eyes wild and wide.

Sasuke’s expression turned mischievous and he tilted his head to speak against Naruto’s mouth.

“Yes,” he whispered hotly, tongue poking out to lap at Naruto’s lower lip. “Especially when you came.”

Naruto’s cock twitched in interest despite still being spent, sheathed in his sticky hideout between Sasuke’s ass-cheeks.

_Man, that boy was going to be the death of him._

Sasuke smelled so good it was intoxicating. Naruto wasn't able to relate his scent with anything else he smelled before, even if he could recognize the musky note of sex that currently lingered on his skin.

He pressed his nose harder in Sasuke's nape, inhaling deeply, the warmness in his chest threatening to explode.

His cheeks were tinged in deep pink, a part of his consciousness completely ashamed of how clingy and dependent on Sasuke he had become. But at the same time, his heart felt so full, happy and complete, simply by holding the boy in his arms.

The Captain shifted, pressing a soft kiss to Sasuke's neck.

“What have you done to me...” he wondered in a low voice, questioning himself.

Sasuke turned his face to peer at his expression, his eyes smiling and full of fondness. He supported his weight on his arms and then flipped his body, nimbly and gracefully straddling Naruto in their love nest.

Naruto readily caught him and caressed along naked abs, running his hands up and down Sasuke's sides.

They were still half undressed and utterly disheveled, making it apparent what they have been doing for the last few hours of blessed privacy.

But, most evidently, they both were sporting huge, loving smiles in replacement of the tension and the wariness that usually hardened their features.

“I haven't done anything I feel guilty of...” Sasuke murmured, ducking down and stealing a kiss, feeling Naruto's lips as they curved into a grin.

He hummed, letting the Captain kiss him again, leisurely rocking into his lap.

Naruto sighed, his fingers unconsciously tightening their grip on the boy's sides.
The low screeching sound from ancient hinges alerted them about Sasuke's door being opened and the couple cut apart with a wet sound.

As soon as Naruto's spotted Itachi's imposing figure standing in the threshold, a rush of panic and embarrassment cursed through his body, his face flaming red as he tried to shift into a more dignified position. Only then he realized that Sasuke was practically naked and sitting in his lap, unashamedly displaying his body and the marks Naruto left on him during hours of lovemaking, and his awkwardness reached a peak. He moved frantically to try covering Sasuke's up with the loose kimono-robe, ears burning and eyes apparently concentrated on the task.

*Thanks god he had tucked himself in his pants before laying down to cuddle, at least!*

Sasuke was staring at him with raised eyebrows, amusement glinting in his dark eyes, apparently unaffected by the fact that his older brother had just walked on them while they clearly...

Itachi cleared his throat and Naruto couldn't ignore his presence anymore.

He gulped through his clenched throat and silently took in a breath, knowing that there was no purpose in trying to cover up what they did. Itachi was no stupid and it wasn't like the Captain had something to say in his defense either.

Cheeks still tinged in pink, Naruto turned to face the powerful hybrid, arms still loosely hugging Sasuke.

To his extreme surprise Itachi also looked immune to embarrassment, the delicate situation apparently not touching him in the slightest.

The man was simply regarding them in curiosity, a knowing smirk faintly curving his lips and breaching his emotionless mask, as if it was perfectly normal to invade your younger sibling's private space and catch them having sex with a stranger.

*Well. At least Naruto's fear of immediate death eased a little.*

“I just finished discussing the present situation with the Jumala's High Council.” Itachi's voice eased the tension, his tone calm and measured. “And I thought you would be interested in hearing the outcome as soon as possible.”

Probably this was the closest thing to an apology the Captain would ever get from an Uchiha for barging in uninvited.

Naruto nodded automatically, distress forgotten and brain immediately focusing on the matter at hand. A hint of tension seeped back into his body language, his shoulders squaring and chin tilting up.

Itachi still hadn't finished toying with him, though.

“ I would apologize for the long waiting, but somehow I am persuaded you found a good way to keep yourselves entertained in the meantime.” the older sibling was actually smiling, obviously taking pleasure in torturing Naruto.

Taken aback, the Captain choked on his own spit, Sasuke's providential hand carefully patting his back to help him through his coughing fit.

*Asshole.*
He glared at the older sibling as if he wanted to strangle him, but the threatening attempt was somehow dulled by the tomato shade of his face.

Itachi openly smiled. Naruto realized that the provocation managed to relax his stance again.

“I have to say that the Jumala were heavily conflicted, even in the light of your very surprising gesture and your keen's offer of surrender.”

Naruto's breath hitched and his body went rigid, the temperature in the room apparently dropping.

Itachi tilted his head, watching the Captain’s reaction carefully. Understanding the importance of the news he was bringing, he quickly resumed the discourse.

“The Invaders, as you call them, are reasonable creatures. In the end, they deliberated in favor of peace. They are willing to discuss the conditions of your surrender personally.”

Naruto couldn't believe it. His whole face lightened up, heart skipping a beat.

They made it.

_The badass half-alien brother of his hybrid lover just saved their ass._

As he was about to voice his endless gratefulness and his happiness about the life-changing result the Uchiha was able to attain for mankind – and maybe also stand up and hug the man, since it suddenly seemed proper – when Itachi's raised palm stopped him abruptly.

“The arrangement comes with some mandatory conditions, though.” the older sibling explained, any trace of a smile disappeared from his features.

“You have to turn in both your political leader and his adviser in the next twenty-four hours, for them to be judged and punished under the Hyvä Koodi.”

Naruto's mouth hung open.

Twenty-four hours?

It was...how could they arrange a global revolution within twenty-four fucking hours?

Itachi's serious expression made it clear that this one was their last opportunity to open up a dialogue with the enemy and that this conditions were the best he was able to bribe in their favor.

The Captain wet his lips, trying to loosen the knot that tightened around his throat.

_It was difficult, but they could do this. He wouldn't screw it up._

He nodded in Itachi's direction, letting the man know he understood all the implications loud and clear. Even if the situation was still desperate, he was beyond grateful for the chance the man had given them.

Itachi curtly returned the gesture.

“I will wait for you in the entry hall, as soon as you make up your mind.”

He turned to leave, stopping merely a few steps into the corridor.

“Ah, by the way,” he tilted his face, searching for his brother's gaze above his shoulder.
“Soulmates is the correct word.”

Sasuke frowned slightly, discretely peering at Naruto's expression only to find him equally baffled.

He returned his attention to his brother, who was wearing that particular custom smile that he reserved for him.

Itachi shrugged, patiently helping their minds around the concept he was trying to convey.

“That's how you'd be called in the Common Language” he explained, his smile opening into a knowing smirk.

Naruto only blinked, blue eyes trailed on the retreating form of the older sibling, still not catching on the context.

Sasuke squealed in his arms though, hiding his reddened cheeks in the crook of Naruto's neck.

The Captain supposed the message was something hanging between the brothers, but he couldn't help being astonished as he realized that Uchiha's embarrassment was triggered by feelings and not by public groping.

_Bah._

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm in time and I am super happy about it! Plus, I am bringing smut! *hides in a corner*
Now: the scene in this chapter practically wrote itself, even if I feel like I could have made it more refined if I stopped someplace to actually think about it. In any case, I will trust your opinion better than mine on this!

What I really want to talk about is my man Itachi! Even writing in an alternative-universe I am trying to keep as much as I can of the characters' canon portrayal. Itachi was one hell of a badass in canon-Naruto and he wanted desperately to bring peace to the ninja world (even if he took some bad decisions on the process). So here I am, deliberately making Itachi side with mankind despite the bad things that had been done to him because in his mind every outcome is still better than war. I love him, so please forgive me.

As for Sasuke, now you know a bit more about Uchiha's ability...and also about the relationship between Itachi and Sasuke. Hope everything sounded in character enough.

**ADDICTIONAL (PERSONAL) NOTES**: life’s been a bitch. I am pulling shifts of only-god-knows how many hours and my mother got chickenpox. I am behind with the draft of the next chapter and a little scared, but I will stay strong.

Thanks for all your support, it means a lot for this old grandma! (Omg the story has more than 100 comments, I am crying).
Countdown (part one)

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Itachi offered to speak in mankind's favor at the Alien Council, actually gaining a second chance for humanity. Naruto and Sasuke had finally some time alone to re-learn each other, at least until Itachi barged in with the ultimatum conditions.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is kindly beta'd by sasu--hime.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the man of honor that he was, Itachi was waiting for the Captain in the main hall, shadows dancing on his pale face in the orange hues of the torches.

Naruto had been quick in making himself proper, not wanting to waste precious time. His thick golden hair was still sticking out in weird directions, but he was appropriately dressed and looked overall authoritative as he quietly came down the monumental stairs.

Itachi’s expression was unreadable, his coal eyes zeroed on the blond man.

On his part, the Captain was hiding well how much the intensity of the dark gaze actually intimidated him.

Approaching the hybrid who currently was mankind’s brand new messiah, Naruto subtly looked around the huge room, seeking eventual traces of the presence of other Uchiha. As imposing as they were, the men seemed particularly gifted in going unnoticed, blending into shadows; Naruto didn’t really like the idea of Shisui jumping out of nowhere, scaring the shit out of him the crucial moment he was supposed to look trustworthy.

When their eyes finally met again, a corner of Itachi’s lips was tilted upward in a sympathetic smirk, the intelligent man looking as if he could easily read through Naruto’s somber mask despite the man’s best efforts.

“It can be arranged.” the Captain stated, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Itachi didn’t as much as flinch and Naruto cleared his throat.

“Twenty-four hours is a strict amount of time, but naturally my keen do accept the given conditions.”

Itachi’s lashes lowered, the doll-like thickness of them creating spidery shadows above his cheekbones. He tilted his chin up, his pale face the only part of his body clearly visible in the dim
“Good,” he spoke in the end, the velvety nature of his voice somehow soothing the Captain’s nerves.

“How did you convince my brother to wait in bed?”

Naruto almost choked on his own spit, taken aback from the misplaced question. Itachi’s face was still inflexible, the man’s overall demeanor looking dead serious and intrigued.

The Captain blinked a couple of times, disoriented by the abrupt change of topic and blatant invasion of his privacy, searching for clues about his interlocutor’s real intentions.

Given that Itachi’s gaze didn’t waver, Naruto could only presume that the hybrid sincerely wanted an answer to the question.

The Captain fidgeted anxiously on his feet, clearly uneasy, a dust of pink tinging the tip of his ears. In spite of his easygoing and loud personality, he was generally a really reserved person that didn’t like to brag about his sexual or sentimental life.

“I told him that I was going to come back to him soon.” he muttered in any case, compliant, refusing to break the eye contact.

Something akin to surprise flickered in Itachi’s eyes, but only for a second. His small smile stretched imperceptibly into a small grin.

“Wise,” he praised, voice flat.

Naruto was still blinking in stupor.

“How do you plan to proceed, then?”

_Uchiha were freakishly weird_, but the resuming of the main topic of discussion came as a relief to the Captain.

Forcing his brain into full gear, Naruto licked his lips in concentration.

“I need a means to contact my base.”

The time was short and running. Every minute was critical for mankind and at least they deserved to know the rules of the game.

Itachi nodded tersely, his attentive black eyes finally shifting.

“This way.” he instructed.

Naruto followed silently.

Turned out that the ancient-looking building was provided with technology of sorts.

Naruto had no idea how the weird computer sitting in the dusty library could work, given the fact that it was unlikely electricity reached the place, let alone internet or phone signals.
In any case, the strange machine was made up of a screen and six different keyboards and, apparently, it was connected to the global network and at least to a couple of satellites gravitating around the planet.

Naruto sat slowly in the wooden chair facing the unusual piece of technology, recognizing some familiar characters on one of the keyboards.

Itachi hadn’t spoken a single word since their bizarre exchange in the main hall, but somehow the silence felt companionable this time.

“I guess it’s better if I don’t ask what this thing is,” the Captain murmured in the man’s direction, instinctively knowing the answer to his question.

Itachi shrugged, tilting his head to the side. The light coming from the big screen in front of Naruto was cold and bluish, giving the whole room a disturbing underwater feeling.

“I don’t think this machine has a name, actually. It was put together for the only purpose of communication. Many of the pieces come from regular man-made machinery, even if I am not sure they serve the purpose they were made for. Others I don’t recognize and never asked.”

Naruto turned his attention back to the screen, the familiar small icon for the internet connection blinking back at him.

He sighed, trying to suppress his curiosity and the swarm of questions he would have liked to ask – how’s this thing powered? What are those unknown symbols on the other keyboards, how does the machine connect and to what exactly? Those would have to wait.

“Okay. I think I can make it work.” he wasn’t actually sure about that, given the fact that he had never seen anything remotely similar in his life. He didn’t have much of an alternative, though, so it was better staying positive about it.

Itachi’s hand landed delicately on his shoulder.

“I leave you at this, then. I will find you again as soon as you and your generals reach an agreement.”

The Captain tilted his head, looking up at the somber expression on Itachi’s features.

“How will you...” he halted himself mid-inquiry, eyes wide. He realized it was a stupid question to ask now that he knew Itachi could sense him. He swallowed, his face coloring slightly in embarrassment for his naivety.

“Alright.” he answered instead, his face shifting back to the screen.

Itachi’s hold on his shoulder tightened briefly.

“Also, please consider that your life is at stake.” was there a preoccupied inflection in the man’s voice?

The muscles of Naruto’s back tensed, but he didn’t turn to look at his improbable companion.

_Why was Itachi telling him this right now?_

“You are currently under custody of the Jumala Army, acting as a guarantor of your keen’s good faith. If something goes wrong or you fail to organize this exchange, you’ll be the first one to be
A cold shiver ran through Naruto’s body at the word ‘dispatched’, the fine hair of his arms standing at attention. It wasn’t like he hadn’t figured this out on his own, but hearing the grim truth aloud somehow made the implications more pending. His life was at stake, together with mankind’s whole existence. It wasn’t the first time, but it could very well be the last.

The Captain could still perceive Itachi’s burning eyes on him.

“I trust you with this, Captain.”

Naruto took a deep, ragged breath, then nodded slowly.

Time to play around was over.

“Thanks.” he mumbled.

He had the subtle, unexpected impression that Itachi didn’t want him dead either, and it served him to strengthen his resolve.

The warmness on his shoulder retreated silently and so did the man who was giving mankind a possibility to redeem themselves.

Naruto laid his forearms on the table, embracing the first two keyboards. He tried to concentrate, cold sweat glistening his forehead despite the chilly temperature.

This wasn’t going to be easy.

He hadn’t brought a radio with him, as was custom for classified missions far away from the base. The signal would never have reached there. The only instrument he had with him was his digital-clock that provided satellite signal and GPS position.

The Union Elite Forces had a secret, private network for communication. It was supported by regular internet connection and was partly linked to the world wide web, but altogether it stood on its own, protected by high security measures.

Eventually, it was possible for some trusted members of the UEF to access the global web from inside the network, but it was practically impossible for an outsider to reach inside, unless they were provided with the key.

Naruto gnawed at his lips.

The key was a string of code impossible to recreate; it contained the IP address of a registered UEF member, the software code, the command to create an opening, a personal password and a secret control-password that changed every three minutes and was generated by the main server.

Naruto’s stomach clenched.

Fuck it.

Shikamaru had taught him something about programming, in the lazy afternoons Naruto had lounged in his friend’s room seeking for company, but re-programming a top-secret key sounded way out of his league.

He could always try sending a regular message to the UEF’s general email inbox, a public web-space that was still in place to allow general inquiries from civilians, but there was no way to know
how long it will take for the message to be noticed and possibly receive an answer. Probably months.

Naruto didn’t have all that time.

Nervous, he drummed his fingers on the rough surface of the wooden desk, collecting some dust on the sweaty pads.

The room smelled like mold and paper and age. The shelves surrounding the Captain and isolating the library from outside noise were filled to the brim with books and papers, probably holding an impressive amount of knowledge.

Shikamaru.

The idea of him cut through the suffocating anxiety building in his stomach.

Shikamaru was a highly trusted member of the UEF and given his role as the Chief of Intelligence Ops he was allowed outside the base’s private network for investigation purposes.

