Growing pains

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12614612.

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<td>Stats:</td>
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Growing pains

by wisteria_hime

Summary

Now in university, Sasuke is living with his childhood friends, Naruto and Sakura - who are happily dating, and very much in love. Sasuke never used to understand when people would say you cannot choose who you fall for. But life is a maze full of twists and turns you can't always predict, or always stop. His falling for Naruto was not unlike that of a rollercoaster; the sensation of being on top of everything, and then suddenly he was plummeting down. Hard, and fast, somewhat expected yet he never saw it coming. As adulthood looms closer, Sasuke tries to navigate through the maze and make it to the other side. The growing pains are only just beginning.

Notes

Hey hey :) so I've been really wanting to write this type of fic for so long, and of all my OTPs I felt that showing this story through Naruto and Sasuke's relationship felt right. It will focus primarily on the three main characters - Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura - with a heavier focus on Sasuke, simply because he is such an intricate and complicated personality that I find the most interesting to write. I hope through this story, you will see a raw and real representation of these characters, for all their good sides and flaws. Basically, a story
about life and how it can go in as many and mixed directions as it pleases, without so much as a warning. Hope you enjoy :)

I was particularly inspired by this (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdUiCJnRptk) music video, more so what the actual video depicts rather than what the lyrics say :) if you check it out I think you will all get a feel of what this story is about and where it is going. Just a tip, but it's not necessary to watch it of course!
It was a beautiful day, the sun shining down warmly and casting a glimmer across the glass high-rise buildings. Sasuke blinked, coming out of his daydreaming and focusing back in on the laptop screen in front of him. Even as rare as this beautiful day was, Sasuke was no slacker. He always studied on the weekends, and this was no different. The library was notably emptier, which didn’t bother him as he was of the opinion the quieter a workspace, the better.

He squinted at the small black text, chunked up in paragraphs on the screen. Remembering himself, he put his glasses back on, having removed them a short while ago to rub the crust from sleep out of his eyes. It was approaching midday, and Sasuke had been at the library since opening hours, a typical 9:30 on the weekends.

“What a surprise, look who I found. At the library, no less!”

Straightening upon hearing the familiar voice, Sasuke twisted in his chair just in time to receive a dull thump on the head. Scrunching his face up, he glared at the other who sat casually as ever on his study space, on his desk.

“How can you look at all those numbers and statistics all day and not get a headache?” Naruto asked, shaking his head as he looked down at the business textbook he had lying open on the desk.

“I listen to you all day, don’t I?” Sasuke retorted back easily, Naruto spluttering in disbelief.

“Please! Being in my presence is a privilege, not a punishment. I bet people would pay to hear me talk to them all day long.” Naruto preened, looking absolutely confident in this assumption.

Sasuke rolled his eyes, “I’m sure. If they wanted someone to voice for an alarm clock, you’d be first choice. It would be so annoying people would get up just to get away from it.”

Scoffing, Naruto pushed at Sasuke’s neat pile of notes lightly, “Bastard, at least I have some freaking intonation in my speech unlike someone.”

“What do you want, idiot?” Sasuke sighed, glaring sideways at the other whilst rearranging his pile.

Jumping to attention, Naruto sprung to his feet and tugged at the back of Sasuke’s chair, “I’m famished. Come and grab a bite with me.”

“I have to study.” Was Sasuke’s terse response, not even glancing at Naruto as he read through the next thick block of text.

Naruto snorted, cracking his neck side-to-side and causing Sasuke to wince, “Yeah, so do I. Then I realised, it’s Saturday and I don’t really give a fuck.”

“Some of us don’t stop working just because it’s the weekend.” He said, clicking down the page and making a note to himself to continually change where he sat at the library. It would throw Naruto off for a longer period of time, at least.

“I know that. Although some of us know when to stop and have a break before our head explodes. You, Sasuke, are not one of those people.” Naruto accused, pointing at Sasuke with one eyebrow raised. He looked utterly ridiculous, and Naruto had never been any good at acting serious.
Shaking his head unfazed, Sasuke turned back to face his screen, “I’m fine. Go and eat by yourself.”

His eyes narrowed furiously when he saw a tanned hand reach out and shut his laptop screen.

“Naruto,” He seethed, with the blonde in question leaning against his desk looking unimpressed.

Naruto rolled his eyes as if dealing with a petulant child, “Don’t you think I can tell when you haven’t eaten? You get all prissy and start with that holier-than-thou crap.”

“I’m not hungry.” Sasuke ground out through clenched teeth.

Blinking once, blue eyes widened and Naruto suddenly backed off, “Oh, well that’s too bad.”

He watched suspiciously as Naruto turned to leave, and at the last second the blonde swivelled around, swiped Sasuke’s laptop and ran like a madman towards the library exit.

“See how hungry you are now!” Naruto called over his shoulder and Sasuke was positively livid.

“Naruto! Get back here, moron!” Gathering his books and papers, he haphazardly shoved them in his bag – something Sasuke hated to do but this was no time to be particular.

Slinging his bag over his shoulder across his chest and giving the desk a quick once-over to ensure he didn’t forget anything, Sasuke took off after Naruto with an intent to tear the blonde apart. He caught sight of blonde hair disappearing at the end of the long hallway leading into the library and Sasuke followed. When he finally caught up with Naruto, they were in the on-campus café and the blonde was already standing in line, Sasuke’s laptop tucked under his arm innocently.

Just as Sasuke took a threatening step in his direction, Naruto turned his head and a mischievous smile took over his face.

“Ah, there you are. Finally decided to take a break, eh?” Smiling, he had Sasuke’s laptop tucked under his arm like it was some sort of melon fruit.

Seething, Sasuke stepped up to him, “Give me the laptop. Now.”

Naruto tapped his finger on his chin, seemingly considering Sasuke’s request, “Hm, I think I’ll hold onto it a little longer.”

“No. Now. Right now, and maybe I’ll consider not beating you half to death.” Sasuke warned, his anger spiking at Naruto’s obvious indifference to his threats.

Naruto shrugged, “Sorry, but no can do. Why don’t you take a look and see what to order while we wait?”

Composing himself with will power that had taken years to build, Sasuke breathed in and out. Temporarily suspending his anger, he settled for a silent coldness as he stood in line beside Naruto. His arms were crossed and his eyes pasted to the menu board in steady avoidance of the annoyance at his side. Resigned to his fate, he tossed over the idea of a chicken salad sandwich or a sweet chili chicken wrap for lunch. Admittedly, eating something would increase his brain power and help him to study more efficiently, though he refused to acknowledge this as Naruto’s idea in the first place.

“I hate you.” He declared, not wanting to see the victorious grin painted on Naruto’s face.
“Pfft, hate how much you love me, more like!” He laughed, loud and vibrant as always, and Sasuke felt his irritation subside.

* 

After a satisfying lunch (Sasuke had made a good choice with the sandwich), Sasuke reclaimed his laptop and in return gave Naruto a solid punch to his chest. Despite coughing and rubbing at the area, the idiot had the audacity to grin at him triumphantly. They then parted ways, with Naruto having a meet up with Sakura next and Sasuke needing to resume his study session.

Sasuke honestly never thought of all career paths, Naruto would choose paramedics. It was a demanding course that required meticulous study and knowledge of the human body. Yet Naruto took to it like a duck to water. He was getting decent grades, enjoying the course and worked hard.

Whereas Sasuke was certain anyone could have guessed his career choice – business. Of course, as his father was a businessman and so too would Sasuke become a business man.

And of course, Sakura was studying to become a nurse. Her ultimate goal was to become a doctor, but she wasn’t in a rush to get there. Whilst Sakura was in her final year of study, Sasuke and Naruto still had another to go. Since their courses had similar and shared subjects in them, Naruto and Sakura studied together more often than not. Sakura liked having a person around to test herself on, and Naruto enjoyed the company more than anything else. The guy was hopeless when it came to studying by himself most of the time, Sasuke remembered back in high school all the late nights they had spent cramming for the next day’s exam.

Back in their second year of university, currently now at the start of their third, the trio had decided to move off-campus together. Sasuke had done the math (naturally), and it worked out cheaper for all three of them to live together in a small share house than each of them living on-campus.

Another detail which had come into that, was the fact that Naruto wanted to move in with his girlfriend. Naruto and Sakura were officially together. Finally, Sakura had accepted Naruto’s feelings as genuine and honest, and Naruto was still completely in love with her. She too, had confessed her love just last year, and the two of them were happier than any couple Sasuke knew. The look in Sakura’s eyes was different now when she saw Naruto, brighter and happier.

Even though Sasuke had said it was financially wise to move off-campus, he was hesitant at sharing a house with the couple. When he had expressed his doubts towards the living arrangements, the two of them had done everything to convince Sasuke otherwise. Settling himself into a study cubicle and unpacking his laptop and worksheets, Sasuke remembered back to when they were desperately trying to persuade him.

“It won’t be awkward at all!” Naruto stated flippantly, which had done little to sway Sasuke. The blonde was so thick-headed, he hardly ever registered an awkward situation even when he was a part of one.

“We won’t do anything to make you uncomfortable, Sasuke-kun. We promise.” Sakura said in earnest, smiling encouragingly at him.

His response was a raised brow, clearly letting her know that he highly doubted the probability of this being true. Remedying her approach, Sakura pressed her fingers to her lips, humming while her mind was running through what to say next. For his part, Naruto only made stupid begging faces at Sasuke, tugging at his arm and pinching his cheeks and just generally being Naruto. Just as Sasuke was about to lose his temper and throw Naruto on the ground, Sakura brightened and straightened her posture with purpose.
“I know! We can put together a list of rules for shared house living!” Sakura suggested chirpily, and Sasuke resisted pulling a face. *Sakura and her goddamn lists.*

“Right, right!” Naruto nodded, clearly approving of the idea.

“Yeah! Like, one of them would obviously be no sex while Sasuke-kun is in the house.”

“Yeah, of course – wait, what?”

Naruto faltered, blinking uncertainly at her, “You’re joking right, Sakura-chan?”

Naturally, she slapped his arm soundly, “Idiot! Stop thinking with your dick for a second and think of Sasuke-kun!”

Bemoaning, Naruto fell back against the couch as if he lost all will to live, “He’s such a house rat, though. He’ll always be around!”

“Your intervention is really convincing me. Please, go on.” Sasuke drawled sarcastically.

“Another would be separate showers, and let’s not forget limited PDA in front of Sasuke-kun.”

Sakura murmured thoughtfully, as if Naruto hadn’t interrupted at all.

“What the hell!” Naruto cried out, like a wounded bear.

Sasuke interrupted the quarrelling couple, holding up his hand, “Look, I appreciate it. I just don’t think it will work out.”

“Shut up, Sasuke. Can’t you see all the sacrifices we’re willing to make for you? Show some gratitude, jerk.” Naruto dismissed him, like he hadn’t just whined that living with Sasuke would be the greatest inconvenience in his life to date.

“Why do you want me to live with you both anyway?” He questioned, genuinely curious of their answer.

Generally, couples moving in together liked to do so alone. Sasuke couldn’t figure out why either of them would want him intruding on their space. It wasn’t like he would be offended if they did, he was used to being alone. Sometimes, Sasuke preferred it and it felt like he was meant to be alone more than anything else.

“As if we’re gonna let you buy your own apartment and hole yourself up there like some premature hermit.” Naruto immediately responded, waving his hand as if to wipe away the idea and Sasuke felt his eyebrow tick.

“What Naruto means is, you’re our friend Sasuke-kun. We started university together, and we should finish it together.” Sakura’s voice was warm and gentle, as she placed a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and smiled at him.

“Exactly. We’ve been in this together for too long to part ways now. Sad to say it, teme, but you’re stuck with us.” Naruto sung, coming out of his hopeless slouching on the couch to give his smile to Sasuke. He swallowed, not sure what to do with all this affection being thrown his way.

“Plus, if we all live together then we get more free vouchers in our mail! They distribute those things per capita, I read it online.” Naruto persisted, his own personal touch of what he called ‘sweetening the deal’.
Sakura sighed and rolled her eyes, elbowing Naruto in his ribs but she was smiling. Rubbing at his chest, Naruto grinned and started laughing, and Sasuke couldn’t hide his smirk.

“Aha! The bastard smiled!” Naruto declared, pointing at Sasuke victoriously, ”Well, smirked, but doesn’t matter – we’re in!” Naruto then threw an arm around Sasuke's shoulders and bringing him in for a half-hug.

“Moron, get off.” Sasuke grumbled, trying to pull away from the warm embrace but Naruto only held on tighter.

He heard Sakura’s giggle and then felt her hug his other arm and sighed.

Later when it had encroached on evening, Naruto caught him again. This time he was alone. Sakura was probably at her part-time job at the coffee shop, Red Bean. He’d have to go there again next week, since it had been a while since his last visit and whenever Sakura was on shift she gave him free coffee – sometimes a complimentary fruit-filled muffin on the side. More so for the coffee however, since Sasuke couldn’t function without it and they did really good coffees there.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto greeted, voice breezy in the quiet of Sasuke’s room.

The latter looked up, waiting for Naruto to speak so he could get back to work. He was going through his lecture material for tomorrow, sitting at his desk in his room. Something made him stop, however, when he caught Naruto’s gaze as the other waltzed over to him. Perhaps it was how serious Naruto looked, or the way he was standing, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets.

“Are you really going to live with us?”

A bit surprised at the question, Sasuke put his textbook down and faced Naruto properly. This is important to him, he realised. Naruto was funny about things like this. He would come off as being all about the fun and the games, but underneath he had his own reasons and meaning.

“I don’t really have much of a choice, do I? Even if I bought my own place, the two of you would be over enough it would practically be the same as living together. This is easier, and financially smarter.” Sasuke argued.

Naruto stared at him for a moment, before a grin melted across his face and he ruffled up Sasuke’s hair playfully.

“You’re damn right. Glad to see you’re finally wising up.” Sasuke grunted and pushed Naruto’s hands away and out of his hair. It was already prone to messiness without that idiot intervening.

Prancing over to Sasuke’s bed, Naruto flopped down and made himself right at home on the soft covers, “Because you know with us, you’ll never be alone. I won’t let you, even if you want to.”

Sasuke paused, the meaning of those words leaving him temporarily voiceless for a few seconds. Of course, he understood now. Why he hadn’t realised it sooner, Sasuke couldn’t guess. Perhaps because sometimes he forgot the past he and Naruto shared, what that meant and how much it still means to the both of them.

“I already know that. You can’t go a single day without pestering me.” He replied, pulling his book closer to him and trying to focus on the text and not the unsteady beat of his heart. He felt Naruto’s smile on his back, and allowed himself a small quirk of his lips as a peaceful silence bloomed in the room.

That had been a year ago, and the arrangement they had remained the same.
The annoying thing about being friends with a couple you had already been friends with, was the way they would constantly attempt to set Sasuke up with girls. As if they felt they had to compensate, since they were so happy being a couple so obviously Sasuke should feel that happiness too. Personally, he thought they felt guilty sometimes when they were doing ‘couple things’ and Sasuke was inadvertently left out. It really didn’t bother him, but it bothered them and when it came to those two, they could never sit still when something could be done.

Perhaps Sasuke might have welcomed the efforts on his behalf, if they had been setting him up with the right gender for a start. Although, really he could blame no one but himself for that. They didn't know about Sasuke’s preferences. Very few did. It was something he had struggled to accept for months himself, he couldn’t imagine how the two of them would feel. Especially Sakura, considering she had been in love with him ‘supposedly’ all those years ago.

Yet, Sasuke was filled with a twisted guilt every time it was inevitably brought up.

“Sasuke-kun, you really should start dating. I know it sounds weird coming from me, but I think it would be good for you.”

“Bastard, I get you a hot date and you blow her off because you had laundry? Are you sure you're not the idiot here?!”

Every time his answer was the same. Not interested, don’t have the time, relationships are more trouble than they’re worth. Usually the two of them wouldn’t nag him too much over it, but it still happened.

When it came from Naruto, it made Sasuke more uncomfortable than anything else.

Sasuke knew why. He had known since the end of last year, when he’d experienced the biggest realisation that it was almost painful in its revelation. Whenever people joked that Sasuke must be jealous that Sakura had chosen someone else, he would bite his tongue and smirk indulgently, letting them believe it.

Having had enough introspection in the early hours of the morning, Sasuke got out of bed and stretched his limbs. Tying a knot across his dark blue dressing gown, Sasuke stepped into his slippers and pushed open his door, starting to head downstairs for breakfast. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard the voices of Naruto and Sakura in the kitchen. Although he was a bit surprised they were both awake relatively early, Sasuke continued walking down the stairs. Once he reached the bottom, however, he stopped to a standstill.

Standing at an angle where he could see into the kitchen yet they could not see him, Sasuke stared. The two were standing at the stove, assumedly in the mood for a hot breakfast. That wasn’t what Sasuke was staring at though. Naruto had his arms wrapped around Sakura’s middle, as she stood in front of the frying pan flipping eggs. She giggled when Naruto turned his head, his nose brushing against her neck. Then he was kissing along her neck, his back muscles flexing as he bent over her. He was shirtless.

His mouth suddenly went dry, his eyes involuntarily lowering to the defined, tanned chest. For a moment too long, Sasuke was unable to remove his gaze, watching intently as the toned abs stretched and flexed whenever Naruto moved his body. Sakura was wearing one of his t-shirts, and didn’t appear to be wearing anything underneath.

The implications of that were too much, too early in the day. Sasuke's throat constricted, and his
palms began to sweat. Turning on his heel, he ascended the stairs and when he reached his bedroom, he closed the door and kept his light off. Breakfast could wait a little longer.

* 

“Damn, morning class is always such a shit,” Naruto groaned, sculling a glass of orange juice in one go and making Sasuke gag.

Naruto had a four-hour block of classes on Thursdays, with a nine am start. Most of Naruto’s classes started at either nine or eight in the morning, and soon he’d be on placement where he’d have overnight shifts that would surely be hell. It was moments like these that Sasuke praised himself for sticking to a relatively calm business degree.

“Don’t swear at the table, you Neanderthal,” Sakura chided, nibbling at the chocolate chip pancakes she had made for herself and Naruto this morning. Kindly, she prepared a couple of plain ones for Sasuke to eat, well aware of his distaste for sweet things.

“Are you kidding me? This guy has said at least three different naughty words so far this morning! Where’s his scolding?” Naruto grumbled, taking his plate and glass up to the sink and washing them up quickly.

“He was in pain, so it’s acceptable,” Sakura offered, earning a disbelieving gawk from Naruto.

“So what? Just because of a stubbed toe? He still said them!” Naruto complained, and Sakura shook her head at Sasuke as if to say ‘he’s hopeless’.

“It was painful enough that I couldn’t stop myself. You say vulgar things so needlessly,” Sasuke commented dryly, turning the page of the morning newspaper. Naruto rambled exasperatedly in the background to himself, of which Sasuke could make out, ‘human brains have no logic’, to which he decided to ignore him from then on.

“I’ll see you later, beautiful,” Naruto said, grabbing his backpack and slinging it on his back as he readied to leave.

“I can’t wait for that,” Sakura replied, smiling sweetly at him as she stood from the table and wrapped her thin arms around his shoulders.

“I was talking to Sasuke, y’know,” Naruto teased, causing the hairs on Sasuke’s arms to rise as he sipped at his tea.

“Oh, come on! Not again!” Sakura huffed, stamping her foot and playing along. Sasuke wondered how he hadn’t gotten cavities from living with them yet.

“Alright, alright. Sorry, you know you’re my number one.” Naruto cooed at her, regaining her favour and they kissed goodbye. Sasuke ate his pancakes, his gaze locked on the newspaper for some time.

“Adios, my favourite people!” Naruto called, to which Sasuke raised his hand in a silent wave without looking up and Sakura shooed him out the door.

As soon as Naruto had walked out, Sakura threw her back against the closed door and faced Sasuke with an expression not unlike one of a woman possessed. Sasuke covered his wince by straightening in his chair.

“Sasuke-kun, I need your help! I really messed up!” She pleaded, throwing her hands in front of her
chest and pressing them together tightly.

After wondering what the hell was going on, Sasuke decided it was best to be direct.

“What?”

Whining in frustration, Sakura flew away from the door and trudged over to the him, plopping down in a chair. She looked so positively morose, that Sasuke put down his paper and gave her his undivided attention.

“I forgot today was our anniversary.” She admitted, in a small voice.

Sasuke was momentarily confused, then it all clicked together. Naruto had been telling him the other day about his big surprise for Sakura for their one-year anniversary, and today was the big day.

“You forgot?” Sasuke couldn’t keep himself from asking. If anything, Naruto was the one who was more likely to forget dates. But then, Sasuke supposed the idiot would never forget the day when Sakura finally said yes to him.

“Don’t look at me like that! I feel bad enough already,” Sakura truly did look miserable, and Sasuke let out a sigh of his own. Why did he always have to end up involved in situations like this?

Sakura mussed her hair messily, a quirk when she was stressed or anxious, “It’s just with all the placement I’ve been doing, being so busy and all, the days just run together and it completely slipped my mind.”

“I don’t have anything for him.” She looked ready to cry, her eyes filling with tears and Sasuke spoke up before the waterworks were upon him.

“Sakura,” Sasuke muttered exasperatedly, rubbing the bridge of his nose irritably, “Instead of complaining to me why don’t you do something about it?”

“But I don’t have any idea what he would want!” She wailed hopelessly, dropping her head in her arms and Sasuke barely restrained himself from getting up and leaving her to drown in her misery.

No, he was Sakura’s friend. He wouldn’t let her make a fool of herself like this. More importantly, Naruto was his friend too and he didn’t want to see the moron hurt on a day that obviously meant so much to him.

“And you assume I do?”

“You’re his best friend, Sasuke-kun. He tells you all the random stuff that I don’t want to hear. He must’ve said something! He’s always wanting something.”

She rolled her eyes at her boyfriend’s materialism, but to his credit most of the time Naruto didn’t actually get what he said he wanted. He would just pine about the loss of it for a few days and then get over it, moving onto the next thing.

“There’s a hoodie downtown he’s been obsessed with, he sent me a picture the other day,” Picking his phone up from the table, he flicked through his picture messages from Naruto until he came across what he was looking for.

He showed it to Sakura, whose eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning, “Oh, it’s kinda nice. I actually think it would look good on him,”
“He didn’t tell me which store it’s in, but since it’s a picture on their website it has the store’s name in the corner,” Sasuke pointed to the bottom right corner.

“Blue Bird,” Sakura read aloud, then grinned happily, “I know where that is! I can drop by there on my way to class later on!”

“Congratulations on your anniversary,” Sasuke inclined his head, and Sakura turned her dazzling smile towards him.

“Thank you so much! You’re literally the best, you know that?” She hugged his head to her chest like a kitten and giggled. He sighed, but was relieved everything worked out.

“Don’t mention it,” he mumbled, releasing him and taking his plate and empty mug up to be washed.

“You don’t have to do that, Sakura,” he protested, making to stand, but she hushed him and already had them in water before he could move.

“It’s the least I can do, really!” She smiled, and he stared at her for a short moment before letting her do as she wished.

Later on in the afternoon, after an intense but productive study session, Sasuke started packing his things for an overnight trip. Seeing as how it was their anniversary, Sasuke really didn’t think he could be a third-wheel tonight, and he didn’t want to. Sakura came in, having just returned from uni and shopping, with a bag from Blue Bird hanging from her hand.

“Oh, are you going somewhere?” She asked, walking over to where he was preparing his things to go.

“I’m going to stay with Karin tonight.” He said, throwing clothes into his overnight bag.

Tilting her head to the side confusedly, Sakura furrowed her delicate brows, “Why would you do that?”

Upon hearing the question, Sasuke deemed the only appropriate response as looking Sakura straight in the eyes and giving her a pointed look. Then, he raised his eyes just above her head to the doorway where her and Naruto’s rooms were.

Bright red bloomed across her cheeks, and Sasuke nodded once he was certain his message had been conveyed. Covering her mouth and coughing awkwardly, Sakura stuttered for a while before managing a small ‘Th-Thank you for being so considerate, Sasuke-kun’, and then she vanished from his doorway.

Once she was gone, Sasuke stopped his packing and glanced at the doorway. Get a grip, he told himself. It wasn’t like Sasuke didn’t know what would happen tonight, he wasn’t a fool. Despite his discomfort with it, he would not deprive the two of doing…what they would do.

Having finished packing fifteen minutes later, he took his stuff downstairs and readied it by the door. He sent Karin a text to let her know he was on his way, grabbing a quick drink of water for the ride over.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto greeted as he suddenly waltzed through the door, and Sasuke wished he hadn’t drunk his water so quickly.

The smile on Naruto’s face was dazzling, and it seemed his entire being was lit up and glowing
with happiness. Even if she was not in the room, his smile was for her. It always was.

“You left the expired milk in the fridge again.” It was Sasuke’s automatic response, and Naruto’s smile disappeared to be replaced with a panicked expression.

“Are you serious?! Damn, I thought for sure I had gotten rid of it this time.” He cursed, glaring at the fridge as if it was his enemy.

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy some more tomorrow.” Sasuke said, walking over to where his bag and laptop were situated, near the exit.

“Where’re you going?” Naruto questioned, lifting an eyebrow.

“Spending the night at Karin’s place. I know you two have plans.” Sasuke explained, for the second time that day.

Unexpectedly, Sasuke caught a hint of a blush on Naruto’s cheeks. Well, maybe the idiot had some modesty at all.

“Sasuke, this is why you’re my best friend,” Naruto professed, placing a solemn hand on Sasuke’s shoulder, “You get the little things that I don’t have to say, like how I’m going to be scoring all night long consecutively and I think that’s beautiful.”

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. Nope, the idiot was still as shameless as ever.

Slapping him on the back good-naturedly, Naruto grinned cheekily, “Thanks, bastard. I owe you a free lunch, okay?”

“You mean free lunch as in anything under 500 yen, I assume?” Sasuke summarised, to which Naruto shot finger guns at him.

“Course! I’m only a university student after all.” Naruto grinned at him brightly and Sasuke couldn’t find it in himself to fight back.

“Have a good night,” Sasuke said in parting, to which Naruto winked and then he was out the door.

* *

Finding an easy park in front of Karin’s apartment block, Sasuke slung his laptop case over his shoulder and hefted his overnight bag out of the passenger seat, slamming the doors shut. The warmth of his car vanished to be replaced with the chilly night wind, and he made haste over to Karin’s single unit. Just as he raised his hand to knock, the door suddenly flung open and standing in it was the figure of a very happy Uzumaki Karin.

“Sasuke! It’s about time! What took you so long anyway?” Pouting, Karin didn’t wait for an answer as she pulled him in for a warm hug.

“Nice to see you too, Karin.” Sasuke sighed, not bothering to return the hug – it only encouraged Karin to hold onto him for longer.

“It’s been way too long since we hung out just the two of us! Come on, we have so much to do!” Sasuke opened his mouth to tell her not to make a fuss, but didn’t get the chance as he was hauled inside the apartment.

Karin was Naruto’s cousin that had relocated to Konoha two years ago, just as they started
university. As soon as she laid eyes on Sasuke, she was completely smitten. She would chase him everywhere, follow him on campus and hang out with them under the pretence of spending time with her cousin who she loved dearly.

Naruto had laughed outright at that. His relationship with Karin, whilst it was a good one, was not one where she would deliberately hang out with him in any circumstance if she could avoid it.

“So, not that I’m not totally thrilled having you here, but you didn’t really say why you needed a place to crash tonight. Mind elaborating?” She said, placing a mug of green tea on the coffee table and sitting cross-legged on the floor across from him.

Sasuke stared at her, then stared down at his mug.

“It’s Naruto and Sakura’s anniversary today.”

Instantly, the easy going smile she had on her face vanished. Sighing, she rubbed at her temples and placed her own cup down on the coffee table with more force than necessary.

“That stupid jerk, always so inconsiderate.”

Karin was also the only person in existence that knew. It wasn’t that Sasuke had told her. No, if Sasuke had it his way then nobody would ever, ever know what he truly felt deep down. Unfortunately, Karin had figured it out all on her own, and no matter how Sasuke had consistently denied it over and over she didn’t believe him. Eventually, Sasuke gave in and told her, confirming what she thought all along.

Sasuke rolled his eyes at her over exaggeration, “It’s their anniversary, Karin. Besides, neither of them told me to leave. I decided myself.”

“No.”

She groaned, putting her own mug down a little too roughly, “Damn it, won’t you even let me finish?”

This was what Karin tried to do every time the issue of Naruto and Sakura came up. She would tell him to express his feelings, and Sasuke would politely tell her to mind her own damn business. Sasuke never wanted Naruto to know. His friendship with Sasuke was perfect, and the brunette was determined not to put that in jeopardy over anything. He wouldn’t be so selfish.

“I’ve already told you, I won’t do it.” He said petulantly, turning his head to the side as he drank his tea so he wouldn’t have to meet her scrutiny head on.

Karin sighed heavily, shaking her head, “I just don’t get what you’re so scared of–”

“I am not scared, Karin.” Sasuke shot back, his prickles coming out at the accusation.

She threw her arms up, at a loss, “Well, I don’t know what any other explanation could be.”

“It’s complicated.” Sasuke bit out, to which Karin scoffed.

“Look, he’s your best friend. Don’t you think he has a right to know? I mean, Naruto cares about
you a lot–"

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“Ugh! You’re impossible, you know that?!” Karin yelled in frustration, pinning Sasuke with a glare.

Silence settled between the two.

When Sasuke finally broke it, his voice was calm, “He’s happy with Sakura.”

Karin’s eyes widened, and she leaned in a little closer.

“I don’t want to ruin his happiness anymore.”

Karin froze, then sighed softly, “Oh, Sasuke. You make him happy too.” She whispered, and Sasuke smirked. But he knew his eyes looked sad, and within their ebony depths she would see the words he couldn’t say.