Naruto remembered vaguely that the man had a fake public account on the global network, which he used to collect information coming from the general public all around the world.

The Captain blinked rapidly, trying to recall the fake identity Shikamaru had set up most recently.

Asuma.

He had used his mentor’s first name.

Sato Asuma. A generic enough name not to draw unwanted attention.

Naruto scratched the bridge of his nose and set himself to work. He looked with suspicion at the foreign-looking keyboards, not finding any trace of a pad, a mouse or a tracker.

How in hell was he supposed to select options and start the weird-machine up?

Furrowing his brow, Naruto glared at the internet icon on the screen, as if the poor thing was responsible for his current predicament.

The browser window opened up on his own after two or three seconds of silent glowering, and Naruto almost jumped off his chair, startled to death.

Instinctively, he looked around the blue-lit room, in a gesture instilled by years of training. None was there to be held responsible of the mysterious machine sudden awakening and Naruto cautiously returned his attention to the screen.

Okay. It was creepy as hell but whatever.

Using the characters for the Latin alphabet on the keyboard, he slowly typed in Shikamaru’s fake name.

The enter key to start web-search was nowhere to be seen, therefore Naruto merely glared at the search button on the screen the same way he had at the internet icon previously.

The research loaded automatically and the fake profile showed up in the civilian data archive.

Once again, The Captain focused on the result, opening up the profile on the screen.
He figured the strange computer was equipped with some eye tracking device or fucking something; he didn’t have time to dwell on how it worked, but he was surely relieved that it did.

The profile page currently loaded was certainly Shikamaru’s, as the caption ‘I love deers’ filling the bio-window confirmed. Honestly, it made Naruto chuckle a little.

The ID photo wasn’t obviously one of his friend, but overall there was no mistaking Shikamaru’s handiwork.

Naruto smiled slightly, a sparkle of hope flaring in his heart.

The civilian profile for surfing the net was a lot less guarded than the UEF’s private network.

Naruto could crack that.

Staring at the screen, he opened a new window in the browser, typing in the name of an illegal program that allowed to see the programming codes behind websites. It was civil-made and worked only on most basic pages, but it was going to be more than enough in this case.

He downloaded the file of the program without encountering problems, then run it on the surprisingly fast alien computer.

Selecting Shikamaru’s fake profile, he demanded access. The background program for strings showed the required password to log in and complete the code, which was perfectly fine since luckily Naruto remembered Shika’s IP address.

Naruto rewrote the string of the web page, adding in the IP and the password in the proper places, reloading the search to find himself inside Shikamaru’s account.

Fuck yeah!

Selecting the bio section of the profile he deleted what was written inside, and instead typed in ‘The Deer is an asshole and he should definitely call me.’

He hoped his friend’s supersonic brain will get the hint soon enough; Shikamaru had the freedom to use his secured government account to web-call himself on his fake profile and since Naruto had cracked his way in, he would intercept the call.

To be honest, the process wasn’t very safe, since their conversation could be easily tracked by anyone with basic hacking skills, but at this point who cared. Naruto was desperate enough to give it a try.

Roughly three minutes after he changed the bio description, Asuma Sato received an incoming call by an unknown user.

Naruto accepted the communication and his screen was suddenly filled with the perplexed face of Shikamaru, looking tensely at his own PC and appearing preoccupied and slightly confused.

A huge grin stretched on Naruto’s lips at the sight of his dear friend, his heart increasing his tempo and slamming against his ribs. Shikamaru looked weary and tired, but fuck, his amazing brain was saving Naruto’s ass right about now, and the Captain was grateful beyond words.

He searched above the screen of the alien-machine on his desk and found a small camera perched on the top. Tapping on the device, he turned it on.
There was no need to tell him that Shikamaru was now able to see him because the man practically bounced in his chair, his eyes as wide as saucers from surprise.

“Naruto?… Naruto!”

His friend’s voice was rough and sounded slightly metallic, but Naruto thought he’d never been happier to hear it.

He smiled tiredly, raising one hand to make the peace sign.

Shikamaru leaned closer to his own PC, almost as if he didn’t believe his own eyes and wanted to double-check looking closely.

“Naruto, holy fuck man, you are alive!”

The Chief’s enthusiastic tone earned him a low chuckle from Naruto’s part.

“Sorry for cracking into your profile, babe. I needed to get in contact with you and didn’t know what else to do.”

“Fuck no, man! You can fucking crack my Goddamn account anytime!”

Now, Shikamaru wasn’t generally one for swearing. In this case, though, he just seemed unable to contain his joy at seeing his friend miraculously still alive, and not even missing a limb. It wasn’t that the UEF didn’t have faith in Naruto or in his impressive abilities as a commander, but nobody who knew about the Captain's suicide plan had really believed he was going to succeed and come back unscathed, this time.

Naruto’s smile grew in intensity, relief washing through his body like warm water.

Shikamaru was fretting.

“Sorry sorry, I know I shouldn’t do this but I am taking a screenshot of your ass-face and sending it to Tsunade. She’s been a wreck of nerves since the moment you left the base this morning and I might be mistaken, but I believe she’s also been drinking more than usual.”

Naruto’s eyes softened, showing his affection for the woman who raised him almost as a mother.

“Yeah, tell everybody that I’m fine.” he breathed out, finally realizing the risks he had taken and the worry he must have triggered into his loved ones.

The Chief was tinkering with his own keyboard, likely spreading the news of Naruto’s extraordinary survival.

Naruto trailed his fingers through his messy mop of hair, knowing perfectly well they had no time to lose.

“I am bringing news, Shika, and I desperately need your help.”

Shikamaru’s fingers halted on the keyboard, his eyes immediately darting upward to find Naruto’s. A quick glimpse of the tensed expression gracing the Captain’s features was enough for Shikamaru to understand the seriousness of the situation.

They were men of action, grown up together in the army; Shikamaru was painfully familiar with Naruto’s the-odds-are-against-us face.
“Spill the beans,” the Chief encouraged, straightening his back. His mind was ready and focused on the Captain, but no bad news could abate his good mood now that he was sure his friend was alive and well.

Naruto gripped the edge of the ruined table he was sitting at, wetting his lips.

“Currently, the situation is tense. The Invaders clearly don’t trust us and I can’t deny the negotiation was extremely difficult and painful.” his voice was steady, matter of factually.

“I wouldn’t have managed to open up a dialogue if it wasn’t for Sasuke and his brother.”

Shikamaru’s eyebrows arched up at the information, faint astonishment showing on his face.

“Are they there with you?” he politely inquired, receiving a nod in confirmation.

“All the Uchiha are here, living together with the Aliens. There are five of them, exactly like Orochimaru said.”

Shikamaru rested one elbow before his keyboard, cradling his face in the hand. He whistled softly.

“At least the bastard didn’t lie for once,” he acknowledged, gesturing for Naruto to resume his discourse.

“As I was saying, Uchiha live here and they seem to be… close with the Aliens, somehow. I have many hypothesis on why it was easy for them to bond, but I believe this is not the place. The point is, thanks to Sasuke’s brother the Aliens are giving us a chance.”

The Chief’s eyes widened, lips parting.

His mind seemed in the process of working up something to say, but Naruto cut him short.

“They are giving us this last occasion, Shika, and there won’t be another. They conceded us twenty-four hours to handle over both Danzo and Sarutobi, since they want to try them for betrayal according to their laws.”

The Captain watched Shikamaru’s hopeful face crumble, his half smile down-turning into a grimace.

There was a small pause in which the two men simply stared at each other grimly.

“Is this essential condition to speak about peace?” The Chief asked, even if he was already sure of the answer.

Naruto exhaled, then nodded.

“It’s our last chance.”

Shikamaru stroked his face, looking tense.

“Fuck.” he muttered, his jaw tensing. “It’s basically a military coup.”

Naruto didn’t say anything about that. He wasn’t stupid and he was perfectly aware of their delicate political situation, therefore he had came to the same conclusion already.

“I am not gonna lie Shika. I kinda have the sensation that instant death would be the better
outcome our leaders could get out of this shit.”

Shikamaru shrugged tersely.

“Guessed as much.” he breathed, scraping the keyboard nervously with a fingernail. “There’s no way they’ll willingly turn in though, not even Old Man Sarutobi.”

Naruto scratched his neck in a mirroring nervous gesture.

“We gotta do this.” he only confirmed, purposely avoiding to state the entailments out loud.

For a short while, Shikamaru seemed lost in his thoughts.

“Well, let me handle this, at least.” he demanded in the end, voice low.

“I honestly cannot imagine an easy way for this to happen and it’s gonna be a bloody mess, but one’s gotta do what they gotta do.”

Naruto chewed the inner side of his cheek, perfectly aware.

“Turning in our leaders will prove our best intentions to fix the past mistakes, at the same time distancing ourselves from their decisions. If we play it wisely, the Invaders would hear us out and we could manage to finally end the war.”

Shikamaru shrugged lazily.

“Gotta play this very wisely, like a chess game.”

A grin appeared on Naruto’s face. If there was someone very wise and irritatingly good at chess, that was Shikamaru. He trusted his friend completely in handling the delicate situation.

“In that regard, I suggest to turn in also Orochimaru.” the Captain wholeheartedly suggested. “Two of the Uchiha are already on our side, but the other three are either conflicted or against us. We know perfectly what Orochimaru did to them, and I think that handing them their prosecutor could play in our favor. Given the close relationship they seem to have with the Invaders, Uchiha’s opinion could make the difference in later decisions.”

Shikamaru’s grin mirrored the one on his friend’s face. Sometimes he completely forgot that there were very obvious reasons if Naruto was considered the best Captain the union ever had.

“I think it’s an excellent idea, and probably the easiest part of the plan.”

Nara briefly massaged his temples, then leaned back in his chair.

“Okay, I guess the moment to drag shit in the open has finally come.” he made it sound as if it was a walk in the park.

“Just pay attention to those Akatsuki scumbags. Danzo is likely to use them as his personal guards.”

The Chief snorted.

“Which is what they patently are. Scumbags, I mean, not guards.”

Naruto choked on a laugh.
“When do the twenty four hours start, in any case?”

The way Naruto was gnawing at his thumb wasn’t a good sign at all.

“Ugh. Actually I believe they are twenty-three already...” the blond muttered sheepishly, careful in avoiding eye contact with the Chief.

He heard Shikamaru uttering a slew of curses.

“Fine, asshole. I’ll work something out. Now lemme go and work my magic.”

Making a dramatic gesture with his hands, Nara shooed Naruto away from the screen.

“I’ll call you back in six hours sharp. I will have secured the connection before then and the plan will be moving.”

Naruto nodded, not making any movement to interrupt the communication. Shikamaru lowered his head, apparently writing something on a notebook near his back.

“Hey Naruto,” he called the Captain's name, raising his eyes for a second to look at his friend. There was relief, affection and determination in the hazel orbs.

“It's so good to see ya, man.”

Naruto smiled shyly, grateful for Shikamaru's affection, glad to be alive and feeling incredibly lucky despite everything.

“See you, crazy asshole.”

Shikamaru waved, a wicked smile playing on his lips, then disconnected the call.

The captain stared at the blackened screen for a full minute, breathing deeply and trying to relax his contracted shoulders.

He didn’t ask about eventual progress in the investigation on Hinata’s death.

Sasuke extended his arms from his colorful nest, like a child who wanted to be picked up. Naruto couldn’t stop a small smile from curling his lips at the sight, and abandoned his privileged observation point against the threshold, walking into the room and squatting down beside his lover.

The boy didn’t waste time in reaching up and tying his arms behind the Captain’s neck, his soft lips pressing delicately against the right side of the man’s jaw.

Naruto sighed in contentment, embracing Sasuke’s upper back with a strong arm and threading his fingers through silky black locks.

They stayed like that for a while, relishing in each other’s presence and in the calming warmth spreading from the contact between their bodies, until Sasuke backed away a little, tugging at the Captain’s uniform and silently inviting the man to lie in bed by his side.

Naruto knelt and laid down, his arms subconsciously searching for Sasuke’s lithe form and dragging the boy closer. They looked at each other in silence, eyes in eyes, quiet breaths fanning faces only inches apart.
Sasuke’s eyes truly were gorgeous, dark gray with purple traces, framed by thick, long and curved lashes.

Naruto reached out, his hand looking enormous and rough near Sasuke’s doll-like visage, and gently he shifted some rebellious inky locks from the pale forehead.

The boy in his arms was looking at him reverently as if he was some kind of indigenous god to worship. His sparkling eyes were windows on his brilliant mind.

“You’re nervous.” it wasn’t a question.

Sasuke’s velvety voice interrupted the silent moment of contemplation. And obviously, his words were perfectly on point.

Naruto sighed, caught red-handed and not knowing what to answer in his own defense.

Of course he was troubled; in something less than a week his whole life had practically turned upside down.

He’d lost his family and his friends, the Kyuubi. He was promoted from a squad commander to a lone soldier. Alien beasts that he had never seen or heard about before had started (or re-started?) attacking mankind. He had discovered his government’s dirty involvement into the war. He had fallen in love with a stunning alien-human hybrid. And now he was risking his own life to try and save humanity from extinction after a ruthless ultimatum.

He cleared his throat, not knowing how to put his emotions into words easy for Sasuke to understand. He licked his lips, simply looking the boy in his beautiful eyes with a pitiful, lost expression.

Sasuke probably didn’t need any words anyway, since one of his elegant hands cupped Naruto’s face, stroking a cheek soothingly, his anthracite gaze softening.

“Tell me something nice,” Naruto mumbled, his voice rough.

He needed a distraction from all the tension weighing on his shoulders, at least up to the moment Shikamaru came back with a proper plan and they could set things in motion.

Sasuke’s perfectly shaped lips curved into a small smile, his fingers sliding up Naruto’s face, caressing his nose.

“You eyes are bluer than the sky.”

Naruto blinked appalled, Sasuke’s soft voice still caressing his eardrums. He tilted his head slightly, trying to read something beside pure adoration in Sasuke’s look and failing.

“Ugh. They are normal blue, I guess?” he sheepishly waved aside the comment, his cheeks heating up as he started feeling self conscious under his lover’s gaze.

The boy denied slowly with his head.

“I have never seen anything this shade of blue, ever.”

The Captain smiled a bit, enthralled by his lover’s innocence.

“I probably should take you to the sea, then.” he declared, playfully pressing a thumb on the tip of Sasuke’s pretty nose.
The boy’s dark eyes grew even bigger.

“Yes please?” he half moaned half begged, clearly boosted at the idea. “I’ve only read about it in books!” he was practically making doe eyes, as if Naruto actually needed some convincing.

He looked adorable. How in hell could the Captain say no to that simple request?

“Fine, fine,” he chuckled, easily caving in. “It’s decided. When everything is over, I promise I will take you to see the ocean.”

Sasuke was purring, eyes half mast in satisfaction like a sleepy cat.

“Then I will know if there’s something else as fascinating as your eyes in this freakish world.” he muttered under his breath, barely loud enough for the Captain to hear it.

Naruto’s face turned deep red in the blink of an eye at the praise. He wasn’t used to receiving compliments, especially not appreciations about his physical aspects, and obviously not from someone as beautiful as Sasuke.

“Ugh, okay...” he trailed off, for the first time breaking eye contact to hide how flustered he actually felt.

“You’re the one with spellbound eyes anyway,” he commented, caressing the skin above Sasuke’s hip.

“Mr. Sharingan.” he teased.

The boy snorted, moving in Naruto’s arms to entangle their lower limbs in a comfortable position.

“They are not so special. I mean….they were given to me only because they can… do things.”

Naruto lifted himself on an elbow, cradling his jaw in his wide palm and looking at the boy spread by his side.

“You said they can record things so that you won’t forget them,” he recalled, a wave of hotness washing through his body at the memory of Sasuke whispering into his mouth that he taped their sex.

“What else can they do?”

Honest to god, the Captain was genuinely curious. It seemed like the eyes were a big source of power for the alien-human hybrids and he had no idea how exactly they were related to their abilities.