*Not the way she can.*
Heart that's pounding

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your encouraging and kind comments :) I'm really glad you are enjoying the story and it's only the first chapter! Here is another for ya'll!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sasuke returned home the next day, he wasn’t surprised to find a note on the fridge and feel the absence of his two housemates. It appeared that Naruto’s big romantic gift for his anniversary with Sakura paid off, Sasuke recalling Naruto’s uncommon anxiousness about the whole thing.

“Do you really think she’s gonna like this? What if I’ve messed up here big time?” Naruto frowned, his teeth digging into his bottom teeth worriedly.

Sasuke exhaled, stopping once again during his game of Sudoku. He liked to train his brain whenever he wasn’t overloading it with new information, and it was also a habit he’d picked up from his father. It was increasingly hard to focus on it however, with Naruto moaning and groaning his woes right into Sasuke’s ear. Deciding participating in conversation would lead to its end faster, he spoke up.

“Idiot, why are you questioning it now? It’s done, you can’t just go back on it.”

“I know, I know that! It’s just, what if she freaks out and thinks I’m pushing it?”

“You’ve been together for a year, what more is there to push?” Sasuke muttered, feeling it was all too simple and Naruto was overcomplicating it as usual.

“Don’t say that! Don’t you know that relationships aren’t so black and white, bastard?” Naruto growled, and Sasuke didn’t offer up any counter argument. It was too troublesome, and Naruto would only say he was inexperienced – yet still asked his advice, like this.

“I’m sure Sakura will see how much thought you put into this. It’s really obvious to notice when you use your brain, it’s not a common experience for us,” Sasuke shrugged, leaning back in his chair and paying no mind to the glare Naruto was aiming his way.

Consolingly, Sasuke shifted more towards him and said, “Look, just go with your instincts. It’s never let you down before,”

“Hey, thanks. That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me all week,” Naruto smirked at him, shoving at Sasuke’s shoulder light-heartedly.

Turning thoughtful, Naruto turned the envelope over in his hands and stared down at it. Then, nodding once, he glanced back up to Sasuke and smiled confidently.

“I’m definitely gonna blow her away,” he said, ever so sure of himself that Sasuke offered a lilt of his lips in return.

Setting the note down, he went over to the jug and made to prepare some fresh coffee. A discount weekend getaway to one of Tokyo’s more prestigious hot springs and adjoining spa centre was
definitely the way to blow any girl’s mind. The trip lasted from midday Friday (today) until Monday morning. Seeing as how Naruto had no classes on Fridays, and Sakura only had a two-hour lecture early in the morning, they could make such a trip. Unlike Sasuke, who alternatively had a two-hour lecture to look forward to at one o’clock, and then another hour of tutorial classes at five in the afternoon.

It would be a quiet weekend for a change.

*

Just before his housemates returned, on Sunday, his father called.

“Sasuke, how are you?” he asked, his bluntness familiar and comforting to Sasuke.

“Alright. I have an essay due next week and I’m just proofreading over it.”

“You can send it to me later, I will read over it for you. It’s always beneficial to have a second set of eyes check your work.” his father offered, and Sasuke widened his eyes.

“There’s no need for you to do that, I mean, I can get Sakura to check it. I know how busy things are.” Sasuke was rambling, knew he was rambling, but couldn’t just stop. It was how he was with his father, always striving to prove himself and stand proudly on his own.

“It is busy, but I can make time for my son.” He replied, and a flutter of happiness struck Sasuke’s core and his lips curled up.

“I’ll send it in an hour or so. Thank you very much, tou-san.”

“Not at all,” his father brushed him off, and Sasuke could sense he was feeling slightly embarrassed so he didn’t push it, “How are your friends?”

“They’re good, I guess. Since it was their anniversary last week, they’ve gone on a celebratory weekend away. Got the house to myself until tomorrow morning.”

“You must be enjoying the quiet, for once.”

“You can say that again.”

“Have you any plans for yourself, recently? Plans with a certain someone?”

Sasuke kept his true sexuality hidden from everyone, but there was one exception to that. Well, now there was two, since Karin had figured him out last year. But before that, his father had been the first and only person alive to know. It had been a confusing time back for him, in high school. When it was only his father and him, Sasuke couldn’t hide anything from him. It had simultaneously been the most frightening and liberating experience. Gaining his acceptance, whilst something Sasuke could have lived without, was a gift Sasuke treasured each and every day. It felt so comforting that one person supported him, the way he lived, and it was not just any person. It was his father, who he loved more than anyone.

Despite how his father accepted him, it had taken a while for him to understand everything about what ‘being gay’ meant. Nevertheless, he persevered and took an interest in Sasuke’s personal life, constantly reminding him he was ready to meet anyone, should Sasuke have someone special. It was amazing. All Sasuke was missing, was that someone special.

“Unfortunately, no. I haven’t really had much time to socialise and get out, much.”
“That’s not good. Studying and self-improving is of course important, Sasuke. But, so is mingling in society once and a while. Try to do something at least once a week.”

Of all things, Sasuke was most definitely not used to a lecture from his father telling him to be more social. It was laughable, compared to how he viewed his father in his childhood as this scary, overarching figure that could not possibly respect him when he was in Itachi’s shadow. When Itachi left, all they had was each other. There were bumps in the road along the way, and many setbacks, but they managed. In his life, Sasuke was most satisfied with his relationship with his father. It was one of the most valuable things to him.

They continued talking together a little longer, his father catching him up on his work and the state of things. Uchiha Enterprises was well known for manufacturing designer sportswear, encompassing all attire but with a sharp focus on athletic footwear. It had been the grain of his father’s first idea, his first ambition for the business world. After his mother passed, his father hadn’t been able to cope with running the business by himself any longer, as it had been a joint family business through and through, so he’d accepted a secondary shareholder to lessen the load. His father never accredited himself solely for Uchiha Enterprises’ success – he had been the biggest supporter of his mother’s role in the business. However, he had a trust fund set up in Sasuke’s name, and his father said if one day he wanted to take over the business, then all he had to do was express his interest and present his resume. Working in his family’s business was Sasuke’s ultimate dream. Before he could achieve that, though, he would truly work his way up in the business world, and bulk up his resume so he would be chosen not because he was the co-founder’s son – but because he would have only the best skills and knowledge that would make him the number one candidate for the job.

At the end of the day, Sasuke knew he had made the right choice to put all his efforts into his future career. It was the natural path for him to take. Yet, as his gaze traversed the empty chairs and quiet stillness of his house, he felt a pang of loneliness. When he thought of smiling blue eyes and laughter that always warmed his skin, he bit back the misery nipping at him.

He would never admit it, but on Monday morning when he heard the familiar click of the lock and their laughing voices, he was relieved. But at the same time, he wasn’t. Because the reality of his situation hadn’t changed, but he held small comfort in the fact that even if he felt lonely – he wasn’t alone.

*

Sasuke was sitting at his favoured bench in Yoyogi Park, his iced tea he had bought over the halfway mark and well and truly dwindling down to the dregs. Tapping at his leg, Sasuke felt a fresh wave of irritation wash over him, drenching him in a foul mood. He had received an email from his lecturer that his afternoon class had been cancelled for the day, meaning he had the afternoon off. Usually, he did his cardio exercise with Naruto before he went to class, but no that he had no class and no Naruto, he felt time burning away so quickly.

He was so annoyed with the blonde, because Naruto couldn’t even let Sasuke know if his plans had changed or he was running late. So, Sasuke had been stuck waiting for him for roughly forty-five minutes, and he was about ready to give up and go home. If he had known Naruto was going to flake out on him, he could’ve had a free afternoon for himself.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed against his thigh and he picked it up. Glancing at the caller ID, he frowned when he saw Naruto’s name. Irritably, Sasuke accepted the call and pressed the phone to his ear, speaking before Naruto could.

“Where are you? You’re over half an hour late, and don’t even think about giving some stupid
“Excuse.”

“Uk, hey, Sasuke. I, uh…I’m sorry, I…”

“Naruto? What is it?” Sasuke’s tone sharpened at the unexpectedly soft voice of his friend, almost quiet. Something wasn’t right. When Naruto was quiet like this, Sasuke knew something wasn’t right.

“I’m kinda, at the hospital right now.” Naruto said, reluctant.

“What happened? Are you alright?” prompted Sasuke, standing up from the bench and taking a few steps forward, away from the noise nearby.

“Oh, no I’m fine. It’s–it’s mum,” Naruto said, a tremble in the voicing of the last word.

Sasuke felt his chest constrict painfully, and in turn his grip on the phone tightened.

Naruto went on to explain, his lack of certainty palpable as Sasuke could imagine him pacing up and down the halls, “Sh-She was in a car accident and–and now she’s in surgery,”

“What hospital?” asked Sasuke, spinning on his heel and walking out of the park to where he had his car parked. His half-empty iced tea forgotten, on the bench.

There was some shifting on the other end of the line, then Naruto answered, “Saint Senju’s.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.” Sasuke said resolutely, prepared to say more if Naruto should fight him on this.

“Okay, drive safely.” Naruto said, then Sasuke was listening to the dial tone.

Shit, things must be bad.

“Naruto,” He called his name as soon as he recognised the blonde hair, striding through the pristine walls of the hospital.

Naruto looked up at his name being called. When he saw Sasuke, he stumbled to his feet and started making his way over to him. As soon as he was there, Naruto enveloped him in a tight hug, which Sasuke didn’t try to stop. In fact, he lightly hugged Naruto back, but it wasn’t a long hug and soon they were parted again. They took a seat on the uncomfortable chairs, Sasuke not minding the fact he was still dressed in his exercise attire.

“Did you call Sakura?” he asked, wondering where the pink-haired girl was during a situation like this.

“Uh, no. No, I don’t think I did.” Naruto mumbled, not really looking like he was paying much attention.

Taking Naruto’s phone out of his limp hands, Sasuke pressed the circular button and noticed three missed calls from Sakura. Glancing at the blonde, Sasuke was about to ask him if he knew his girlfriend was calling, but one look at his face had Sasuke changing his mind.

At that moment, Sakura’s face flashed across the screen – she was calling again. Deciding to do the right thing, Sasuke pressed accept and put the phone to his ear.

Sakura’s voice crackled through the line in a flustered rush, “Finally! What have you been doing!? I’ve been trying to call you for–”
“It’s Sasuke.”

She paused, confused, then asked, “Sasuke-_kun? Why do you have Naruto’s phone? Is he there? Let me speak to him.”

“We’re at the hospital. Kushina-_san has been in a car accident.” He answered, turning his head to the side and lowering his voice. Nurses were brushing by them in a steady flow, always moving from one room to another.

“Oh my god,” Sakura breathed into the phone, as if her voice had been sucked from her lungs.

A moment of silence, then, “How is she?”

Crossing his legs together at the ankles, Sasuke leaned back in the hard, worn chair and rolled his shoulders, “In surgery, at the moment. We’re just here waiting.”

“Sakura, you need to get down here.” He added quietly after a beat, glancing over at Naruto and his pale face.

There was rustling on her end of the phone, and Sasuke registered the sound of a pencil hitting the ground and Sakura’s muffled cursing, “I will, I’m going to leave now. I just have to let my lecturer know it’s an emergency, since this class is compulsory.”

“How is he okay?” she asked, worry bleeding through her voice.

Sasuke suddenly found it hard to swallow, “Not really.”

“I’ll be there in under twenty minutes.” With that, she hung up the phone and Sasuke pulled his away from his ear, staring down at the black screen.

“Sakura’s coming soon.” Sasuke said, hoping to get some sort of response out of the blonde as he returned him his phone.

It did. Naruto slowly turned his head to the side, looking at Sasuke with wide eyes, “B-But her class, it’s compulsory—”

Sasuke was quick to cut in, “Idiot, this is an emergency. Of course she can leave, she will work it out with her lecturer. Don’t worry about that right now.”

“You’re more important, Naruto.” Sasuke assured him, and was surprised when he felt Naruto take his hand in his, holding it weakly.

He didn’t say anything, but Sasuke saw the tears spilling down his cheeks even as Naruto kept his head low. Sasuke tightened the hold, giving the warm hand a squeeze. He was relieved to feel a light squeeze in return.

Seventeen minutes later, Sakura came rushing forth towards them.

“Naruto!” She called out his name, and the blonde lifted his head and looked around until his eyes locked on her.

“Sakura-_chan.” His voice was scratchy, his eyes bloodshot.

Crouching down in front of him, she began combing through his hair tenderly and looking at him with the utmost concern in her eyes.
“Your class,” He started, but stopped when she shook her head firmly.

“I need to be here, with you. I’ll sort everything out, don’t worry, neh?” Her hand then stroked down the side of his face, as she gathered him in her arms and hugged him closely.

And then, they all played the waiting game. Sasuke had had to step out for a while, due to a call from his father that had intended only to be a brief check-up but turned into a longer conversation due to the news Sasuke had. His father wasn’t particularly close with Kushina, as in didn’t hold weekly dinners or met with her on a regular basis. He did, however, consider Kushina one of his friends, as well as an important familial figure to Sasuke. Countless times, she had looked out for Sasuke when his father had been inundated in work or was away from his son. For that, he would always be grateful to Kushina.

Hearing such tragic news caused him great concern, as Sasuke could tell from all the questioning his father did over the phone. Whenever he was worried or anxious, his father asked too many questions. It was one of the very few tells Sasuke had learned about him over the years. He tried his best to reassure his father, even though he himself felt upset. The phone call ended with Sasuke promising to update him on Kushina’s progress when he knew more and his father urging him to take care on his way home. It was oddly comforting.

When he returned, it was to a scene of cliché sweetness, yet none the less tragic. Naruto had his head rested on Sakura’s petite shoulder, his face turned into her neck. Sakura was trailing her fingers delicately through his hair, her lips pressing to the top of his head and silent tears falling down her cheeks. A trip to the bathroom would distract Sasuke from irrelevant thoughts, and clear up his foggy mind before he returned to them.

Another hour and a half later, a doctor wearing surgical scrubs appeared in the hallway and was, unlike the last five or six of them, heading their way. Naruto was the first on his feet, with Sakura and Sasuke not far behind him.

“How is she? Is my mum alright?” He demanded, almost threatening in a way but it was only the nerves and the stress of it all. Just as Sasuke was inseparable from his father, Naruto had no one he loved more than his mother.

“There was some internal bleeding, but we’ve managed to stem the flow and we’re giving her some blood transfusions right now,” the doctor said, pulling down the mask to speak, “She had some fractures in her right arm, but they are only minor. She is stable, now. We’re confident she will make a full recovery.”

In chorus, the trio breathed a sigh of relief. Kushina was okay, she was stable and her chances of recovery were great.

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“Can I see her?” Naruto asked, his hands trembling at his sides and his eyes wandering to the room his mother was in.

“Of course. Family only, please.” The doctor advised, and Naruto sharply turned to look at Sasuke.

Clasping his hand in Sasuke’s, Naruto stepped forward and stated, “Sasuke is family.”

The doctor furrowed his brow, “It says here that Uzumaki Kushina only has one living relative, that being her only son. If I’m not mistaken, this is you Uzumaki-kun.”

“Naruto, it’s okay,” Sasuke attempted to change his mind, he didn’t want to cause conflict.

“Shut up! Mum would want you in there, she would say the exact same thing!” Naruto heightened
his voice, in that way he did when he was determined on making a point.

Repressing a sigh, Sasuke eased his hand out of Naruto’s and decided to be frank. It was the best way to talk to his best friend in any situation, really.

“I know, but you’re her son.”

Sasuke watched blue eyes blink open wide, the rims red from tears that have been trapped inside for too long. Placing a hand on his shoulder, Sasuke left it there for a short moment, a light grip as a means to show his support.

“She’s your mother, go and see her. Don’t leave her lonely.”

“We’ll be right here waiting for you, Naruto.” Sakura said tenderly, smiling at her boyfriend and nodding her head once. She reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze, which he returned right away. Then, with a meaningful look towards both of them, he mustered a watery smile before nodding and walking into his mother’s room. Once he was gone, Sakura turned to him.

“Why did he call you, and not me?” she asked, not upset or accusing, just confused.

“He wanted one of us here, it obviously didn’t matter to him which one.” Sasuke slickly replied. That was the least of his worries at the current moment, he didn’t know why Sakura brought it up now. Then again, he never really understood women at all even in the best of times.

She nodded, taking a seat and teasing out the tangles from her hair, “Yeah, I guess our names are pretty close together in his contacts.”

Sakura didn’t elaborate further, but Sasuke interpreted her thought process right away – that Naruto had meant to call her, and his finger had slipped and thus explaining why Sasuke was there first. Narrowing his eyes, Sasuke swallowed back his ire and deigned not to reply. Sakura was a good person, no doubt about it – but she could be so cruel sometimes, and not even realise it.

When Naruto came back out, he had gained back a lot of colour.

“She was only awake for a few minutes, then the drugs took her under. I was just so glad to see her, and hear her voice. She even smiled at me, like nothing was wrong.” Naruto chuckled wetly, wiping at his eyes.

“That’s great, I’m so happy for you Naruto,” Sakura smiled caringly up at him, rubbing his arm tenderly. Sasuke allowed a faint smile to cross his lips, and felt a spark of victory when Naruto saw it and his own smile hiked up a few centimetres.

“Now, let’s get you home.” Sakura said, wrapping her scarf around her boyfriend snugly. The wind had picked up during the time they were inside, the weather dropping down to just above freezing.

Suddenly, Naruto’s face broke and he frowned, pulling back from the two of them, “I can’t leave.”

Sensing he was going to put up a fight, Sakura intervened straight away, “You’re not staying here overnight, Naruto.”

“I can’t leave my mum here all alone! I’m not going anywhere!” he yelled, eyes a mixture of fierce protectiveness and childish fear.

It was Sakura’s turn to frown, “She’s asleep, she’s not going to wake up until tomorrow morning.”
“That’s not the point!” rebutted Naruto, quick off the roll.

Sasuke eyed their exchange, ever the passive observer. All the potential scenarios he considered in his head only lead to a bad outcome in his situation. When those two got into a serious argument they wouldn’t stop until they were separated from each other and spent a decent amount of time apart. At a time like this, Naruto wouldn’t survive having his precious people away from him. Sasuke sighed through his nose. Honestly, in his lighter thoughts he mused that they suited each other very well. Stubborn fools should go together, no?

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Sasuke stepped up to them and drew attention, “Go home, idiot.”

“S-Sasuke?” Naruto reeled, as if just remembering his presence.

“Tomorrow morning we can wake up early and go to the hospital as soon as you want. Now, you need to rest. Your mother would say the same thing.” Sasuke shrugged, experience teaching him that level-headed indifference was the most effective way to diffuse any high tension exchange.

Now, Naruto was staring at him like he hadn’t seen him in years, “Sasuke.”

Then it was like Naruto collapsed against him, embracing Sasuke tightly and pressing his face against his neck, “Thank you.”

Swallowing past the lump that had suddenly gotten lodged in his throat, Sasuke lifted his arms to wrap around Naruto’s waist. As much as he was strong for Naruto, the day had taken its toll on him as well. He had been truly scared, not only of losing a precious person like Kushina but also the fear of what it would do to Naruto. His mother was his only blood family he had left, nothing bad could ever happen to her.

“Tomorrow you have to see her too. She was asking where you were.” Naruto mumbled, his lips against Sasuke’s neck but Sasuke was far too emotional to get caught up in that right now.

“I will.” Sasuke somehow made his lips work, despite how wobbly they were feeling.

“We will. Together.” Naruto corrected, and gave him a final squeeze before letting go and standing upright once more.

With that, the trio left the hospital, with Naruto in between Sasuke and Sakura as they braced the chilly late afternoon wind.

*  

The next day, Sasuke had driven himself and Naruto to the hospital to arrive just past nine am. He had gotten little sleep the night before, and he was almost certain Naruto had no sleep. Sakura had been sleeping when they left, but she had been up the entire night sorting out her university issues and taking the necessary time off and gaining what extensions she needed, providing evidence and such. It was ridiculous, Sasuke mused in his more rebellious thoughts, that so much effort had to be put in to prove that a tragic event had taken place just to maintain a passing grade. As if the stress from the trauma of the accident wasn’t enough.

“Let’s not wake her, she barely sleeps as it is,” Naruto had advised whilst shrugging on his coat and grabbing his wallet.

So they had departed, made a quick detour for Sasuke’s daily morning coffee and Naruto got himself a hot chocolate, and made their way over to St Senju’s.
When he walked into her room, Kushina was awake and already smiling at them.

“Morning, kaa-chan.” Naruto leaned down over her, wrapping her in his arms softly and holding her for longer than he usually would.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” She replied, patting Naruto on the back reassuringly, soothing in a way only a mother’s touch could be.

Sasuke took a seat at her side, drinking his coffee and reveling in the calmness that had overtaken him upon seeing her awake and relatively well. When they broke the hug, Kushina turned her head over to look at him.

“Sasuke, dear.” She smiled up at him, sweet as she always was even as she looked white as paper and as fragile as a porcelain doll.

“Yeah.” He said, was all he could manage. His throat was closing up on him, dammit.

“I’m happy you’ve come to see me when I’m like this.” Kushina reached over weakly, brushing against his hand and he enveloped hers in his without hesitation.

Uzumaki Kushina, Naruto’s mother. She was the closest thing Sasuke had in his life that was close to a mothering figure, seeing as his own had died when he was very young. Had been killed, was more accurate, but Sasuke tried not to think about it when he could help it. The memories only seared him, painful and precious to his heart.

“My dad wanted me to send you his warmest regards and he sincerely hopes you will make a fast recovery,” Sasuke said, finding it hard to look her in the eyes when he felt so vulnerable, “If there is anything he and I can do for you, for both of you, we’ll do it.”

“Please tell him thank you very much, I feel like I’m fully recovered hearing that,” she grinned up at him, her smile tired around the edges but no less bright or beautiful, “As long as you can look out for this one the same you always have,” Kushina inclined her head in Naruto’s direction, “Then that would be more than enough, dear.”

“Hey, come on,” Naruto spoke up, a pout taking over his lips, “I’m not that bad y’know. I can take care of myself,”

“Oh, really? The big boy who can look after himself but wouldn’t leave the hospital yesterday without getting scolded by your girlfriend and then your best friend?” Kushina rolled her eyes, sharing a look with Sasuke that almost brought a smirk to his lips.

“Dammit, Sasuke! You told her!?” Naruto’s accused, his voice practically screaming ‘traitor’ towards the other.

“Not Sasuke.” Kushina interjected, and Naruto froze on the spot, realizing who it could only be. Sakura, of course. She must have made a call, or a made a quick drop in - despite how practical she was, when it came to people's well-being Sakura was always looking for what more she could do to help them.

Though not as close to Naruto’s mother as Sasuke was, it didn’t mean Sakura cared for her any less. In fact, she was strikingly similar to Kushina in many ways – to name a few, fiercely independent, low tolerance for idiots (i.e. Naruto), and very intelligent. The two were fond of each other, and had formed a good relationship even before Naruto and Sakura had become a couple.

“She’s very worried about you, and Sasuke too. I can see how tired you both look.” Kushina
squeezed his hand, and Sasuke was amazed at how much strength that flowed into him from such a small gesture.

“I didn’t mean to make you guys worry for me,” Naruto mumbled, crossing his arms and casting his gaze downwards, “It’s just, I just–”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. I’m not as slow as you are, idiot,” interrupted Sasuke, earning an outraged look from Naruto but he continued, “I already know. Just don’t neglect yourself in turn, or you’ll be the one stressing everyone out,”

Raising his head, Naruto’s eyes met Sasuke’s across the room, and in light of the early morning sun, shone brilliantly blue. Sometimes, they needed no more than a look between each other to understand what the other wanted to say. For a long time, Naruto had been very in tune with Sasuke’s innermost thoughts and feelings. However, Sasuke had a certain feeling buried so deep inside him not even Naruto would see it. For as long as he could, Sasuke would keep it that way.

“You’re right, damn. I’m sorry.” Naruto admitted, rubbing at his face and shooting them both an apologetic grin. His smile was one that was very hard to turn away from, Sasuke spoke from experience.

“That’s my boy.” Kushina beamed, lifting her arm towards her son and within moments Naruto was by her side, her other hand clasped in his. When they smiled together, Sasuke would often compare it to watching a supernova.

Then, Naruto reached over the bed and caught Sasuke’s hand, his grip tight but his hold so warm. Sasuke’s eyes widened, and he fought the tears tingling in his nose. It was at times just like this one when Sasuke could fool himself into believing they were their own little family. Kushina doting on him, and scolding Naruto, even though she loved him more than words could describe. He and Naruto, and no one else. It was them against the world. At least in these small hours, it was.

Chapter End Notes

Was it too early to write such a sad chapter? Maybe. Do I regret it? No :D haha you guys didn't expect it right? XD well expect the unexpected!
After two weeks and a half weeks passed, Kushina was deemed healthy enough to leave the hospital and continue her recuperation in her own home. Due to this, Naruto had decided he would stay over with her for a week, just to look after her and make sure she didn’t strain herself.

“I’m telling you, I’ll be fine sweetheart,” Kushina protested, being helped by Sakura out of the taxi car as Naruto exited from the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, and I said I know you, kaachan,” Naruto rolled his eyes, popping the trunk and pulling out his bags, along with his mother’s bag she had kept at the hospital. Sasuke moved over to help, hefting Kushina’s bag over his shoulder and letting Naruto take care of his own.

“You’re as stubborn as those little horses, just pushing forward without worrying if the load you’re carrying is too heavy,” the four of them walked slowly up the driveway, to Naruto’s childhood home.

“You brat! You dare speak to your mother like that, eh!?” Kushina growled over at her son, raising her arm threateningly and squeezing a tight fist. To his credit, Naruto’s only sign of fear was the loud swallow her words elicited.

“I-It’s for your own good! Just listen to your son, geez! I’m not a kid, anymore.” Grumbling, Naruto moved up in front and inserted his keys into the locks.


Scoffing, Sasuke strode past and pushed roughly into his shoulder as he passed by into the house, “Idiots are the last to enter, I think you meant.”

Sakura helped Kushina into the living room, sweeping her away before she could offer with helping to unpack her things or fix them something to eat. It didn’t take long between Naruto unpacking his mother’s things and Sasuke heading to the kitchen to fix them all a cup of tea. Setting the four mugs down on the coffee table, Sasuke took a seat on the single seater lounge whilst Sakura sat beside Kushina on the wider one.

“Isn’t Naruto taking a while?” Sakura asked, sipping at her tea and casting a glance over to the stairwell.

“You know how much of a slowpoke that boy can be.” Kushina rolled her eyes, but it was good-naturedly.
“But the tea’s going to get cold, after Sasuke-kun made it especially,” pouting, Sakura looked down and Sasuke stood.

“I’ll go see what’s taking him so long.” Sasuke said, and any lingering irritation disappeared at seeing the Sakura’s face brighten. Even Kushina seemed a bit more at ease, giving a nod in his direction.

As Sasuke climbed the stairs, he realised he could hear no noises coming from anywhere. Being the uselessly loud person he was, Naruto very rarely did anything without creating some level of noise. Which meant, that Naruto wasn’t doing anything. Quickening his pace, he reached the top of the stairs and turned down, heading for Kushina’s room. Pushing the door open, he saw the suitcase laid at the end of the bed, and Naruto standing in front of the window. He hadn’t heard Sasuke, so clearing his throat, the latter kept his face blank as Naruto startled and turned to see him.

“What’s taking so long? The tea’s ready,” he said, staring directly into those sapphire orbs.

“Oh, Sasuke,” Naruto gave a small smile, then turned back to the window, “My bad, I’ll come down now.”

Raising his eyebrow, Sasuke didn’t leave but approached closer, so he was standing side by side with Naruto.

“What are you doing?” asked Sasuke, glancing sideways and forward again before Naruto could catch him looking.

“Y’know, just thinking about stuff that-I really shouldn’t be thinking about,” Naruto gave a self-deprecating chuckle at the end of his sentence, fake smile tugging at his lips and making Sasuke more aware. His eyes then slid to a photograph on Kushina's bedside table, and Sasuke followed his gaze. Three people were in the photo, but only two still lived in this house. Sobering, Sasuke let him have a moment.

Ever since the death of his father, Naruto had wanted to change things. To become someone in society who prevented what happened to Minato from happening to anyone else, that no one else should go through the pain Naruto and his mother both went through. It was why he’d chosen to pursue a career as a paramedic – so he could get to someone who needed his help as fast as possible, without wasting a single second. All Naruto wanted was to give everyone a fighting chance, to save them until they could get to the hospital. He honestly could have become a doctor if he had wanted to, and Sasuke recalled an old conversation before they all entered university, that he had eavesdropped on.

“Naruto, you do realise you have the skills and the aptitude to pursue something more if you so wished,” Iruka, their high school guidance counsellor.

Sasuke had been passing by, but hid behind the partially opened door when he heard Naruto’s name.

“What?” Naruto asked, and Sasuke heard the doubt in his voice.

“Like getting into medical school. Like becoming a doctor, a surgeon, whatever you want,” Iruka explained, the terms making Sasuke stiffen. If Naruto wished to pursue any of those careers, he’d have to leave Tokyo to do it. Maybe even transfer overseas...

“Thanks, but that’s not for me. I’m gonna become a paramedic, the best one around,” Naruto
replied, and Sasuke felt a flutter of relief whoosh through him.

“Are you sure that’s what you want? I just don’t want you to limit yourself because you don’t think you’re capable. Because you are, Naruto. Don’t underestimate yourself.”

Iruka had always held a particular liking towards Naruto. It wasn’t obvious, not something that the students gossiped about or anything like that. Yet, Naruto was one of the very few that Iruka actively chased after when he didn’t make his scheduled appointments, or they hadn’t seen each other in a while.