Sasuke sighed and took a deep breath, his face calm. He closed his eyes for a couple of seconds and then opened them to display blood-red irises. The commas surrounding the pupils spun quietly as he focused his gaze on the Captain.

“Orochimaru classified this eye-form as a third level Sharingan. To simplify things so that it’s easier to understand, let’s say it gives the owner enhanced vision, photographic memory and the ability to shape small amounts of energy.”

Naruto’s mouth was hanging open into an embarrassing o-shape, surprised both by Sasuke’s apparent willingness to open up with him and the boy’s impressive powers. He blinked stupidly, forcing his jaw closed. He remembered the sort of sword of electricity that Sasuke had used against the Alien Creatures back at the headquarters, the one who easily penetrated the beasts tough skin.
“So you can mold energy… into physical forms?”

Sasuke tilted his head, apparently thinking about the question.

“I am not sure I understand what you mean,” he mumbled in the end, lifting up his left hand, palm turned upward.

The Captain heard a sharp buzz and then, like magic, a sparkle of blue-light looking like electricity appeared in the boy’s palm.

“Whoa!”

Sasuke grinned smugly, apparently amused by his partner’s noisy enthusiasm.

“That’s electricity that I put together concentrating my inner energy,” he shortly explained, the sparkles in his hand growing brighter. “You know, energy cannot be created nor destroyed, but only transformed. It is also possible to create mass from energy or vice versa, theoretically speaking, but it’s something that I am not able to achieve. I can slightly modify the basic energy of existing things, though, changing some of their physical properties.”

Naruto’s eyes were sparkling in wonderment. Being raised in the military, he had never been one believing in the existence of superheros, but with Sasuke in his arms he realized his view was quickly changing.

“That’s how you increased the viscosity of your saliva!” the thought slipped out the Captain’s mouth before he had time to register it, and the blond was left flaming in embarrassment for his inappropriate loudmouth, images of Sasuke’s sultry expression while he sucked him off clouding his rational thought.

The boy only smiled mischievously, tilting his chin up to steal a quick kiss.

He settled down comfortably on the mat again and closed his eyes, the twinkling on his palm ceasing abruptly.

When he lifted his lids a few seconds later, Naruto watched in fascination as red, gleaming flowers bloomed in the darkness of the boy’s irises.

“This is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.” it was a sincere statement, and it slipped without permission from Naruto’s mouth.

Sasuke’s cheeks colored faintly at the comment, but he didn’t shy away or broke his concentration.

“This is the Mangekyo Sharingan and the abilities of this one are slightly subjective.” the boy’s voice was low and lulling.

Naruto nodded, completely enraptured by the explanation.

“We all use it to shape bigger amounts of energy…you know, energy that we have to absorb from outside sources. The Mangekyo also allows us to interfere with other creatures energy.”

Naruto’s smile fell, his breath abruptly catching into his lungs. He leaned down to look closely in Sasuke’s hypnotizing eyes.

“Meaning that you can mess with other creatures train of thoughts?”
He was taking the liberty to use Shikamaru’s own words.

Sasuke blinked, the flower of the Mangekyo Sharingan staring back at the Captain in all its deadly glory.

“Not all creatures have thoughts,” the boy observed brilliantly before shrugging his shoulders. “But yeah, we can embed in the brain something like...fake impressions, forcing other creatures in doing things they normally wouldn’t have. It really depends on basic frequencies and the strength of their defenses though.”

The Captain fell silent, his expression tight and grim.

His mind had suddenly provided him with an image of Sasuke’s Mangekyo Sharingan, that night Naruto had found him half naked sitting on the windowsill, the night that they made love for the first time.

_The night in which Hinata died._

He gulped, unknowingly distancing himself from his lover’s inviting body.

“Naruto?” Sasuke had obviously noticed the sharp change in the Captain’s demeanor, because his voice sounded insecure and preoccupied.

Naruto lifted his unfocused eyes back to the boy’s face and found worried dark-gray orbs trying to decipher his expression.

_Hinata would never have killed herself, she wasn’t that kind of woman._

Gaara’s controlled voice echoed into the Captain’s brain.

Naruto licked his lips, fingers reaching down to stroke Sasuke’s alarmed face.

Gaara had been so sure that Sasuke was responsible for the horrific and inexplicable death of their mutual friend that Naruto had stubbornly refused to listen about his suspicions.

_Naruto trusted Sasuke._

He didn’t know the precise reason why he did or if his trust actually had some rational basis at all, but Naruto was sure that Sasuke meant well and that he didn’t want to harm him. It was a certainty that had come to him together with the warmness in his chest and all those feelings of belonging that linked him and Sasuke together.

The Mangekyo Sharingan however, had terrifying abilities that seemed to confirm both Gaara and Shikamaru’s suspicions.

“Sasuke, I have to ask you a question.”

The query was out of his lips the moment a sliver of doubt attempted to nest into his heart. He didn’t want secrets between himself and his most important person.

He was pretty sure that Gaara’s suspicions were stupid – the guy was a fatalist and it was well known - and caution was the only reason Shikamaru had warned him against the boy.

_But._

But the investigations on Hinata’s death seemed stuck at a dead end and despite the many
evidences collected nobody really believed in the hypothesis of the girl’s sudden suicide.

Naruto gulped with some difficulties, remembering Hinata’s pale eyes focused on the ceiling of her room, lifeless. He exhaled crisply from his nose, pressing his eyes closed for a minute.

*He had to ask it*. It was only to totally banish any suspicion that Gaara and Shikamaru had put into his head. Only for that reason.

*He didn’t doubt his lover. He knew he would have never used the Sharingan on him.*

When he opened his eyes, Sasuke was sitting in his nest of colorful fabrics and looking at him with evident concern.

“Did you use the Mangekyo Sharingan on Hinata?”

The question came out of the blue and was more blunt than he intended, but it was the best he could muster while trying to hide the slight tremor in his voice.

Immediately, Sasuke’s shoulders stiffened and his posture became defensive. His eyes were on Naruto, his lips parted as if he intended to say something, but nothing came out.

Confusion hit the Captain like an aggressive slap, and it took him a minute to realize that it wasn’t an emotion of his own but it belonged to his companion.

Hoping for a possible misunderstanding between them and still trusting the boy, he provided a bit more detail.

“I am talking about the woman who was responsible for the Security Branch, Sasuke. The one you met at Orochimaru’s questioning, the one who died mysteriously.”

Sasuke blinked then shifted his gaze to the floor, avoiding eye contact.

Naruto’s breath hitched, because in that moment he knew in his belly the answer that was coming.

“Yes.” Sasuke’s voice admitted, quietly.

All the muscles in Naruto’s back tensed, his fist clenching by his sides.

He didn’t know what to say.

He felt like a ton of bricks had just fallen upon him, crushing him to pieces.

Why had Sasuke – *his Sasuke* – done something like that? To a vulnerable person like Hinata, nonetheless?

“Are you the one responsible of what she did?” forcing the words out his constricted throat hurt like he was heaving, but the Captain needed to ask. He needed to be sure about what actually happened and to know the truth. He was fed up of lies – his whole life seemingly built upon them.

The confusion in Sasuke’s eyes increased and he protectively brought up his knees to shield his body, but Naruto wasn’t focused enough to spot the changing in his demeanor.

“Answer me, Sasuke. Did you kill her?”

The boy bit his lips nervously, his gaze darting from the floor to Naruto’s disbelieving and angry face for a brief moment.
He nodded.

The captain choked down the desperate sob that fought to come out of his lungs.

*So Gaara had been right in the end.*

He grimaced, unaware of the hurt and betrayed expression clear as day on his face.

Moving his suddenly exhausted limbs slowly, he stood up from Sasuke’s bed, his eyes empty and unfocused.

An alarmed and frightened sound, almost reminding him of a wounded animal, ripped from Sasuke’s throat.

He could feel through the bond that linked him to *his love, his life partner, his everything*, that Naruto was closing him off.

“No!” he murmured, crawling toward the Captain’s standing form. “No, please no!” he begged.

Naruto wasn’t listening to him, the image of Hinata’s dead body burned permanently into his retina.

*Sasuke murdered her.*

The Captain’s heart clenched painfully and a lone silent tear slid down his face.

Ignoring the boy trying to hug his calves and the waves of pure panic and disarray coming from him, he turned and calmly walked towards the door.

“No!” Sasuke’s voice was desperate and weak, but the Captain didn’t turn to look at him, even though the other was crying.

Naruto was abandoning him, he was blocking the flow of emotions between them, fighting their bond. He didn’t want to be with Sasuke anymore.

“Naruto, please...Shikamaru said she wasn’t your friend!” his voice was broken and trembling, high pitched and scared.

The Captain blinked at the additional information, not knowing what to make out of it. His right hand reached for the knob and turned it.

He exited the room silently at the echo of Sasuke’s broken sobs.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Guys, I have to be honest here: this chapter was hard. It was kinda complicated to write because it's an incredible turning point and it also contains so many different emotions - it seems like a rollercoaster, really - that it really drained me.

I prefer letting you do the talking, anyway so... yeah. Please leave your opinion in the
comment box down below if you have 2 minutes of spare time!

As usual, thank you for your loving support; it is really important and pushes me in writing even during hectic periods like the last two weeks. The story is now in its last few chapters and a lot of action is still gonna happen!

Stay tuned! xxx
Countdown (part two)

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Naruto accepted the Ultimatum conditions and reached out to Shikamaru for a plan. While chatting with Sasuke about the Sharingan powers the Captain found out that Sasuke's responsible for Hinata's death, causing a fallout between them.

Chapter Notes

Sasu--hime made this thing readable, which I am beyond thankful for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto had been sitting in the dusty library alone for a long time when Asuma Sato received an incoming call.

Turning on the small webcam perched on top of the screen, he promptly accepted the video-chat request, Shikamaru’s half bust immediately invading his field of vision.

“Here we are,” Shikamaru murmured, his eyes focused on another monitor placed to his right on the desk. “I am bringing some good news, bro.”

Only after he finished typing on the other keyboard did the Chief turn to face the camera. He wasn’t able to hide mild surprise and preoccupation at what he saw, eyebrows lifting up, forehead wrinkling and spine straightening.

Naruto’s face was gloomy, his overall appearance dulled and completely in contrast with his normal self; he looked exhausted, almost as if he hadn’t slept decently for many nights in a row, and his normally very lively blue eyes were foggy and unfocused. He was slouching in the uncomfortable ancient chair facing the screen, his powerful body thrown on the thing carelessly, and he looked beaten, in pain.

Shikamaru took in all these details, his brain trying to put the clues together to understand what might have happened in such a short time that had sucked that incredible life force out from the Captain.

“You don’t look very good, man,” he observed sincerely, testing the waters. He wasn’t sure if it was his place to question Naruto about his current state of evident dejection, despite the worry chewing aggressively at his stomach.

Naruto wasn’t normally one to fall into hollowness, nor one to give up for that matter. Shikamaru had personally seen him deal with such painful and desperate situations, a permanent smile plastered on his lips nonetheless, that he was kind of scared to face whatever managed to break his friend’s unshakable positive attitude.
Naruto didn’t react to his consideration, his eyes lowered, almost shy of the camera.

“Wanna talk about it?” Shikamaru dared asking, filling the silence, trying to hide the preoccupation from his tone. He didn’t want to sound like a doting mother, even more because Naruto never had the luck to have a real one in his life, but Naruto’s lifeless appearance was honestly worrying him.

The Captain moved slightly, tilting his head to finally look into the camera.

“Later.” he only murmured, jaw tight.

Shikamaru was scared shitless by the emptiness in his friend’s gaze, but he didn’t say a word.

“Fine. Ahead with the plan, then.” the Chief conceded, deciding it was better not to pry and give Naruto his time.

“After our previous conversation, I immediately summoned an emergency meeting of the UEF Council and explained the situation at the presence of Tsunade. Nobody was exactly happy about the tight position we’ve been put in, but the general opinion on what needed to be done was pretty much cohesive, so here are the facts.” the Chief made a small pause, picking up a paper from his crowded desk.

“We decided to corner Danzo first. If we go for Sarutobi, putting him under formal arrest, Shimura would surely be alarmed, and he’d also get plenty of time to draw up a defensive plan. Therefore, immediately after the council was disbanded, Gaara and his Sand left on a secret mission to Danzo’s current location - which, surprise surprise, is not his well known estate in the city.”

The Captain arched an eyebrow at that, but he didn’t catch up on Shikamaru’s attempt of humor.

The Chief carried on.

“Gaara went practically ballistic when arguing against Danzo and insisted passionately to get the assignment of his capture. There’s no need for me to tell you that he’s a man who knows what he’s doing; in this case he seemed also particularly committed to the cause, so I am confident he will succeed.”

The small nod coming from Naruto silently acknowledged the validity of the statement. Despite the tension that had strained Naruto and Gaara’s friendship recently, the Captain would never doubt the redhead’s competence nor his loyalty.

“In the meantime, Kakashi in person is keeping an eye on Sarutobi, just to be sure that the man doesn’t harbor suspicions against us and that he doesn’t accidentally leave the town.”

Naruto tiredly caressed his face, a bit of the tension lifting while hearing Shikamaru’s assured words.

“Okay. Well done.” the praise that left the Captain’s mouth didn’t really sound as such, but at least he was finally looking at Shikamaru straight in the eyes.

“That was everything about phase one, which is going to be over in a few hours. Concerning phase two instead, I need your knowledge to define some details.”

Being called to purpose apparently helped the Captain shaking off some of his apathy. He sat up straighter, assuming his usual dignified posture, and his gaze sharpened, letting Shikamaru know that he was paying attention.
“We are going to march to the Alien Base early in the morning. The idea is to dismount the trucks five or so kilometers from the camp and reach destination by foot, both for logistic and strategical reasons. Tsunade is coming, and so is Kakashi, Genma and Asuma. And me, obviously.” Shikamaru winked flirtingly, earning a small, strained smile on Naruto’s part.

“Our ex political leaders and Orochimaru are gonna be chained and escorted. Just to be sure they would play along, ya know… better be safe than sorry.”

The Captain nodded, kneading the painful knots at the base of his neck.

“Kay, sounds good to me. I will inform the Uchiha about the program, so they’ll talk with the Alien’s committee and everyone can prepare. I know it would be too much and maybe even a bit too stupid asking you to come by unharmed but please, try at least limiting the weaponry to one item per person. Choose white weapons, if possible.”

Shikamaru nodded, swiftly noting the advise down.

“Could we have a single gun as an...incentive for the prisoners?” he demanded, trusting Naruto’s answer.

The Captain thought about it for a second.

“Yeah, that will be fine, but keep it visible. The guys here don’t really like weapons and they will instantly kill anyone who infringe the conditions. Trust me, it is not worth it.”

“.... and that’s where I needed your help.” Nara shrugged. “Not that weapons of any kind would aid us if your Uchiha friends decide to attack us, obviously.”

Naruto waved his hand in a way that implied his agreement with the statement and Shikamaru smirked.

“Which reminds me...how is Sasuke?”

The way Naruto’s whole body suddenly freeze was impossible to miss. The Captain’s fists balled in his lap, his shoulders narrowing because of the tight contraction of his pecs. The line of his jaw was sharp, teeth clenched, and the azure eyes lowered to the dusty desk.

Shikamaru fidgeted slightly in his armchair, leaning closer to the screen. Surely nothing that bad could have happened to Sasuke in the meantime, could it?

The prolonged and tensed silence was wrecking Shikamaru’s nerves, filling his mind with grim eventualities.

“Naruto,” the Chief nudged his friend, unexpected anxiety gnawing at him.

The blond tilted his face, crossing his arms against his chest in a subconscious protective gesture.

“Gaara was right,” the three words that slipped out his tight lips opened a pit in Shikamaru’s stomach and the man fought against the sensation of uneasiness that threatened to take over his body.

High-strung, he decided that the best option to approach conversation was playing dumb and let Naruto vent about whatever happened between him and the hybrid that spoiled their relationship.

“About what?”

Naruto raised his eyes, head still hanging, and Shikamaru was struck by the pain and the
“Sasuke killed Hinata.”

All the fine hair on the Chief’s body were standing at attention. Naruto’s words were cold and functional, detached, but Shikamaru knew it was an act. Together with the horror and the slight anger that came with the knowledge, Shikamaru couldn’t help but feel intense empathy and pity for his friend.

Naruto had defended Sasuke fiercely from any accusation till the very end, and sure as hell had believed in the boy’s innocence. He was in love with the bastard, Nara could tell. And now Naruto’s trust and his best intentions had been betrayed yet again and by no one other than the person who probably was most important for him.

‘I am really sorry’

“...How in hell did this happen? I thought the boy was with you that night...” he inquired instead, trying to keep the conversation rational and impersonal for his friend’s sake.

Naruto sighed. The expression on his face made it clear that he was currently hurting everywhere, and even breathing appeared painful.

“He has...those eyes,” the Captain hesitated, making a vague gesture with his right hand. “They can do things. Like you guessed he can… influence other creatures’ mind and their behavior, apparently also from the distance.”

Shikamaru gulped with difficulty, his mind trying to wrap around the concept. If what Naruto had just said was truth, then the whole military base underwent an incredible risk only by housing the supposedly harmless hybrid. Nervously, he chewed at his lips but didn’t dare ask his friend for more in-depth information.

“Why did he do it?”

Naruto massaged his wrinkled forehead, hiding his expressive eyes from view.

“Who cares. He did.” he only grumbled under his breath, his voice sounding defeated.

Shikamaru couldn’t help but turn up his nose in distaste. He himself was feeling angry, annoyed and harmed because of Sasuke, but Naruto’s reaction wasn’t alright. There must be a reason why the boy did what he did, and it surely was important. The punk had been quiet and compliant the whole time he’d been in the UEF’s custody, cooperative and even gentle at times. He protected Naruto and his friends – and Shikamaru was fucking grateful for that - and didn’t show malice towards anyone but the Hyuuga girl and well... Orochimaru. If there was one thing about him he understood, was that Sasuke only acted with a purpose.

“Naruto, honestly,” Shikamaru’s calm tone carried a friendly reproach. “I do care and you should care too, considering how important Sasuke seems to be for you.”

The Chief’s polite words apparently struck a cord inside the Captain, who finally lowered the hand hiding his face.

“He said...” he paused, trying to remember Sasuke’s exact words. “He said that you told him she wasn’t a friend.”

And like that, Shikamaru lost his natural ability to breathe.
His brain efficiently provided him with an image of a troubled Sasuke standing in a white corridor of the security branch, his expression troubled as he watched Hinata fussing over a livid Naruto. And then he’d asked him.

‘Is Mrs. Hyuga Naruto’s friend?’

He could still feel the velvet quality of the boy’s voice in his ears.

And Shikamaru had denied.

Realization dawned on him like a cold shower, unbearable guilt washing over him.

“Fuck,” he choked out, eyes wide and worried, harsh lines drawing on his face. The strangled cry managed to get the Captain’s attention.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Shikamaru had his hands clenched into his long hair, his expression horrified and disbelieving, eyes wicked.

Naruto opened his mouth to ask him what the hell he was going on because damn, obviously he was missing something, confusion for his friend’s unexpected reaction annoyingly prodding at his thoughts.

The Chief cut him short though, his voice sharp as a blade.

“What did you tell Sasuke when you introduced him to me?”

Naruto furrowed his brows, having no idea where the question was coming from, but answered nonetheless.

“That you were my friend.”

Shikamaru’s despair only seemed to increase.

A friend. Fuckfuckfuckfuck.

“Same with Gaara, right?”

Naruto was still wandering in the darkness, clueless about his friend’s frantic questioning.

“Yeah, of course.”

The Chief grimaced, his lashes moistening.

In his head, the truth shone clear as day in all his wrongness.

“Christ, I am the one who killed her!”

Naruto gripped tightly the armrest of his chair, his knuckles turning white from the strength behind the hold. He firmly believed he had never been more confused in his whole life.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he decided to question, a sliver of irritation involuntarily seeping into his tone.

Shikamaru hugged himself in a pitiful defensive gesture. 
“It’s true,” he stated calmly, sounding hollow. “He asked me about Hinata and I told him she was no friend of yours.”

“That’s alright.” Naruto felt the impending need to reassure his friend, given the apparent state of shock he was falling into. “What I don’t understand is how this has something to do with Hinata’s death.”

Shikamaru looked at him for real, his eyes pinning the Captain from the other side of the screen.

“He is not completely human, Naruto. He lived his whole life as a prisoner, honed to be the perfect killing machine. ‘Friend’ was his roundabout way to ask me for permission.”

The Chief was pale, insanely so.

The Captain wouldn’t have bet he was faring any better.

“Sasuke probably understood that you called ‘friends’ the people you cared about, the ones to protect. And Hinata was obviously a threat from his point of view, given she was clearly romantically interested into you.”

Saying that Naruto was astonished would have certainly been an understatement.

_Had Sasuke killed Hinata out of jealousy?_

Shikamaru was very obviously freaking out about how his apparently innocent answer, uttered in good faith out of politeness, had actually sealed the destiny of the unaware young woman.

However, Naruto was too submerged by his own intricate thoughts to help him out of the raising panic.

_The idea of two people in a deadly competition to get his attention was unfathomable, and jealousy surely wasn’t a sensible reason to commit murder._

“Sorry to interrupt,” Itachi’s smooth voice filled the blue-lit library, catching both Naruto and Shikamaru by surprise. “I was casually passing by and I happened to overhear your conversation.”

‘Casually my ass,’ Naruto was considerably tempted to counter, but he merely snorted to acknowledge the man’s arrival.

He turned his head slightly to see him quietly strolling by his side, his usual unreadable mask perfectly in place.

With silence stretching uncomfortably between the three of them, the Captain’s conscience abruptly reminded him about good manners, and he silently scolded himself for his chronicle lack of them.

He cleared his throat, his role as an embassy of the UEF suddenly weighing upon his shoulders, and made a clumsy gesture in the computer’s screen general direction.

“Itachi, meet my friend Shikamaru Nara, Chief of the Union’s Intelligence.”

As expected from an Uchiha, Itachi was impeccable, bowing his bust elegantly in a display of respect.

“A pleasure.”
Naruto bristled in his seat, shyly indicating the imposing man standing by his side.

“Shikamaru, this is Itachi__”

“__Sasuke’s brother and our current savior . I do remember him.” the Chief interrupted, exhibiting an impressive amount of nerves. He had this fierce image of Itachi leading the assault to their base while riding an alien beast that he couldn’t shake off his mind.

“Glad to see you again,” he murmured directly to the man.

Itachi’s lips curved slightly in a weird smile.

“I seem to understand that my brother caused troubles.”

Straight to the point and inappropriate as usual. Even if Naruto was getting used to the hybrid’s unpredictable antics he couldn't stop his body from tensing up; he could only imagine the intensity of Shikamaru’s uneasiness from the other side of the net. Distressed, he tried to work some saliva in his suddenly very dry mouth, but words weren’t coming to him.

“Yes and no, Sir. Not exactly.” Shikamaru, his irreplaceable wingman, answered for him. “Somehow I feel like I am partly responsible of your brother’s actions, but I believe it’s not my place to talk about this with you.”

The heartfelt confession managed to shake the Captain out of his reverie.

“Shika, that’s not__!”

His friend’s icy glare was enough to interrupt him.

“I think I’ll leave you two to this conversation and Naruto, for once, you’d better listen.”

The blond blinked, unsure about what was happening. In any case, he was glad of the fact that Shikamaru looked partly himself again, and perfectly in control of the situation.

“Farewell my friend, Itachi.” he bowed, mirroring the respectful gesture the hybrid had paid to him shortly before. “If everything proceeds according to plan, which I hope, I will see both of you round nine in the morning for the negotiations.”

Naruto didn’t want to be left alone with Itachi and most of all he didn't want this conversation to happen. Feeling cornered, he instinctively leaned toward the screen, hoping that Shikamaru would catch the hint and revise his idea of disconnecting.

He wasn’t ready.

“Before I forget, Naruto,” the Chief’s voice came like a life-belt thrown to a drowning man. “In regard of this matter, I won’t tell anyone. Whichever you decide is up to you entirely; I would never dare judging your relationship with Sasuke at this point.”

The Captain pressed his lips together tightly until his jaw hurt. Shikamaru nodded in his direction meaningfully, then disconnected.

He was giving him the freedom to evaluate and decide. Sadly, it was a blessing and a burden at the same time.

Resigned, Naruto turned to face Itachi, his shoulders curved under his own pain.
The pale man was wearing his custom somber expression, but his eyes were extremely lively.

He didn’t pressure the Captain into conversation nor showed signs of impatience.

Naruto brought his hands together, uneasy, tired and hurt, searching for a small distraction as he found the balls to fill Itachi in.

“Sasuke admitted doing something bad to a woman of my faction.” he started out with the facts, searching for words to do justice to the events and Hinata’s memory.

“He killed her with the Mangekyo while she was vulnerable and disarmed and he did it because he was jealous of her.”

If Itachi reacted in anyway to the statement, he didn’t show it. Keeping his eyes firmly focused on Naruto and his expression neutral, the man fished for another chair from the nearby table and sat down slowly in front of the Captain.

After a long pause that only made Naruto more nervous, the hybrid spoke.

“How do you feel about it?”

Naruto blinked, taken aback by the query.

How did he feel about it? What kind of stupid question was that!

Fed up, he opened his mouth to give that mixed-race asshole a piece of his mind, when abruptly he realized that he didn’t know how he felt about it.

Closing his mouth with a teeth clicking sound, Naruto stared into the void as his mind started working to make some sense of the confused emotions exploding in his chest.

Sure as hell he was hurt; he felt insulted and betrayed by Sasuke’s actions, especially because the boy had managed to break the trust between them. Also, he felt sick in his stomach for the inhuman treatment the boy had reserved for Hinata, and the fact that Sasuke didn’t feel any guilt for his abnormal behavior also contributed to his slight sense of nausea. On the other side, he somehow felt… flattered that Sasuke had desired to be with him so intensely to consider murder as an option. He felt like Sasuke looked out for him and always put him first among his priorities. And also, there was the fact that, despite everything, he couldn’t stop loving him.

“I am conflicted, I guess,” he answered, when finally he felt like the painful feelings suffocating him made any sense.

“What he did was ruthless and completely against my principles. He literally slaughtered a kind, disarmed woman for his personal interest, for crying out loud!”

Itachi arched one eyebrow, but didn’t say anything.

“Then again, doesn’t matter what he did, I cannot seem able to stop…” he took a deep breath, feeling stupidly flustered for what he was about to say. “…loving him. Because I still do, despite how strongly I disapprove of his actions, and it’s making me crazy!”

Both Itachi’s eyebrows where now raised, likely showing his surprise at the somber Captain’s sudden outburst. Tilting his head to the side he assumed a meditative expression, his pale hands smoothing out small creases on his loose pants.
“I don’t intend taking my brother’s defense on the matter, since he is mature enough to make his own decisions.”

Itachi’s voice was calm and assertive and Naruto fought against his need to snort disapprovingly.

*Mature...Sasuke? But he’s basically a child!* , he would have liked to scream back, but then he realized how hypocritical the thought was and a pang of guilt pierced through him.

*You didn’t have any problem claiming that child,* an evil voice in his head sing-songed, and Naruto lowered his eyes under Itachi’s inspecting gaze.

“...However, I feel like it would help if I give you some context on how we work and how we were raised, considering that you share a bond with my brother.”

Shoulders still sagged, the Captain snapped back to attention, looking at the older sibling shyly. He found only patience and understanding in Itachi’s black orbs and he was dumbfounded at how empathetic the imposing man seemed to be.

“We have not been raised according to human moral, Captain, and we have no education whatsoever on social constructs. We have been trained since a very young age to express at best our alien side and abilities, but the only knowledge of appropriate human-behavior we possess comes from the novels we were allowed to read and it’s completely theoretical.”

Naruto should have known, because everything was very perceivable given the context. He pressed his sweaty hands together, sort of ashamed that he needed to hear the obvious out loud and to be reassured like an infant.

No judgment whatsoever was coming from Itachi anyway, or so it seemed.

“Our existence up to this moment had been...” the hybrid paused for a second, chewing on his cheek as if he was searching for the proper word. “...lonely. Most of the time we were forcefully kept separated from each other and our usual relationships with the few human we were allowed to see consisted of violence and abuse.”

Suddenly, the Captain felt his stomach clench and he had to suppress the aggressive urge to vomit. Even if he wasn’t the one responsible for the Uchiha’s mistreatment, he couldn’t help but feel guilty and dirty.

Itachi looked at him as if he was uncertain, and that was the first time Naruto caught a glimpse of frailty on the man’s perfect, stoic features.

“To be fair, Captain, I don’t hold a very high opinion of your keen.” he confessed, a sad smile curving his lips.

Naruto returned the gesture, his own half smile sour and leaving a bad taste in his mouth. There was nothing he could say to make the situation better, therefore he kept quiet.

Itachi straightened in his chair, resuming his discourse.

“It was when I heard about you from Sasuke, I saw you and the way you approach my brother that I started... reconsidering my position.”

The small smile playing on Itachi’s lips actually looked sincere by then. He made a small pause, managing to look attractive even in the dim blue light of the suffocating room.
“I can grant you that whatever my brother did, he did it with his best intentions. His deepest desire is to help you, share his life with you and make you happy. Those are unavoidable consequences of your bond.” the man’s words sounded final and scientific, as if he was revealing the theory behind a mathematical theorem.

Naruto found himself enthralled, his brain trying to wrap around the idea that he and Sasuke were naturally programmed to be together.

“To paraphrase what I am trying to tell you in human terms, no one else will ever love you as deeply and unconditionally as Sasuke does, and a part of you already accepted this.”

The troubled blue eyes looked up.

“Fate might have bound you together because of your frequency, but the bond needs acknowledgment and desire on both parts to develop.” Itachi’s eyes were mischievous, implying that he knew perfectly what he was talking about and he wasn’t about to be fooled by the Captain’s eventual excuses.

Naruto’s cheeks flushed red. He couldn’t deny Itachi’s words, his attraction and longing for Sasuke were borderline obsessive, too apparent for his lies to stand a chance. He sighed deeply, scratching the small feral-like scars on his right cheek. His soul yearned for Sasuke and that was the reason why things had gotten so complicated.

“It doesn’t change the fact that he ruthlessly killed an innocent person.” Naruto’s voice was tired. All the recent tension and drama was starting to wear his spirit out.

To his utmost surprise, Itachi sighed in tandem with him.

“Guess it’s too difficult to explain to you how ‘innocent’ is for us a point of view.”

The Captain furrowed his brows, trying to think like someone who’d been raised without any moral value whatsoever.

“We can perceive small fluctuations of energy, Captain.” Itachi supplied, seeing how difficult it seemed for Naruto to grasp on the reasoning. “Meaning that we get a general grip on people’s intentions.”

Naruto’s eyes widened and he shifted backwards a bit in his chair, appearing sort of frightened by the revelation.

“So you do know what I am thinking?”

Itachi couldn’t help but chuckle at Naruto’s shocked expression and his high pitched, panicked tone. It took him a while to compose himself and stop giggling under his breath, but when he managed, he felt the need to reassure his agitated companion.

“No, what we perceive is by no means that complex. I can feel that you are distressed, sad and angry...and a little scared. And that you are genuinely drawn to my brother.”

Apparently, his attempt at calming the other down worked, because Naruto relaxed his stance.

“Sasuke had likely perceived something about this woman that made her a threat for his happiness, therefore he got rid of the problem. We’ve been educated to be efficient and selfish, you see.”

‘Like wild animals’, Naruto’s mind supplied. *Everything came down to survival in the end.*
And like that it dawned on him, a bolt from the blue. *To despise a wolf for protecting his pack from intruders didn’t make sense, not even when a person was killed to do so.*

Naruto’s shoulders slumped, his eyes softening imperceptibly.

He glanced at Itachi, who was simply looking back in respectful silence, and was grateful for the steering presence of the man.