“I know, I don’t. I could probably do more, but that’s not my thing.” Naruto shifted, and there was rustling inside – probably picking up his backpack. Sasuke hid himself further behind the door, masked for when Naruto would exit.

“I wanna stay in Tokyo and go to university here. I’ve gotta try my best after all, if I want to follow Sakura-chan and that bastard after high school’s done.”

With a small laugh, Naruto said goodbye and breezed out of the office, and Sasuke watched him go from his place behind the door.

Naruto was never intelligent in the conventional manner, Sasuke mused. It had taken a while for him to really see it, but Naruto used his head in different ways. Not thinking of the most logical strategy or relying on some form of dumb luck, but relying best on his instincts. Despite how he wouldn’t admit it, Sasuke agreed with Iruka. If he truly wanted to, Naruto could choose any of those career paths. He was not limited in the way that Sasuke and Sakura were, by restricting themselves to one area they were exceedingly talented in. Naruto was good at anything, as long as he applied himself and had a goal he wanted to achieve.

Yet, when he thought back to that incidental moment, Sasuke’s heart was immediately at ease when Naruto said he would stay. In hindsight, Sasuke could have realised his feelings a lot sooner, if he paid attention to his reactions to things like that. He could survive being apart from Naruto, but it didn’t mean he wanted to.

“Your birthday is coming up soon.” Sasuke eventually said, as way of changing the topic. He had been friends long enough with Naruto to know when he wanted to talk about his father, and when he wanted to only mention him in passing. It was something that was just understood between them, just as Naruto did when Sasuke’s mother came up in conversation.

“Hah, yeah,” Naruto tucked his hands in his pockets, smiling out at the sky, “Can’t believe I’m hitting my terrific twos, finally!”

“You mean terrible twos, right?” Sasuke countered, earning a laugh from the other.

“No way, not for me, man.” Naruto smiled, and Sasuke felt his unease fade away.

“Just remember to act like a 22 year old, and not an actual two year old after that.” Turning on his heel, Sasuke began heading out of the room.

Naruto’s heavy footsteps followed behind him, “Geez, stop lecturing, will you? You sound like an old man enough already.”

They returned downstairs, and enjoyed the tea together.

*
“I think we should all plan a surprise party for Naruto,” Sakura said, her hands clasped together and her voice hushed with excitement.

She, Sasuke and Karin had gathered together in their apartment, taking the chance to talk freely without worrying that Naruto will overhear. It was almost the end of the week, which meant his birthday was drawing closer and soon he’d return home. His mother was recovering well, but she and Naruto had some weird genetic ability to heal themselves more quickly than the average person would.

“Do you think so?” Sasuke asked, not willing to expand further on the thought and giving Sakura a chance to explain.

“Of course! It’s been tough for him lately, that’s why surprising him with a party full of people who love him will be perfect to cheer him up!”

“So, you mean just a friends party? I don’t think Auntie can handle hosting a full on party so soon,” Karin offered her input, to which Sakura nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, definitely! We can let him spend the day with her and then when the evening comes around, surprise!” She threw her arms out at her side, green eyes sparkling as if imagining the surprise coming to fruition.

“Alright.” Sasuke assented with a nod, and Sakura beamed.

“That dummy always has loved surprises, especially when he’s the one being surprised,” Karin agreed, then smirked, “But we can scare him a little when we say ‘surprise’, right?”

Sakura laughed and Sasuke shook his head. They then spent the remainder of the afternoon planning out the nuts and bolts of the party, and allocating roles. Sasuke was going to handle the food and the cake, Karin was in charge of calling up all of Naruto’s friends and inviting them, and Sakura would deal with the decorations and bringing Naruto to the apartment.

Lightly slapping her hands on her knees, Sakura stood, “I think it’s time we took a break. I’ll get us some coffee!”

“Thanks,” Karin said, and Sasuke inclined his head to indicate gratitude. As soon as Sakura was out of hearing vicinity, Karin turned on Sasuke. He barely repressed a sigh. Somehow, he knew this was going to end up happening at some point, “Do you think it’s a bit much? He’s an idiot, but Naruto might not be up for a surprise right now,” Furrowing her brow, Karin frowned in thought, “Maybe we should think of something else.”

“You’ve always had a problem with the way Sakura does things. If you don’t like it, say so.” Sasuke drawled, rolling his eyes and wishing he was somewhere else. The library, specifically – where chatty people were a non-existent species.

“Hey, don’t put words in my mouth! I like Sakura, she’s my friend,” Karin pouted, then leaned in closer and lowered her voice, “It’s just that she doesn’t know him like you do. I think it’s weird you let her act like she does.”

“They were friends for three years before becoming a couple, Karin. It’s not like she knows nothing about him.” Sasuke shrugged, not wanting to drag out the conversation.

“And you’ve been best friends with him double that. Your point?”

“Just get on with it. The party’s decided, and Sakura’s right. That idiot loves being the centre of
attention, so this is what he needs right now.” Sasuke said, a tone of formality in his voice, just as well since Sakura re-entered the room with their coffees ready.

“Now, where were we?”

*

“SURPRISE!”

Everyone shouted, and Karin had her wish fulfilled, as Naruto jumped out of his skin like he was having a heart attack. She cackled wickedly in the background, and Sasuke couldn’t help but smile. Sakura had her hand pressed on Naruto’s back, soothing him. Naruto’s eyes fluttered about the room, his eyes landing on every single person that had come to wish him well. Then, his face cracked into a megawatt smile, and only he and Sakura would see the tears clinging to blonde eyelashes.

It was a bubbly evening, upbeat music flowing around the apartment and laughter heard in every direction. Sasuke noted it was just like him, for Naruto to come around to each person and have a chat with them before the night ended. He truly was grateful for every friend he had.

“So, who was the mastermind here?” Naruto’s happy voice would be easy on anyone’s ears, but Sasuke pushed the thought aside in favour of paying attention. He, Sakura and Karin were now Naruto’s targets, the people he’d saved to talk to until last.

Karin made a sly face, bringing a finger up to her lips, “We’ll never tell. It could be any one of us, and you know how bad you suck at guessing games.”

“Aw, come on! It’s my birthday, don’t I deserve it?” Naruto winked at Sasuke, who really struggled not to notice how his heart rate quickened.

“Come on, you know! Teamwork is the answer for everything, don’t you remember?” Sakura said, eliciting laughs from everyone in the group, even if Sasuke’s was the quietest.

“Well, thanks so much, guys. Best family I never had,” Naruto smiled, and looked like he was glowing under the sparkling fairy lights.

The rest of the party went by in cheerful time, no one getting overly intoxicated or ruining anything. Sasuke had made sure the alcohol supply was only limited, and weak. He would do anything for Naruto, but he would not deal with drunk randoms in his home. It was fine regardless, since Sasuke had always believed drinking alcohol didn’t equate to the amount of fun that could be had.

When the last couple of people had left, Naruto turned from the door and looked at Sasuke. Nodding towards the balcony with a hopeful light in his eyes, Naruto didn’t even have to say anything as Sasuke’s feet carried him over there. His present for Naruto was tucked snugly inside his cardigan. They took a seat on the cushion bench, and stared up at the stars together. For a while, it was just quiet between them, the sounds of crickets and distant traffic the only thing to be heard.

Then, Sasuke cleared his throat, tried calming his fraying nerves, and spoke.

“Happy birthday.” Sasuke dropped the present in Naruto’s lap, already looking away out at the stars in the sky.

The wrapping paper crinkled and cracked, the sticky tape squeaking as Naruto hurriedly pulled it
apart. He had always been so impatient when it came to gift-giving, even when it wasn’t his gift. Sasuke remembered all the times Naruto had given him something, and he’d taken immense pleasure in delaying the unwrapping process for as long as humanly possible. If Naruto would even glance at Sasuke’s gift, he’d glare at him and move away, taking even longer to open it. When it came to Naruto’s own gifts though, Sasuke let him do as he wished. Had to let the idiot have some fun, sometimes.

“This is,” Naruto lifted the item up in front of his face, his eyes alive and engaging, “a DVD?”

He then turned that inquisitive gaze upon Sasuke, and the latter hated the way his heart beat faster from such a simple act.

“It’s a compilation of all the short films we made in high school.” Sasuke explained, clearing his throat and attempting to sound as stoic as he usually did, but he could hear the embarrassment seeping into his voice.

Being more than halfway through their university degrees, Sasuke had reminisced of their high school lives, and how quickly the time had flown by. Knowing Naruto, he was certain a gift of sentimentality would speak more, and mean more to him rather than a materialistic gift. So he’d gone through all of the old footage they’d collated throughout their high school years, and compiled it into a DVD. This way, Naruto could watch it wherever he was if he ever felt like remembering easier times.

“I see,” Naruto muttered, and that was when Sasuke chanced a glance up at the other’s face. His onyx eyes widened. Naruto was smiling down at the disc, his fingers gliding over the glass casing covering it. Not being someone who appreciated excessive cheesiness, Sasuke hadn’t created a fancy or cute cover for the disc. He’d just placed some white cardboard inside the casing cover, writing a single word in black marker over it: ‘Memories’.

“Thanks, Sasuke. This is awesome, really awesome,” Naruto’s smile upgraded to a grin, sunny and bright, “You can be thoughtful when you try! Even more awesome!”

“Idiot, shut up.” Sasuke glared at him, but it held no substance. Naruto could clearly see that, for his smile hadn’t dimmed in the slightest.

“What are you two doing?” Sakura’s voice echoed from the doorway, her footsteps coming closer until she had sat herself down, cross-legged and on Naruto’s other side.

“Look what Sasuke got me,” Naruto immediately pushed the DVD into Sakura’s hands, a buzz of eager energy, “It’s a DVD of all the videos we made together in high school!”

“Oh, wow!” Sakura’s voice brightened up, and Sasuke glanced over to see her smiling happily down at the case. He suppressed a startled flinch when excited green eyes raised and locked onto his.

“This is amazing, Sasuke-kun! Did you do this by yourself?” She looked at him in admiration, a look Sasuke hadn’t seen directed at him for quite some time.

He shrugged, trying not to look as uncomfortable as he felt, “It was nothing, anyone can burn a DVD or CD these days.”

“But, this is really special!” Sakura protested, and naturally Naruto followed.

“Yeah! You must’ve gone through all of ‘em when you were editing and stuff.” Naruto’s smile grew wider, and he threw an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders and gave him a half-hug.
“Hey, let go!” Sasuke tugged at his arms, but Naruto wouldn’t move a budge.

“Aww! Sasuke, you love us after all! What a considerate friend, we’re unworthy!”

“Exactly!” Sakura chirped, giggling over Naruto’s shoulder and Sasuke wanted to disappear.

“Stop laughing, you two.” He groused, only making them laugh more.

It was when he was with the two of them like this that Sasuke could forget about his feelings. Nothing had changed, they were just three best friends – trying to live and support each other in this crazy world. When they all felt the same happiness, the innocent joy shared between true friends. No couples jokes, no odd man out, just friends. If Sasuke thought of it that way, then he could face the reality that he would forever be stuck at the ‘just friends’ level. It stung, but was better than nothing,

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry guys, there won't be an update next week :( I feel bad for going on a hiatus so early in the story but I'll be back soon! Hang on until then :)
Chasing the warmth

Chapter Notes

Hey my readers :) I have returned with a new chap fresh off the word doc! Haha, I know, I'm sorry it's been so long. Uni has been a bitch, and I've been trying to sort myself out. But I got inspiration and have this here for you! I hope you enjoy it, and if you're just new to my story, welcome!

Late autumn was here, and with it the happy medium before the chill of winter descended upon Tokyo. Sasuke wasn’t fussed either way, watching the crimson leaves fluttering in the wind. Weather was of little consequence and interest to him, which made him a terrible partner for small talk. Not that Sasuke was interested in any of that frivolity.

This season, however, held important memories for him. That was why, whenever it did eventually roll around, he’d remember. It wasn’t really a date or day that stuck in his mind, but it was in the sun that shone, the leaves that fell, and the wind that blew. When he was faced with these unavoidable natural forces this time of year, even the foggiest of memories would clear up instantly.

He wished he could say he appreciated it, but he couldn’t. Because whilst people may go on and on about making memories, some memories were better left forgotten. Pressing the button for his bus stop, Sasuke stood and made his way out, braving the chilly wind. As the bus door closed, Sasuke winced. He should have bought a scarf, because he was terrible with cold weather. Shrugging his shoulders and rolling them in circles for the blood circulation, he rounded the corner and headed towards the house at the end of the block.

As soon as he walked in the door, Sasuke released a sigh at the warmth only a lived-in house could provide.

“Okaeri, Sasuke-kun!” Sakura’s cheerful voice called him from the kitchen.

“Tadaima.” Sasuke called out, slipping off his shoes and entering the kitchen to grab some water.

Sakura was getting started on dinner. They took it in turns each night, where one cooks and the other two help by cleaning everything up. Despite her less than good cooking skills, Sakura had managed a grand total of five meals she could make without disaster.

“I’m making omurice, I hope you’re hungry! The eggs are about to expire, so I’m making a lot.” she smiled at him from across the counter, and he nodded his head in assent.

“It’s fine.”

“Oh, good! You know, it’s good weather for it,” Sakura was then behind the fridge, searching out more ingredients, “I think I’m getting the hang of this~”

At this point, Sasuke turned around and quietly left. He tried not to feel too guilty when Sakura continued talking as if he was still in the room. Whilst he appreciated her kindness, Sasuke sought
solitude right now. Ever since they had met, Sasuke had never been adept at placating Sakura. Despite how she fusses over and adored him, Sasuke could never give her what she truly craved. It wasn’t until she finally understood this truth, that she opened her heart to Naruto.

Once he was inside his room, he closed his door and a soft sigh blew out at the seclusion. Sasuke valued his friends, he did not take them for granted. But they could not solve everything, and it wasn’t fair on them to try and be disappointed at Sasuke’s despondence. He knew how to deal with himself, and he didn’t need to be told any different. Like all things, it would pass. For now, though…

For now, Sasuke would leave his things at the door and sink down onto his bed. Feeling sentimental, Sasuke pulled up his sleeve and revealed his right forearm. His pale skin looked healthy, normal. Until he reached his wrist, where the pink lines criss-crossed messily and revealed what a mess Sasuke had made of himself.

Extending his fingertips, just about to graze the raised skin, he stopped. A humiliated flush filled his cheeks, and he looked away harshly, clenching his teeth. Now that it was cooler weather, he didn’t need to apply concealer on the daily to mask his shame. It brought him little comfort. Now, he would be forced to acknowledge their existence. A grim reminder, as such.

He was so ugly like this. He knew it, he didn’t care. Long ago, Sasuke had accepted he was not a very nice person, on the inside or outside. Yet, people called him handsome. They called him dashing, gorgeous, striking. All were lies. He was the only one who saw it, and he hated it. More than his flaws, he despised when people told him lies.

It was honestly hard to think back to that chunk of his life. He was such a miserable child, and he was a jerk to so many people who were only reaching out to him, misguided as their attempts might have been. Pursing his lips, he pushed his fingertips down on the pink lines. They didn’t hurt, not like they used to. They were still tender to touch, and maybe they always would be. Nonetheless it was something Sasuke had to live with, and he had learnt that life didn’t make things easy for you. But persevering anyway, despite all the shit that’s been and there is and that’s yet to come. That was what strength was.

“Hey, teme. What’s this I hear about you being all gloomy? Stop moping and come help with din—” Naruto’s voice arrived at the same time he did, his hand knocking on Sasuke’s door while pushing it open.

“Naruto.” Sasuke was too flustered to hide his shock, as he reached for his sleeve and jerked it down.

But it was useless, he had been a moment too late. Naruto had seen, and was now completely silent. Standing at the door, he looked like one of those catalogue models frozen in a moment. His hand still on the door knob, and his blue eyes opened wide.

“Don’t just barge into people’s rooms while you’re knocking, idiot! It defeats the purpose!” Sasuke spat venomously, standing abruptly with a scowl fixed on his face.

Naruto looked back at him, blinked, and let go of the knob. He wasn’t leaving, nor was he coming any closer. Sasuke didn’t have an escape, not unless he wanted to go out through the window. The cold weather made this option significantly unappealing.

“Sasuke, what are you doing?” Naruto spoke clearly, calmly, very un-Naruto like if you knew him well. Which Sasuke did, which only served to make the knot in his stomach bunch up even tighter.
Swallowing past the lump in his throat, Sasuke averted his eyes away from clear blue orbs. Naruto had a knack for catching Sasuke in his most vulnerable moments, more so when they were kids. Adults now, Sasuke had a better understanding of his emotions and could hide things easier without attracting the idiot’s prying eyes to him. However, Naruto was incorrigible as ever and had seen Sasuke’s weaker sides more often than he would ever be comfortable with.

Dammit, he didn’t want Naruto to see him like this. While everyone else only saw the emotions Sasuke let them see, Naruto was different. He could see past Sasuke’s masks, and that was something that scared him so much.

“All of your business.”

And wasn’t that Sasuke’s answer for everything? To him, it was a justifiable response for just about anything. Whether people agreed with him, however, was something different entirely. Naruto was one of such people this line had jagged effectiveness on. Sometimes Naruto would back off, and sometimes he was a dog with a bone.

“We’re friends. We live together. It’s my business, so tell me.”

It wasn’t a request, and the way Naruto was still staring at him with that piercing gaze, Sasuke just knew he wouldn’t let this go.

“All you see anything in my hands, Naruto?” Sasuke asked, raising his hands up mockingly, “Do you want to perform a search of my room? Check my pockets, too? God, you’re so stupid.”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke could already feel the guilt niggling away at him. Whatever Naruto was feeling at this moment, he was entitled to it. Sasuke knew that. After all, Naruto had been there when it happened. In the same token, that was part of the reason Sasuke could get so cold with him. Of all people, he didn’t need Naruto treating him like glass.

Naruto hadn’t said anything else, not even a rebuke against Sasuke’s words. It was a strange feeling to see Naruto quiet and thoughtful, and not an entirely bad one. It was just that Naruto’s mind picked up on things that other’s missed, and that was part of the reason he had so many friends. Naruto was a good friend.

Thinking time was over when Naruto moved forward, closing the wide space between himself and Sasuke. They looked at each other, and it was only now that he was close to him that Sasuke saw how watery his eyes were. His warm hand then flew out and gripped Sasuke’s. Disconcerted, Sasuke attempted to pull his hand back, but the moment he tried Naruto held on even tighter.

“Y-You’re okay, yeah? You’d tell me if you’re not, right? You can tell me anything, Sasuke. I promise you’re not alone,” Naruto was imploring, full of that passion he only got for those he cared deeply about. His desperation seeped through in every second he clutched Sasuke’s hand in his, his grip stronger than it ever was.

Sasuke stared, too shocked to speak. With his idle thoughts, he had frightened Naruto into imagining the worst. There wasn’t any wonder that he would, he was aware of how much Sasuke had struggled in the past. How he still struggles, sometimes. When he has bad days, Naruto is the first one at his side.

“All, it’s okay. Calm down, it’s not like that,” Sasuke implored, looking directly at his friend and not wavering once.

Blonde eyebrows dropped and furrowed, worry still shining through those eyes, “It’s not?”
“I was just,” Sasuke licked his lips, unsure how to express himself, “just looking.”

Judging from his expression, Naruto was not reassured. To someone who had never cut themselves, like Naruto, the words would never be properly understood. Naruto had felt pain, and Sasuke would never deny or dismiss him of that pain. It was only a different pain to that of Sasuke’s. Exhaling, he explained.

“It’s just this time of year, it makes me remember a lot. I don’t feel the same as I did, but those feelings are still there. I think about them, and that’s all.”

Noting the grip on his hand hadn’t weakened and the distraught look on Naruto’s face remained, Sasuke tried to add some reassurance.

“It was years ago, Naruto. Things are different now compared to back then.” Sasuke had never been great at the whole reassurance thing, but it was better than silence.

It seemed to have worked, as some of the tension bled out of Naruto’s features. He looked away from Sasuke, now looking down at the floor.

“I know. It’s just, whenever I think back to that day, it makes me hurt so bad to think what might have happened.” He mumbled, scrubbing at his eyes and sniffing back a sob.

Naruto was a strong person, it was in his nature to take things head-on and charge forth fearlessly. Yet, when it came to his connections with other people, Naruto could be unexpectedly fragile. His heart was too big for everyone, and Sasuke knew a part of that big heart belonged to him.

“It could have happened, yes,” Sasuke nodded, and didn’t miss the slight wince from his friend, “But it didn’t, you made sure of that.”

For a few years now, Sasuke knew he wasn’t always deserving of that place in Naruto’s heart. That’s why, he tried his best to treat it gently in times like these.

“As for now, I really am okay. Don’t build things up to be worse than they are inside your head. You know your brain’s only good for half the day.”

Sasuke teased him, because that’s how he knew if he and Naruto were okay. It was when they weren’t bickering and jabbing at each other that something was wrong. It didn’t make sense to most people, but it didn’t need to. It was something only he and Naruto would ever understand.

“Bastard, I’m an academic too, y’know. Don’t act so high and mighty.” Naruto retorted, not with his usual sparks but a half-smile still tugged at his mouth.

“Alright, good. You’re okay,” Naruto continued, and Sasuke nodded along placatingly, “But, if you’re ever not—”

Sasuke sighed, fighting against the weird urge to smile. As much of a moron Naruto could be, he could also be overly caring to the point of smothering. When he was like this, Sasuke often pictured him as a fussy and frantic mother hen. He snorted at the image.

Naruto narrowed his eyes at him warningly, “You gotta tell me, got it? I don’t care if you think it’s nothing or that it’s stupid or whatever. I want to know.”

“For the record, I still think you should consider a future career in lecturing.” Sasuke offered up in jest, although it didn’t garner any change in Naruto.
“Sasuke.” he muttered, both sounding stern and concerned.

“You’ll be the first,” then, he tugged roughly on Naruto’s hair until he yelped. Good, at least he wasn’t staring at Sasuke with that look anymore.

“Damn, you jerk! I’m trying to support you here and all you do is give me your sass!”

“You’re an easy target. You have the worst comebacks.” Shrugging, Sasuke sidestepped Naruto and headed back downstairs.

“Hey! What did you say?! Sasuke!!” Whining loudly, Naruto tromped after him grumbling and Sasuke’s features relaxed.

Yes, he really was okay. It would always be cold this time of year, but Sasuke had his people to help keep him warm.

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“Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the waaay!”

Sasuke’s eyes twitched. Even in his own home, he couldn’t escape the cheerful singing of Christmas carols. Winter was upon them, and with it the spirit of the season. Naruto was, and always had been, a big supporter of the holiday. In fact, he was so supportive of it all, that their Christmas decorations had gone up not at the start of December, but at the end of November instead.

“Sasuke, I could really use some back up here,” Naruto cajoled in that sing-song voice that made Sasuke consider stuffing cotton in his ears, “Wanna duet with me?”

Naruto was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, waiting for his ramen to cook on the stove. Clearly, he was bored and looking for some entertainment.

“Adding another voice to that travesty of supposed singing you’re doing won’t make it any better,” he grumbled, not glancing up from his spot on the couch with his laptop. It may have been the holiday season, but Sasuke had no intention of slacking off and falling behind. Besides, readings were easy enough – if you were in a calm, quiet environment with no distractions.

Quite unfortunate he lived with Naruto.

“Man, I’m sure glad I can always count on my personal grinch to liven things up during Christmas time.” Naruto teased, and Sasuke rolled his eyes. Every Christmas they had spent together, Naruto foisted the nickname upon him with unfailing diligence.

Scoffing, Sasuke gave Naruto an unimpressed look, “I’m not a grinch, I’m normal.”

Naruto burst out laughing, “Haha, good one. The guy who’s studying over the holidays calls himself normal.”

“Shut up, moron.”

“Look, you’ve even got a green sweater on. You’re totally grinch-like!” Naruto proclaimed, and Sasuke resisted rubbing his temples in frustration.

Instead, he decided to get himself a snack from the kitchen.

“Hey, where are you going? I didn’t offend you, did I? Grinch-chan?” Naruto was mocking him,
he had that cocky ass smirk painted on his face.

Sasuke had his death glare ready as he approached, “I’m getting something to eat, move over.”

Just then Sakura rounded the corner humming and gasped dramatically at the sight of them. Naruto and Sasuke startled at the reaction, then watched her and waited for some sort of explanation.

“Oh my god!” Sakura broke into a fit of giggles, doubling over. Naruto and Sasuke exchanged a mutual ‘what the fuck’s going on?’ look.

“Sakura-chan, you’re kinda scaring me.” Naruto admitted with an awkward smile, his voice nervous as he watched his girlfriend continue to laugh.

“You and Sasuke-kun! You’re under the mistletoe!” Sakura’s eyes were glimmering in good humour, her finger pointing to the ceiling.

At the same time, two heads looked up above them and sure enough, there it was. Sasuke couldn’t believe his eyes. Fucking mistletoe, seriously!?

“Why would you bother hanging that thing in a house with three people?” Sasuke hissed, stepping out from under it and urgently willing his blood not to rush to his cheeks. He wouldn’t stand the embarrassment if that happened.

“It’s tradition! Plus, we are having a Christmas party tonight. It’s good to have something fun like this for our friends.” Sakura had the audacity to wink and Sasuke wanted to wring her neck.

“Well, go on! Don’t let me stop you, go ahead and kiss.” Sakura’s voice was like honey, her entire face lit up with mirth. Sasuke couldn’t be more mortified.

“EH!?” Naruto exclaimed, eyes widening like saucers at his girlfriend’s laxness.

“Like hell!” Sasuke spat reflexively, crossing his arms and putting his prickles out.

“Come on, it’s tradition!” She objected, frowning disapprovingly at them both.

“But we’re guys, and it’s Sasuke.” Naruto said, and Sasuke tried to convince himself what he felt was not dismissive rejection. It didn’t hurt, it didn’t.

“Doesn’t matter, it’s mistletoe. I don’t make the rules.” Sakura held her hands up helplessly, and Sasuke narrowed his eyes at her.

“This is ridiculous. I have work to do.” Sasuke made to retreat, but was not fast enough.

“Wait a sec, Grinch-chan.”

Catching Sasuke off guard, Naruto grabbing his wrist to keep Sasuke in place. Then, he leaned in quickly and kissed his cheek. It lasted maybe about five seconds, but to Sasuke it felt so much longer. In that moment, he was hyper focussed on everything. The press of Naruto’s lips against the skin of cheek, the warmth of his hand as it held onto Sasuke’s wrist. The hold was gentle, but strong in a secure way. He was covering Sasuke’s scars, and he surely knew that. It felt deliberate, protective, and it made Sasuke’s head feel fuzzy. He was so warm.

Sakura squealed, her eyes crinkling in happiness as she fawned over her two best friends. Meanwhile, Sasuke was stiff as a board and stuck looking at Naruto. The idiot was smiling cheerily at him as he leaned back and let Sasuke’s wrist go, tucking his hands in his pockets.
“It’s tradition, bastard. Don’t want any bad luck for Christmas.” Those broad shoulders shrugged and Sasuke opened his mouth, then closed it uselessly.

“Aww, Sasuke-kun! You’re embarrassed! It’s so cute!” Sakura swooned, coming up to him and cuddling against his arm, taking advantage of his rather pliable state.

“I’m not embarrassed!” He hissed, easily letting anger override his flustered state. He instantly shook Sakura off his arm and hoped he didn’t look as ruffled as he felt. Laughter danced in Naruto’s eyes, the smile never leaving his face and Sasuke clenched his stomach to get rid of the fluttery feeling.

Squaring his shoulders, he turned on his heel and began packing up his things from the living room. No way was he staying in their proximity a moment longer.

“Wait, Sasuke! Aren’t you going to return the kiss?” Naruto called out, unable to hold back the tease and causing Sakura’s giggles to return.

“I’m living with morons!” He muttered tetchily, making sure Naruto and Sakura could hear as he turned his back on them and strode out of the room, ignoring their joyful laughter.

Slamming the door to his room shut, Sasuke put his stuff down and fell back against it for support. Covering his mouth with his hand, in the darkness of his bedroom he felt his cheeks begin to heat up. Unbidden and against every fibre of his being telling him not to, Sasuke let his fingertips press against his cheek. Not even a minute ago, Naruto’s lips had been there–

Swearing to himself, he threw his hand away from his face as if it were acidic and pushed off his door. He was not some love-struck teenage girl, for fuck’s sake! Get a grip, he told himself, setting up his work at his desk. If Sasuke didn’t think about it, then he wouldn’t have to feel stupid things like hope or disappointment or, happiness. He tightened his lips together, and ignored the sound of his heart in his ears.

In the late afternoon, preparations for the party began. Sasuke and Naruto worked to move the furniture around while Sakura put food into bowls and chilled the drinks in the fridge. They were ready with ten minutes to spare, and then people slowly started trickling in. Most of them were their old classmates from high school, who had all travelled back home for the holidays. Naruto and Sakura called them friends, but Sasuke was not naïve. They were not his friends, they were Naruto and Sakura’s friends. And that was okay, because Sasuke wasn’t the type to have so many friends in the first place. They were important to his friends, so Sasuke accepted it and did his utmost to be polite and somewhat interested in them. If any approached him to talk, that is.

As it was, Sasuke was currently hanging out in the kitchen. He didn’t mind it, since it was getting stuffy with all the people in the living areas. Naruto was catching up with Kiba, the two of them exceptionally rowdy amongst the guests. Sakura was having an in-depth conversation with Shikamaru and Chouji, probably getting the latest gossip about Ino. Speaking of Ino–

“Sasuke-kun! It’s been a while!” One second Ino was waving at him from the living room, and the next she was right beside him in the kitchen and batting her eyes playfully.

“Hi, Ino.” He said cordially, and it was strange how happy girls were when he even said that much to them. He didn’t want to imagine if he was interested and attempted flirting with them, they’re probably eat him alive.