“How old is your brother?” he found himself asking, absentmindedly.

In a too familiar gesture, the hybrid tilted his head, pondering.

“How old are you, Captain?”

Naruto blinked, automatically revealing that he recently turned twenty-five.

Itachi’s lips quirked.

“Supposing that you are counting on conventional solar years that makes you more or less Sasuke’s same age.”

The surprised gasp that escaped the Captain’s lips would have sounded beyond comic in another situation.

*How was it possible? Sasuke looked so young and was so innocent and naive!*  

Providentially, Itachi decided to stop the clumsy wandering of his mind.

“We don’t grow old as fast as humans do, Naruto.”

“Oh,” was all that Naruto could say.

Stupidly he didn’t even stop to consider that possibility, to dwell on the fact that he and the boy he was tied to belonged to completely different realities.

Sasuke wasn’t human, Shikamaru was right.

The Captain realized he knew nothing about his lover’s keen and what was important for them and the new awareness made his skin burn. In his heart he felt shame for himself and his preposterous approach, but also the tingling of a new resolve.

The room was awfully dark, only a few slanted rays of moonlight filtering inside from the narrow window.

Naruto had to wait for a while on the threshold for his sight to adjust to the dim light, squinted eyes scanning the bare space in search for Sasuke’s familiar form. After a few minutes he spotted him curled up in the small space between the wall and the deep-red ottoman.

The boy was awfully still, his bare foot clearly visible because of the stark contrast between his fair skin and the pavement.

Taking a deep breath, the Captain hesitantly walked towards him, receiving no acknowledgment on Sasuke’s part. The boy was hugging his bent legs, face hidden and pressed to his knees, shoulders slumped.
Only when Naruto was barely a foot from him, he realized that Sasuke was shivering slightly, almost as if he was cold.

The captain quietly bent down, carefully reaching out a hand to touch the boys forearm.

Sasuke almost jumped at the contact, curling himself up in an even smaller ball. His skin was deadly cold to the contact, and a pang of worry chewed at Naruto’s stomach.

Delicately sliding his raw pads on the exposed length of Sasuke’s arm, Naruto reached for the boy’s bent head, bending his wrist to gently cradle the boy’s face.

Sasuke let him do it without protesting and allowed the Captain to tilt his face upward, exposed to the other man’s eyes.

Naruto felt horrible as soon as he took in Sasuke’s devastated face, his cheeks still wet from tears and his eyes puffy and tired. Guilt washed over him as he realized that Sasuke had been crying alone for several hours, likely since the moment Naruto had left him behind without giving him an explanation.

Wanting to see his lover’s face in proper light, the Captain reached for the box of matches that he kept in the upper pocket of his vest, picking one out with the intention of lighting the candle close to Sasuke’s bedding. He made a sharp movement to ignite the head against the coarse surface of the ottoman and Sasuke abruptly jumped away from him, pressing flat against the wall with frightened eyes and becoming smaller, suggesting he believed Naruto’s movement was intended to hit him.

Naruto’s heart clenched, realizing Sasuke was afraid of him and convinced that he would hurt him.

As if that wasn't bad enough, in the pale light of the matchstick flame, Sasuke’s face appeared even more swollen and patched in red spots, his eyes bloodshot.

The captain felt so worthless, so at fault for reducing his lover in that state, that would have dug a hole and disappeared into the floor.

There was no way in hell he could ever lay his hands on Sasuke with the purpose of hurting him, didn't matter what he had done.

Trembling, a painful knot in his throat, Naruto reached out toward the boy again, being careful in moving slowly so that he didn't get scared. He caressed the boy's head, relishing in the familiar silkiness of the locks, then shifted closer, his hands gently embracing the back of the boy’s neck.

Sasuke was still watching him with wary, big eyes, but he didn't move away this time.

Heartbeat increasing, Naruto gradually inched closer, resting his forehead against Sasuke's.

“Do you hate me?” it was a pitiful whimper that barely resembled Sasuke's usually sure and confident voice.

Naruto felt tears collect into his eyes, the sensation lightly stinging.

Sasuke sounded broken.

“No,” Naruto admitted sincerely, his breath hitching. “No, I don't.”

The boy's tensed body relaxed a bit, his shaking subduing.

The small flame of the match died and Naruto dropped the stick without giving it a second
thought. He circled Sasuke's apparently frail form with both arms the best way he could, considerately giving the boy a few seconds to push him away if he wasn't okay with the physical contact.

When Sasuke didn't make a move that suggested discomfort, Naruto lifted him up in his arms, removing him from his convenient hiding spot on the floor.

Sasuke clutched his shirt holding his breath and allowed Naruto to carry him to bed, where he delicately put him down.

“I am sorry I got angry,” Naruto mumbled, flexing his legs to join Sasuke on the tatami mat. He didn't know how to go about it and it felt terribly awkward.

The boy was still hugging himself protectively, lips downturned, and overall reminded him of a wounded wild animal.

The Captain sighed, allowing him his space.

“Maybe nobody told you about it but... killing is bad, you know.” he scratched his arm, nervously. “I don't know how it works for Aliens... or for you and your__” he hesitated, thinking about how to word it. “__family. But when a human dies they're forever gone and all the people dear to them will miss them.”

Sasuke tilted his head to look at him and Naruto felt more than saw that he was inspecting him, pondering his words.

“Mr. Nara said she was no friend,” he breathed, and he sounded so confused about it, Naruto wanted to hug him. He felt stupid for not understanding the real meaning of that sentence the first time Sasuke used it.

“Yeah, she wasn't a friend of mine,” he conceded, shifting closer to the boy. “But she was friend and family of someone else.” he tried to explain.

Sasuke seemed to dwell on his words, and Naruto was assaulted by the sudden desire to see his expression. He moved to reach inside his pocket for another matchstick, but before he could pick one the candle lit spontaneously on his left, almost startling him.

Sasuke's Sharingan was spinning as the boy stared at the colorful bedding, nose wrinkled in concentration.

“But she wanted to take you away from me.” his voice was still shy. A corner of Naruto's lips tilted up for the boy's unconscious bluntness.

As if Sasuke had to worry about Naruto's faithfulness of all things.

He reached out and caressed the boy's knee.

“Killing is only understandable when done to protect life, not to worship death. Death is painful, Sasuke, that's why killing should be avoided at all cost.” he tried to sound reassuring, understanding. “Just imagine how you would feel if someone took your brother away from you forever.”

Sasuke rocked back and forth for a while, apparently thinking about it.

“Itachi is not easy to kill,” he offered after some time, and Naruto somehow understood that it was a statement meant for self reassurance.
“Well, yeah, I cannot disagree on that,” he confirmed, a part of him amused. “But if he was taken away you’d be hurt, wouldn’t you?”

To that, the boy nodded.

“So I did a bad thing,” he concluded, his body subconsciously moving to curl up once more. He didn't sound judgmental, though a bit disappointed in himself.

Unexpectedly, Naruto's chest filled with pride.

“Yeah, but you didn't know about it, back then.” he smiled at him.

Sasuke's expressive eyes were back to their normal color, wide and slightly ashamed. The boy's nimble fingers were playing with the material of Naruto's orange hoodie, the toes of his small feet curled in tension.

“So you still want me... even if I am bad?” he sounded so insecure it was heartbreaking.

Naruto couldn't hold himself back anymore and tugged the boy in his arms. He hugged him close and pressed his face in the elegant curve of the pale neck, his whole body relishing the familiar scent. Sasuke's unusual rigidity disappeared gradually until he melted against Naruto's chest, hiding his face against a broad shoulder.

“As if I could ever stop wanting you...” the Captain whispered against the boy's jaw.

And then something clicked in place somewhere and he was hit by a river in flood of emotions and feelings, dawning on him with the strength of a train. He felt sorrow and guilt and insecurity, as well as sadness, affection and relief, the latter so strong that it left Naruto light headed.

He kissed the boy's jaw softly, feeling the familiar warmness of their bond swell into his chest, and sighed in contentment against the smooth skin. With delicate hands he cradled Sasuke's face and lifted it so that he could look into his eyes.

The boy still appeared shaken after the long hours of desperation and silent crying, but his eyes were shimmering with life now, his rosy lips parted.

“You are the best thing I got from life and there is no way I am letting go of you, ever.” he confessed, feeling like a weight lifted from his chest as he spoke the words.

It was the truth.

He watched in enraptured fascination as Sasuke fought to control his own raw emotions and leaned in to touch their noses together.

“Always remember this.”

He should have felt embarrassed as he definitely bared his heart for Sasuke to take it. Instead he only felt a sense of completeness and finality.

Shaking in his arms, Sasuke nodded shortly, breath hitching, and tilted his chin up, searching for familiar lips.
I guess you noticed my struggle with this chapter. To me, the pacing just sounds off and there is way too much dialogue and not enough action. Still, it had to be done. This chapter is a full piece of introspection and you get many different point of views on the events. Plus, this is where the main moral knot - Sasuke killing Hinata - is solved, and of course the way Naruto acted is controversial. Now you have answers pretty much to any question except, well... the war.

Your feedback would be super appreciated for this piece because - alas! - I am feeling very insecure.

You probably have also noticed that the chapters are going to be 16 (15 + epilogue). We're almost there people! Thank you for your support, it's precious! <3
Doomsday

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: Shikamaru had the plan ready. Itachi had a personal conversation with Naruto and helped him to figure out his feelings. Naruto forgave Sasuke for the incident with Hinata, explaining him the value of life.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was full of mental mistakes and it was fixed by lovely Sasu—Hime. Thanks a lot pal!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The chilly morning breeze blew against the Captain's face, messing up his already unruly hair. It was still early, the sun just shyly peeking through the trees bordering the clearing, the sky pink-bluish. Naruto had been watching the glimmering stars for a while, contemplating them nostalgically as they gradually faded into the light. He didn't get much sleep that night.

Beside him, sitting on the monumental staircase to the alien fortress, Sasuke was staring at the frosty clearing in silence, his cheeks reddened from the cold and his inky locks fluttering in the wind. The boy had been quiet for a long time, hyper aware of Naruto's state of tension and anxiety. He had decided it was better to leave the Captain to his own thoughts, at least for the time being. Nonetheless he had refused to leave Naruto's side, faithfully pushing calm and comforting vibes through their bond, offering support the best way he could.

Naruto was actually nothing short of terrified at the moment and he didn't even bother trying to hide it and play cool. He was literally surrounded by people who were able to feel every small fluctuation of his mood, so he didn't see the point in pretending to be confident about what was to happen.

The pressing tension was visible in the contraction of his jawline and his heart was beating faster than it should have. The heavy weight of responsibility was making him feel claustrophobic, and that was why he had been sitting outside in the open since the wee hours of the morning.

A high-pitched cry of rusty hinges abruptly broke the morning quiet and attracted Naruto's attention, his head automatically turning toward the source of the noise. Itachi came out from the heavy looking wooden portal, almost like a mystic, ethereal apparition, his long tresses tied back in a messy braid.

Naruto kept his eyes on the man as he approached, a weird mixture of wariness and fascination stirring in his stomach. Sasuke shifted slightly by his side and, suddenly, the Captain felt the soft weight of the boy's head sitting against his shoulder. Unable to do anything about it he found himself smiling like a fool, a pulsing warmness making its way into the wild mixture of emotions he was experiencing. Itachi's imposing figure was magically forgotten as he tilted his face to the side and pressed an affectionate kiss to Sasuke's cool forehead.
“Good morning.” Itachi's velvet-like voice held a soothing undertone and Naruto raised a hand to wave at him, not interrupting the intimate contact with his lover.

“Hi, 'Tachi,” Sasuke verbalized the greeting for both of them and the older sibling didn't seem to mind.

A few seconds of silence followed, not even the birds chirping in the freezing morning air, and Itachi flexed his long limbs to gracefully sit down on the stone steps together with the other two men.

“It's still early,” Itachi's voice came again, and Naruto didn't know if he hated the man or if he was grateful for his attempts at making conversation.

His left arm reached behind Sasuke's back and he tugged the boy against his body in a loose embrace.

“Yeah, but sleep was evading me,” he confided as an explanation, even if he was pretty sure that Itachi already knew.

“Sasuke's been keeping me company.”

Itachi smiled faintly at that, his gaze traveling across the frozen field.

“Being nervous is reasonable,” he offered, not commenting upon the fact that Naruto and Sasuke seemed to be back to their touchy-feely state of bliss.

“But at this point we have to hope for the best.”

It was undoubtedly wise advise, but it was easier said than done. The Captain wasn't simply playing with his own life this time, but mankind's whole existence was on the line together with his.

“There are so many things that can go wrong…” Naruto mumbled to himself, not really expecting anyone to pick up the words.

“And so many others that can go right,” Itachi supplied, his smile turning mischievous.

Damn Uchiha and their over sensitive ears.

Naruto turned slowly to face Itachi's profile, appealed by the man's apparent state of calmness. Sasuke shifted quietly in his arms, the warmness of his body coming closer and his face pressing in the crook of Naruto's neck.

“Shisui's on the main tower scouting the area. As soon as your friends appear into the clearing he will be bringing the news.”

The Captain hummed in understanding.

Itachi's eyes were glued to the rising sun, one of his hands coming up to pin some loose strands behind his ear and out of his face.

“Obito's coming, but Madara isn't.”

Naruto grimaced. He figured that Obito was the name of the shady Uchiha that didn't feel compelled to come over and introduce himself when they first met.

“Orochimaru's under arrest and we're going to turn him in together with the others.” he provided.
A small amused sound escaped Itachi's lips, and both Naruto's eyebrows raised in puzzlement. The little humming was unfamiliar and childish and it sounded weird coming from the stone-faced hybrid.

“It's not like I underestimated you, Captain,” Itachi assured, his pale face finally turning so that he could get a glimpse of Naruto's expression. “But convincing Madara to side with humans is not going to be a simple task.”

Naruto's attentive gaze met Itachi's for a second, then lowered. He didn't know what to think about the whole situation. Orochimaru was their best card, the only leverage they could concretely use to get at least the Uchiha approval. There was nothing else that they could say or offer as a way to acknowledge the inhuman abuse the Uchiha had to suffer.

“Madara was the first,” Itachi's voice was soft and the man seemed immersed in his own thoughts. “Orochimaru made him and his brother in quick succession, ambitious and greedy, aiming to get recognition as soon as possible.”

The Captain took in the additional information, quietly weighing the words.

*So, Madara and Obito were brothers.*

“His technique for genetic blending wasn't perfect back then, and he wasn't sure which alien alleles contained the characteristics that he desired to maintain or develop. Still, believing to be a flawless genius, he rushed through things and didn't wait to see if he got down the basics alright.”

Now Naruto was intrigued. Itachi was speaking out of his own will and the Captain's instincts were tingling, as if alerting him to pay close attention.

Itachi took a small break, ebony locks flowing in his face despite his best efforts.

“Madara came out rough around the edges and unrefined, but his superhuman abilities became apparent immediately and Orochimaru was incredibly hyped by the results of his first attempt. Izuna though...”

*And now who was this Izuna?*

As if reading his mind, Itachi shrugged his shoulders.

“...he forced Orochimaru to face the failure, and that preposterous felon surely hates to fail.”

Naruto would have laughed at the unusual wording if he wasn't so captivated. In his arms Sasuke also appeared engrossed, eyes wide and curious as if he were hearing the story for the first time.

“Izuna was physically and mentally unstable and he inherited just a few abilities from the alien genome. Orochimaru had to revise the whole Uchiha project and admit his own limits, after him. It took him more than four years to make Obito, then.”

Oh. Obito and Madara were not brother then, and this Izuna was born in-between the two. If math wasn't an opinion - and Naruto was kind of good in math - that made six Uchiha and not five. *Orochimaru had lied.*

“When Shisui was made, Izuna was a fully developed child but none of the traits Orochimaru had intended for him appeared. He was incredibly difficult to deal with and weak, so Kabuto suggested they get rid of him.”
Naruto heard Sasuke gasp loudly, the boy's hand clutching at his shirt. He could feel Sasuke's gunky distress through their bond without any need to take a glimpse at the boy's face. Somehow he could easily figure out the rest of the story; math was not an opinion and apparently Orochimaru wasn't a liar either.

Itachi went on, though.

“Izuna was given to Akatsuki to play with. I heard he ended up choked to death a week or so after he was taken from Madara. They didn't even bury his corpse.”

There was a sharp clicking noise and Naruto realized it came from his teeth gritting together.

Those fucking animals. The Captain was aware of the darkness that was part of human nature, but sometimes he forgot how evil and disgusting men could be.

Izuna was only a child.

Sasuke's breathing had become very erratic and Naruto instinctively moved to properly hug him with both arms, allowing the boy to be clingy and hide his face against his shoulder.

Naruto’s hardened eyes searched for Itachi’s and he found that the man was focused on the way he was cuddling with Sasuke.

“Madara wasn't even eight years old when all that happened, but Uchihas aren't prone to forgive and forget. Honestly, if somebody ever dared hurting my brother...” Itachi's eyes raised and Naruto met fierce bloody red marred by a weird three pointed star, reminding him of a shuriken. Unwavering, he held the gaze, the unspoken threat from the older sibling echoing in the silence.

Naruto wasn't afraid; he understood where Itachi was coming from. He also knew that the hybrid actually was a very intelligent and reasonable man and, on his part, he had nothing to hide from those ever-seeing eyes.

After a few tensed seconds the shuriken-like markings in the men's irises retreated into the pupil, disappearing into a normal Sharingan. The three commas spun lazily, assessing, and finally vanished into blackness.

Itachi hadn't said a single word, but Naruto knew he'd been acknowledged.

He smiled faintly at the man, feeling a strange sense of companionship blossom into his chest.

Don't you worry, I got him.

Itachi's lips curved and he smiled back.

A black clad figure chose that moment to jump down in front of them out of nowhere, and Naruto had to put some effort not to get defensive from nerves.

“They're coming.”

Figures if it wasn't Shisui. Naruto sort of hated the asshole.

The tall hybrid was simply clad in a sleeveless traditional camisole that left his muscled arms exposed, completely unmindful of the freezing weather. His Sharingan was activated and his attention as usual on Itachi, his expression somber.

Itachi turned in his direction and smiled briefly, causing the whole bad-ass attitude to melt in an
open, friendly face.

*Oh, so that's how it was!*

Naruto was often told he was naive and a bit handicapped when it came to reading people's feelings for each other, but by now he was starting to get a grip on the Uchiha mechanism and their shades.

*Itachi was so self assured and unequivocal when explaining the whole 'bond-thing' to Naruto because he personally had one.*

“You always scare the shit out of me,” he commented frankly, earning an arched eyebrow from a bewildered Shisui. “I know that you do that on purpose, bastard!” he pouted, his voice exaggeratedly whiny.

Shisui blinked repeatedly, evidently taken aback, than peeked at Itachi for suggestions. He found Sasuke's brother trying to suppress a mischievous grin, his eyes sparkling, and he understood that yes, Naruto actually dared messing with him.

His mouth opened into a grin, exposing perfect white teeth. His unmarred face seemed not one day older than Naruto's age, but the Captain right now knew that the men was likely ten years his senior.

“I am sorry Blondie, but you always look so skittish around us!”

Naruto actually chuckled. He figured he couldn't deny that.

“You don't exactly look trustworthy, yanno?” he was only half kidding, but Shisui didn't take it personally.

In his arms, Sasuke started making his custom happy purr.

“Obito is coming down. How far is the Union's platoon?” Itachi's voice was relaxed, but managed to bring their attention back on track.

Shisui nodded quietly.

“They are probably half a kilometer from here right now. Should I go get them?”

Itachi shrugged and gracefully stood on his feet.

“No. Let them come to us,” he ordered gently, dusting some dirt off his pants.

Naruto followed the example and stood, helping Sasuke up with him.

“We will make introductions before going inside. The Jumala leaders demanded to set up the encounter in the underground party hall, seeing that they consider sunlight particularly aggressive.”

The Captain nodded, straightening his uniform.

“My people are coming in peace. They will have their weapons in clear view and one single rifle for all of them.”

Shisui looked at him as if he was stating the obvious and Naruto was abruptly reminded that these folks literally saw everything. It was slightly frustrating.
“Damn you and your superpowers,” he muttered, making all three Uchiha grin smugly.

The portal on top of the staircase opened and the hybrid named Obito came out, clad in a long black and orange robe. He elegantly descended the steps to ground level, moving smoothly like a feline.

“It's good to have you,” Itachi acknowledged him without turning to see his arrival. The man simply shrugged. “You have perfect timing.”

And as Itachi said so, Naruto’s human eyes finally spotted the golden hair of Tsunade floating into the wind, the locks almost shining in the first rays of the sun, and his heart filled with emotion. She was wearing her formal attire, and she looked nothing short of majestic in black and green, the golden medals like pricey jewels adorning her chest.

Behind her, three stooped figures stumbled forward in chains, dressed in the fluorescent yellow jumper given to the prisoners. Right after, holding the faithful Skorpion and keeping the hostages in track, the fierce red of Gaara's tresses was unmistakable.

Naruto didn’t think that he would have felt so genuinely happy and relieved to see his friends coming to aid him, but the thing was he had to fight back tears, not wanting to make a fool out of himself.

The closer his people came, the more they seemed to be. Everyone with a relevant role in the Union had joined the cause: the whole Sand Squad, with Ino and Sai still bandaged and patched up and Neji with his usual grudge, Kakashi, Genma and Asuma, Yamato and the Bad Guys with Suigetsu's arm in a plaster cast, Shikamaru, Shizune, and even Kurenai who technically had retired from military service.

All those people had believed in Naruto until the very end, even when he demanded them to put everything on the plate for the last desperate hand.

Naruto’s heart was bursting, each and every sacrifice he made now worth it, all the risks he took seeming acceptable in the light of this moment.

Uncaring for their official diplomatic position, Sasuke delicately slipped his smaller hand the Captain's own, holding tightly, sharing the swelling feelings and silently giving him strength.

Naruto loved him. He hoped that Sasuke could feel how absolute his devotion to him was and he briefly squeezed his hand to thank him.

The wind blew softly as the group waited in silence for the Union’s delegation to come closer. Itachi, Shisui and Obito looked stern as the ceremonial required, but strangely welcoming at the same time. Naruto thought that it was probably something about that energy-vibes-issue Itachi had tried to explain him.

The Union’s platoon stopped in perfect formation about twenty meters from the fortress stairs and only Tsunade came forward alone, holding herself like the proud general that she was.

She stopped in front of the small welcome-party, her hazel eyes perusing every Uchiha face with attention and then coming to a halt on Captain Uzumaki’s.

Naruto couldn't help but give her a cheeky grin in return. Tsunade's expression didn't waver, but a sparkle of mirth and affection appeared in her eyes at the sight.

“Captain Uzumaki Naruto, Sasuke.” she acknowledged, finally breaking the silence. She slightly
bowed at them both and Naruto returned the gesture.

Tsunade's eyes then shifted to the other Uchihas, her body language open.

“I believe we've never been introduced properly, young men.” she excused herself.

Promptly, Itachi bowed gracefully, saying his name aloud. He then proceeded offering Tsunade his hand, which the woman shook without hesitation.

“Our honor to finally meet you, Lady Senju.” he declared.

Shisui was the next one to introduce himself, a bit more rougher around the edges but hey, Naruto didn't expect many people to be as flawless as Itachi was, honestly. Obito followed suit, despite looking extremely uncertain.

“I would like to personally thank you in the name of the Union Elite Forces and the whole mankind for the effort you put in making this encounter possible. Come what may, we will be forever grateful.” Tsunade's words were formal but sincere. In the light of the Union's past mistakes, she'd never thought they would be given the luxury of a second chance. Like Naruto, she was a woman that valued honor deeply and she perfectly understood the exceptionalism of the circumstances.

Itachi shook his head modestly.

“We've done nothing but take position,” he offered, peering curiously at the small woman standing fearless in front of him. “Dealing with the problem is only up to you, now.”

Lady Senju nodded, exuding determination.

From where the Union's soldiers stood to a halt, a rough metallic voice suddenly hollered undignified vulgarities. Naruto instantly tensed up, preoccupied by the Uchihas eventual reaction to Orochimaru's uncomfortable presence. He turned to look at the three men standing by his side and noticed some strain seeping into their demeanor.

The hoarse voice kept shouting despite the resounding slap of Gaara's hand against the gaunt face of the scientist. It looked like the Snake wasn't exactly happy about his current predicament and he intended to make his opinion well known.

Shisui tilted his face, a forced smile stretching his lips.

“If you'll excuse me, I have a couple of words to say to an old friend,” he declared, earning from Itachi a nasty glare that would have withered flowers.

Naruto felt for him.

Tsunade had an arched eyebrow and looked pretty confused, but she politely acknowledged the request.

The next second the man vanished, immediately reappearing behind Orochimaru in the middle of the Union soldiers. Gaara was so taken aback by the sudden apparition that he couldn't mask his stupor and gawked – yes, cool-blooded Gaara actually gawked – and jumped out of the way. The hybrid whispered something to the Snake's ear that made Orochimaru's eyes grow wide, and then efficiently gagged him with a piece of clothing. Naruto saw him salute Gaara and shortly the mass of curly-hair reappeared by Itachi's side, the smile on his face now genuine.
Well, maybe Naruto didn’t actually hate the man, after all.

Tsunade was clearly surprised by Shisui’s superhuman abilities – Naruto by now accepted that he was unrealistically fast and stealthy, but obviously seeing that for the first time was kind of shocking. In any case, she actually looked amused more than anything and the Captain had to cough to cover up a chuckle.

“Well,” Itachi said, looking unexpectedly awkward all of a sudden. Sasuke started purring softly, clearly entertained.

All the tension was gone.

“Now that we went through the formalities, I would like you to follow me inside the building where we will join the Jumala’s Council. Obviously, everyone is welcome since we have enough room for all of you.” Sasuke’s brother recovered fast, Naruto had to give him that. The captain took a peek in his companions’ direction noting how Gaara was standing all rigid and Shikamaru was shamelessly grinning. Good stuff.

Sarutobi and Danzo had been forced to kneel onto the frozen ground in front of everyone. Hiruzen was hanging his head in clear submission while Danzo obviously still had some fight in him, but both were quiet. Shimura’s face was dirty and one of his eyes swollen and tinged an angry shade of purple.

Commander Senju turned toward her army and made an eloquent gesture to come forward. Asuma moved to help the prisoner on their feet, Gaara focusing to keep them in gunsight. Then a shadow passed through Naruto’s field of vision, only noticeable because of the low position of the morning sun.

Sarutobi’s head was rolling on the ground before anything else was registered, vivid red staining the gray-green land and melting the ice.

Naruto could almost hear the soft thud of the crane hitting the soil, spurts of blood erupting from the headless body before it sagged.

Eyes wide open, the Captain felt the air abandon him, time slowing down until he was able to hear the frantic beating of his heart.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Sasuke’s stance shifted into battle mode by his side, his body instinctively leaning forward as if to shield Naruto’s. Then, Itachi’s voice cut through the surreal haze of the moment, the same instant Naruto registered Asuma’s widened eyes filled with terror, Shikamaru’s face dotted in fresh blood and the glinting of a blade lowering in Danzo’s direction.

“Madara.” it was a murmur.

Naruto already knew.

He didn’t know if the Uchiha’s superhuman abilities were rubbing on him or if his proverbial instinct was simply sharp enough to keep their peace, but at the moment it was a trivial matter. Madara was coming for them.

Naruto took in some oxygen, his lungs burning because of the freezing air, and time started running at his normal speed again, with Ino’s sharp cry resounding into the clearing.
Shisui immediately bolted forward but he could barely reach Shimura before the sharp katana Madara was brandishing pierced through the man's right shoulder.

Gaara jumped back and fired.

The perfect formation of the Union soldiers broke into a mess of bodies scattering across the field, distancing themselves from the dangerous intruder.

The projectiles from Gaara's rifle at least managed to distract Madara long enough for Shisui to jump out of his reach holding Danzo's wounded body.

“Madara!” Itachi sounded livid. In the meantime he had moved in front of Tsunade in order to protect her from an eventual attack.

Naruto's eyes darted toward him, then back to the tall, threatening man standing above Sarutobi's body.

“What in hell do you hope to achieve, acting exactly like the people you despise?”

The anger radiating from the long-haired hybrid raised goosebumps on Naruto's skin.

Madara's expressionless face broke into a nasty grin, his eyes dancing with a disquieting light before bleeding red.

“You are probably too young, my dear,” he shouted, switching the hand that was holding the blade. “But some of us cannot be that naive anymore.”

Something akin to surprise showed on Itachi's face at that, but it was a passing shadow. The glimmering red of Sharingan immediately took over as he softly called Sasuke's name.

In a second, Naruto found himself with his back to the cold ground several meters on the left of the monumental staircase, the rumbling of a charge and ferocious roaring filling his ears and the soothing warmness of Sasuke's body on top of him.

Unbalanced, he craned his neck to see what actually was happening in the middle of the field and he saw a half dozen of the monstrous alien creatures preparing to attack his companions, a couple of them still in the process of running down the stairs from the temple. In the terrain where Naruto and Tsunade had previously stood was now a big gash more than a meter deep, result of a hit that was aimed for them.

The Captain tried to sit up, panic finally flowing into his system, but he only managed to lift his upper body on his elbows. On the other side of the monumental staircase, Tsunade was crouched together with Obito and Itachi, unscathed, and Naruto shamelessly sobbed in relief.

“Naruto,” Sasuke's voice was like a flame in the darkness and the Captain's attention immediately shifted to the boy. His lover's eyes were red and intense, his expression unusually stern. Nothing else was said as Sasuke helped them both to their feet.

Itachi appeared by their side, holding a pale, sick looking Tsunade into his arms.

“I sent Obito to inform the Jumala Council of Madara's betrayal,” he quickly informed, gently lowering the woman so that she could stand on her own feet.

“Those aliens that opted to side with him are called Kapin; they are a small group of rebels that stands against the power of the elders, and they always have to distinguish themselves from the
The bloody aliens' skin was dark purple instead of the usual sheer-white and, if possible, it made them even more monstrous.

“As soon as the Jumala get word of their aberrant behavior they will be executed instantly.”

Naruto didn't know how that was supposed to happen, but he knew for sure that, given the situation, 'instantly' wasn't fast enough. The creatures were attacking his friends and family, trying to destroy what was dear to his heart. He spotted a glimpse of Shisui trying to keep those animals in check and protect Danzo from Madara at the same time.

Like hell Naruto was standing here watching as his people were butchered. *Not again.*

He felt himself running toward the battlefield before he knew what he was thinking.

Sasuke's voice called for him, but Naruto's legs didn't stop. He wanted to protect them, all of them. It was only his fault if they were involved into this mess.

The Captain barreled into Madara as the hybrid was concentrated in a one on one close combat with Shisui and, surprisingly enough, he didn't feel him coming. The impact was unbelievably hard, Naruto's elbow against the side of Madara's face, firm body against firm body. Even if Madara was the one bearing the worst of the collision, Naruto couldn't help but hiss in pain; it felt like he had just willingly run against a brick wall at full speed.

Shisui actually seemed shocked by Naruto's intervention because he wasted a second to look at him wide eyed. Then he turned around and stopped an attack from one of the alien beasts and Naruto seized the moment to collect Madara's lost blade.

Three creatures in front of him were lifted into the air and thrown carelessly to the ground hundred of meters ahead, as if they were made of Styrofoam, and Itachi and Sasuke appeared to his side, both looking focused and deadly.

“They have a weak spot under their jaw” the older sibling instructed and Naruto took the suggestion for what it was. “Watch out.”

He nodded and followed Itachi's movements with grateful eyes, watching as the man kicked Madara in the ribs and out of the way.

He dodged the claws a creature aimed in his direction, nimbly spinning to face the enemy. The huge thing growled in dissatisfaction and lounged for him again, coming for him with his shark-like teeth. Naruto promptly ducked, rolling towards the monster instead of avoiding it.