“So good to see you! You’re looking well.” she smiled at him, and Sasuke hoped he managed a somewhat kind look in return.
“Thank you. How are you?” He recited the words like a script, but luckily, she didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, you know! Good mostly, aside from studying like crazy. The usual, really.” She said, and Sasuke nodded along. Ino wasn’t exactly someone he’d call a friend, but she was always friendly to him. He couldn’t understand it, when he’d treated her like shit in the past. Nevertheless, Sasuke was grateful for her forgiveness.

She didn’t have feelings for him, though. Not anymore. No, from what he could vaguely remember Sakura telling him, she had a boyfriend and it was–

“We meet again, little cockroach.”

Of course, Naruto had invited Sai. Ugh, Sasuke was never participating one of these things again.

It’s not like he had anything against Sai, but Sai seemed to have a hell of a lot against him. The awkward part was his fake politeness, because he’d insult Sasuke but do it with a smile on his face. Not that Sasuke cared, he was used to it. A lot of his old classmates from high school still held a grudge against him, and some flat out hated him. Sai was one of such people. Sasuke could get it. He had deeply hurt the two people Sai had come to call as friends, as well as his current girlfriend. Of course, he’d be intolerant of Sasuke.

“Evening, Sai.” He went with, dipping his head fractionally and noting how Sai’s fake smile widened further.

“Geez, what did we say about nicknames? Nobody likes the ones you choose.” Ino sighed, playfully whacking Sai on the arm. She glanced at Sasuke and smiled apologetically.

“So, you are still living here, huh? That’s a surprise.” Sai commented, and it was a loaded statement if Sasuke ever heard one. Clearly a jab at Sasuke’s abandonment of his friends, when he used to leave them behind instead of walking with them.

“Yeah. It’s convenient.” Sasuke stated indifferently, and noticed a shift in Sai’s expression.

“If you ever do move out, please let me know. I’d be quite interested in moving to a location that’s closer to the university.”

In other words, when Sasuke leaves, Sai can replace him. Be a better friend, the type they deserve, and all that.

“Sure.” Sasuke indulged him, wanting nothing more than for this interaction to end.

“Oh, there’s Sakura! Come on, I want to show you off. See you later, Sasuke-kun!” Ino gave him a smile and a parting wave, which he returned. The wave, not the smile. He had the notion if he smiled at Ino when Sai was around, it would be more trouble than it was worth.

He noticed Shikamaru watching from across the room, his eyes calculating even as his face couldn’t look more bored. Another person who didn’t warm to Sasuke. Fair enough. Perhaps Sasuke should see what Karin was doing since she couldn’t make it tonight. No, didn’t she say something about a date? Some guy named Suigetsu?

Oh. Well, he could always hang out in the laundry as a last resort. No one ever went into the laundry, and it didn’t smell so bad. Unless today was the day Naruto had put his laundry out. Sasuke grimaced at the thought, and crossed out that option.
“You look prepared to enter a black hole and never return.”

“Neji.” Sasuke acknowledged to the man who had appeared beside him.

In truth, Sasuke didn’t have all that much to do with Neji. Aside from the fact he was close with Naruto, he didn’t know much about the guy. As he was studying to be a psychologist, he could be pretty damn perceptive. It felt like Neji’s eyes could see through just about anything sometimes.

Deciding he would at least make an attempt at conversation, he shrugged, “It’s a party.”

Neji smirked, in that way someone did when they felt like they knew better than you, “I suppose Naruto is the one who roped you into this?”

Sasuke didn’t respond, and that gave Neji his answer.

“He’s the type to do anything to ensure all of his friends are safe and happy.”

Sasuke wondered sometimes. He wondered whether the admiration Neji held for Naruto was indicative of something a little more, of something deeper. Something had occurred between them in high school, Naruto had brought out a better version of Neji that many didn’t think was possible. Since then, Neji kept in close contact with Naruto and held onto their “bond” dearly. Yet, Neji had more expectations piled on him than Sasuke did. He perhaps had as much responsibility to burden as Itachi had, once. Perhaps, those expectations shackled him from exploring those deeper feelings.

People swooned over Sasuke at first sight, but Naruto was the one who captured their hearts. He drew people to him and kept them close, kept them warm and made sure they always knew he was there for them. If it wasn’t for his pure obliviousness to himself, and his genuine feelings for anyone close to him, it would almost be cruel the way he made so many adore him so much. Sasuke should know.

“Is there something you needed?” Sasuke cut through the sentimentality like a knife.

Neji didn’t appear to mind, in fact seemed to appreciate the topic change.

Turning to face Sasuke directly, he had his ‘business’ voice on, “Meet with Hinata-san after the holidays. Her father wants her to gain some insight and real business advice from you.”

Sasuke barely repressed a sigh. Since Sasuke had been a child, Uchiha Enterprises and Hyuuga Corporation had been allies. His father stressed the importance of the connection, as it was almost impossible to find a reliable company to connect with that wasn’t out to swindle you. As Sasuke would take over from his father, Hinata would do the same. She attended a different university to Sasuke, still in Tokyo but this one was geared specifically towards business degrees. Whereas Sasuke had attended an all-rounder university, so he, Naruto and Sakura could stay together. The point was that someday, they would be partners in business.

He honestly hadn’t taken much notice of Hinata in high school. Not until their final year when she had plucked up her courage and confessed to Naruto. Honestly, that idiot attracted too many people for his own good. Naturally, Naruto hadn’t returned her feelings. How could he, when Hinata barely spoke to him in all the time they’d known each other? But being Naruto, he did agree to accompany her to the formal dance their senior year held. Then, they’d gone to different universities and Naruto had gotten together with Sakura. But, that was beside the point.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like Hinata, but he didn’t like her either. Where she was soft-spoken and apologetic, Sasuke was blunt and didn’t give a fuck of what people thought of him. Moreover, it was obvious he was intimidating to her since she couldn’t even ask him herself about this. In his
opinion, she wasn’t cut out for the business world, despite being the eldest and heir to the Hyuuga Corporation. His patience ran thin when dealing with indecisive people as she was. Perhaps he was being judgemental, maybe after spending some time in university she’d changed.

“That doesn’t sound like a request.” Grunted Sasuke, his eyes watching Hinata stutter over a conversation with Naruto and Sakura. It seemed she couldn’t shake the habit when in Naruto’s presence.

“It’s not. You will do it, or else I’ll have to get involved. Do you understand?” Neji raised an eyebrow, waiting. Whilst not wanting employment in the family company, Neji acted as a mentor and confidant of sorts to Hinata. Being as timid as she was, Neji assisted her however he could when she was struggling.

Sasuke did not appreciate the ultimatum, however, his features hardening, “What I don’t understand is why you can’t be the one to do it.”

“I have far too many important events coming up in my schedule without worrying about the professional competence of my cousin.” Waving a hand away flippantly, as if he was pulling fucking rank on Sasuke, Neji couldn’t look more arrogant. It pissed Sasuke off, because he knew he was backed in a corner.

If Sasuke didn’t say yes, he’d only end up with a grating lecture from his dad about the importance of extending a helping hand to their allies. All his frostiness aside, Sasuke didn’t like being on the outs with his dad. It was just frustrating to deal with all the liaison and relationship-building crap that came with running a business. He wasn’t cut out for it. That had been more Itachi’s forte, which was why he’d been the first choice for the company in the first place.

Well, it was never too late to develop social skills, right?

“Whatever. Give her my number and she can decide when.” Pulling up his number on his phone, he let Neji take a screenshot of it. Sasuke would offer his help, but if Hinata wanted it then she had to be the one to arrange things.

“Good.” Neji nodded, then left without another word. Probably off to inform Hinata, like the dutiful nephew he was.

There was a sudden chorus of cheering and laughter and Sasuke caught sight of his house mates kissing each other under the mistletoe. The same mistletoe that Naruto had kissed him underneath earlier today. Naruto’s hands cupped her cheeks like fine china, pulling her close to him and smiling into the embrace. His heart dropping to his stomach, Sasuke left the room and silently ascended the stairs. Nobody noticed, good. If Naruto bugged him about being anti-social or whatever the next day, Sasuke would say he felt sick and fell asleep. It wasn’t entirely a lie, he mused, closing his door on the sound of applause.

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Sakura had travelled to the outskirts of Tokyo two days ago. Her parents wanted her to come and spend Christmas with them. She also decided it would be nice to take a short break before her work piled back up again. Naruto was disappointed they wouldn’t be able to spend the day together, Christmas being so romantically regarded in Japan as it was. But, Sakura had whispered sweet promises in his ear that made Naruto smile so charmingly Sasuke didn’t care to know what they were.

As it had become the tradition over their years in university, Sasuke and Naruto spent Christmas
together, and with their parents as well. Naruto called it their ‘once a year family dinner’, although that was partially inaccurate. Whenever there was a special occasion happening in either of their lives, it was celebrated jointly. Seeing as how his father never remarried, and neither did Kushina, their friendship had grown as a bi-product of their sons’ friendship. They congregated in the Uchiha family household, as they did every year. Sasuke’s father didn’t particularly care, but Sasuke insisted they stay in the house when it was Christmas.

It could be this year that Itachi came home.

Even if it was only a phone call, Sasuke didn’t want to miss it. When they had all been together, Christmas was such a special time for Sasuke and his family. His parents didn’t work, Itachi didn’t go anywhere, and Sasuke could spend the entire day with all of them. If Itachi ever did want to return, Sasuke figured that during Christmas was the most likely time it would happen. Even being young as he had been, he could tell his big brother immensely enjoyed their Christmases together. Maybe, Itachi missed them too.

He knew it was a childish habit of his, yet his father had never rebuked him for it. Whenever Itachi was mentioned, his dad got a cold, sad look in his eyes but never said anything further than that. It was naïve to think that Itachi would return, after all he hadn’t returned for nine years. At a young age, he had lost not only his mother, but his brother as well. The difference was, Itachi willingly left whilst his mother was forcibly taken. It was a continuous pain that never left Sasuke alone, but Sasuke could keep living. He had a lot to live for, he saw this now. He saw it a long time ago, really.

Currently, they were seated around the table with KFC and side dishes his father and Kushina had made.

“How is your course, Naruto?” Fugaku asked, slicing through his chicken. Sasuke could see Naruto biting the corner of his mouth, clearly trying not to smile – or laugh.

Of course, Naruto would find the fact he and his father ate fried chicken with cutlery entertaining. Despite how long they had known each other, it never grew old with Naruto. Sasuke kicked him in the shin and bit back a smirk at the way Naruto choked back a whimper of pain.

“It’s going pretty good,” Naruto grinned, though to Sasuke it looked more like a grimace, “The workload’s become pretty steep, but no surprises there. A few of my classmates are considering dropping out because of it. Not me, though, in fact I think I just like it even more. The crazier, the better.” Naruto chuckled, and Kushina rolled her eyes and smiled at her son.

She had improved greatly since her accident, now fully recovered. It was comforting to see her as vibrant and full of life as she always had been.

Fugaku nodded, and Sasuke could tell he was pleased with the answer, “You have admirable perseverance. Keep it up.”

Naruto’s smile was megawatt bright, “Thanks!”

Leaning forward, Kushina caught Sasuke’s gaze, “What’s the Honours course like, Sasuke? Since Naruto didn’t go for it, I’m curious!”

“Kaa-chan, I could’ve gotten in y’know!” Naruto protested, frowning and looking very close to pouting, “I just decided that it wasn’t for me. I like learning and stuff but reading pages of research and articles is so boring. I’d fall asleep before I even got any work done.”
Sighing dismally, Kushina nodded, “I know, you inherited that from me. Why couldn’t you get Minato’s thirst for knowledge?” She bemoaned, earning a squinty-eyed glare from her son.

Her eyes widening, she elbowed Naruto in the ribs none too gently, “And don’t call it boring! You’re insulting Sasuke!”

“Oh! Aw, but come on. I insult Sasuke every day, he’s used to it—OW!” Clutching himself, Naruto protected his now tender sides from any more violent jabs. Sasuke was having a hard time holding back his laughter, and he could tell his father found it amusing as well.

“Be quiet, you.” She scolded, then turned back to Sasuke and smiled sheepishly, “Sorry, Sasuke.”

Shaking his head, Sasuke said, “That’s alright. It’s not really Naruto’s fault.”

Surprised, Naruto’s eyes jumped over to Sasuke and shone with gratitude, “Sasuke!”

Reaching for his glass of wine, he continued, “He’s just so tactless he can’t help it. I think it’s called the blurt reflex.” Then he quickly brought the glass to his lips to avoid his smirk being seen.

“Oi! You!” Immediately protesting, Naruto looked as if he was about to rise in indignation.

One side-eye from Kushina, however, had Naruto’s fire flickering. Grumbling, the blonde paid attention to his food and clearly sulking about the injustice of it all.

“I like Honours. It’s challenging exploring a topic in such depth, but it’s a topic I’m very interested in. Being able to research in something I’m passionate about is rewarding in and of itself.” Sasuke answered, met with Kushina’s lovely smile.

“I’m so glad! Good for you, honey.” She encouraged, and the corner of Sasuke’s lips lifted up.

“You’ve always had a precocious nature about you,” his father stated, drawing Sasuke’s gaze to him, “Even as a child, you were always questioning ‘why’ instead of ‘what’. It’s a very good trait to have.”

Sasuke tried to hide his pleasure at hearing his father’s praise, but probably failed miserably. He always lit up whenever his dad spoke like that about him. Making his father proud was a continual goal in Sasuke’s life. Even as his dad had told him before that he took pride in him, Sasuke never wanted to lose those precious words.

“Thanks, tou-san.” Sasuke settled on, his face neutral even as his insides sung with joy.

They finished with dinner and dessert, a simple but scrumptious vanilla pudding with fruit. Gluttonous as always, Naruto just had to add in some pieces of the cake Kushina had brought over for them to have the next day. When his mum yelled at him, Naruto only smiled indulgently and shrugged, saying he wouldn’t have any tomorrow. He looked so smug about it. Likely, Naruto was counting on eating Sasuke’s share since he wasn’t a sweet tooth. Sasuke decided he’d mess with the idiot tomorrow and pretend to want his share. That would teach him for being so thoughtlessly greedy.

It was now late, and Kushina was asleep in one of the guest bedrooms whilst Sasuke’s father had retired to his study to do some leisurely reading. Sasuke was sitting on the floor in his childhood bedroom, with Naruto sprawled over bed. Another thing, Naruto insisted on sleeping over during these Christmases they spent together. Sasuke had long stopped questioning it, since once Naruto made up his mind about something it was an uphill battle trying to discourage him.
“Hey, hey. It’s just like a sleepover! Remember when we had them back in high school?” Naruto babbled, his leg swinging over the edge of Sasuke’s bed.

Sasuke huffed a laugh, shaking his head, “You do realise we live together?”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same!” Naruto complained, then continued, “I mean, there’s so many memories we have together here! Remember that time we stayed up ALL night studying here in your room for that nightmare maths exam I had? And it turned out I’d gotten the date wrong by a week!”

“It was the first time you’d ever been early in your life, dead last.” Sasuke could find amusement in it now that it had passed, though at the time it had been so maddening. Naruto was so thick-headed, a trait that Sasuke believed he would never grow out of.

“God, you were so pissed off at me. You tossed all my shit out the window when we got back here and it was raining!” Laughter broke through Naruto’s voice, as he moved around so his face was closer to Sasuke’s.

Flicking his friend’s forehead, Sasuke allowed a smirk to cross his lips, “After making me fry my brain all night for nothing, I think I was being quite generous with you.”

Naruto laughed happily at that, pushing at Sasuke’s shoulder light-heartedly, “You’re in a good mood.”

Sasuke hummed, leaning his back against the side of the bed, “Is that so?”

“Mhm,” Naruto nodded, paused, then pinned Sasuke with that piercing gaze, “Your dad’s super proud of you all the time, you know that right?”

Shocked at the astute statement, Sasuke didn’t think as he said the first thing that came to mind, “What?”

“That’s why you’re so happy.” Naruto confirmed.

Raising his eyebrows, Sasuke cast his eyes out across his room, “You sound sure of yourself.”

“You wanna know how I can tell?”

Unable to mask his interest, Sasuke flicked his eyes back to Naruto. Tilting his head to the side, Naruto reached out and brushed Sasuke’s fringe aside. His touch was unexpected, and Sasuke froze like a frightened rabbit. Then, Naruto tapped his finger in between Sasuke’s eyes.

“It’s all in your eyes. You think you’ve got it all covered, and from the outside you do. But I know from one look at your eyes what you’re really feeling.”

Letting his hand fall away, Naruto stretched out his joints and groaned at the feeling. Sasuke watched him, unable to contradict anything he’d said. He couldn’t, not when Naruto was so…

Finished with his stretching, he flopped back down and smirked triumphantly, “I know all your secrets, teme.”

_Do you really, Naruto?_ Sasuke’s traitorous mind spoke to him. _Can you see my feelings? Do they disgust you? Do they confuse you?

As he watched his best friend chatter away on his bed, Sasuke felt his heart waver.
Would you ever want to try and understand them?

His musing was interrupted by Naruto’s phone ringing. After fishing it out of his pocket, Naruto sat upright and Sasuke knew who it was before he said anything.

“Ah, it’s Sakura-chan!” Naruto exclaimed, that loving smile lighting up his entire face, “Hey, Sasuke. Is it okay if I—”

“Idiot, don’t ask stupid questions. Go ahead.” Shooing him off his bed and out of his room, Sasuke took note of the ‘thank you’ Naruto mouthed to him as he answered the phone. His voice sounded so happy, as he moseyed down the hall to Sasuke’s bathroom.

Right on cue, Sakura calling served as a harsh reminder to check himself. However close he felt his connection was with Naruto, Sakura was his girlfriend. Naruto wouldn’t notice his feelings. Naruto was in love, and he was happy, so why would he be thinking about anyone else?

Lying down on his bed, Sasuke felt the warmth Naruto’s body had left behind. He curled into it, uncaring of how pathetic he looked. He pulled out his phone and decided to finally reply to Karin. She’d sent him some texts throughout the day wishing him a happy Christmas and wanting to organise a meet up soon. It was probably to bitch about Suigetsu. The two had a destructive, unlikely chemistry since their first date. Sasuke wasn’t sure if Karin actually hated him or not. He had yet to meet him, but Karin had been pissed at Suigetsu every time Sasuke asked about it and instantly shut the idea down. It would happen sooner or later. Resting his arm over his stomach, his phone buzzed in his hand but kept watching the snow fall outside his window.

Itachi wasn’t coming home this year. There had been no phone calls, not an email, nor text message to be seen. As usual, and Sasuke despised himself for being freshly disappointed every time. He and disappointment were becoming very well acquainted as of late. Closing his eyes, Sasuke breathed in deeply and let it out slow. I miss you, nii-san.

Chapter End Notes

Haha...I had the Christmas chap planned last year but never got around to it ^_^ so here it is now? Lol, only half a year late xD I’d love to hear your thoughts, opinions and questions :) until next time lovelies! Ta!
Hey hey everyone! :) I'm proud to present this new chap, brought to you by procrastination from final exams haha x) I'm almost finished though, so I'm having a pre-celebration with another chapter. Here comes more plot! Enjoy your read~

P.S. I know little to nothing about the business world/getting a business degree, so I apologise for how vague this probably sounds and I welcome any constructive criticism you guys have!

“Man, I’m freezing my ass off!” Naruto declared, pouting at the cold wind that blew through the Yoyogi Park.

Sasuke could see Naruto’s breath when he spoke, and a memory struck him of when he was younger. His mother would make pretend they were dragons with breath so hot the steam was coming out. It had always made Sasuke feel warmer when they played that game, and even now when it was a mere memory it conjured a flicker of warmth in within Sasuke.

The snow coated the ground in perfect white sheets. It wasn’t falling from the sky now, but it was none the less beautiful to look at. He and Naruto had braved the cold to take a stroll in the snow, since it was of a milder temperature today. Naruto had a fascination surrounding it, he had always loved snow. Sakura was still tucked up in bed, and had no intentions of leaving the warmth to join them. Being a nursing student, Sakura’s schedule was never empty. He couldn’t blame her for declining when she had time off, she had many a sleepless night these days.

Shuffling through the snow-covered grass closer to Sasuke, Naruto’s teeth were audibly chattering. Then, he leaned up against him and swung his arm over Sasuke’s shoulders, pulling him in. It was like an embrace.

Sasuke stiffened, side-eyeing Naruto, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m cold, let’s share body heat.” Naruto suggested, when he was already doing it.

Elbowing his ribs hard, Sasuke attempted to manoeuvre out of the octopus clinger-on that was Naruto Uzumaki, “Fuck off.”

Sasuke was rugged up, wearing his warmest winter coat, and underneath that was a knitted sweater, and underneath that was a thick t-shirt. Plus, he was wearing two pairs of socks and a pair of snow boots, as well as thermal gloves. There was no shame in bundling up against the cold, Sasuke didn’t care how it made him look.

Naruto, on the other hand, that idiot. He was wearing a big hoodie, which whilst looked warm was not warm enough for a setting anywhere snow related. He always bragged to Sasuke (and just about anyone who would listen) that he was hot-blooded, that it took a lot for him to really feel the cold. However, it seemed that not even Naruto’s hot-bloodedness was immune against the icy winter of Tokyo this year.
Not one to be so easily deterred, Naruto huffed and huddled in closer, “Come on, don’t be a dick. It’s gonna benefit us both, y’know!”

“Three seconds until I rip your arm out of its socket.” Sasuke iterated, quite clearly, whilst giving Naruto the warning glare.

It felt too close. Too intimate. Sasuke needed it to stop before he got used to it, before he could revel in the warmth. Having their bodies pressed together, innocently, to keep each other warm with their own heat. *Ugh, stupid.*

“Can’t we just act like normal best friends for like a minute?” Whining at him like some dejected dog, Naruto peeked up at him hopefully.

Sasuke deadpanned, “No.”

“But I’m giving you affection!” Stomping his foot on the snowy grass like a petulant child, Naruto was now glaring at him.

Giving a derisive snort, Sasuke threw the arm around his shoulders off forcefully, “By making me your personal arm rest. I’m touched.”

“NARUTO-KUN! SASUKE-KUN! IS THAT YOU, MY FRIENDS!?”

Whipping their heads in the direction of the voice, *that voice*, Sasuke recognised it immediately. Sure enough, Rock Lee was bounding over to them, the snow not dampening his fiery personality at all. And behind him, at a slower rate, Sasuke noticed Gaara was there as well.

“BUSHY BROWS! GAARA! HEEEEY!” Naruto called out just as loudly, his coldness forgotten as he waved vigorously and grinned at them.

“It is good to see you both!” Lee smiled widely, and Sasuke offered a greeting nod. Naruto, of course, hugged them enthusiastically.

Laughing brightly, Naruto slapped Lee on the shoulder, “I’ll say! Haven’t seen you since the party, bushy brows.”

Naruto then turned to face Gaara, who was watching him with a smile, “And I haven’t seen you in ages, Gaara! I missed you!”

“Sorry, Naruto. I only arrived in Konoha a few days ago. I was going to call you later on, actually. How fortunate we met like this.” Gaara addressed both of them, and Sasuke’s lips hiked up slightly.

Naruto shared the sentiment, nodding heartily, “Yeah, it’s great! How long are you staying?”

“I’ve got another week here, before I return to Kyoto.”

Gaara’s home had always been Kyoto, but during his high schooling his father had sent him to study at Tokyo. There were some complicated relationship issues there that Sasuke had no business knowing about. Naruto most likely knew the whole story, since he had been a big support to Gaara during that time.

“I’m taking Gaara-kun around! Though he has lived here before, there are always more exciting things to be seen in this vibrant city, Tokyo!” Lee piped up, eyes shining.
“That’s true. Tokyo is always exciting, although I am quite cold at the moment.” Gaara did look cold, despite being just as rugged up as Sasuke.

“Anyone up for a coffee?” Sasuke offered, since he was actually craving one and it was a way to be social, talking over drinks and whatnot.

“An excellent idea! Although it is very beautiful here in the park, so I propose going to retrieve everyone’s coffees and returning them to drink here!” Lee looked ready to go this instant, all fired up as if he was about to run a race.

Sasuke still wasn’t over the embarrassment of losing a track event to Lee in high school. It did teach Sasuke, however, not to underestimate anyone and that despite having talent, hard work could never be replaced.

Gaara seemed mildly concerned, “Lee, you don’t have to go by yourse–”

“Hold on a sec, bushy brows! If you’re going, then I’m going too! ’Cause, y’know,” Naruto dropped his tone, speaking lowly to Lee and Gaara, “Sasuke’s real picky about how he takes his coffee. He won’t drink it if it’s too sweet, the bastard.”

Grinding his teeth, Sasuke glowered at his housemate, “I can hear you.”

“Ah, then it’s settled!” Naruto declared, clearly keen to get away from Sasuke’s proximity, “We’ll go and get the coffees! You guys stay here, we won’t be long!”

After giving the two of them their coffee orders, Lee and Naruto shot off out of the park, and Sasuke wondered if they were timing themselves.

A period of silence passed, then Gaara spoke up softly, “It’s been a while, Sasuke. How are you?”

Gaara was a rarity: one of Naruto’s friends who didn’t hate him. Well, there was Lee, but Lee was friendly to everyone and liked to believe the best of them. If their situations were different and Sasuke saw him more frequently, he sometimes had the curious thought that he and Gaara would be good friends. He didn’t mind his company, and since Gaara was as blunt and upfront as Sasuke was, they always understood each other.

Breathing in deeply, Sasuke released it with a sigh and watched his ‘dragon breath’ in the air, “I’m well. Despite the holidays, I don’t feel much rested at all.”

“Yes. University constantly looms over us. I envy our peers who are to graduate this spring.”

“Sakura’s almost finished. Naruto and I still have a year to go.”

“You two have always been somehow in sync, no matter what facet of life you’re in.” Gaara flashed a small smile, seemingly amused.

Sasuke rolled his eyes and muttered, “It’s annoying.”

It wasn’t, really. In all actuality, Sasuke was grateful to have Naruto at his side as they grew together. It brought Sasuke comfort when he thought back on their shared past, of how much they had done and how far they had come.

Then, it was as if Gaara heard his thoughts as he said, “I’m sometimes envious of the bond you both share. It’s not something that can be tainted by distance or time. You can always seek solace in that.”
Sasuke was silent, stunned. He hadn’t expected that. Of course, people knew he and Naruto were friends, but did they view their friendship like this? No, many probably wouldn’t understand why Naruto bothered him in the first place. But if Gaara thought this way, then perhaps he wasn’t the only one.

There was a break in the conversation, and Sasuke didn’t know what to say. It seemed he didn’t have to say anything, as Gaara turned to face him fully.

“I had feelings for Naruto, once.” Gaara stated, and Sasuke did a double take.

“What?” He asked, honestly shocked. Sasuke wasn’t very close with Gaara, but they were both friendly when they saw each other. Sasuke was aware of his close friendship with Naruto, but had never considered that Gaara felt that way about him. The more Sasuke thought about it, the more it was making sense.

“It was in the summer after we graduated from high school,” Gaara explained, gazing out at the snow-covered park, “Even though we went to different schools, Naruto never cut me off. He always did his best to help me, so I wouldn’t feel alone.”

“It was awkward for some time between us after that. I felt humiliated, and Naruto felt ashamed of himself for rejecting me, and for ignoring my feelings. Even as I told him it was never his fault, he was stubborn.” Gaara smiled, and Sasuke could imagine it too. Being the kind of person, he was, Naruto wouldn’t let his friends carry burdens on their own. He shared their pain, and tried to understand them.

Tilting his face up, Gaara examined the cloudy sky as he continued, “But then, one day, everything was okay. I ran into him at a coffee shop, and it was so unexpected that neither of us felt pressured. Since it had been so long when we had last seen each other, we talked for a while and that was when I knew my heart was healed.”

Sasuke eyed him, not liking the way his heartbeat was speeding up, “Why are you telling me this?”

Teal eyes slid to the side, regarding Sasuke neutrally, “You and I are a lot alike, in more ways than you think.”

What did that mean? Was Gaara suggesting that–? Did he really think that–?

Crap, can he see it?

Brushing him off, Sasuke broke the eye contact and glanced away, “I don’t know what you’re on about, but you’re mistaken.”

“All I’m saying, is that you cannot lose a friendship with Naruto. It’s impossible, so it’s pointless to fear such a thing.” The words were direct, but Gaara’s tone was almost consoling.

They didn’t talk much after that, given they were the type of people who could be in each other’s company, not say a word and still feel comfortable. But in this instance, Sasuke was internally panicking. He felt so exposed hearing Gaara’s words, he felt stupid. Was he that obvious about how he felt? Did Sasuke take it for granted, how oblivious Naruto was, that other people too would be oblivious?

“Hey, guys!” Naruto was back, hurrying towards them with coffees in hand and flushed cheeks. That moron, running around in the cold with what he’s got on. Well, if he got sick then he would be the one to deal with Sakura’s wrath.
“You’re back. That didn’t take long.” Gaara greeted, and Naruto grinned triumphantly over at him.

“Oi, Sasuke. Here’s your cappuccino.” Naruto nudged his arm with the cup and Sasuke took it with some muttered thanks, scrutinising it.

“Where’s Lee?” Gaara asked, looking around as if he would pop out somewhere.

Naruto smirked, like he knew something they didn’t, “He’s coming, don’t worry!”

Narrowing his eyes, Sasuke addressed Naruto, “Did you remember t–”

“–To ask for no sugar? Yes, bastard, I remembered. Tasted it myself even to make sure there wasn’t even a hint of sweetness. Rest assured, it’s bitter, just how you like it.” Naruto pulled a face at the thought of pure coffee, but Sasuke was more focused on something else he said.

“You drank my coffee?” Sasuke asked darkly, making no effort to hide the disgust on his face.

Pausing from sipping at his drink, Naruto blustered, “Wh–don’t look at me like that! I was testing it!”

Holding out his hand, Sasuke ordered, “Give me your drink.”

“What are you gonna do to it?” Clutching the drink closer, Naruto assessed him with distrusting eyes.

“Nothing. I just want it for a moment.” Sasuke was placid, calm, completely masking his less than innocent intentions.

Heaving a great sigh, Naruto handed it over, “I’m gonna regret this.”

Taking the cup in his gloved hand, Sasuke brought it to his lips and took a long sip. The sweet taste of mocha filled Sasuke’s mouth, and he fought a grimace as he swallowed it all down.

“Sasuke! Cut it out!” Naruto snatched it back, betrayal written all over his face, “You don’t even like it, you’re wasting it!”

“Good. Don’t drink my coffee again.” Sasuke then took a sip of his cappuccino, almost sighing at the deliciousness.

“Argh, you’re damn hard work! Fine, you just lost your taste tester. I quit.” Turning his face away resolutely, Naruto started up a conversation with Gaara. Sasuke didn’t miss the glimmer of mirth that passed over his face before he replied to Naruto.

Sasuke was about half way through his coffee when they noticed Lee’s figure running over to them. He was carrying his and Gaara’s coffees, and keeping them surprisingly steady. They all greeted him back, and he beamed at them all. This guy is as annoyingly cheerful as Naruto.

“Here you are, Gaara-kun!” Lee presented the cup to Gaara in his energetic, theatrical way that was simply Rock Lee, “They were not serving caramel macchiatos at the nearest Starbucks, so I ran over to the next nearest one to get it for you!” He explained, pulling out his own latte and sipping at it eagerly.

Sasuke’s eyes widened. The next nearest Starbucks was a good many kilometres away. The fact that Lee ran all the way there and back in less than an hour – he was insane as ever.

“You didn’t have to do that. I could have had something different if you messaged me.” Gaara
stated, looking down at his drink calmly. Sasuke would wager it was still warm to the touch.

Shaking his head quickly, Lee patted his shoulder and reassured him, “Nonsense! You wanted it especially! Besides, it was a good opportunity for me to get in some additional training today.”

“I see. Thank you, Lee.” A pleased smile passed over Gaara’s face, lighting it up in a way that was not often seen.

Lee smiled his thousand-watt smile and stepped closer to Gaara. Although Sasuke couldn’t see anything, he could tell Lee had placed his hand in the small of Gaara’s back. It was still strange, the concept of such a pair together. Yet, Sasuke couldn’t deny them their happiness, especially after what Gaara had just told him. He had well and truly moved on, and was content.

Glancing to the side, he watched as Naruto regaled them both with a funny story, something about one of his practical experiences going awry in an awkward way – not funny at the time, but hilarious now it was in the past. Naruto was glowing, nothing but happy to be in the presence of his friends. His eyes crinkled when he laughed, and his smile was big and genuine.

If Sasuke told Naruto the truth, would he be able to move on as well?

* *

Sasuke was on his third coffee today, and reasoned he was doing well given the circumstances. Hinata had messaged him earlier in the week, so here they were. Currently sitting in the Red Bean café discussing tactics and strategies and finance. Despite their differences, Sasuke had to admit that Hinata wasn’t as hesitant about giving input as she had been in the past. She had some good ideas and methods, but was still naïve about certain aspects of how running a business worked. Particularly, surrounding navigating her professional relationships.

“If you want to do well in business, then you’ve got to be decisive. Show any sign of uncertainty and no one will take you seriously.” Sasuke explained, bringing his Americano up to his lips and taking a long sip.

Hinata was thoughtful for a moment, then looked up determinedly, “I-I only wish to seek out c-compromise when I can. If it’s an option, isn’t it b-better?”

“Compromise is important, but so is having a firm stance. Don’t try to be everyone’s friend, that will get you nowhere.” Sasuke answered easily, since this was never an issue for him. It sounded cold, but Hinata would need to grow a backbone if she hoped to make any in-roads when she took over.

“It seems to get N-Naruto-kun very far.” She defended, and it was the first time she had countered anything Sasuke had said.

Frankly, he was mildly impressed. Less impressed to see she still idolised his best friend, but that was none of his business.

Inclining his head, Sasuke granted her that much, “That’s true. But, have you ever seen him compromise his beliefs to keep everyone happy?”

Straightening in her chair, Hinata looked off to the side and it was clear she was thinking on what he’d said.

He continued, “More to the point, Naruto isn’t in business. All these strategic tactics and logical decision-making doesn’t register with him. It’s something we will have to deal with day in and day
Now that Sasuke considered it, Naruto would probably do okay in business. He would approach it in that unorthodox, but effective manner which Naruto tackled everything with. All the paperwork and red tape would bog him down, but if it came to solidifying deals or networking with others Naruto would thrive.

Coming back to himself, he noticed Hinata’s despondence and attempted to offer some consolation, “What you need to do is build your own identity. Admiring other people is fine, but you are not them.”

Her lavender eyes widening, Hinata pursed her lips and gave an understanding nod, “I see. That makes s-sense, and Neji-nii-san has said the same thing to me b-before.”

Sasuke nodded as well, “You have time to work on it. If you address it before you graduate, then you should be fine.”

Just then, Sasuke’s phone buzzed and he excused himself as he checked his messages.

_Naruto_: Yo! Since you’re already out braving the cold mind picking me up some ramen?? Oh and Sakura wants chocolate. Doesn’t matter what just get a lot lol xD

Narrowing his eyes, Sasuke glared at the message. _That idiot_, did he think Sasuke was some sort of courier service? Then, if Sasuke flat-out refused then his phone would surely explode with all the pathetic messages Naruto would send. He would go on about friendship, and bonds, and basically _beg_ Sasuke until it became too annoying to endure. Repressing a sigh, Sasuke typed back:

_Sasuke_: You better pay me back, idiot.

He didn’t even get to put his phone away when it buzzed again, and he saw Naruto’s reply:

_Naruto_: You’re the best!!! You got it! Thanks S’uke :-)

Pushing down the urge to smile, Sasuke tucked his phone away and turned back to Hinata, “Sorry, my roommate knows no personal boundaries.”

Guessing at who he meant, Hinata giggled and brightened, “How is N-Naruto-kun, lately?”

“If you want to know, ask him. I’m not a messenger.” Sasuke answered, irked at his defensiveness.

If there was anything Sasuke couldn’t stand, it was having girls ask him about Naruto. It happened less now that he was with Sakura, but it still happened. And every time, it left Sasuke feeling sourer than a lemon.

“O-Oh, no! Th-That’s not it!” She stuttered anxiously, waving her hands as if to dispel any notions Sasuke may have conjured up about her.

But it was. Since they were young, Hinata had never been direct with Naruto. She always watched him from the shadows, was always asking others about him. Whatever her intentions were now, Sasuke didn’t want to deal with it.

Pushing his chair out, Sasuke stood and began gathering his things together, “I gave you advice, so I’m leaving.”

Hinata stood up as well, respectfully seeing him off, “O-Of course! Um, this was very enlightening
today. I hope we–”

“Hinata! Oi!” An obnoxious voice called out from across the café, and soon they were making their way over.

“K-Kiba-kun?” Hinata seemed surprised to see him, so it didn’t look like they had arranged to meet up. For once, he didn’t have his dog with him. Sasuke wished he had the power of teleporting himself. It was a gift he would never put to waste.

Great, this guy was worse than Naruto. Where Naruto was loud and cocky, Kiba was triply so, with none of Naruto’s graciousness. Plus, he was an asshole. Back in high school, Kiba liked to make homophobic comments every chance he got. Sometimes, Naruto had joined in. Regardless of the fact they were both more accepting now, it had stuck with Sasuke even after they’d graduated. Kiba didn’t like him, whatever. Sasuke wasn’t fond of him either.

A frown already fixed on his face, Kiba stared Sasuke down whilst moving closer to Hinata, “What are you doing hanging around this prick?”

Stiffening at the coarse language, Hinata hurried to diffuse the sparks, “N-No, don’t say that. S- Sasuke-kun has been helping me–”

“You sure? ‘Cause it looks like he’s intimidating the hell out of you.” Kiba scorned, and Sasuke was so done.

He didn’t have time for this jealousy bullshit.

“I gave her advice. We’re business students. Acts of decorum, proper speech eloquence, and how to exude competence. Nothing your skill set can help her with.” As Sasuke listed everything off, Kiba’s face reddened and he became visibly agitated.

Sasuke knew how to hit people where it hurt. It was a low blow, since Kiba hadn’t been accepted to university. The ability to cut through people’s bravado and silly facades was something he couldn’t change, and he didn’t want to. If people couldn’t handle hearing the truth, then that was their problem.

Shaking his head, Kiba laughed humourlessly at Sasuke, “Fucking hell. I really don’t get why Naruto keeps you around. He must be blind to see any good in you.”

“Kiba-kun, stop it.” Hinata grabbed his arm, her eyes pleading at him.

Sasuke shrugged, those sharp words not even grazing his skin, “I don’t know. Ask him.”

Growling at the lack of reaction, Kiba didn’t hold anything back, “Arrogant as always. You’re so full of yourself, but you’ve got nothing to be proud of. Compared to everyone else, your life is pretty damn empty.”

“Then you have no reason to feel inferior to me.” Sasuke asserted, wanting to bring this interaction to an end.

“I’m going, now. Let me know if there’s anything you need clarification on,” Sasuke spoke and looked only at Hinata, although he could feel the heat of Kiba’s glare burning him.

“Th-Thank you, Sasuke-kun.” Offering him an apologetic smile, Hinata looked sincere. Well, at least he didn’t put his time to waste.
Nodding at her, Sasuke fastened his scarf around his neck and left the café without looking back. He could hear the tail-end of Kiba’s insults continuing as he walked out the door, and they consisted mainly of expletives.

As he rounded the corner, Sasuke cast it out of his mind. He had some shopping to do.

* 

As soon as Sasuke walked in, he dropped the shopping bag on the kitchen bench and walked around to the living area. Naruto was stretched out on the floor, his laptop in front of him. Probably reviewing his coursework before they returned to university. Sakura was seated on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, but stood upon seeing Sasuke had arrived and was making her way over.

“Ramen and chocolate, done. Where’s my money?” Cutting to the chase, Sasuke looked at the two of them expectantly.

“Aw, okaeri, Sasuke! Good to have you back.” Naruto glanced up from his laptop, his reply blissfully ignorant as if Sasuke hadn’t spoken at all.

“Thanks, Sasuke-kun. Money’s in the fruit bowl, from both of us.” Sakura gave him a grateful smile as she plucked her chocolate – Sasuke had gone with Rocky Road, which she seemed pleased about – out of the bag and got started on making tea for everyone.

“Hn, thanks.” Sasuke checked the receipt and took all the money he needed.

Naruto groaned, “Sakura-chan, don’t give in so quickly. Let the bastard wait a little, he could use more patience.”

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke ambled over to the couch where Sakura had been seated. He took the other side and shamelessly pilfered her blanket. It was freezing outside, and he needed to warm up quickly.

“I’m not the one who acts recklessly all the time, usuratonkachi.” Sasuke countered, earning a squinty-eyed glare from Naruto.

“That’s half the time for your information!” He corrected, and Sasuke sniffed haughtily as he made himself comfortable, “But thanks I guess, you did get my ramen.”

“Just don’t eat it all at once like you do.” Sasuke chided, and just as Naruto began to splutter his indignation Sakura interjected from the kitchen.

“Yes, he’s right. You need to learn some will power, Naruto! Having ramen every other day is not healthy. You know that!” Her tone was scolding, like a mother. It was how Sakura tended to be when she felt either of them were neglecting their health.

“Hey, I’m also a student. There’s this thing called ‘cost of living’.” Naruto protested, and a small part of Sasuke could see his point. Naruto’s schedule was insane.

There was a lot of theory work and practical experiences involved in becoming a paramedic. And when Naruto did night shifts as part of his prac, Sasuke could understand the convenience meals.

“Besides, I’d eat ramen for breakfast, lunch and dinner if I had it my way!” He grinned at the thought of such a ridiculous thing, and Sasuke shook his head while Sakura rebuked him further.

Tuning them out, Sasuke checked his phone for emails and messages. There was one from Karin,
wanting to do a study session together. Offering to meet at her place tomorrow afternoon, Sasuke wasn’t surprised to see her agree. Karin was a good friend in that way, always flexible and never held anything against Sasuke. They could be straight up with each other, in more ways than Sasuke was sometimes comfortable with.

“So, you and Hinata, huh?” Naruto said abruptly, catching Sasuke’s attention.

He was grinning at him, but it wasn’t like the usual. There was something… off about it. Was Naruto not happy about the fact he met with Hinata? What did that mean?

“What?” Sasuke asked, confused.

“Yes! When did you start liking her, Sasuke? It’s so unexpected, but I think you’d make a lovely couple.” Sakura chimed in, setting down their mugs of tea on the coffee table as she sat beside Sasuke and pulled the blanket over so they were sharing it.

“I have no idea what you two are saying. I neither like nor dislike her.” Reaching for his mug, Sasuke wondered how the hell they came to such weird conclusions. How they even found out about that in the first place was beyond him.

Sakura turned to him, breaking off some of her chocolate to eat, “Didn’t you meet with her today? At the Red Bean?”

It was clear any notions of privacy Sasuke thought he may have had were completely invalid.

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from the other two.

Naruto attempted to clarify, “He’s just sorta touchy about stuff like that—”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Sasuke swiftly cut in, and they hung their heads at his abruptness.

Sighing harshly, Naruto tried again, “Look, he thinks you were mocking him on purpose right in front of Hinata.”

“If he’s so insecure about himself, it’s not my job to soothe his ego,” Sasuke scoffed, peeling off the blanket and leaving its warmth as he rose to his feet, “and Hinata is the opposite of who I want, so forget it.”

“What!?!” Naruto and Sakura screeched, staring at him with bugged eyes and wide, open mouths. *Shit.* Had he just said that? Out loud? His lips had just moved, so he must have.

“Do you like someone, Sasuke-kun?!?”

Sakura was up in an instant and leaning up to get closer to him – all the easier to scrutinise him.

“Who is it?!”

Sasuke flinched at Naruto’s voice from his other side – when did he get there? – as he leaned in just as close, violating Sasuke’s personal space without a care.

And so, the interrogation begins.

Exhaling harshly through his nose, he looked at the both blankly, “No, I don’t. I said Hinata doesn’t have attractive qualities to me.”

Naruto didn’t miss a beat, “What are the goddamned qualities you find so attractive then? Come on, Sasuke, what’s your type?”

*You,* Sasuke’s mind supplied airily, and he shook his head. He was losing it, seriously. What if he had said that out loud?

“We can match you up with someone!” Sakura beamed at him, looked so excited at the thought of Sasuke finding someone precious to him. Truly, it was a sign of just how much she had matured. Sakura had grown out of her one-sided feelings, and he respected her for that. Sasuke was still trying to do that, and it was so much harder than everybody says it is.

“Tell us every detail, I’m sure we can help you. Between the two of us, Naruto and I know a lot of nice girls!” Smiling, Sakura placed her hand on Sasuke’s arm, supportive and gentle.

There it was. The conversation killer, the moment where Sasuke should correct them but he never does. Being as closely knit as they all were, Sasuke was honestly surprised they hadn’t found out already. As much as he loved them, Naruto and Sakura were incredibly nosy. Perhaps Sasuke was incredibly reclusive, but some things he just couldn’t share with them.

So, Sasuke dismissed them, “There is no need for that. I have more important things to consider than falling in love.”

“Who said anything about ‘falling in love’? A date can just be a date, bastard.” Rolling his eyes, Naruto smiled at him. Likely amused at Sasuke’s no-nonsense attitude, even towards dating.
“There’s nothing wrong with dating for fun. I think it would be good for you, Sasuke-kun.” Sakura offered, so hopeful for him.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind. I have to make a phone call, so I’m going.” Grabbing his tea, he stepped away from them and disappeared up the stairs before they could say another word.

As soon as he got to his room, he had to try hard not to slam the door shut. It wouldn’t do him any good if Naruto and Sakura thought he was upset over being ‘dateless’.

Sasuke was annoyed. More than annoyed, he was exasperated. It was getting worse every time, and it was becoming more trouble than it was worth. As if the idea of liking someone, of having feelings for them, was something to get excited about. That was not the way liking a person always went. Liking someone could be so incredibly painful, and wonderful at the same time. One moment you wish to turn off your emotions completely, and the next you’d never been more grateful for every single moment you spent together.

Because Sasuke did have someone he liked, and he did all he could not to think about him for too long. Having it brought up so suddenly like this only made Sasuke feel it even more intensely.

He had confirmed it. Now, Sasuke was certain. He could never do what Gaara had done.

Because Sasuke was terrified, that after all of it came out and Naruto rejected him, that he–

That he wouldn’t be able to move on, anyway. How pitiful, he mocked himself. Unable to stop his feelings, even after getting closure. Sasuke could handle a lot of things, but he couldn’t stomach the thought of such a failure. The fear of being in unrequited love, that it would slowly kill him from the inside out.

Sasuke had to do something. The question was, what could he do to get them to stop?

* * 

“Would you say you’re into blondes?” Karin asked randomly, and Sasuke couldn’t help but think amusedly, Déjà vu.

He didn’t even grace her with a look, “No.”

There was a noted pause in conversation, and Sasuke wished for it to pass and the string of conversation to end. He had come over to study, and to hold Karin accountable for studying as well. Yet, here she was, blatantly procrastinating. Perhaps this had been her plan from the start. Nevertheless, Sasuke wouldn’t let his time be wasted. He had his highlighter out, going through his textbook diligently in preparation for his next assignment.

“Um, you sure?” Karin inquired, not even bothering to cover her scepticism.

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke highlighted a phase and replied, “Hair colour has nothing to do with it. That’s stupid.”

Another stretch of silence, and Sasuke thought he had made it through the rocky waters to the other side.

Then, Karin had to open her mouth again.

“What about tall guys?”
Dropping his studies for the moment, Sasuke stopped everything and put his head in his hands.

“I have a few guys in mind, wanna see some pics?” She babbled on, swiping her finger across her phone screen with a concentrated gleam in her eyes.

Glowering, Sasuke rubbed at his temples and muttered under his breath, “Not again.”

“What? What did I say?” Karin heard him, of course.

“First Sakura and Naruto, now you. Even my father has mentioned it. I’m not interested in seeing anyone, and that’s that.” He said, with a tone of finality as he returned to his work.

“No!” Karin blurted out loudly, startling Sasuke to skew his highlighter line off the page.

Scowling darkly, he looked up to see she was glaring back at him and continued, “I don’t accept that answer, that’s crap!”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow, “Excuse me?”

“You’ve got yourself in a rut and now all you do is pine after that dumbass when you should be out showing off your sexiness to the world!” Karin bemoaned, falling back on the couch as if it was some great ordeal.

Sasuke choked, “I am not pining.”

She shot him a shrewd look, “You look like a dishevelled, homeless cat that got left out in the rain half the time I see you. So cute, but so miserable. It’s pathetic!”

Sneering at her, Sasuke decided it was ‘ignoring time’. That is, ignore her until Karin got frustrated with his lack of response and gave up. He didn’t need to be lectured about his romantic endeavours, or lack thereof. He particularly disliked it whenever Karin brought up his feelings for Naruto, like they were up for discussion.

Karin ploughed forward with her one-sided conversation-intervention, “I know relationships aren’t your thing, I get that. But you can have a little fun here and there! You used to.”

That was…true. As of late, Sasuke found his interest in hooking up was waning. He hadn’t been with anyone since he had moved in with Naruto and Sakura. Perhaps it was a dry spell, but maybe it wasn’t a coincidence that his feelings for Naruto have swelled recently. Being around him all the time, living in the same space as him, was not exactly helping the matter. No, rather it was giving Sasuke more and more reasons to–

Well, it was something Sasuke tried not to think about.

“You’re so gorgeous, Sasuke. And you’re funny, in a cerebral kind of way. I tell you how amazing you are like, every day, don’t I? Because you are, you always look so good no matter what you’re wearing. You know, I bet we could have a lot of fun together, Sasuke.” Taking her glasses off, Karin threw him a smouldering look that he glanced at for about a second before looking away in disinterest and scoffing.

Despite how much Karin knew about Sasuke, she still liked to flirt with him. Most of the time it was harmless and playful, and it’s not like Sasuke took her seriously. She had also told him if at any time he needed a woman to make someone jealous she was available to offer her services. That was laughable, given that the only person he wanted to make jealous wouldn’t even bat an eye at Sasuke kissing a girl.
Surrendering his silence, Sasuke drawled unamused, “Save the flattery for Suigetsu.”

Karín’s face screwed up as if she had just smelled rotten egg, “Ugh, as if. He doesn’t even need it, firstly. Self-absorbed ass, he is.”

“I’m just saying you should get some guy, or guys, give you some attention. I mean, for god’s sake, you’re 22! And you’re acting like your love life has passed you by and you’re just waving at it as it disappears off into the distance like some runaway train!”

Sasuke frowned, feeling like he had done something wrong. Everyone apparently thought he had, and it felt disheartening. Moving from her spot, Karín ambled over to where Sasuke was and plonked herself down beside him. Leaning against him, she gave him a half-hug, her way of reassuring him. Honestly, her and Naruto were much too tactile for their own good. He felt like a plush toy when he was around either of them.

“Let’s go out tonight, you and me.” She suggested, grinning saucily and waggling her eyebrows with intent.

A half-smile curled his lips, “What about Suigetsu?”

“Ha! That jerk and I aren’t exclusive, I can do what I want and so can he.” Karín waved him off, and Sasuke considered it.

“Not tonight.” He said, already having his evening planned and not keen on changing it.

“But Sasukeee–” Karín whined, sounding every bit as annoying as Naruto did when he called his name like that.

“We’ll do it next week.” Compromising, Sasuke blocked his ear as Karín cheered victoriously.

The next week rolled around, and it was on Friday night that Sasuke accompanied Karín for a night to ‘get himself out there’. It had taken him longer than usual getting ready, feeling irritated by his inability to pick clothes. His impatience got the better of him in the end and he threw on the outfit he had picked from the start. Naruto and Sakura were out at the movies, so Sasuke didn’t have to endure any of their teasing or comments about it.

They went to a karaoke bar, getting drinks and snacks for the night. Sasuke was finally introduced to Suigetsu, who had tagged along. He was snarky, sarcastic and completely full of himself. But he was also blunt and honest, which Sasuke immensely appreciated. Despite being many things, Suigetsu wasn’t fake, and Sasuke found he didn’t mind his company. It could be entertaining watching Karín get worked up and irritated by someone.

There was another person coming, someone named Juugo. He was Suigetsu’s friend originally but Karín said he was good company and helped keep Suigetsu in line when he got too much. It was about fifteen minutes later that a red-headed man poked his head into the room, and Suigetsu leapt up to welcome him in.

“This is my pal, Juugo. Juugo, this is Sasuke. He’s Karín’s best bitch.” Giving him a snaggle-toothed grin, Suigetsu had no qualms about fucking with Sasuke even after meeting him half an hour ago.

Rising to the challenge, Sasuke rebutted, “I thought that was you.”

Karin cackled like a witch, doubling over from the force of it. Juugo cracked a smile, and chuckled lowly. For his part, Suigetsu grumbled and stomped around back to his seat, grabbing all the snacks
to himself petulantly. When the laughter passed, Juugo settled down in the booth beside Sasuke.

“Sasuke. Hello.” the man spoke softly, contrasting almost hilariously with his strong physique.

“Hey. Good to meet you.” Sasuke offered, and was surprised at the gentle smile returned to him.

“Likewise.”

Maybe Sasuke had found his answer.

Chapter End Notes

It was a bit indulgent of me to add in Gaara ^^ hope you all don’t mind! I do love him so very much too, hehe. Plus, I also think there was much wasted potential in developing a deeper friendship between Gaara and Sasuke. Oh and can’t forget the LeeGaa, because I’m a sucker for that ship! Also, yay for all of Team Taka together! :D some interesting times lie ahead for our dear Sasuke :3 until next time lovelies, thanks for reading xx

Also, just a little timeline for this story (to orient myself and you guys as well, if you're interested!)
Chapter 1 = early September
Chapter 2 = late September/early October
Chapter 3 = October (Naruto’s bday :D)
Chapter 4 = late November/December (Christmas holidays)
Chapter 5 = mid January
Since their karaoke night, Sasuke was developing a friendship of sorts with Suigetsu and Juugo. Despite being the opposite of a social butterfly, Sasuke found their company amicable in strange ways. Suigetsu’s easy going sarcasm, and Juugo’s quiet but welcoming nature was refreshing. What’s more, neither of them knew Naruto. He wouldn’t trade his friendship with Sakura and Karin for anything, but sometimes being with them reminded Sasuke of his weakness. It was a welcome change to spend time with people who weren’t deeply invested in his personal life.

“I’m glad you’re getting on with them. I mean, they’re weirdos for sure, but they’re not bad people. Well, Juugo’s not. Suigetsu’s a pain in the ass.” Karin then cursed him out, flipping through the pages of her magazine violently. He’d paid her a visit to catch up one on one, and they decided to spend the time with leisure reading and conversation.

“You know, Juugo’s got an anger problem,” Karin announced, and Sasuke raised an eyebrow at her, so she continued, “I’m not kidding, and I don’t mean it lightly. It’s not even anger, more like a kind of single-minded rage.”

*How unexpected*, Sasuke thought to himself. Not once in all the times he’d spent with him did Sasuke think Juugo was capable of such anger. He wasn’t the type to actively seek out conflict, but then again Sasuke hadn’t known him for that long.

“It’s like he loses sense of himself, only full of rage at that moment. It passes, it always does. But when he’s that upset, it’s really hard to be around him.”

Sasuke was silent, taking in all this information and what it meant, “Is he receiving medical help?”

“I don’t know the details, but apparently his long-time therapist or whatever passed away and he’s adamant about not replacing him. He tries really hard to manage it, but Juugo struggles with it more than you’d think,” she explained, and upon seeing she had caught Sasuke’s interest added, “Just wanted you to know, since you guys seem to get on pretty well.”

Levelling a shrewd gaze at her, Sasuke probed for answers, “What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Shrugging, Karin’s attention was on her magazine, and Sasuke felt a pinprick of annoyance.

“So, are we still on for Suigetsu’s party tonight?” Karin changed the subject, excited, “It’s been so long since I went out to a night club with you! We have to dance together so I can see all those jealous faces and know I’ve won.”
His upper lip curled, “Am I your trophy, now?”

Scoffing obnoxiously at Sasuke, Karin sent him a lazy wink, “You are so much more than that, baby.”

Raising his eyebrows at her, Sasuke didn’t have time to reply when Karin cut in, “So, you coming?”

“Yes, I’ll go.” Sasuke didn’t have to debate much over it, since he had made no other plans for this evening. It was Suigetsu’s birthday, and he wanted to spend it in a night club with some of his friends. Apparently, Sasuke was invited.

Karin let out a victorious cheer, smiling over at him, “Yes! We’re gonna have so much fun!”

Sasuke hmphed, but felt a slight pulling on his lips. Despite appearances, he was looking forward to a night out. They were decent people, and the more he got to know them the more Sasuke grew comfortable with their presence.

He hadn’t really told Sakura and Naruto about his new friends. Whenever he went out to meet with them, he’d tell his housemates he was going to meet Karin. Not a complete lie, but not the whole truth. He didn’t know why he was hesitating. But then, was there really a need to tell them? It was his life, and Sasuke didn’t have to explain anything about the company he kept.

When evening came, Sasuke got ready at Karin’s and shot through a text to his housemates that he would be out for the evening. He didn’t necessarily want to, but between the two of them Naruto and Sakura were the worst worry-warts when it came to him. It was better to set them at ease, and avoid the inevitable pestering later. They replied wishing him a good time, and that they were also going out. Since they had two sets of keys between the three of them, there wouldn’t be any issues getting home.

Sasuke wasn’t much of a night club person, but he appreciated the atmosphere every once in a while. Upon arrival, some women were already eyeing him like a piece of well-cooked steak. With Karin attached on his arm, though, he avoided direct attempts at flirting.

The two of them had joined up with Suigetsu and Juugo, and they all celebrated Suigetsu with a drink together. Sasuke even danced together with Karin (only one, he wasn’t that generous), before she and Suigetsu split off together and left him in Juugo’s company. Sasuke didn’t mind it, and neither did Juugo. In fact, he smiled and wanted to move to a quieter area so they could talk easier.

So, they talked. Sasuke ordered another drink, and decided not to get another. Drinking at a club was overrated, and too expensive for Sasuke’s pocket. Juugo worked as an animal rescue worker, saving all manner of animals that were abused by man-made disasters. Sasuke had a hidden soft spot for animals, and listened to every word intently.

When he smiled at something Juugo had said, he noticed the way his eyes softened on Sasuke. The way this man was looking at him, Sasuke could already tell. Juugo was smitten with him. And if he was honest, he felt at ease when he was with Juugo. He was quieter than Sasuke, but the other listened and remembered little things he’d say. Things that Sasuke didn’t think others noticed, and he could feel Juugo’s care for him.

One minute they were talking, and the next Juugo had his lips on Sasuke’s, tangling their tongues together. A soft moan vibrated in his throat, and before he could overthink it he was kissing Juugo back.
It was so nice to kiss someone again. Not so nice to see flashes of blonde hair and blue eyes when he opened his eyes, so he kept them closed. *Right*, that was why he stopped hooking up in the first place. Juugo was leaning in closer, pressing up against him firmly. Sasuke felt his back being pushed against the edge of a nearby table, and Juugo was coming closer and closer so Sasuke placed his hands on the table’s edge for support.

Then, *Sasuke* heard a very familiar voice booming across the room:

“HEY! GET THE HELL AWAY FROM SASUKE!!”