Handling a blade felt weird, uncomfortable and unusual. He had received basic training on white weapons when he started his career in the Union, but he wasn't an assassin and he didn't practice as much as he should have.

Still, when he struck in the creature's direction, his aim was flawless. The long, sturdy metal penetrated the alien's shell without much effort and the beast started screeching in a mixture of pain and surprise. Naruto took good hold of the hilt with both hands, praying to all the gods he could remember that the sword was well honed. Putting his whole body-weight into the movement he dragged the blade downwards through the creature's neck, effectively cutting into the flesh. The alien swayed then fell on its side, a weird translucent substance drenching Naruto and the floor, its muscular body twitching. He roared softly one last time, sounding defeated and in pain, then stopped moving completely. Naruto released a breath he didn't know he was holding.
He turned to look around the battlefield, spotting Sasuke and Shisui as they destroyed the alien-beasts, fighting side by side with Naruto's people and protecting them.

Danzo's body laid motionless onto the ground, eyes wide open, and Orochimaru was nowhere to be seen.

The Captain's instinct told him to move closer to Sasuke so that he could be with him and protect him and he wisely decided not to question it. As he was running toward the heart of the battle, something went horribly wrong. It happened too far away from them for Naruto to see, but the moment pain and panic painted marred Shisui's features he knew it.

Itachi had been wounded gravely.

Naruto sped up the moment Shisui vanished, not wanting to leave Sasuke's back vulnerable and open to an attack. He jumped in, in front of Shikamaru, blade raised at face level to shield them from one creature's sticky tongue.

“You okay, man?”

Shikamaru was ashen pale and sported a painful looking gash across his right thigh, but he still managed to offer a weak grin to his friend.

“Still in one piece. Your boyfriend actually saved my life a hundred times.”

Naruto had to smile at the way Shikamaru addressed Sasuke.

“Yeah, he's amazing like that,” he half joked, jumping out of the way of a whipping tail.

There was a flash of red and Gaara jumped right into the next beast's face like the crazy asshole that he was, brandishing his brand new crow knife.

Naruto muttered profanities under his breath as he went to help him, lashing at the beast with his sword to distract it.

“Under the jaw, you gotta aim under the jaw!” his hollering went partially lost into the noise of the raging battle surrounding them, but Gaara had luckily been gifted with perceptive ears.

Skillfully, he slid down the creature's neck, gripping the column with his legs and letting his body be pulled to the underside of it by sheer force of gravity.

Naruto held his breath as the redhead's abs flexed and he plunged the blade in the soft flesh under the monster's jaw, resulting in the alien losing its balance and stumbling to the ground.

Gaara was quick enough, jumping down so that he wasn't crushed by the monster's impressive bulk, and Naruto took advantage of the situation to kick his friend's knife all the way into the creature's head, hoping it was enough to inflict a deadly wound.

“You fucking dickhead!” he went on giving the Sand's captain a piece of his mind, but somehow the insults were dulled by the fact that he was hugging the man breathless.

Gaara stood motionless in the embrace like a rag doll, eyes wide and full of surprise, until he was turning blue from lack of oxygen and he pat his blond friend's back as a sign to be released. Naruto did so, taking two steps backwards to give him space, completely forgetting about the supposed tension between them.
“Thanks,” Gaara muttered, awkwardly scraping his forearm.

Naruto just grinned, his body already in motion to go and support Sasuke.

And then it happened, faster than he would have thought. Madara jumped down from the sky and was on him in half a second, a shiny blade of energy in his left hand. The burning blade pierced through Naruto's strong chest as if he was made of butter and the Captain was left with no choice but kneel down due to the pain and the brute force of the impact.

The ache was unfathomable. He had to fight real hard to keep control and stay sane.

He could feel his own blood flowing down from the gash on the right side of his sternum, the pressure of the blade still there. He raised his head with some difficulty and looked at his opponent straight in the eyes, noticing how Madara's expression was devoid of emotion.

The man extracted the energy blade with a sharp tug and Naruto lost his balance, falling to the ground on his hands and knees.

A constant stream of red poured down from his chest and to the half-frozen grass, the metallic smell of blood permeating his nose.

Naruto had been wounded in battle many times before, but he immediately realized that this time the injury was way worse. One of his lungs had probably been perforated and was collapsing, because he was experiencing serious trouble in breathing.

He registered Sasuke's scream of anguish in his head before he heard it in real life, and then Madara was kicked out of his field of vision, a trembling and unsettled Sasuke left in his place.

His lover crouched, helping him sitting down with worried eyes full of tears and shaking hands. Gaara and Shikamaru were by his side right after.

“It is better if we keep his bust up, I believe. Do you have something to slow down the bleeding?”

Tsunade also came to assist him, gently pushing Gaara aside. She knelt down by Naruto's head, laying the captain's bust on his knees and resting his head against her abdomen.

Sasuke pressed his left hand against the gash in Naruto's chest, the Mangekyo Sharingan blooming into his pupils. Naruto was barely able to hear his friends fretting over him above the dull wheezing of his troubled breath.

The contact with Sasuke's skin was incredibly soothing and Naruto concentrated on the calming sensation to take deeper, more regular intakes of air.

He was losing a fucking lot of blood, too much for him to have a chance. He had seen enough wounds in his life to know that for sure.

Sasuke's face above him was terribly beautiful, even when his troubled expression went from worried to panicked.

He started sobbing, eyes filled with tears. Tsunade was shushing him, trying her best to calm him down.

“I cannot heal him...” the boy hiccuped, shaking and clearly desperate. Tsunade patted his head, feeling strangely close to him.
“Shush, kid. We'll find a way.”

She was a medic and that was a lie. She had been holding back tears from the moment she had seen the extent of the damage to the Captain's chest. She wasn't willing to give up hope, though. Naruto taught her as much.

Shisui reappeared a few meters beside them, carrying the weight of a beaten up looking Itachi.

A cold, satisfied laugh resounded in the clearing. Madara was laughing of their misery, clearly pleased at achieving the result he wanted one way or the other.

In the midst of the mind-numbing pain and the frustration that he was experiencing, Naruto clearly felt the surge of Sasuke's blind fury mounting. He only had a second to look his lover into his eyes, Sasuke's gaze soft and full of love for him, then the boy disappeared in a bolt of blue.

“Sasuke!” it was Itachi's voice calling him, in place of Naruto's that simply couldn't.

The man was put down on the grass close to the Captain by an unusually delicate Shisui. The man then sat right behind him, allowing Itachi to lean against his chest so that he could sit up straight.

The older sibling was covered in cuts and bruises and his left arm was hanging at a weird angle, but all his attention was focused on the clearing in front of the temple, where his brother was challenging the older of them.

“Trust him with this, Koi.” Shisui was trying to calm him down and make him stay put. “He is stronger than Madara when he's focused.”

That admission coming from Shisui slightly reassured Naruto. He knew that the man wouldn't dare lie to his lover, even more because of their bond.

Naruto craned his neck and returned his attention to the battlefield, where Madara and Sasuke seemed to dance among the creature's corpses. Even from the distance, he could perceive the state of rage and disorder clouding Sasuke's mind, and despite the fact that the boy seemed to hold his own pretty good so far, he needed Sasuke to concentrate.

The last thing he wanted was for his love to get hurt.

Closing his eyes he inhaled as deeply as his sane lung allowed and focused on sending off calming vibes through the bond that connected him with Sasuke.

Meanwhile, Madara had started to concentrate his energy in balls of scolding fire, plummeting them like comets around the area.

The other soldiers from the Union were slowly regrouping around Naruto's half laying form, nursing their own wounds, but in spite of everything the Captain resisted the temptation to get distracted or give in to fear. He kept working on the connection he had with his lover, sending off affection, pride and trust.

The next ball of molten fire coming from Madara was huge, and Sasuke didn't have any choice but responding in kind. The two thriving flames collided in the center of the clearing and Shisui was forced to raise an invisible protective barrier around them, since the fire was so huge and powerful that it would have melted all of them even from a hundred meters away.

Then Naruto felt it; Sasuke answered the pull, gratefulness and love spreading in the Captain's aching chest. He opened his eyes to find Tsunade's preoccupied gaze focused on his face, her
delicate hands caressing blond locks away from his sweaty forehead.

“Don’t you dare fucking die on me,” she whispered, but there was sorrow in her words. Naruto collected all his spare energy to give her a small smile, then rolled his head to the side to follow the ongoing combat.

Sasuke had just back-flipped away from Madara's deadly blade of energy when he stuck up his left fist high in the air, electricity concentrating in his raised arm.

Thick black clouds started forming into the previously clear sky, amassing together in bigger cirrocumulus, almost as if a storm was gathering right above their head. Meanwhile, Sasuke continued dodging and fighting, keeping Madara at bay, and the sky grew angry and menacing.

“Shit, he's gonna fry us!”

Itachi raised his only functioning arm, reinforcing Shisui's protective barrier with all the energy he had left.

At the same time Sasuke lowered his left hand and bolts of lightning started raining from the sky in sparse order, invading the whole clearing with thousands of watts of electric energy. Itachi and Shisui combined had to struggle to resist the brute force of the attack, everybody inside the small safe bubble staring in awe at the devastation happening outside.

It was terrific. Naruto had never seen a similar power unleashed before.

The ground shook under them, the field burned black and trees at the borders were reduced to ashes within seconds. The light was so blinding it hurt keeping the eyes open.

The cataclysmic electric tempest lasted about one full minute.

When it was over, in the midst of a desert, fuming land, Madara was kneeling naked to the ground, his skin and hair irreparably burned.

Sasuke walked quietly up to him, standing proudly, unharmed and beautiful. His face was a little dirty and his hair ruffled from the wind, but he looked powerful and glorious.

Naruto's eyes filled with tears of emotion. He watched with attention as Sasuke approached the older Uchiha, the two of them starting conversation like a couple of old friends.

A blue blade of electricity appeared in Sasuke's left hand.

The wind blew.

Sasuke chopped off Madara's head with surgical precision.

Tears started running down Naruto's unusually pale face. If was over. Sasuke, the other amazing half of his soul, was going to be okay.

He sighed in joy and relief and allowed his tired lids to fall closed, just for a minute. He didn't open his eyes again.

Something was wrong. He couldn't feel Naruto through their bond anymore, but it was different from the time the Captain had closed off trying to push him away. It felt cold and lonely, eliciting unpleasant shivers down Sasuke's spine. Sparing one last glance to Madara's dead body, the boy
turned in the direction where his heart was and started running. Naruto's energy level was so low that Sasuke could barely perceive him.

Worry almost making him sick, he reached the group of people cradled together in the only patch of green grass left, noticing how everyone was looking at him with soft, reverent eyes.

Itachi was laying on the ground against Shisui, the two of them curled together in a small ball, a weird emotion dancing on their pale faces. Sasuke scanned through the people crammed in there, his eyes desperately searching for his most important person.

Then it hit him. **Shisui and Itachi were feeling sorry for him.**

A pang of sorrow constricted Sasuke's heart and a wave of undiluted panic raised, his movements turning frantic and sloppy. He made room for himself among the multitude of Naruto's friend, his lover's energy barely perceivable by now.

**No. No, no no! There was surely a mistake. Naruto was a strong human, he was going to be okay.**

Shikamaru was the last one to get out of his way, his eyes watery, and Sasuke finally could see him. Laying motionless in the arms of a crying Tsunade, surrounded by his pals. Naruto wasn't breathing.

A desperate noise ripped from Sasuke's throat as his legs gave away and he fell onto his knees, crawling the rest of the way to his lover's still warm body.

Tsunade raised her hazel eyes at him, dirty face streaked by tears of sorrow.

Sasuke reached out to touch Naruto's chest, his delicate hands caressing devotedly from the place where Naruto's wound was, up his neck and then cupping his face lovingly. Without even realizing it he started sobbing quietly.

Tsunade respectfully moved away to give him more room, saying goodbye to her boy with a gentle caress.

**Naruto wasn't breathing and Sasuke felt like he was going to die too.**

Still in shook, the boy leaned down, cradling Naruto's bigger body into his arms and hugging him close. Tears had started spilling from his eyes like an everlasting flood, his heart in pieces. He started rocking back and forth.

It was painful to watch. The proud warrior that just fought for mankind's salvation, redeeming all of them, was now sitting on the ground like a broken doll with his dead lover in the arms. The sounds Sasuke was making were heart breaking, even more than the high pitched, devastated cry that escaped his throat.

Itachi couldn't stand it. Eyes focused on the desolated land, he was also crying, like everybody else in the group. It was a silent collective mourning, a farewell to a friend. Itachi despised the fact that he had to be the one telling his brother that he wasn't going to be whole ever again.

Obito appeared on top of the half-destroyed staircase and was on them in a second.

He crouched silently in front of Itachi, respectful of the pain surrounding them.

“Sorry if it took me a while,” he whispered, laying his eyes on Itachi's incapacitated arm. “They
accepted the surrender. Today, the Great War is finally over.”

Itachi closed his eyes and sighed. It was a bittersweet news.

The person who fought for peace the most wasn't here to see it happening, and there was no patch that could make his brother any less broken.

Obito tilted his head to the side, addressing Shisui.

“Madara was taken down. Who was it?”

Shisui offered a sad smile.

“Sasuke.”

Obito raised both eyebrows, looking pensive.

“Madara had wounded to death his human mate, “ the curly haired man explained.

Obito nodded at that, raising his head to take a look at Sasuke's shaking body as he was wracked by sobs.

“The kid doesn't deserve this.” he murmured, his expression grim.

None said anything. Itachi's tears were still pouring despite his attempts to will them away.

Obito slowly stood back on his feet.

“Let me see if I can fix this.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So I am late. Actually almost a week late (eugh). If you had the chance to take a peek at my tumblr you probably know already that migraine is my biggest enemy. If you pair that with my (more than) fulltime job, you get the reason for this delay.

About the chapter, I only have to say: “I did tell you that many things were still about to happen, didn’t I?” (Insert here innocent face). Plis dun kill me… just remember that my tags don’t lie!
Now we’re left with only the epilogue and, differently from the prologue, it’s gonna be more like an additional chapter.

Please be kind to me and let me know your thoughts about the story so far! (I luv yu).

See you soon!
Epilogue - Amor Vincit Omnia

Chapter Summary

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER: The UEF Comitee was on time for the scheduled encounter with the Jumala, but Madara and a faction of alien rebels had something to say about that. A raging battle ensued and Naruto received a deadly blow from the older hybrid. He died in Tsunade's arms right after Sasuke killed Madara off in a rage.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to sasu--hime for the precious feedback and corrections!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FROM: S.N. Head of Intelligence UEF
TO: Press Office UEF – Media and Communication
OBJECT: Press Release, day 15.010

It is to be communicated with the utmost urgency that on this date the Great War officially comes to an end.

An agreement of co-existence was stipulated between the Union - under signature of the Supreme Commander Lady Tsunade Senju – and the Jumala party, in order to avoid future belligerence and promote mutual respect and understanding.

The aforementioned treaty is based on the conviction that the co-existence of our races is a precious asset, as well as on the shared desire for peace and prosperity.

Hereby the two organizations shall maintain their separate government structures in the way they deem fit, but are inextricably linked and put into communication by diplomatic mediators under the names of war heroes Uchiha Itachi, Uchiha Shisui and Uchiha Obito.

It is also to be known that the political leader of the Union Governor Hiruzen Sarutobi - as well as his personal adviser Shimura Danzo - were handed over to the Jumala for trial after their arrest under the accusations of treason, violation of international laws, arms trafficking, warmongering, abuse of authority and manslaughter.

By common agreement and under a jointed jury, they pleaded guilty of their crimes and were executed according to the international laws.

As a direct consequence of their dismissal, Danzo's secret criminal organization known as “Akatsuki” is to be dismantled immediately.
Worldwide known scientist Orochimaru, “The Snake” of genetics, managed to escape imprisonment during the tumults that preceded the stipulation of the treaty. He is to be considered a wanted prisoner on the run and a public enemy of both the Union and the Jumala population.