Then, Naruto’s fist struck out of nowhere and punched Juugo square across the jaw. The force Naruto had packed behind it was strong enough to dislodge Juugo from Sasuke and to stumble over sideways. He crashed to the floor and Sasuke stared, his lips still parted from the kiss he’d just been sharing. In a flash Naruto’s back was in front of him, his friend forming a blockade between Sasuke and Juugo.

...What is going on?

“DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH HIM!” Naruto’s face was furious from the side profile Sasuke had of him, and he was yelling, “You hear me!?”

Sasuke wasn’t drunk, he’d only had two drinks. Therefore, he was coherent enough to understand this situation didn’t make sense. Why was Naruto here? And if Naruto was here, then that meant—

“Sasuke-kun, are you okay?” Sakura appeared by his side, her hands fluttered lightly up and down his body checking for any injuries.

He turned to her, his confusion blatant as he asked, “Sakura, what’s happening?”

“Well, Naruto and I spotted you here just now and we were going to come over to talk! But then, we saw that guy just-just force himself on you! He was starting to get really physical, I was so worried. Before I could even say anything, Naruto was already charging over here. You know how he is! I didn’t think he’d do something like *that*, though!” Sakura’s eyes flickered forward, apprehension seizing hold of her body as she assessed the scene before them.

“Keep your hands to yourself! No means fucking *no*, asshole!” Naruto was bellowing, and he looked so angry. Whenever Naruto grew this livid, it was because something had deeply distressed him in such a way that he couldn’t regulate his emotions properly. It had been some time since Sasuke had seen him in such a state.

Clawing himself up from the ground, the punch had clearly impacted Juugo. Catching a glimpse of his face, Sasuke suppressed a wince and Sakura held Sasuke’s arm tightly at the sight of blood trickling out of his nose. There was big red mark on Juugo’s right cheek, in the shape of Naruto’s fist.

“The FUCK!?” Juugo roared, and Sasuke’s stomach twisted up in knots.

No, shit. Juugo was losing control. That anger problem Karin had mentioned, Sasuke should have paid more attention to it. He had to stop this. Naruto wasn’t weak by any means, but Juugo looked monstrous. Neither were going to back down. He had to try, do *something*. Before this night became irredeemable.

Stepping forward, he ignored Sakura’s trembling protests and stood by Naruto’s side. He looked only at Juugo, catching his attention. Naruto looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel, but before he could get a chance to speak Sasuke cut in.
“Juugo. Calm down, and look at me,” Sasuke spoke normally, but his message was received loud and clear.

In an instant, Juugo’s eyes snapped to him. And then, as quickly as his temper had flared, it fizzled.

“Sasuke? What’s going on?” He asked, his voice lowered and confused. Taking in his surroundings, Juugo caught sight of Naruto in a defensive position and Sakura frozen behind him.

Keeping his voice even, Sasuke assured him, “It’s fine. Go outside, we’re leaving.”

Nodding at the instruction, Juugo said not another word and slipped away into the crowd, heading towards the exit. Sasuke exhaled silently, crisis averted.

Naruto tore into him instantly, “Sasuke! What are you fucking doing!?”

Not yet. He still had to take care of these two. God, the gravity of the situation was only just now starting to sink in once the threat had passed. Naruto and Sakura had seen him—they had watched him kissing another man—

“I’ll explain it later.” Was his explanation, and it wasn’t good enough if Naruto’s clenched fists were any indication.

“You’re taking that asshole pervert home!? No, no way.” Naruto said firmly, his body still buzzing from the adrenaline. Luckily, Sakura had stepped closer and was holding his hand. Good, maybe it’ll calm this idiotic hothead down.

“You shouldn’t go by yourself.” She added, eyebrows upturned anxiously.

“Nothing’s going to happen.” He said, wanting nothing more than to disappear.

Protests were flying out of Naruto’s mouth before he’d finished the sentence, “Are you kidding me!? He just had his hands all over you! You can’t trust him—!”

“Do you trust me, Naruto?” Sasuke broke in, his eyes locked steady on Naruto’s.

His anger faltered, and Naruto narrowed his eyes, “Of course, I do! But—!”

“Then listen to me. I will tell you both the details later. Right now, I’m taking Juugo home. I’ll see you back at the house.”

The three of them were silent then. Once Sasuke had made up his mind, they were hard pressing changing it. He had a responsibility, and he needed to know that Juugo was alright. More than anything, he needed a moment away from his two closest friends to process all that had happened in such a short time.

“Call us when you’re leaving so we know when to expect you back.” Sakura requested softly, her worried emerald gaze piercing through his nonchalance.

“Yeah, okay.”

Then, he turned on his heel and walked away. The music was at the same volume it had been when he had entered the place, but all Sasuke could hear was white noise. His body was on autopilot, as he located Juugo outside near the streetlight and led him over to his car. Sasuke was buckled in and driving on his way to Juugo’s place before he knew it, and he vaguely wondered how much time had passed since it all happened.
The silence was eventually broken, as Juugo spoke up, “Did I lose control of myself?”

“You were very angry. Although, I would be pissed too if some random guy punched me out of nowhere.” Sasuke answered, and grimaced.

Naruto, that idiot. His impulsiveness was going to be the death of him, Sasuke was sure of it.

“I’m so sorry.”

Sasuke looked away from the road for a quick second, seeing Juugo’s dejectedness.

He tried to provide an explanation, “I think Naruto thought that you,” Sasuke stopped, thought better and rephrased, “He came over because of a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” Juugo parroted, then said, “Did he believe I was sexually assaulting you?”

Sasuke nodded, pursed lips and furrowed brow. There was no point in lying, and Juugo needed to know the whole situation before he jumped to any hasty conclusions.

Then, in a quiet voice, Juugo asked, “Was I?”

Shocked at how little the other thought of himself, Sasuke answered with conviction, “No.”

Silence. Sasuke continued, “I wanted it, Juugo. If I didn’t, I would have made myself clear.”

Juugo sighed, a heavy sigh that spoke of bone-deep weariness, “I’m sorry, my memory isn’t so good after one of my episodes. Please apologise on my behalf. If he wants to press charges, I understand.”

Was this guy serious? Sasuke blinked in disbelief, “Juugo, you didn’t even touch him. He punched you.”

“Oh,” Juugo mused aloud, “I won’t press charges.”

That was the least of Sasuke’s worries, “I’ll let him know.”

When he pulled up in front of Juugo’s apartment, he waited. For him to speak, leave, something. Sasuke wouldn’t leave without knowing he was okay, or at least didn’t feel unnecessarily guilty.

“I feel embarrassed acting in such a way around your friends. This was not how I ever wanted them to see me.” Juugo confessed, and Sasuke was still finding it hard to believe this same man had lost control of his temper so wildly this same night. There was no doubt, Juugo had good intentions and never meant to hurt anyone.

So, Sasuke would reassure him of that, “I’m going to explain everything. They’ll understand. Naruto’s just—he’s an idiot. Once he knows what happened, it will be okay.”

Juugo didn’t have a response for that, but he seemed less morose than he did earlier.

Turning to Sasuke, he smiled softly and unclicked his seatbelt, “Thank you for taking me home, Sasuke. I’m sorry once again, for how the night ended up.”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s in the past now. We can move forward from here.” Sasuke said, even though he wasn’t sure of that answer himself.

Opening the car door, Juugo got out and held it open, still talking to him, “I’ll see you later, then?”
Sending him a small smile, Sasuke nodded, “Yeah, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Sasuke.” With that, Juugo closed the door and walked into his apartment building without looking back.

Meanwhile, Sasuke sat in his car with the engine and his mind still running. After considering all his options, recounting the entire event in his head multiple times, there was only one conclusion. No matter what angle he looked at it from, Sasuke knew what had to be done. He could see no other way of settling this completely. He’d have to tell them that he was gay.

Just the thought was troubling, his heart rate increasing just from considering it.

The reason he had kept it from them in the first place, was because Sasuke feared they would connect the dots and realising. It was unfounded and unreasonable, and Sasuke was aware of this. Yet, he feared the friction it would cause between him and Naruto. Would Naruto change his behaviour around Sasuke once he knew? The casual, friendly touches could vanish. Those warm, open smiles could become small and forced. Sasuke hated it. He hated how dependent he was on that sparse contact from Naruto, as if it was a lifeline that kept him from straying too far.

But, that didn’t matter. It was now past the point where Sasuke could return, fooling them and protecting them at the same time. He would have to be honest, and risk whatever judgements they placed upon him from here onwards. Gripping the steering wheel, he exhaled slowly and let it go as he pulled out his phone to call Sakura. He was on his way home.

* *

As soon as he walked in the door, he was barraged with Sakura’s fussing and Naruto’s onslaught of questions. Breathe in, breathe out. Deciding he wanted to be standing when he did this, Sasuke moved to the kitchen and predictably, they followed him. And without further hesitation, he talked. He told them about Juugo and Suigetsu, how he had met them through Karin and was now considering them as his friends. They in turn revealed they hadn’t known Sasuke would be there, that they were only trying to have a fun night out together.

Having the backstory of it all, Naruto interrupted (as he had throughout, so damn typical), “Okay, okay. So, if that Juugo bastard is your friend, then just what the hell was he doing to you?’

The moment had come. Sasuke couldn’t put it off anymore, he was at the end of the story. He had promised them an explanation, and it was now or never.

“You wanted to know my type, didn’t you?”

It was Sakura who answered, although she seemed cautious, “Well, yes.”

“It’s Juugo.” Sasuke said, simply. He did like Juugo. It just wasn’t the sort of ‘like’ that meant long-term relationship.

The silence that followed was deafening. He looked between the two of them, gauging their reactions. Sakura was wide-eyed, and seemed genuinely speechless at Sasuke’s revelation. Having carried a torch for him for so long, he hadn’t been sure of how she would take it. He hoped she wouldn’t take it personally. Naruto, on the other hand, looked stoic. He was probably trying to grasp the idea Sasuke had such preferences, that Sasuke had any preferences at all.

“What are you saying?” Swallowing hard, Sakura peered up at him with her lips quivering.

“This is who I am. Accept it or not, but it’s the truth.” Sasuke stated, remembering what his father
had told him all those years ago. He held his head high, he was not ashamed.

Sakura was visibly distraught, tears pooling in her eyes, “Why didn’t you tell us? How long have you—”

“A while.”

“You like guys?”

It was the first thing Naruto had said, and it was unfair how those three words struck Sasuke right to his core.

Shaking his head, Naruto glowered at the floor, “I just don’t get it. Half the time you act like you’re totally repulsed by the human species, now you come out with this? I thought you were asexual or something.”

Just like that, Sasuke’s walls came up. It didn’t matter that it was Naruto, even if it hurt. Sasuke would not tolerate anyone talking down on him.

“I don’t care if you get it or not. You don’t get to pass judgement on me, and I don’t owe you any explanations.”

Despite his feelings for Naruto, Sasuke had been with other men before. No relationships, just someone he could call and they would hook up with no strings attached. Flings, he supposed he’d call them. Obviously, neither Naruto nor Sakura had known about them. So, assuming Sasuke just wasn’t interested in people was not entirely unfeasible.

Banging his fist against the fridge, Naruto’s eyes were fierce and blazing through him, “Dammit, Sasuke! What else are you hiding from us?”

“Naruto, please.” Sakura tried to calm him down, but it was too late. Sasuke was pissed, and Naruto was angry. The clash was imminent.

“You’ll never learn to express your true feelings, right? They’re your feelings, you can’t just run from them like you do everything else you bastard!” Naruto’s voice had risen, and he’d stepped closer to Sasuke.

He glared daggers at his longest friend, “You think you can preach to me? Don’t act so superior. You’re not perfect, Naruto. Far from it.”

Fuelled by his sadness, Sasuke was ruthless, “All that homophobic shit you spewed back in high school, did you forget?”

His words cut through Naruto’s spitfire so effectively, and the silence in the room was thicker than early morning fog. He noted the way those broad shoulders stiffened, how his face cracked and how hard he was gritting his teeth. Sasuke didn’t care.

He kept going, “I didn’t.”

And Sasuke didn’t forget it. Naruto was different now, and he accepted all relationships for what they were. His acceptance of Lee and Gaara together was sheer proof of this. But all throughout high school, Naruto, like most teenage guys, used the slurs and laughed about Sasuke’s sexual orientation like it was some joke. Before Sasuke had truly accepted who he was, he hadn’t known why it got under his skin so much. Why it felt so personal. Then afterwards, it became impossible to ignore.
Sneering, he stepped closer and dealt the final blow, “You haven’t lived it, so don’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t have done. You could never understand how it feels.”

Naruto wasn’t saying anything back, his head lowered and his anger all but gone. Sakura’s tears were now streaming down her face, her hands cupped over her mouth to cover her sobs. Sasuke knew Naruto was ashamed of his old self, but it was a hurt Sasuke had been nursing for a long time. At the time, Naruto had a lot of influence in the school and had encouraged others without realising it. So many people spouting bullshit, unknowingly spreading hate. He could forgive but he would never forget, and he certainly didn’t have any sympathy left to spare for Naruto.

Moving back, Sasuke walked out of the kitchen and stopped at the doorway, “Juugo didn’t do anything wrong.”

Casting a dark look over his shoulder, he said, “So back off, and mind your own business.”

With that, Sasuke left the room without so much as a backward glance and was soon in his bedroom, door closed and shrouded in the dark. Maybe he should have listened, maybe he should have let them speak. It was over, and all Sasuke wanted to do now was close his eyes and lose himself to sleep. The looks on their faces were burned on his retinas, as he shed his clothes and went to bed.

*

The next day, Sasuke was in his room until the other two had left. It was a Saturday, which meant Sakura had her part-time job at the Red Bean café to go to, and Naruto usually did some recreational activity with his other friends. This week Sasuke thinks he remembered Naruto mentioning it was outdoor rock-climbing or something of the sort. The two of them would be up early, so Sasuke told himself to sleep in and wait until they had left. He woke up just before ten in the morning, and the house was silent. He hadn’t slept well, having woken up multiple times throughout the night. Sakura’s shift started at nine, and Naruto would have left even earlier to meet with his friends and travel to the location for their activity.

Sasuke could fathom no better way to spend the day than working on his project and studying in the library. He contemplated staying home, but didn’t want to risk staying and be subject to Naruto and Sakura’s awkward stares and comments.

Getting up, he stretched his arms over his head and felt some of his bones cracking as his body woke up. After a quick breakfast of muesli and yoghurt, Sasuke was out of the house and at the library just after eleven o’clock. For the next couple of hours, it was good. He worked productively and consistently and was making real progress. His mind was clear of his own dramas, focussing only on the work in front of him. That was, until around one o’clock when he was discovered.

“Hey, Sasuke-kun!” Sakura’s familiar voice whispered over to him, and he looked up to see her at the top of the stairs and making her way towards his desk.

“How did you know where I was?” Sasuke asked slowly, feeling uncomfortable already. Sakura must have just gotten off from work, and had come looking for him.

“Oh, come on! Please, give me some credit,” Sakura giggled lightly, her emerald eyes glinting with fondness for him, “If you’re ever anywhere, it’s the library!”

There was an air in a library that Sasuke couldn’t find anywhere else. It was peacefully quiet, but so full of life. Everyone was always working towards something, whether it was the pursuit of more knowledge, studying or revision for exams, or even transforming ideas into creations. More
to the point, nobody was interested in pestering Sasuke in here. It was disappointing he could be so predictable, but that was what happened when you only had three close friends.

“What are you working on?” She asked, settling herself into the chair beside him and peering over curiously.

“Collating the results of the questionnaires I sent out two weeks ago. The last of them were returned, so I’m categorising the data.” Sasuke answered, his eyes back on the computer screen.

It was for his Honours project, something Sakura understood well. She had completed hers a month ago, as she was due to graduate very soon. Sasuke was envious of her, still having a year to go on his.

Sakura’s throat hummed with an impressed noise, “You’re so proactive, it’s incredible. I don’t know how you do it. I mean, I am too, but I can procrastinate terribly.”

He knew she was only using this topic as a segway into something else. His earlier confession still fresh on their minds. Sasuke couldn’t deal with it any longer, and decided he had to be the one to break the ice. Sakura was always too gentle with him, even when he didn’t deserve it.

“If you have something to say, then say it.”

There was a short pause then, Sakura not expecting to be confronted when she was the one who came to him. Sasuke worked on, doing anything he could to distract himself from remembering the earlier incident.

“Does anyone else know?” She eventually asked, in a soft tone. Sasuke stopped typing, and turned to face her directly. He didn’t have to ask to know what she was referring to.

“My father,” he started, and Sakura nodded, “and, Karin. Now, you and Naruto.”

Doing a double-take, Sakura queried, “Karin?”

Sasuke was silent, so she continued, “Y-You mean to say, that you told Karin but you didn’t tell us?”

“I didn’t tell her anything.” He iterated, because he knew sometimes Karin and Sakura grew jealous of each other.

Despite the girls being very close friends, they still liked to consider themselves each as Sasuke’s best female friend. As for what Sasuke thought, he cared for them both equally. However, he’s only ever had one best friend. And it would stay that way—at least, Sasuke hoped it would.

“She knew, all on her own.” Sakura suddenly answered her own question, and Sasuke glanced off to the side.

“How? I mean, I-I never would have guessed–Sasuke- kun, I always thought that it was just–”

“What do you want, Sakura?” He cut her off, none too gently.

Sasuke wouldn’t be answering how it happened. He never would, and he had made Karin swear to do the same if she ever found herself in such a situation. It wasn’t that Sasuke was transparent, but more of the fact that Karin was Naruto’s cousin, and she had become so close with Sasuke. She knew them both so well as individuals, and then she got to know them together as best friends. Because of that, she could see it all and piece two and two together.
Sometimes, Sasuke wondered why Sakura hadn’t figured it out, as well. They spent so much time together, just the three of them. They lived together. Then again, she had been infatuated with him for so long, and perhaps had blinded herself to believing Sasuke liked girls, but was just waiting for ‘the one’. And as for Naruto, Sasuke had already accepted that he would never figure it out on his own. His obliviousness of others’ feelings for him was as naïvely charming as it was absolutely crushing.

“I was just hoping we could talk.” She offered in a small voice, a hopeful smile crossing her lips. Eyebrow raised, Sasuke scrutinised her, “Alone?”

Sakura blinked rapidly, then stuttered in nervousness, “A-Ah, Naruto’s back at home, he just got back from rock climbing. He said he’s going to catch up with you later!”

Naruto. God, Sasuke had fucked it all up. If that was Naruto’s reaction to finding out Sasuke liked men, then he didn’t want to imagine how it would be if Naruto found out that he–

“I don’t care. I don’t want to see that blockhead.” He spat, and although Sasuke wasn’t lying, it wasn’t the whole truth.

There was a fear that festered inside him, that blew up whenever issues like this came along. The notion that one day, Naruto would get fed up and grow tired of Sasuke’s trying, high-maintenance personality and cut their ties for good. Though Sasuke wouldn’t blame him if he ever did, he couldn’t deny the painful tug in his chest at the mere thought of it actually happening.

Sakura approached carefully, “It’s just…surprising. I guess the way we found out wasn’t the greatest, for any of us. I’m really sorry about that, Sasuke-kun.”

He shrugged, appearing more unaffected than he felt, “You were both bound to find out eventually.”

Breathing in slowly, Sakura leaned back in her chair with a wistful look in her eye. Sasuke was going to return to his work, but something was stopping him. He waited, and soon enough Sakura began to speak.

“You know, I used to wonder all the time what kind of girl you liked. Every time you rejected me, I would think that I was missing something. I heard a rumour when we were children you liked girls with long hair, so I grew my hair as long as I could.” She gave an embarrassed smile at that, then tugged at her short pink locks nostalgically. It was the first time in a long time that Sakura reflected on her past feelings for Sasuke, to him.

Was there a rumour like that about me back then? Sasuke frowned. Never had he mentioned such a thing about how he liked girls’ hair, he hadn’t ever considered such a thing. He was aware of how girls used to obsess over him, but to such an extent? How many other rumours like that had people made up about him?

Sakura went on, “Then, I was convinced you wouldn’t notice me if I wasn’t just as smart as you were, so I studied hard and became top of the class. I tried so hard to be everything for you. When it wasn’t enough, I felt so pathetic. I thought the type of girl you would fall in love with was an unattainable ideal I could never live up to.”

“And now, I know the real reason behind why you always rejected me.” Sakura smiled at him, and Sasuke could see an old hurt shining through. So many years Sakura had spent devoted to him, and she claimed to have been in love with him more than once.
He had sometimes wished he could have returned it to her, given her some of the love she craved from him. Yet, every time he had thought about it he always came to the same conclusion. It was nothing more than platonic love.

“I’m sorry, Sakura.” He apologised, the most comfort he could give in small words.

“Oh no, it’s okay,” she looked down at her hands, her smile sweetening. “I think I should be grateful to you, really. When you told me no the last time I confessed to you, it really felt like the last time. After that, I couldn’t do it anymore. I finally let you go. And it was so hard, but I moved on.”

Yes, Sasuke remembered that day. It had been in their senior year of high school, and Sakura had come to him with a heartfelt, and desperate confession. Sasuke had rejected her yet again, but had said some other things too. Things he had never mentioned before, but felt Sakura had needed to hear. He never enjoyed rejecting her, despite what others seemed to think. All he had wanted was for her to find her happiness without him. And, she had.

“I’m just so happy being with Naruto. I didn’t think I could feel this happy!” her laugh tinkled like chimes in the wind, and Sasuke noted the wet quality to it. If he looked at her eyes, they would surely be filled with tears. He didn’t say anything, but his hand curled into a fist in his lap. He could never, never tell them the whole truth.

It would just be cruel.

“I really want you to be so happy like this one day, from the bottom of my heart.” Sakura suddenly took his hand, and he inhaled through his nose slowly.

His heart was spasming in his chest. Her smile was so kind, it was painful.

“Is Juugo your,” she paused, releasing his hand as her mind worked on how to word her question sensitively, “Is he your boyfriend? Are you dating him?”

Sasuke’s answer was immediate, “No.”

Humming, Sakura nodded and swayed in her seat, “Do you want it to be that way, with him?”

He looked her straight in the eyes, “Relationships aren’t my strong point, Sakura.”

Whether it was in the romantic or platonic sense, Sasuke knew a weakness of his was intimacy with people. Naruto was right, he didn’t like to share his true feelings. Making bonds, keeping them and nourishing those bonds, strengthening them over time was so…difficult. It was the one aspect of life Naruto had always excelled in where he failed.

“If you ever find someone that you want to be with, we’ll support you. I promise.” She assured him, a tentative light in her eyes.

We? That seemed unlikely. Gaining acceptance was one thing, but understanding was something else entirely. Especially in Naruto’s case. Naruto may come around to accepting that Sasuke was gay, but what would he do if Sasuke walked out one morning with a man in his room? Not that Sasuke would ever do something of the kind, but it was all relevant.

Sasuke must have let his doubt show, as Sakura’s eyes filled with sympathy and she moved closer to him.
“I know that Naruto,” she paused, furrowing her brow and pursing her lips, “I know how he used to be in high school. It was awful, the things he said and how he acted. Me, too. I’d laugh along, even though I felt uncomfortable about it. But, he’s changed. Naruto’s not like that anymore. You know that, right?” Leaning in closer to him, he saw her worriedly bite at her lip.

When he didn’t speak up, she hurried to reassure him, “He would never abandon you over something like this.”

Sasuke wished he had never gone to the night club. He wanted to change everything, wind back the clock to when they were younger and carefree, and didn’t care so much about romance and relationships.

Placing a hand on his arm, she squeezed gently, “He cares about you so much, Sasuke-kun.”

It hurt. Why did she have to say those words in that way? Why did those words have to make Sasuke feel so relieved?

He was so weak.

“Make up soon, neh? He gets so sulky when you guys fight for real.” Sakura whispered like it was a secret, cupping her hand around her mouth and talking low.

“I’ll see you at home! Remember to take breaks and walk around every now and then!” Sakura waved goodbye, with a smile. Sasuke lifted a hand in farewell, and when she turned allowed his lips to lift slightly. In spite of it all, Sasuke was supported by her. Sakura always tried to reach out to him, even if she never did understand his actions sometimes. A small smile still on his lips, he reapproached his work with renewed vigour.

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Darkness filtered through the windows instead of sunlight, and Sasuke turned on the desk lamp for additional brightness. Having spent over half the day at the library was fruitful, but also mentally draining. He could feel his brain getting tired, and just finishing up with a chapter review he decided to get himself a coffee. His stomach grumbled its displeasure, begging for more than that, but he ignored it. Food could come later, right now he needed to distract his brain from more frivolous thoughts.

Strolling out of the library, Sasuke stopped at a nearby coffee shop that was open twenty-four hours. Ordering his coffee, he took a seat and scrolled through his newsfeed as a mental break. When it was done, Sasuke took his coffee and tasted it on the spot. A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows as he looked up accusingly.

“I ordered a cappuccino.” Sasuke murmured, glaring at the cashier.

The cashier, whose nametag read ‘Emiko’, blinked at him and gave a single nod, “Yes, that is a cappuccino.”

Unimpressed, Sasuke corrected her, “No, it’s a flat white.”

Pursing her lips together, she looked like she was thinking hard as she clarified, “Are you sure?” Sasuke scowled, “I know what a cappuccino tastes like. Apparently, you don’t.”

A panicked expression crossed her face, before she bowed at the waist and stammered, “I-I’m very sorry. Would you like us to remake your coffee?”
“No, you’ll just get it wrong again. I’ll accept this free of charge.” Sasuke compromised, whoever said he was uncooperative clearly didn’t know him well enough.

Emiko straightened up, eyes wide and unsure, “Please, wait a minute—”

“I’m paying for him.”

Sasuke whipped around at that voice, an unmistakeable voice.

Naruto had just walked in, and was standing in line behind Sasuke. He was carrying some plastic bags, probably take-away dinner for himself and Sakura. When their eyes met, Sasuke levelled a dull glare at him. *Of course*, Naruto was always the good guy swooping in to save the day, doing everything the right way.

Emiko looked over Sasuke’s shoulder to his housemate, and her posture relaxed, “Oh, I see. Well, um, th-the total is 400 yen.”

His brow twitching in irritation, Sasuke broke the gaze and walked out. Not long after, the automatic door opened again and Naruto was calling out to him.

Narrowing his eyes, his fingers tightened around the coffee cup, as he turned and asked, “What?”

He didn’t expect to see Naruto so soon, even though Sakura had said he wanted to catch up with him earlier. *Damn it*, Sasuke thought he could have avoided him for a little longer, at least.

“Thought we could have a chat. I mean, it’s the least you could do since I paid for your coffee and all.” Naruto pointed out, gesturing to the coffee Sasuke was holding.

“Coffee that I didn’t want.” Sasuke was being needlessly snippy and dismissive. He should be thanking Naruto, not snubbing him for his kindness. He had Sasuke’s back more times than the other could count, and he still treated Naruto like this.

Frowning at him, Naruto’s tone was chiding, “You shouldn’t yell at the cashier, Sasuke. They try their best, y’know!”

Sasuke scoffed, turning around coldly, “Clearly, their best isn’t good enough.”

He could hear Naruto fuming behind him, trying to reign in his frustration, “Enough of that! I just wanna talk! Is that too much to ask?”

Not saying a word, Sasuke stood still and considered it. Whatever Naruto had to say to him, he would have to hear it eventually. Delaying it would only provide a hollow comfort, and Sasuke wasn’t one to delude himself by living in his own fantasy land. Taking a sip of his coffee, he stepped forward and headed back towards the library.

“Hey! Where are you going!?” Naruto’s loud voice filled up the surrounding area, the sound of his feet pounding the pavement as he caught up with Sasuke.

Without a backward glance, Sasuke approached the doors of the building and scanned his ID to enter, “To the library. If you’re coming along, then shut your loud mouth already.”

“You jerk!” Naruto griped, also scanning his ID and scooting through the door to follow Sasuke. They ascended the stairwell and Sasuke led the way back to his desk, where all his belongings were still arranged.
Surveying the area, a frown tugged at Naruto’s mouth, “Don’t tell me you’ve been here all day—”

“You had something to say. So, start talking or leave.” Sasuke was in no mood for sympathy, he just wanted to get this over with.

Though he looked pissed off at being dismissed, Naruto pushed on, “About before, what I said.”

A ripple of unease passed through Sasuke, “What, you have something more to add?”

“It’s just that—” Cutting himself off, Naruto shook his head and started again, “I just overreacted because it felt like you were pulling away from us. Not telling us something this big just—it makes me mad!”

Exhaling harshly, Naruto rubbed at his face and rested his forearms on the desk in front of him, “I always believed I was there for you, whenever you needed me. But when you said why you couldn’t tell me this, I realised I haven’t been there for you at all. And, I feel like a useless friend.”

“I know I was an asshole back in high school. I said all the worst kinds of shit, and you gotta believe me when I say that if I could take it all back, I would. There’s nothing to be proud of being that guy.”

Naruto continued on, looking pained, “I’ve heard all the stories about people our age who come out, y’know a-and their parents throw them out on the street. All their friends turn their backs on them, and tell them how they’re wrong and it’s disgusting—as if they had a choice. How they get bashed up so badly by strangers, for just being themselves. I just–I can’t accept that! It’s not anyone’s fault, because you can’t help how you feel, right?”

Sasuke’s eyes widened. Hearing Naruto say those words, his heart beat faster.

Stop deluding yourself, he’s not giving you permission. But, everything Naruto was saying shed light on his reactions now. He spoke with a trace of fear, and it made Sasuke remember last night. After he had separated Sasuke from Juugo, Naruto was mad, but there had been something else there. Distress, panic, uncertainty. He had been scared.

“Does your dad know, Sasuke?” Naruto asked, hesitancy filtering through his words and breaking Sasuke out of his pondering.

Inclining his head, Sasuke elaborated, “Yeah, he was the first.”

A slight pause, then Naruto ventured, “How did he take it?”

“He didn’t understand everything, but he made it clear he accepted me. He’s been supportive since then.” Sasuke really was fortunate to have the father he had. Maybe their relationship wasn’t always perfect or smooth, and their family had suffered many hardships, but after everything they still had each other. He could always rely on his dad.

Releasing a giant breath, Naruto slouched back, “Man, I’m so glad. He always looks so serious, I wouldn’t have a clue how he’d react to something like that!”

Sasuke tsked, shaking his head, “Idiot. He might be strict, but he loves me. No matter what, he’s always there for me.”

An uncomfortable silence followed Sasuke’s words, and they looked away from each other. Sasuke tried not to see it, but the guilt had been plain on Naruto’s face. Biting the inside of his cheek, Sasuke felt the hopeless frustration. He had never meant to make Naruto feel guilty, but whenever he spoke his feelings Sasuke just couldn’t articulate them delicately. They came out as he thought
them, blunt and unfiltered.

Sobering, Naruto caught his eye and lowered his head apologetically, “I’m sorry about before, Sasuke. That wasn’t how I meant to react, but it all just came at me so fast I kinda let my feelings vomit all over the place.”

“Don’t worry about it.” An apology was on the tip of his tongue, but Sasuke couldn’t quite get it out. He had reacted badly as well, he had been too harsh on Naruto. Sasuke knew that, but he was unable to say a thing, Pathetic.

“No, I need you to understand, because I get it now.” Naruto was shaking his head, a determined glint in his eyes, “You like who you like, and it’s as simple as that. You should never feel bad about it. And it’s a really great thing to like someone, y’know.”

Sasuke straightened in his chair, readjusting his posture to mask his visible flinch. He hadn’t been able to stop it, not when Naruto was saying such things to him.

“And, I accept you as you are. There’s nothing I’d want to change about you, not your pompous glares, or your bitchy mood-swings, or your razor-sharp tongue.”

The highlighting of his less than desirable qualities made Sasuke glower at him, and Naruto returned it with a relaxed half-smirk. Then, he leaned over and put his hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. It was warm, and squeezed him reassuringly in a way that hadn’t changed since they were kids. Sasuke couldn’t look away from him, his face blank and his mind going haywire.

“You’re you, Sasuke. You’re always gonna be my best friend. You’re stuck with me, and Sakura-chan too. We’re not gonna leave you alone, ever.” Naruto declared, in that way that was simply Naruto, and it robbed Sasuke of the power of speech. 

Naruto, why?

As he looked into the face of his best friend, Sasuke felt the stinging pang of his yearning rushing up to the surface. He could kiss whomever he wanted – and Juugo was such a good person, so genuinely good – but his heart was never as full as it was when he was with Naruto. No one outside his family had ever reached him so deeply as Naruto did. Sasuke’s lips parted, his face losing tension he hadn’t known it had been holding for so long.

Why do you have to make it so hard?

Naruto’s eyebrows shot up, his hand moving off Sasuke’s shoulder and slapping to his forehead as he whined out dramatically, “Damn, I’ve gotta apologise to that Juugo guy! He must think I’m a real psycho, or something!”

Sasuke rolled his eyes, but chose to go easy on him, “Juugo’s not mad. He knows it wasn’t entirely your fault.”

“I really am sorry about, uh…ruining your moment. I thought he was taking advantage of you, so I couldn’t help myself.” Naruto explained hastily, a light blush blooming in his cheeks as he scratched the back of his head.

Sasuke raised an eyebrow, amused at such a rare sight of Naruto embarrassed, “Idiot, I can protect myself.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t protect you too!” He immediately protested loudly, and his blush deepened at the shushes other students aimed towards him.
Clearing his throat, Naruto looked away and brushed Sasuke off, “Besides, you’re the type of guy who needs all the help he can get.”

A twitch developed in Sasuke’s left eye, “No, that’s you.”

“Ha! You wish!” Naruto chuckled lowly, shaking his head.

Shrugging, Sasuke busied himself for searching for the next chapter to review, “I don’t have to wish, since it’s already true.”

Naruto grumbled and groused at him under his breath, and it was entertaining seeing as how he looked to be visibly straining himself to stay at a low volume.

“Aren’t you going to go?” Sasuke interrupted his friend’s ramblings, glancing at the time on the clock hanging from the ceiling. It was just after seven o’clock, and Naruto wasn’t a night owl like he was. Usually, he slept early and woke early, whereas Sasuke was the opposite. He woke up early when he needed to, but preferred working late at night when everything was just quieter.

Shaking his head, Naruto unzipped his backpack and started pulling out his textbook and notebooks, “Nah, I’m gonna stay. Haven’t studied at all today and having you close by helps keep me in check. Mind if I join you?”

Sasuke watched Naruto going through his stationery. He was lining up all the highlighters in a row on the table, with his face all scrunched up in concentration. Suppressing a smile, Sasuke humoured him, “Do I have a choice?”

Glancing up, Naruto shrugged and grinned hopelessly, “Nope. Just thought I’d be courteous to you and all.”

“For the first time. I’m speechless.” Sasuke played along, and earned a playful shove in the shoulder for his efforts.

Brightening up all of a sudden, Naruto picked up his plastic bags from earlier and plonked them on top of the table in front of them, “Ah yeah, and I picked up some yakisoba and tonkatsu– since I know you didn’t eat in hours, teme.”

Rifling through the plastic bags, Sasuke sighed, “You always get the largest portions. Idiot, I can’t eat all of that.”

Disheartened at his mistake, Naruto’s shoulders slumped and he looked down and pouted, like a kicked puppy. It was a look Naruto had used a lot in their childhood, and continued to pull out every now and then. Strangely enough, it was a weirdly endearing look to see on him, even as a fully grown 22-year-old man.

Pulling out the food (and drinks, Naruto had gotten him two bottles of water, god–), Sasuke arranged it all on the table in front of the both of them. Nudging Naruto in the arm, he nodded at the food and instructed, “Just eat with me and get to work.”

A whole-hearted smile bloomed over his face, as Naruto nodded and began digging in to the tonkatsu straight away, “Yosh!”

A bubble of warmth settled within him. Having Naruto accept who he was lifted some of the weight from Sasuke’s shoulders. He hadn’t realised how important it was to him, but now that Sasuke had it he felt so much happiness. Even if it hadn’t really changed anything, even though Sasuke was still hiding something from them, he was in Naruto’s world. He wouldn’t be cast aside,
and it felt like the start of better days.

Chapter End Notes

Naruto, your protective side is showing ;) I hope you all enjoyed that rollercoaster of emotions! I know I did when I was writing it, and I can ensure you that this is not the end of the drama yet. Also, Sasuke is a coffee snob and doesn’t even know he is xD

Side note: I’ve recently had an unexpected hardware failure, and as a result I’ve lost my drafts for future chapters of this story ;_; as well as some personal stuff which really sucks. So it might take a bit longer for the next chapter to come out, but I hope you can be patient with me and continue on with the story! Until then, take care everyone xx

Weekly chapter timeline for reference:
Chapter 1 = early September
Chapter 2 = late September/early October
Chapter 3 = October (Naruto’s bday :D)
Chapter 4 = late November/December (Christmas holidays)
Chapter 5 = mid January
Chapter 6 = end of January
Did you guys notice I changed the summary for this fic? ;w; It doesn’t really make much of a difference for y’all already following this story, but I just thought it describes what I want to capture much better. As well as the fact that this quote was lost in my recent hardware failure sooo I don’t have that scene in my drafts anymore *nervous laugh* I’m saying too much orz my bad guys!

Oh and also…sorry for changing my username…again ^^” I don’t mean to cause any confusion lol don’t mind me having that small identity crisis xD rest assured, I will be sticking with this one! I really like it ♥ Anyway, enjoy!

WARNING: (spoiler)

mildly sexual scene, a little over halfway through the fic ;)

As Sasuke descended the stairs, the spice of ramen tickled his nose and he grimaced. What was going on? Sakura had banned Naruto from consuming ramen any earlier than 11 AM. Naruto followed her rules strictly, even when she wasn’t around. Mainly because he knew Sasuke would tell Sakura the moment he saw her, and his love for ramen just wasn’t worth his girlfriend’s wrath.

“What is this?” he asked, stepping into the kitchen.

Ramen was cooking in a pot on the stove, with no one in sight. Looking left and right, Sasuke blinked and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just past 7 in the morning, and his housemates never left earlier than 8.

“Yo, you’re back.”

Sasuke flicked his eyes back over to the stove, and there was Naruto. Leaning up against the bench, where an assortment of flowers was arranged.

Naruto smiled, and walked forward with his hands in his pockets, “Happy Valentine’s Day, Sasuke.”

Parting his lips, Sasuke’s mind ticked over, “Valentine’s?”

“Did you forget? Geez, you call me hopeless.” Naruto harrumphed, crossing his arms and looking away.

Sasuke frowned, “Why are you telling me that?”

Raising both eyebrows, Naruto shot him a funny look, as if Sasuke was the one who had said something strange.
“Man, you’re acting pretty stupid today. What’s up with you?”

Sasuke once again scanned the area. He couldn’t see Sakura. Now that he looked closer, it didn’t even look like their house. It was their house, but somehow it felt different. Smaller, and cosier. Almost as if not three, but two people lived here. The ramen had disappeared, and now the kitchen had transformed into the living room. He was seated on the couch, with Naruto right beside him. A lot closer to Sasuke than he was used to.

“You’re spending this day with the wrong person.” Sasuke asserted, and made to leave.

He could hear Naruto’s voice protesting behind him as he stood, “Hey, come on. Don’t make me hug you! You know I’ll do it!”

Sasuke ignored him, and visualised on the door that was getting closer with each step he took. Whatever this was, he had to get out now. Because there was no way any of this could be real. He didn’t live with only Naruto, and he wasn’t the person Naruto cooked breakfasts for (even though Sasuke would rather jump into a frozen lake than eat ramen for breakfast) and spent Valentine’s with. No, Naruto wasn’t his. Never was, and never would be. If he left quickly enough, he could escape this illusion before it ensnared him, tempted him into believing there was more.

Then he was in Naruto’s embrace, arms wrapped around his waist and the man beaming down at him. Like sunshine coming through lace curtains, warm and soft. He pressed their foreheads together, and Sasuke stiffened at the intimate touch. Sasuke could count the freckles on his nose and see his golden lashes up close. His eyes were so blue, so clear. They were in a bedroom, bathed in gold from the sunlight filtering through the window. Or was it Naruto, was he the sun?

“I like ramen, so eat with me.” Naruto cajoled, his smile widening and his arms around Sasuke strong.

Sasuke blinked, and shook his head, inadvertently making their foreheads rub against each other, “There’s no ramen here. You know I can’t stand eating that.”

Pulling back, Naruto produced a piece of paper from his jeans pocket and waved it in front of Sasuke’s face, “I have a coupon for one free bowl! Don’t you want it?”

“Get it through your head, you idiot. I don’t like ramen.” Sasuke exhaled, annoyed.

His face shifting to a heavier, solemn look, Naruto argued, “But you do, Sasuke.”

Then, the clock radio on the bedside table started screeching with static. Naruto’s mouth was still moving, but all that Sasuke could hear was the static noise buzzing through.

Straining to hear, Sasuke tried getting closer, “Naruto, I can’t hear you. What are you–”

Before Sasuke could get an answer or say anything else, the radio static dropped off, and a clap of thunder rumbled loudly outside. Sasuke opened his eyes, and blinked up at the ceiling. Rain was pounding down on the roof; the thunder having settled down for the moment. In his peripheral vision, he could see the blurry numbers on his digital clock. They read something like 6:25 AM. Or it could possibly be 6:52 AM. His vision was shit in the morning, and why the hell did the numbers five and two have to look so similar anyway?

It was too early, regardless. Turning over, he hiked the blanket up closer around his nose and buried down into the warmth. Closing his eyes, he let himself drift off again, letting the dream fade away before he could think about it for too long.
Sasuke’s dreams were so bittersweet. Sometimes, they could be crueler than his nightmares.

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“Happy Valentine’s Day, Sasuke-kun!” Sakura chirped, bombarding him with a quick hug when he walked into the living area.

Flickering remnants of his dream appeared in his mind, and he shut his eyes guiltily as Sakura hugged him. Raising a hand, he patted it against her back lightly.

Pulling back, she grinned and handed him a small wrapped box, full of what Sasuke knew were homemade chocolates. Ever since high school, it was something Sakura had done for him every Valentine’s Day. Knowing his distaste for sweet things, she consistently gifted him with dark chocolate. Despite how she no longer gave him chocolates to win his heart, she still liked to make them for him each year. If he was honest, Sasuke didn’t mind it. The chocolates Sakura made for him always tasted good, never overly sweet.

He nodded gratefully, placing the chocolates on his shelf inside the cupboard, “Thank you, Sakura.”

Brightening, Sakura tilted her head to the side and gave a closed-eye smile, “You’re welcome! I hope they taste good, I did something a little different with them this time.”

Sasuke ventured a guess, “Did you add chili?”

“How did you know!?” Sakura exclaimed, gobsmacked.

He shrugged, pulling out his mug and putting some coffee on, “You were cooking with it the other day. Sounded like you got some in your eyes.”

Flustered at her previous (angered) reaction, she turned around and went back to preparing breakfast, “I-I see. I’m sorry if I disturbed you with that, Sasuke-kun.”

“It’s fine. Thanks for still taking the trouble to make the chocolate.”

She offered up a grateful grin to his understanding words. A peaceful silence came over them, the type that only early mornings could provide. Then, he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Sakura appeared not to have heard, the noises of cooking distracting her. When Naruto came into view, he was shirtless. Sasuke wished he had made his coffee stronger. He shot a smile straight to Sasuke, soft and sleepy-looking. Then, he flicked his eyes over to Sakura, and his smile turned sly.

Putting a finger to his lips, Naruto ambled over, and caught Sakura in a surprise hug from behind. She gasped, then smiled and slapped Naruto on the arm playfully.

“Geez, Naruto! Let me go, I have to make breakfast!”

“Aww, but Sakura-chan,” he whined, hugging her and gently swaying her side to side, “I love you! What about my Valentine’s kiss?”

She rolled her eyes, biting her lip to trim her wide smile, “You already got one, stop being greedy.”

“I want another!” Naruto huffed, then grinned and kissed her on the cheek, embarrassing her.

Watching Naruto and Sakura was, at times like this, conflicting. Despite the pain it brought him, Sasuke could admit they were a good couple and matched so well. Sometimes, it was nice to watch
them together. Other times, Sasuke almost couldn’t stand it. But, there was something distinctly heart-warming about them, particularly when he thought of Naruto. He had loved Sakura since he was a kid, stupid and good-for-nothing and snubbed by everyone. It had been a childish infatuation, which had progressed to a genuine crush, and had then transformed into feelings of real love. Seeing her come to return his feelings and be with him, choosing him, was the end to a perfect love story.

What was that ridiculous saying? If someone you love is happy, even if it destroys you, their happiness is worth it. Even if you aren’t the source of their happiness, it’s worth it.

Something like that.

“You’re not gonna stay for breakfast?” Naruto asked him, letting Sakura go and pulling up a chair.

“I have to head in early. I’m meeting with one of my lecturers soon.” Sasuke explained, one of a select few people who didn’t care one bit for Valentine’s Day, dreams be damned.

He didn’t know what their plans were, but he could assume they were going to spend most of the day together. Sakura had a free morning, with only one class in the afternoon. Sasuke was almost certain Naruto did not have such a lax day in his schedule. He honestly had no idea how the moron juggled it all, but Sasuke supposed if anything dating Sakura would keep him in line.

“Are you spending the day with anyone?” Sakura asked, bright-eyed and interested as ever in his dating life.

Too bad it was non-existent to Sasuke.

Shaking his head, he picked up his coffee and took a long sip, “No, I have more important duties to attend to.”

As well as his consultation with the lecturer, Sasuke also had to drop by Juugo’s. Since their last night out, they hadn’t seen each other yet. It didn’t feel like Juugo was avoiding him, but perhaps avoiding embarrassment. Nevertheless, Juugo had left his jacket in Sasuke’s car, and was going to return it. He had let Juugo know, and was slightly surprised at the receptive response. Still tentative, but it seemed Juugo was ready to move past the awkwardness.

Naruto’s eyes sparked, “You gonna see Juugo?”

Giving in and taking the bite, Sasuke nodded, “I have to return his jacket, so yes.”

Raising both eyebrows, Naruto smirked, “His jacket, huh?”

“Well, make sure you’re back by evening time.” Sakura instructed, plating up breakfast for herself and Naruto.

Sasuke frowned at the unusual curfew, “Why?”

“Because, we’re gonna have our weekly movie night!” Naruto declared, pumping a fist in the air and being overall much too enthusiastic for a quarter past eight in the morning.

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Sasuke pointed out, with a raised brow.

“Yeah, and we’re gonna have all day to spend together.” Naruto aimed a rather charming grin Sakura’s way, wrapping an arm around her waist and tugging her closer.
“Naruto! Stop it!” Sakura blushed, pushing at his chest half-heartedly and trying to take her seat.

Giving up his hold when she twisted his ear, Naruto rubbed it but looked as cheery as ever, “Come on, bastard! We gotta have our movie night every week, or else we’ll grow apart.”

“Considering I live in the same house as you, I don’t see how that’s possible.” Sasuke deadpanned, once again mourning the loss of his personal space. The last thing he wanted was to be tacked on to a movie night, forced to watch Naruto and Sakura being wrapped up in each other.

“Please, Sasuke-kun?” Sakura requested, a hopeful smile on her lips.

“I’ll even let you pick your depressing as shit movies you like.” Naruto bargained with him, earning a scornful glare from Sasuke.

He corrected, “You mean documentaries?”

“Yeah, those things,” Naruto waved his hand, as if the name didn’t make a difference, “Take your pick, you don’t wanna miss this chance to torture us.”

Sakura cleared her throat, then clarified, “I happen to enjoy documentaries too, you know.”

Rolling his eyes, Naruto revised his phrasing, “Right, well, you can make me suffer. I know that always cheers you up.”

“Fine.” Sasuke relented, his antagonistic side winning out.

Naruto and Sakura swapped triumphant grins, and Sasuke began getting his things together. He wouldn’t stay for breakfast, because he didn’t know if he could take much more of this without making sarcastic comments. They deserved their happiness, and he didn’t want to be the dark cloud again – always bringing them down, lonely and selfish. Besides, it wasn’t his place. When Sasuke walked out the door, he didn’t think about how they would spend the day together. He would forget the way they looked at each other, as if one held the sun and the other the stars.

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Having met with his lecturer already and finishing up his classes just after 1 o’clock, Sasuke had a quick lunch break before driving over to Juugo’s. Grabbing his jacket off the back seat, Sasuke made his way into the building, checking his phone for Juugo’s flat number. Standing in front of the door, he knocked three times and waited.

He could hear a lock being undone from the inside, and was then greeted with Juugo’s smiling face, “Sasuke, come in.”

“No problem.” Sasuke called back, taking a moment to get a closer look at the flat.
When Juugo returned, he was carrying a bouquet of orchids. Sasuke’s eyebrows rose curiously, then his eyes grew wide when Juugo extended them out towards him.

“These are for you,” Juugo murmured, his voice kind, “I know it’s cliché, but everyone should receive something special today. I bought some Swiss chocolate for Karin and Suigetsu. But, since I know you don’t like sweets, I thought some flowers would be nice.”

“Thank you,” Sasuke inclined his head, taking the orchids and feeling strangely touched at Juugo’s innocent motives. Clearly, he was a person who greatly valued his friends, “Sorry, I don’t have a gift.”

Shaking his head, Juugo smiled charmingly, “That’s not why I gave you them.”

Feeling himself tense at the words, Sasuke knew he had to set things straight. If he didn’t do it now, he could lean Juugo on and he wasn’t the kind of person to string people along. No, if anything, Sasuke was the opposite – he cut people off; not a great alternative, but that wasn’t the point.

Clearing his throat, Sasuke stated it plainly, “I don’t want to disappoint you, but I’m not interested in a relationship.”

Met with a neutral expression and silence, Sasuke furthered his statement, “If that’s what you want from me, I can’t do it.”

Lifting up a hand, Juugo gave a small smile, “Sasuke, it’s okay.”

He moved over to the cream-coloured couch, sitting down and glancing over at Sasuke expectantly. Finding no reason to be wary, Sasuke placed the flowers on the kitchen bench and joined him.

“I understand. I would never ask any more from you than you’re willing to give. To be honest, starting a relationship is not a position I am ready to put myself in. Not yet.” Juugo explained, and Sasuke would admit he was surprised.

Most of the time, guys would try to latch onto him after a hook-up or a fling, wanting more of him. Sasuke couldn’t be less interested in that, the idea of a long-term relationship putting him off entirely. Juugo seemed to have no interest in such a thing.

His gaze now down at his hands, Juugo muttered lowly, “I just like spending time with you. I feel calmer, and more like myself.”

Swallowing down his relief, Sasuke took this chance to clarify some things, “Karin told me it’s due to a medical condition.”

Juugo gave a single nod, now gazing over to the window near the balcony, “It is. I was much better than this, a year ago. After Kimimaro died, I lost all the control he had helped me gain.”

Sasuke had heard the story of Kimimaro, from Juugo himself. It had been a couple of weeks ago, before the night out. The man had passed away from a terminal illness about two years ago, and worked as an anger management personal therapist. From what Sasuke could tell, Juugo had developed very deep feelings for him, some of which hadn’t faded even after his death. Nothing ever came of anything between them, but Juugo knew that Kimimaro had cared for him and that was all he needed to keep going.

“How are you managing it now?” Sasuke inquired, genuinely interested. If Juugo’s wellbeing was
at risk, then Sasuke wanted to help him before it could get worse.

Juugo shrugged, and gave a hesitant smile, “Not great, but not terrible. Not as bad as it’s been. I just need to eliminate situations where I can get triggered. It’s harder than you’d think.”

“You could try working with another therapist.” Sasuke suggested, not one to tip toe around other’s feelings. Well, most of the time, anyway.

Nodding, Juugo linked his hands together over his knees, looking thoughtful, “I want to. I do, but I just need time.”

Juugo paused, then said in a small voice, “He was special.”

Not sure what to say to that, knowing from experience sometimes words weren’t necessary, Sasuke didn’t respond.

Coming out of whatever memory he had been reliving, Juugo was apologetic, “Sorry, didn’t mean to be a downer. It’s just that, when we’re together,” he stopped, trying to articulate his thoughts, “It’s not the same kind of feelings I had for him, but what you do for me is what he did for me. You calm me down, just your presence is enough.”

Stunned at such an admission, Sasuke wondered how he of all people had attracted such a gentle-minded and kind-hearted person. He felt himself soften, and his eyes dropped to the ground to hide his vulnerable visage.

“I did enjoy our time together the other night. Before it was disrupted,” Juugo offered, and Sasuke raised his head and locked gazes with the man.

“As did I.” Sasuke uttered, his eyes flickering down to his lips then back up.

The fiasco surrounding his ‘coming out’ to his best friends aside, Sasuke had thought back to their kiss that night. More times than he’d rather admit. Juugo was attractive, and Sasuke deemed the man a more than adequate kisser. He couldn’t deny his interest in exploring more of this physical attraction, together.

Leaning over, Juugo placed a hand just above his knee, “We don’t have to start a relationship to keep enjoying ourselves,” slowly, he ran his hand up the inside of Sasuke’s thigh, “do we?”

“No, not at all.” Sasuke murmured, and he barely got the last word out before their lips were pressing together softly.

If Juugo was okay with this agreement, then Sasuke had no qualms about it.

Laying back on the couch, he pulled Juugo with him. Their mouths still connected, Sasuke ran his hands up the man’s sides, reveling in the firm muscle underneath. It felt good, and was long overdue. Sasuke wouldn’t hook up with just anyone, he had his standards. Call him picky, he didn’t care. But, Juugo was the first man to come along in a while that he had felt like being with. It was uncomplicated, they both knew what they wanted. The best part was that Sasuke could forget about his other feelings, and just be in this moment.

Juugo’s hand still on his thigh, he hiked Sasuke’s leg up and he curled it around the man’s waist. Their groins were pressing together, and Sasuke broke the kiss to exhale on the rush of desire at such an intimate touch. He hadn’t pleasured himself in weeks, hadn’t been pleasured by another for months. Circling his arms around Juugo’s neck, Sasuke raised himself up and undulated his hips, rubbing their arousals together slowly. Dropping his head in the crevice between Sasuke’s neck and
shoulder, Juugo exhaled shakily and grinded continuously against Sasuke, firmer this time. Moaning at the increased contact, Sasuke’s head dropped to one side, and his neck was soon being smothered in kisses. Juugo was sucking on his skin, it was going to leave marks, and Sasuke couldn’t give a single fuck.

He was reaching his climax faster than usual, his cheeks flushed and his breath coming out in pants. He hadn’t even taken off his jeans and he was already this close, he felt like a sexually frustrated teenager again. Part of him tried to hold back due to the risk of embarrassing himself, but that only made him more desperate, and want it more.

“J-Juugo, I’m–” Sasuke tried to tell him to slow down, to make it last longer. But, all of that got lost between Juugo’s hot breath in his ear and the pleasure building higher between his legs.

“It’s okay, Sasuke. Just, let’s just–” Juugo didn’t finish his sentence, moaning loudly at a particularly hard thrust that sent shivers up both their spines. They were both fully hard, fully clothed, and had no intentions of stopping.

Pulling Sasuke’s other leg up to wrap around his waist, Juugo’s hands landed either side of Sasuke’s head. Then, Juugo dragged the lower halves of their bodies together. It was long and slow, and his dick was overstimulated, with his jeans and boxers rubbing against him as well. Sasuke came with a low-pitched cry, his eyes shut tightly as he was coming all over himself. With another couple of thrusts, Juugo came too, groaning softly and resting his forehead on Sasuke’s collarbones.

When they had caught their breath, Juugo raised himself up and smiled down at him, “How was that?”

“Fucking good.” Sasuke sighed blissfully, his tongue always looser post-orgasm.

Laughing good-naturedly, Juugo helped him sit up and offering him a shower while Sasuke’s boxers and jeans went through the washing machine, then the dryer. A light blush filling his cheeks, Sasuke nodded his thanks and followed Juugo’s directions down the hall to the bathroom.

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Sasuke left Juugo’s just after 4:30 PM, having stayed over much longer than he’d originally intended to. It wasn’t wasted time though, Sasuke thought with a smirk. Certainly, there would be plenty more of that to look forward to. He and Juugo didn’t expect anything else from each other, and Sasuke was more than happy with the arrangement.

In that moment, Sasuke’s feelings for Naruto hadn’t been at the forefront of his mind. He had just been giving pleasure, and receiving it. Nothing hurt, and it had felt overwhelmingly good. If he could be like this with Juugo, and forget for a while about Naruto, then Sasuke would continue with this arrangement.

He stopped by the shopping centre to top up on his groceries. While he, Naruto and Sakura shared the cost for their staple foods, they had all agreed on buying their own snacks. Sasuke felt like something salty, so he headed towards the savoury foods aisle. On his way out of the checkout, he passed a café and heard someone call out:

“Sasuke! Is that you?”

Looking around, Sasuke tried to locate the source of the voice. He recognised it immediately.

“It is you! Hold on a moment!” Kushina called out again, waving to him from the entrance to the
“Good afternoon, Kushina-san.” He nodded politely, and received a fond pat to his cheek. The last time he had seen her had been at Christmas, so running into her randomly like this was a pleasant surprise.

“It’s lovely to see you! Come and sit for a bit, we should catch up!” She offered, her eyes shining already as she took him by the arm and led him inside.

They took a seat at the closest booth, Sasuke placing his bag of food on the floor beside him. If it was anyone else, Sasuke would have been gone by now. But, he could never turn his back on Kushina. Her motives were always pure, fuelled by her genuine care for him. After they both ordered their coffees, they filled each other in on what had been going on as of late. Sasuke’s workload at university was piling up, and Kushina’s self-run photography business was going well. She took the most beautiful photos, of people and landscapes alike.

When their coffees arrived, Kushina spoke up while Sasuke was taking a sip, “Actually, I have something to tell you. It didn’t feel right to talk with you about it over the phone, y’know.”

He blinked, then put his mug down. If it was face-to-face news, then it must have been something very important, or something very upsetting. Inhaling a small breath, Sasuke braced himself.

Her eyes softened, and then she said, “Naruto has told me about what happened, with all of you at the night club.”

Sasuke stilled, caught off guard by her words. But, of course, what had he expected? Naruto told his mother everything, they were so close. The incident wasn’t exactly scandalous, and if anything, Naruto had the most to be embarrassed about when recounting it. Yet, a prickle of unease came over him. He hadn’t considered her reaction about it, just what would Kushina think of him, now?

Shaking her head knowingly, she touched his arm, “I always tell him to be careful with his words, I’m sorry. That wasn’t for him to tell.”

“No, it’s alright. I’m okay with you knowing.”

Sasuke was quick to reassure her, as he knew how badly she worried over Naruto and her desire for him to always make good choices. She could never be called a bad mother, never, and she deserved to be reassured of that. If there was anyone he felt even slightly comfortable talking about this with, it was Kushina. She smiled warmly, and Sasuke took such comfort in that smile.

“If I’ve ever been pushy with you in the past, about dating girls and such, I’m sorry for that. Sometimes, my mothering instinct takes over and I nag you about silly things, y’know.” She apologised sheepishly, a hint of embarrassment in her words but it was nonetheless endearing.

Sasuke liked it when she nagged him. He could never replace his mother, but Kushina was just like a second mother to him. She was kind and understanding, and shared so much of her love with him he sometimes didn’t know what to do with it. Sasuke would always be grateful to Naruto, for sharing his mother with him.