In order to honor war heroes Captain Uzumaki Naruto of the Kyuubi and Uchiha Sasuke, who lost their lives in order to promote peace and create a bridge between mankind and the Jumala party, the agreement described above is officially named The Uzumaki-Uchiha Treaty.

[Further in-depth information in the attached documents.]

Best wishes,

Nara Shikamaru

Chief of the Union Intelligence

“Sasuke.”

He couldn't even hear. There was this sort of strange whistling sound in his ears, drowning out everything and making the world around him mute and dull.

It was so cold, desolate and lonely. Hostile.

Sasuke didn't want to be there alone, he didn't see any point.

Struggling to take in a sharp intake of air, his lungs almost refusing to cooperate, he pressed his face against the warm skin of his lifetime partner, feeling the wetness of his own tears against his cheeks.

He wished it wasn't real.

A desperate, high pitched sob escaped his lips, his shoulders rising and falling unevenly.

The emptiness in his chest wasn't something that could be easily ignored. It was a sign, a tangible proof that Naruto, the only being Sasuke had been able to create a connection with, was forever gone.

And it hurt.

Sasuke felt as if someone had just clawed out his heart and ripped it in pieces.

He wasn't sure if he was ever going to function again, now that a half of his soul was forever lost. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to keep functioning, to be honest.

What was the purpose of his life if his soulmate wasn't here with him to share it?

Sasuke had no purpose. He was made to kill and destroy, and after that confrontation with Naruto where he almost lost his lover, he was well aware of being a monster. Without Naruto by his side, without someone to keep him in track, someone who loved him enough to put up with him, he was surely better gone.
Reflexively, he tightened his hold on the strong body abandoned in his arms.

It was his fault.

Naruto had always protected him and kept him safe and Sasuke had failed to do the same. He had failed the only person that helped him make sense.

*He was better off dead.*

And Naruto had definitely been understating it when he had said that losing someone 'hurt'. The word 'hurt' didn't even came half close to how devastated Sasuke felt. He had no doubt that it was the worst kind of pain he had experienced, ever. It was unbearable; Orochimaru's creative ways of torturing paled in comparison. It was making him mad, crushing his body, draining his energy.

*He just wanted it to be over, to be with Naruto.*

A delicate hand landed on his hunched shoulder, squeezing it gently.

Sasuke trembled, breath ragged, and searched for the strength to raise his heavy head.

He found Obito's pensive face just inches from his, the man's powerful body crouched beside Sasuke's.

Tears impossible to dry still poured from Sasuke eyes and down his face, making his eyesight blurred.

Obito retreated a bit, respectfully giving him space.

“Lay him down, kid.” he commanded softly, voice and face devoid of emotion. His eyes, though, were filled in pity and understanding.

Sasuke looked at him, wary, his arms instinctively tightening around Naruto's shoulders. He wasn't ready to separate from his love, to say his last goodbye.

Obito held his gaze, patiently waiting for a reaction. When Sasuke gave no sign of collaboration, his stiff, defensive demeanor clearly suggesting that he didn't trust anyone and didn't want to listen to what they had to say, Obito spoke again.

“I want to help.”

Sasuke didn't really believe him, but his alien side was subconsciously perceiving Obito's honesty and his good intentions. Therefore, albeit reluctantly, he gradually loosened his hold on Captain Uzumaki's body.

He delicately lowered the man down on the grass, as if Naruto was only sleeping and Sasuke was affectionately moving him in bed and didn't want to wake him.

Sasuke's hands and arms were coated in blood and most of it was Naruto's. The sight caused a wave of Nausea to clench his stomach and Sasuke had to fight against the sudden need to heave.

Obito patted his back awkwardly, almost as if he was trying to ground him, but his eyes were focused on Naruto's lifeless face.

Obito's irises bleed red and his pupils dilated and opened up in a sort of three blades scythe.

There was a small surprised gasp from close by, but none of the two Uchihas was paying
Obito's lips curved in a sad smile, his expression softening.

His left eye glimmered and changed in a vivid purple color, the iris disappearing completely.

“He's still here,” he murmured, focused on the Captain’s body. “He's clinging to you.”

Sasuke's hands balled into fists in his lap, his heartbeat speeding up.

He looked at Obito with spirited, hopeful eyes, the wind messing with his hair.

Obito tilted his head to the side.

“He's a though one, we got to give him that. Stubborn as a mule.”

Sasuke sucked in a pained breath, sniffing. One of his hands hastily came up to clean some tears and dirt off his face, leaving a streak of blood in their place. He nodded, his eyes on Naruto, filled with fresh tears that threatened to spill.

“No idea if this will work, but I guess it's worth a try,” Obito declared, but he was mostly talking to himself.

“Shisui,” he called, face finally turning in search of the curly-haired man. “Bring Itachi here. I will need your help.”

Obito was the only one speaking, breaking the silence for the Captain's mourning.

Shisui arched one eyebrow in perplexity but nodded, nimbly standing up and helping Itachi on his feet with gentle hands. He set Itachi's good arm on his shoulders, holding the man tightly around the waist and helping him walk forward.

The sea of Naruto's friends opened a passage for them to walk through, their grieved faces following their movements, respect and gratitude reflecting into their eyes.

It was the first time ever that Shisui perceived so many positive vibrations directed at him by a group of humans. It felt awkward, but strangely soothing.

“What are you planning to do?” he whispered to Obito as soon as he was at ear's range.

“I am fixing the Captain's body, I hope. And then we will see.”

Itachi moved weakly in Shisui's arms, struggling to stand on his own.

“Do it.”

Sasuke gasped, torn between staying as close as possible to Naruto and standing up to help his heavily wounded brother.

“Can you heal him?”

His voice was shaking, the quality of it roughened up by all the sobs that escaped him.

“I can try,” Obito confirmed, focusing his attention back on the Captain. “I have no idea if it will work or have some after effects. Never tried something similar before,” he quietly admitted.
Sasuke nodded, hope swelling up in his chest, bringing back some of the warmness that seemed to have abandoned his body.

He knew it was a remote possibility, but maybe he would get a second chance to be with his only love.

His lips tightened into a thin line, remorse and guilt almost suffocating him. He couldn’t help but feel responsible about what happened. If only had he been more careful, If only had he taken on Madara since the beginning…

A lone tear slid down his right cheek and fell onto Naruto's shoulder.

Obito was trying to make up for something that was only Sasuke’s fault.

*If it didn’t work and Naruto was gone, Sasuke won’t stay either.*

“I will need a huge amount of energy,” Obito spoke calmly, interrupting his train of thoughts and distracting him from the sorrow that was filling the hole in his chest. “More than I am able to gather alone. I need you to collect everything you can at the moment and pass it on to me. Understood?”

Itachi furrowed his forehead, tilting his head in an attempt to spot Obito's expression.

“You won’t be able to deal with that much power on your own,” he stated coldly, matter-of-factly.

Obito grinned wickedly a bizarre spark his eyes.

“That will be my problem to deal with,” he explained, his hands efficiently moving to grasp Naruto's uniform top. He gripped the material tightly with his fingers and tore the shirt open to expose the skin and the gaping wound to sight.

“Activate your Mangekyo and tell the people to stay back,” he instructed with some urgency.

It was difficult to convince Naruto's devoted friends to leave the Captain's side, especially a thug, brilliant guy with vivid red hair. In the end they managed to convince them to wait out of a circular area of twenty meters radius, where arguably they would have been safe.

Obito laid his flat palm to cover Naruto's wound, skin to skin contact.

Shisui and Itachi leaned over the man, each of them dutifully laying a hand on Obito's shoulders.

“Sasuke,” Obito called him without averting his eyes form the Captain, his focus solid and steady. “Give me your hand.”

Biting his lower lip, Sasuke obeyed, sliding his left hand in Obito's free one.

“Begin collecting energy, but keep it in your palms. When I give the command, push it through me with all you have and keep doing it until you are drained.”

A tensed glance was exchanged between Itachi and Shisui, but nobody spoke.

It was highly unlikely that someone could channel such a huge amount of energy through their body without consequences, even if that someone was a perfected human-alien hybrid like Obito was.
A faint, trembling yellow light started to be visible where Obito's hand made contact with Naruto's chest.

The air around the group of Uchiha was starting to move, vibrating and charging with all the energy that the men were putting together.

Four Mangekyo Sharingans were taking in the image of Naruto's lifeless body, his face drained from all colors and his exposed skin covered in blood.

The wind gained strength and started blowing violently around them, bringing along the smell of ashes and the metallic pang of blood. Beyond the howling of it, was only silence.

Obito's purple eye was perfectly focused on where his hand covered the fatal injury at the captain's chest, his brows furrowed in deep concentration.

“Ready?” he inquired, without waiting for an answer. “At my three, bring it on.”

And like that he started counting, almost as if he actually knew what he was about to do.

“One…” he voiced, the rising tension palpable.

“Two…” he hesitated, taking in a steady, deep breath.

“Three!”

Sasuke wasn't able to describe what happened next. Shikamaru and all the others would have told him that they saw a blinding golden light encompassing everything, followed by a sort of shock wave as would happen right after an explosion.

Sasuke only knew that the air all around them trembled and grew hot before Obito channeled all the energy given to him and pressed a ball of molten energy from his hand into Naruto's chest.

The bright light of it filled the wound and expanded, the soil shaking under their feet from the raw power, then dissipated in a blast.

When it was over, Sasuke barely registered his brother fainting, Shisui scantily catching him but falling together with him to the ground.

Obito's purple eye was blind, its previous light disappeared as streaks of blood poured down from the lid in place of tears. He was breathing raggedly, fighting a losing battle to maintain consciousness.

Sasuke himself felt his lids heavy, his mind clouded and dull and his body shutting down protectively. With all the strength he had left he lay sloppily onto the ground, curling around his lover's motionless body.

He passed out trailing his fingers through soft blond locks.

**IT'S PEACE!**

Sarutobi and Danzo executed – Supreme Commander Senju is the new leader of the Union

Union Today, Head-title, Day 15.010
Head of Diplomatic Relations Uchiha Itachi elected Tsunade's adviser

[…] Lady Senju never made a misery of the fact that she is and has always been a leader in the military and therefore not completely suit to rule over a multiracial newborn country trying to live in harmony and peace. Itachi had been elected to be her personal adviser by a regular voting among the UEF members.

*Union Today, Day 15.027*

UEF soldiers raid Akatsuki hideouts in Capital City suburbs: 5 dead and 27 arrests.

*WorldNews Online, Day 15.031*

Disgraced Genetic Prodigy Orochimaru found dead and dismembered

The body, almost unrecognizable, was found in the middle of recently reopened Liberty Square, in the heart of the city, looking like he had been mauled to death by some unknown beast. By his side, hung to the monumental Spirit of Victory sculpture, were the remains of his faithful right-hand man known only as Kabuto […]

*Independent Information Paper, Day 15.045*

Sasuke slid the pad of his forefinger against the pearly-white skin reverently, the contrast between the shimmering paleness of the scar and Naruto's caramel complexion never ceased to amaze him. That small patch of new, silky skin looked oddly fascinating and innocuous in the middle of Naruto's chest. It didn't look threatening or deadly like the wound that it once was.

Sasuke inhaled slowly, his stomach clenching painfully at the memory. He slid down with his head, maintaining the comforting contact between his cheek and Naruto's chest, then turned to press a hot, open mouthed kiss upon the scar.

The gentle fingers tangled in Sasuke's black locks came back to life, caressing his scalp.

Sasuke moaned lowly at the pleasant tingles that the soothing massage elicited.

“Are you trying to work some more Uchiha Magic into me?” Naruto's voice was soft and slightly roughened from sleep.

Sasuke smiled against his skin.

He caressed down Naruto's chiseled abs seductively, mischief making his dark eyes glimmer.

Naruto's muscles contracted and goosebumps appeared on the blond's arms.
Sasuke pressed his whole face against Naruto's chest, snuggling even closer.

"I was just thinking of how lucky I am to have you."

It sounded honest and filled with affection.

An unusually shy smile curved Naruto's lips and he leaned up to kiss the top of Sasuke's head.

Sasuke's arms slid lower to hug Naruto's lean waist.

There was nothing that needed to be said aloud on how they both felt about each other. At this point, Naruto had completely gotten used to the fact that he was able to feel Sasuke's emotions as if they were his own.

The ex-Captain allowed his lids to fall closed for a second, relishing in the morning quietness and in Sasuke's attention.

"Did I sleep too long?" he asked calmly, his free hand finding Sasuke's naked thigh and caressing along the skin.

He felt his lover denying against his chest.

"Just remember that you promised Itachi you would call Tsunade today. You know how she gets if she doesn't hear from you for too long..."

Naruto stifled a chuckle and opened his eyes, searching for the familiar, maddeningly beautiful face of the other half of his soul.

"I am retired!" he protested, still sounding more amused than irritated. "It should be my right to laze about, disappear from sight and enjoy life for a while!"

Finally, Sasuke tilted his face up and gifted him with a small, mischievous smirk.

"She threatened to reveal the truth about your 'death', you know..."

Naruto snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Fine," he conceded, making it sound like he had just accepted the biggest compromise ever. "To be honest I also miss that old hag."

Sasuke giggled softly and Naruto couldn't resist anymore. He leaned up and stole a kiss from those gorgeous lips that bewitched him since the very first minute, moaning in pleasure as he swallowed his lover's happy laugh.

His hand on the delicate skin of Sasuke's thigh slid up to grip a hipbone, Sasuke's mouth immediately opening up more to deepen the kiss.

Naruto allowed himself to get lost in the ecstatic sensation of Sasuke's hot and lean body moving teasingly against his own, the sweet wetness of the boy's mouth stealing his breath away.

He groaned softly, feeling Sasuke's contentment and the familiar purr that accompanied their intimacy.

"You know what?" he murmured on the boy's kiss-swollen lips. "It's early. And I perfectly know how to use the time we have left before breakfast..."
Without any warning, with a sudden jolt of muscles he flipped over Sasuke's smaller body, pressing him carefully into the softness of the bedsheets.

Sasuke released an appreciative sound, his legs immediately spreading to welcome Naruto in between them, hips rocking up in open invitation.

“I really like this idea,” he whispered, his velvety voice hiding a dirty note, spiking desire through Naruto's body.

The ex-Captain tilted his head to kiss his lover again, their bodies starting to move in a familiar dance they had learned by heart.

Outside the open window of their bedroom the sun was still rising, the perfect disk of light hanging just slightly above the water. The sound of the ocean waves was soft and soothing, not covering up the laughs of a couple of children seeking shells on the shore.

A group of fishermen was sailing back to the small port of the nearby village, their work for the day already done.

Chapter End Notes

So this was it...the story finally comes to an end.
Honestly, I think I will miss it. I started writing it for fun, obviously not believing that it would have turned in the 200 pages monster that it is today.

To all of you that followed Naruto and Sasuke through this journey, thanks a lot. I appreciated and loved every single comment, I squeaked for the kudos and I learned a lot from this writing experience.

Shout-out to sasu--hime that fixed all my mistakes and helped me improving the language, I will be forever grateful.

ALSO! A sweet reader came to me saying that they have seen FANART OF MY STORY. I sadly didn't have the pleasure to see it for myself but I am already dying at the thought of it because there are no words, really, to say how grateful and happy I would be if some soul felt inspired by the story enough to produce new content. Therefore - plis plis plis - if some of you saw the fanart (or made it!) please let me have a link to that masterpiece! *tears up in happiness*

Some of you also asked me if I had a twitter profile where they could follow me, and now I created one. [@kleinerteufel 16 - kleiner_teufel is my twitter // @herja-k is my tumblr]
Resonance is over but chances are I will be back with a new story(ies) sooner or later... this is what I do, lol.

If you read everything up to this point, feel free to reach out to me in the comments or on twitter, so that I can personally hug you for all the appreciation this story was given. I would love to hear your opinions and thoughts!
To all of you, thanks a lot <3

P.s.: I was almost forgetting! The title of this chap is a quote from Publio Virgilio Marone (Bucoliche X, 69). The complete sentence is "Omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori" which means roughly "Love always wins and we do drown in love".

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!