Lowering his head, Sasuke spoke softly, “I’m sorry, I never told you. I hope you aren’t disappointed.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I could never be disappointed in you.” Clasping his closest hand in hers, she held on tightly and looked in his eyes, completely serious, “You’re perfect just as you are. And don’t you apologise for a thing. You don’t ever have to justify yourself to anyone.”
Having not expected such a caring response, Sasuke was quiet. Despite how much things had changed; his preferences were still frowned upon by many people in society. Sasuke was quite lucky, to have all the people he cared most for accept him completely. Not hiding it anymore was, in some ways, a relief.

Her expression turning thoughtful, Kushina continued, “I hope Naruto is treating you well. That boy, he’s said so many stupid things already in his short life. I’m worried about that big loud mouth of his, and how it runs away with him.”

Sasuke closed his eyes, thinking of his best friend. Even though they had always been known each other, they hadn’t always been friends. Naruto was always somewhere in the background of his memories though, like the clouds were always somewhere in the sky. Things hadn’t always smooth between them, even now they have their rocky times. When they overcame those times, they were closer than before. The only difference was, whilst Sasuke’s feelings had changed over time, Naruto’s hadn’t. And Sasuke couldn’t blame him for not always understanding, for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, for hurting him more than anyone else. Because Naruto cared about him, and that alone was enough. It had to be enough.

Blinking back into the present, he faced Kushina’s anxious gaze, and said, “Naruto accepts me for who I am.”

He always has.

Sasuke decided not to mention Naruto’s initial conflict with the idea when he had told him. It had all been a misunderstanding, anyway. In the end, Naruto had stood by him. Would always stand by him, something that Sasuke still needed reminding of from time to time.

The tenseness melting away, Kushina slumped in her seat, “I’m so relieved to hear that. I believed he would, but you know how I am!”

Sasuke’s lips quirked, because he did know. In the same instance she could be furious beyond belief, Kushina would be overflowing with worry and concern. It was a passionate, fiery way she expressed care for her loved ones – and a trait her son had certainly inherited.

It was quite for a moment, until the sound of a nearby couple laughing caught their attention. They were so close together they looked like Siamese twins, and were feeding cake from their own forks to each other. Sasuke looked away, instantly bored and uninterested in seeing other people acting like idiots in love. Yet, he caught sight of Kushina’s face, a trace of longing on it as she slowly turned her attention back to Sasuke.

“That’s right. It’s Valentine’s Day, isn’t it?” Her smile saddened, and she looked down at her left hand wistfully. She never stops wearing her ring, Naruto had told him once, long ago.

With his hand still in hers, Sasuke gently squeezed, and she startled a bit in surprise. Then, a smile lit up her face and she squeezed back. It was hard this time of year, not only for Kushina but for his own father as well. Although Sasuke couldn’t remember how, or even if they had celebrated Valentine’s Day, he somehow knew the day was a black spot for his father. Because no matter how small or brief the day was, it was still a reminder that his mother was gone. That pain was shared by Kushina, too.

Brightening up, she nodded and they both stood from the booth, “Say hello to your father from me, Sasuke. I hope he’s well and healthy, and full of life!”

“Thanks, I will.” He replied, returning her nod with his own as they made their way out the front.
“And please remember to take care,” she insisted, fixing the collar of his shirt and smoothing it down, “Study well, I know how much the work is piling on right now. But don’t be so hard on yourself, neh? Take a break every hour or so, and keep warm when you’re out! If you can, make sure Naruto does too. He likes to act tougher than he is, y’know.”

Her words alone warmed him up from the inside, and he allowed a full smile to stretch his lips, “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

She wrapped him in a tight hug, and he bent his head down and returned it without hesitation. Despite not being all that overtly affectionate of a person, he could be around a few people. With Kushina, Sasuke didn’t worry about keeping up appearances. He could seek comfort from her, and even when he didn’t she would offer it to him wordlessly. Waving goodbye, Sasuke exited the café and headed towards the carpark, his bag dangling from his hand and crinkling in the wind.

*  

“Naruto, are you crying?” Sakura asked, tentative sounding but with a sprinkle of amusement in her tone.

“No!” he objected instantly, much too fast to be taken seriously.

Turning his head to the side, Sasuke took one look at his best friend and confirmed, “He is.”

“I’m not! Shut up!” Naruto shifted his position on the couch, yanking the blanket up his body to hide his vulnerable state.

Sakura and Sasuke exchanged a look, and both sighed. They had settled in for their movie night, covered in blankets with their preferred snacks scattered across the coffee table. Just over half an hour into the film, and Naruto was tearing up and sniffling back a runny nose. Sasuke pulled a face every time he did it, disgusted at the habit.

“Geez, why are you like this?” Sakura looked at him, exasperated but fondly so.

“I told you he picks depressing shit!” Naruto yelled, pointing accusingly at Sasuke, “Just–I just feel for those poor animals. Look at what we’ve done to them, that-that was all! I’ll never use plastic again, fuck.”

Sasuke had chosen the documentary, *A Plastic Ocean*, which was released onto Netflix in Japan recently. Although he could write in English and comprehend it quite well, Sasuke had more trouble when it came to the spoken language. Thankfully, he could use the subtitles. Of course, Naruto was the opposite, and could in fact speak English quite well but couldn’t read more than a few words. Sakura, naturally, was excellent at both.

“Awareness is the first step towards change.” Sasuke observed, which earned knowing smile from Sakura, and a reproachful glare from Naruto.

“I’m not in the mood for your wiseass, y’know.” He griped, his eyes red-rimmed and his hair a mess.

“It’s okay, Naruto. Getting emotional from a film is a good thing, it means it’s really getting its point across to you.” Sakura soothed him, plucking out a couple of tissues and pressing them into his hand.

“Why aren’t you guys crying?” Naruto sniffed, using the tissues to clean up his face and blow his nose.
Sakura hummed, resting her thumb and first finger against her chin, “Well, because Sasuke-kun and I are logical,” then, she flashed a mischievous smile and poked at Naruto’s puffy cheeks, “You always think with your heart first, baka.”

“There, there.” Sasuke teased, unable to resist joining in. He patted Naruto’s shoulder with mock-concern, smirking when his hand was whacked away.

“You both suck, y’know that!? Some friends you are, just because this stuff gets to me!” Huffing, Naruto threw the used tissues in the bin (they’d moved it closer because of their snacks) and crossed his arms petulantly.

“You’re the one who said I could choose the film.” Sasuke reasoned, making Sakura bite her lip. She was trying not to laugh, and Naruto slapped a hand to his forehead and groaned loudly.

“Well, I’m a fucking idiot then, aren’t I!?” Naruto fumed, looking extremely put out.

Bursting out into a fit of giggles, Sakura’s eyes closed in joy as she leaned against her pouting boyfriend, resting her head on his shoulder. All too amused, Sasuke let forth some chuckles of his own. A cranky Naruto was much too easy to have fun with. After a moment more of his indignance, Naruto cracked and his face slipped back into its signature grin, happy and carefree. That smile, that Sasuke could always count on to lift him up. Naruto was soon joining in, laughing along the loudest. Wrapping one arm around Sakura, and the other around Sasuke, he drew them both in and hugged them tight, close to him. The contact startled Sasuke, but he didn’t try to pull away. Not yet, he thought. He could stay there for just a few seconds more.

“You both better be ready to comfort the hell out of me, when this thing’s over.” Naruto demanded, his hopeful grin turned toward Sasuke.

“I’ll leave it to Sakura.” Sasuke said, then shifted over, putting the space back between them.

Sakura heaved a sigh, “Do I really have to?”

Throwing his arms up in the air, Naruto complained, “Aww, come on! You know I’d do the same for you! I’m always the first one there whenever you–”

“Shut up, idiot. I can’t watch this properly with you blubbering in the background.” Sasuke cut him off, unapologetic as ever.

Naruto growled, looking ready to launch into one his loudmouthed rants, “Y-YOU! Damn it, Sasuke–!”

“Naruto, shh!” Sakura pressed her finger against her lips, turning her attention back to the screen.

“Sakura-chan, you’re mean.” He whined, sagging down the couch pitifully, the wind blown out of his sails. But, Sasuke could tell he was only pretending, his blue eyes glittering in the dark. If anything, right now, Naruto couldn’t be happier.

As long as he’s happy. Sasuke would keep telling himself that, and someday the voice in his head telling him otherwise would fade.

Chapter End Notes
…can you tell I really love exploring the relationship between Sasuke and Kushina? ;///; I just can’t get over the fact she and Mikoto were close friends in canon and she adored baby Sas and wanted him to be friends with Nardo like I just can’t aaaAAhHHH...!

Anyway *clears throat* there you have it! Kind of a filler chap for you lovelies, hope you don’t mind! But also Sasuke x Juugo is officially on x) Thoughts? Questions? I’d love to hear them all! Thank you so much for reading and I hope you are doing well! Until next time, take care xx

Weekly chapter timeline for reference:
Chapter 1 = early September
Chapter 2 = late September/early October
Chapter 3 = October (Naruto’s bday :D)
Chapter 4 = late November/December (Christmas holidays)
Chapter 5 = mid January
Chapter 6 = end of January
Chapter 7 = February (v-day!)
Sasuke was sitting on the couch doing some light reading, coming to an interesting part in the novel he was keen to read. The problem was, Naruto was sitting beside him, supposedly going through his prescribed readings on his laptop. However, Sasuke sensed Naruto’s attention had waned, and he was being stared at.

Unable to take those eyes burning holes through him, Sasuke places a marker in his page, putting the book down. Repressing a sigh, he finally asks, “What?”

Setting his laptop aside on the coffee table, Naruto pointed a finger at his face, squinting, “Your neck looks really banged up. You okay?”

His eyes grow wide, and in a moment of weakness Sasuke claps a hand to the side of his neck. He had forgotten to cover up the hickeys that remained remnant of his…sexual activities, with Juugo yesterday. Last night, it had been dark whilst watching the movie, and his shirt collar hid most of the damage rather well. This morning, he’d gone for a simple sweater, nothing out of the usual. The problem? It was a V-neck. So, his promiscuity was basically on display for all. How embarrassing.

He brushes it off, feigning boredom, “It’s nothing.” Pretend not to care, and sometimes Naruto would lose interest.

Truly, the key word in that sentence was ‘sometimes’.

“Don’t say that! They’re full on bruises, I would know! Just, let me get a closer look—” Naruto’s hand hooked around his wrist, suddenly. Sasuke only had a split-second to flatten his hand firmly against his neck before Naruto was tugging on it with all his might.

“No! Naruto, get lost—!” Sasuke pushed back to the other end of the couch, but Naruto wasn’t letting go.

Scooting over and closing the space between them, Naruto spoke like one would to a disobedient house cat, “Come on! I need to see how bad they are, alright!? It’ll take one second—”

Sasuke growled, pushing the palm of his other hand against Naruto’s face roughly, “I am going to
“throttle you—”

“What’s all the noise about?”

*Oh no,* not Sakura. His chances of minimising this drastically decreased, *any second now—*

“Sasuke’s got an injury he’s hiding from us!”

–Naruto would blurt it all out, *like the dense knucklehead he is.*

Sakura’s eyes flashed, her medical persona rearing its head as she rushed from the stairs over towards them, “What kind of injury? How bad is it?”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke took the distraction to dislodge himself from Naruto’s iron grip and come to a stand, “Like I just told this idiot, it’s nothing.”

Sakura was protesting immediately, a worried frown on her face, “But, Sasuke-kun! What if it’s worse than you’re making it out to be? Don’t be stupid like Naruto, acting tough when you’re really in pain.”

“Why am I always getting scolded!?” Naruto wailed from the couch, and Sakura glared at him sternly, quieting him.

“I said, forget it.” Sasuke emphasised, keeping his hand over his neck self-consciously. He briefly wondered if he could make it to the door before they caught up to him.

“I need to see for myself to be sure! Naruto.” She then nodded at him, seriously.

Returning the nod, Naruto stood up, “Right!”

Then, Naruto moved closer and grabbed Sasuke around the waist with one arm. Shocked at the sudden, unexpected contact, Sasuke’s hand was loose when Naruto’s other arm reached up and snatched it away from his neck. Releasing the hold on his waist, Naruto stepped back and only kept a firm grip on his wrist, preventing him from running or covering his neck again. Sakura zoomed in, ready to inspect and diagnose. Sasuke couldn’t have been more mortified, still shaken up from having his body pressed up against Naruto’s like that. He refused to react, if he so much as blushed then that would be the end for him.

When Sakura finally got a closer look at his neck, she paused. Then, her eyes widened, and she blushed furiously. Sasuke gave her a pointed look, *serves you right.* Why was he friends with such prying people?

“Sakura-chan?” Naruto asks, as clueless as a child.

“Naruto, you idiot!” Slapping him soundly on the arm and making him lose his grip on Sasuke, Sakura was glaring at him, “Making me worry over–!”

Rubbing at his abused bicep, he moaned painfully, “Over what?”

“Those bruises came from,” clearing her throat, Sakura’s cheeks warmed to a rosy pink, “from kissing.”

“Kissing?” Naruto parroted, his head tilting to one side confusedly. He looked back to Sasuke, his eyebrows furrowed in thought. After a moment more, when Sakura raised her eyebrows to him in what must have been a specific way, a lightbulb went on inside his head. Blinking rapidly, Naruto
raised his head in understanding, “Oh.”

“Honestly! You’re studying to be a paramedic! Can’t you even recognise the difference between serious bruising and–” Sakura stopped again, flustered, but pushing through to continue berating Naruto, “–and other types of bruising? You idiot!”

“Don’t be harsh, Sakura-chan! I never would’ve guessed Sasuke got them from–” Naruto suddenly stopped his pathetic attempt of self-defence. Rather than looking embarrassed, a troubled light entered his eyes, “Thought you said you had more important things to do yesterday?”

Sasuke almost snorted, but covered it with a scoff, “I didn’t schedule it.”

“So, does this mean you and Juugo are together, now?” Sakura asked tentatively, her thin eyebrows rising as did her curiosity.

Sasuke deflects easily, “That’s none of your business.”

“This guy, you said he had anger issues, right?” Naruto continued, as if Sasuke hadn’t spoken.

Naruto looked frustrated, “He could lose it at any time, you don’t even know what his triggers are!”

“Juugo wouldn’t hurt me.” Sasuke didn’t have a shred of doubt in those words. He meant them, Juugo had never done anything to hurt him and Sasuke would be able to stop him even if he tried.

Sasuke’s retort was instantaneous, and judgemental, “You weren’t a saint yourself. Punching a stranger, all over a misunderstanding.”

Sasuke couldn’t ignore the hairs on his arms raising, goosebumps underneath his sleeves. He was supposed to be angry, and yet one measly sentence from Naruto unbalanced him. Not the type to need or want protection, Sasuke shouldn’t have been fazed by such a meaningless declaration as that. But, as usual, Naruto was his exception.

Sasuke’s retort was instantaneous, and judgemental, “You weren’t a saint yourself. Punching a stranger, all over a misunderstanding.”

“And I’ll do it again, if I have to! I don’t care!” Naruto stated, his voice intensifying and his entire body taut with tension, “If he ever raises a hand against you, I’ll beat the shit out of him!”

Sasuke couldn’t ignore the hairs on his arms raising, goosebumps underneath his sleeves. He was supposed to be angry, and yet one measly sentence from Naruto unbalanced him. Not the type to need or want protection, Sasuke shouldn’t have been fazed by such a meaningless declaration as that. But, as usual, Naruto was his exception.

Naruto continues his verbal assault, getting more worked up with each word, “I mean, are you stupid, or what? You’re supposed to be a genius, and you’re acting like a dumbass!”

Scoffing, Sasuke eyed him coldly, “Being forced to live with someone like you, it’s bound to rub off on me.”
Drawing himself up to his full height, Naruto stepped forward, challenging and eyes fierce, “Damn it, what the hell’s wrong with you!?”

“Naruto, don’t!”

Sakura stood between them, her hands out either side of her, lightly tapping their chests and instinctively making them back off.

She turned to look at Naruto, an anxious but strict look in her eyes, “You made your point, stop trying to turn this into a fight. I know you’re worried, I-I am too. But, Sasuke-kun knows what he’s doing. He’ll never let anyone walk all over him.”

Sakura then turned, transferring the gaze onto him, “Sasuke-kun, it’s your life so we can’t tell you what to do. Although, I do agree with Naruto. It’s okay if you and Juugo have an understanding and boundaries, but just please be careful. We wouldn’t be able to live with ourselves if something happened to you, and we could have done something to keep it from happening.”

Attempting to smooth things over, Sasuke says, “I know what I’m doing, and so does Juugo. He said of all people, I make him feel most like himself.”

Becoming thoughtful, Sakura grabbed her chin between her thumb and forefinger, “That’s true. You talked to him when he was angry that night, and Juugo seemed to calm down very quickly. Like he lost all his reason to fight.”

“Yeah, so what? Doesn’t mean it’s always gonna work.” Naruto grumbled, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the ground.

“I’m not helpless or weak. I can hold my own, and I’ve beaten up stronger guys before. So, stop making a big deal of nothing,” Sasuke demanded, but it drew no further reaction out of Naruto, “Oi, usuratonkachi.” Aiming a kick for Naruto’s shin, he hit right on the bone and got the desired reaction.

Hopping onto his other leg, Naruto clutched at the sort spot and groaned out in pain, “OW! Fuck, don’t do that! You askin’ for a fight or something, teme!?”

Sasuke crossed his arms, a trait he’d picked up from his father when he reprimanded others, “Stop sulking.”

“I’m not.” Naruto mumbled, sounding for all the world like a moping toddler.

Sasuke exhaled, his shoulders rising and falling with the action, “I can look after myself, unlike someone.”

“I can take care of myself just fine!” Naruto exclaimed, indignant.

“Right, the guy who can’t even put on his pants properly in the morning is totally self-reliant.” Sakura scoffed, rolling her eyes and fighting back a smile.

Naruto flushed, complaining loudly, “Sakura-chan! You promised you wouldn’t tell Sasuke about that!”

She went on as if she hadn’t heard him, chiding him, “You were so noisy when you fell, it’s a wonder Sasuke-kun slept through it.”

Groaning, Naruto covered his red face with a hand, “Come on, give me a break!”
“Trouble with counting, huh?” Sasuke asked, his lips curling at any chance to tease Naruto.

“Shut up, asshole,” Naruto threw at him, lifting his frowning face up, “It was dark, and I couldn’t see properly! It happens to everyone sometimes! And I-I don’t do it all the time!” Naruto was floundering over his words, diverting eye contact, and very obviously lying.

Sakura giggled into her hand, and Sasuke was smirking upon imagining it. Naruto, flailing around like a fish out of water, trying to put his leg through nothing but thin air. Naruto was scowling, but his mood had notably lightened up much more. Their scuffle momentarily forgotten.

* 

The rest of February went by in a blur of classes and assignments, March arriving much quicker than Sasuke had expected. Finals loomed over them like a thick fog and ate up all their time. For Sakura especially, as she would graduate as a fully qualified nurse by the end of March. The three of them were only together for breakfast, their schedules and study sessions not allowing them any more time to waste.

Sakura’s birthday was also around the time of the end of semester, and graduation for some. Which meant everyone would be too busy to attend a party for her, unfortunately. However, Sakura herself had come up with a solution: combining the graduation party and her birthday celebrations into one big event.

“It’ll be perfect!” She explained, bright-eyed and brimming with enthusiasm whenever she had a good idea, “Those of us graduating can have our well-deserved party at the end, and we can celebrate my birthday, too! Putting the two parties into one event is the best way for everyone.”

Along with Sakura, Ino, Shikamaru and Shino were graduating. Despite the fact the latter three attended a different university in Tokyo, their group from school times still stuck together for important moments. Well, Sasuke wouldn’t have cared if they didn’t, but being friends with Naruto and Sakura meant he was forcibly kept in touch with them.

Naruto puckered his lips, considering the idea, “Are you really sure, Sakura-chan? I mean, it’s your birthday. We’ve gotta celebrate it properly, I don’t want you to feel even a tiny grain of sadness!”

“We could celebrate your birthday earlier, then it will still be a separate event.” Sasuke suggested, and Naruto nodded with enthusiasm.

“Yeah, yeah! That’s just what I was gonna say! You’re always stealing my ideas, Sasuke.” Naruto nudged him childishy, and Sasuke nudged him right back.

Sakura smiled, and raised her hands placatingly, “Guys, I’m really fine with it. Besides, this just means you’ll have to get me a bigger cake to share. Hmm, maybe even two?”

So, it was set. Finals came and went, but all in all Sasuke wasn’t worried about them. Unlike every other aspect of his life, his studies were the one area he excelled in without trouble. And on top of all that, Sasuke had to endure Karin’s whining about his sudden ‘sexual re-awakening’ and not informing her sooner.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me! I had to find out from that bastard Suigetsu, of all the damn people.” She hissed, her face screwing up in distaste.

Sasuke didn’t reply, figuring it was better to let her rant rather than adding oil to the flame. They had met up in Shibuya, stopping for morning tea at a nearby bakery.
Karin continued her one-sided conversation, sighing hopelessly, “Well, I knew it was a matter of time, anyway. You two were like, constantly eye-fucking each other.”

“If you say so.” Sasuke said, non-committal.

“So, what did they have to say about it?” Karin asks, stirring her drink with the straw idly.

Shrugging, Sasuke watched the people passing by from the wall window, “Sakura was reasonable, and that idiot eventually came around.”

Raising her eyebrows interestedly, Karin raised a hand to stop the conversation, “Wait, rewind. Naruto wasn’t happy with you and Juugo?”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke explains, “He thinks Juugo’s condition will be an issue. I told him to mind his own business, and that I could protect myself. He got the message.”

Karin sat back in her chair, a perplexed look on her face, “Wow, you’re as dumb as he is.”

Sasuke was slightly miffed at such an insult, “What?”

“He’s jealous!” She burst, throwing her arms out either side of her dramatically.

“No, he’s not.” Sasuke replied, sure of at least that much.

Giving him a flat look, Karin argues, “Uh, yeah, I think he kinda is.”

Shaking his head, Sasuke rebuts easily, “That’s just Naruto. He cares about his friends, so this kind of reaction is normal.”

Unimpressed, Karin scowls at him and chastises, “Don’t give me that ‘Naruto is everyone’s friend’ bullshit. You know you’re his best friend. No one else even comes close to you.”

Sasuke wasn’t following, “So, what?”

Slapping a hand to her forehead, she groaned and explained slowly, as if to a child, “So, it seems to me that someone doesn’t like sharing you.”

Raising a brow, Sasuke didn’t see what she was getting at, “It doesn’t matter. He has no right to tell me what I can and can’t do. I’ll do as I wish and I don’t need anyone’s approval for that.”

“Boys, oh my god. You’re so infuriating!” She proclaimed noisily, slamming her palm on the table and drawing some eyes to her, “Stop making me want to punch you in that pretty face of yours—you know how much I love your face!”

Sasuke didn’t say a thing and went back to eating his dark chocolate and cherry glazed slice. The piece was too big for his liking, he’d have to take half of it home.

“So, Sakura’s graduating.” She said eventually, moving on from the prior topic.

Sasuke nodded once, “Yeah.”

“Is she planning on leaving the city? It’s not easy getting a job, especially your first one, in a place like Tokyo.”

“She’s been recommended for a new graduate position at Saint Senju’s Hospital. The offer should be out soon.”
Leaning back in her chair, clearly impressed, Karin says, “For real? Shit, she must be damn good for them to want her fresh out of university.”

She was. Sakura had been a diligent student all her life, unlike Sasuke and the opposite of Naruto. Everyone knew how hard she worked, and how much she wanted it. If anyone deserved a position like this, it was her.

“She’s staying, then? They’re not breaking up?” Karin clarified, frowning at the sentence as she said it.

“Why would they?” Sasuke kept his voice even, even though it was a strain. Unfortunately, like Naruto, Karin couldn’t take a hint or realise when she was overstepping.

“I mean, they don’t seem like the ‘long-distance’ type of couple. And even if she’s staying, Naruto’s still a student. That’s not gonna make it easy, especially with how busy she’ll be. It could be the end for them.”

Frustrated beyond the limit of masking it, Sasuke interjects, “They love each other, Karin. They can’t stop so easily.”

“Sasuke, no,” Karin backtracked, realising her mistake as Sasuke remained emotionless, “Wait, I-I didn’t mean—”

Their table buzzer went off, making Karin jump in her seat. Pushing his chair back immediately, Sasuke stood, “My coffee’s ready.” And he headed over to the counter without another word.

Despite being related, Karin tended to underestimate Naruto. Just because Sakura was graduating didn’t mean anything would change. Even if they did become separated, something like distance would never be enough to discourage Naruto. Sasuke—everyone—knew how he didn’t give up on what he believed in, even if to anyone else it was a hopeless case. For Sakura, Naruto would do just about anything to see her happy and be with her.

Sasuke didn’t wish for their break-up. It would surely devastate Naruto, and Sasuke didn’t want that. At the same time, it hurt to sacrifice his feelings. But even though it hurt, Sasuke would rather bear the pain silently than inflict any more on Naruto. Love was a stupid, complicated thing. Karin had misunderstood, but it wasn’t all her fault. Sasuke couldn’t even make sense of his feelings sometimes, and they were his feelings. Taking his coffee with muted thanks, Sasuke returned and decidedly spoke first, changing the topic. He knew that Karin knew, but he didn’t care.

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Graduation day had come. Sakura looked stunning in her formal hakama. It had cost her quite a bit of money, but she had reasoned she would be using it again when she came back to study later to become a doctor. Naruto and Sasuke had dressed in western-style suits, saving their traditional wear for next year when they would both graduate.

Though he and Naruto weren’t allowed to come in for the official ceremony, they could stay for the main part of graduation: taking photos with friends and family. It didn’t take long until Sakura was rushing out of the hall, her parents trailing behind her and her diploma clutched in her hand.

With a huge grin, Naruto caught her and spun her around in a small circle, “You did it! I knew it! You’re amazing, Sakura-chan!”

She laughed, and held onto him, hugging him, “I finally made it here!”
“Congratulations, Sakura.” Sasuke offered, nodding his head and she turned her dazzling smile towards him. Her parents had caught up and they all exchanged greetings.

Pulling away from Naruto, Sakura wiped discreetly at her eyes and announced, “Let’s take some photos!”

Naruto and Sasuke stood to the side, with Naruto working the camera whilst Sakura took photos with her parents. Then, her parents moved to the side and Sasuke took over the camera duties, as Naruto went over to her. Sasuke didn’t think about it as he clicked photo after photo, their smiles brighter than ever.

“Sasuke-kun, you too!” Sakura reached out an arm towards him when he was done, all smiles and excitement.

“Me?”

“You know I have to have one of the three of us! Come on, just one? Please?” She begged, putting her hands together and looking so hopeful.

When he didn’t answer, Naruto rolled his eyes and wrapped his arm around Sakura’s waist, “He’s just embarrassed ‘cause he’s not gonna look as good next to you, Sakura-chan. You’re so beautiful!”

“You don’t have to keep telling me.” She insisted, but still awarded him with a blushing smile.

“And me, of course! It’s downright shameful how handsome I look today! Suits aren’t my thing, but who am I kidding? I look amazing!” Naruto gushed over himself, striking a pose that was surely meant to be charming.

“Having fun in your fantasy world, idiot?” Sasuke sniped, biting his tongue.

Naruto had never been overly formal, hating all the fuss and bother of dressing up. But when he did, a lot more eyes were drawn to him. More than usual, anyway. It had been a crazy twist in their first year of university, just how many girls came up to him. When they were together, Naruto would automatically assume they were interested in Sasuke. And truthfully, Sasuke had as well. Not out of arrogance or a sense of superiority, but due to the fact he had been dealing with girl crushes since late elementary school, and could recognise them from outer space. What a relief and concurrent shock it was, then, when a girl would shyly confess she had come over to talk with Naruto.

To Sasuke, though, Naruto would always be Naruto. It didn’t matter how he’d changed over the years, or how much more ‘attractive’ he’d become in others’ eyes. Underneath it all, he was the same moron, that extraordinary personality a constant he didn’t ever grow out of. That, more than anything, was what Sasuke couldn’t stop feeling attracted to.

Clicking his tongue, Naruto sent a squinty-eyed glare in his direction, “Jealous bastard. You think I’m handsome, right, Sakura-chan?”

She giggled, and tucked some of the unruly golden strands behind his ear, “Yes, you’re very handsome.”

Sasuke looked away.

“Come on, this is a once in a lifetime photo! We gotta take it!” Naruto insisted, persistent to a fault.
A familiar, old voice entered the fray, “You guys were going to leave me out? I’m kinda hurt by that.”

“K-Kakashi-sensei?!” Sakura stammered, blinking rapidly to make sure she was seeing correctly.

“EH, SENSEI!?” His mouth falling open, Naruto balked.

Hatake Kakashi, their teacher from high school. Due to a group project gone awry, Kakashi had taken the three of them ‘under his wing’ so to speak. He had helped them all, with more than just their school work. In Sasuke’s case, Kakashi had been the one to care about Sasuke’s grades when he hadn’t and helped renew his motivation to study. He owed much to the man, who hadn’t changed much since their high school graduation three years ago.

He raises his hand in a wave, “Yo! Sorry I’m late. A black cat crossed my path, so I had to take the longer route and ended up getting lost on the road of life.”

“You liar!” Naruto and Sakura cried at once, outraged as they had been back then.

“Hn.” Sasuke brushed it off, seemingly unruffled but just as annoyed as the other two.

Kakashi chuckled slightly and shrugged. Then, they all started laughing. Well, Sasuke smiled, but that was worth so much in itself.

“What are you doing here?” Sakura asked, beaming up at him excitedly.

“Well, I had to come and see my favourite student graduate university. With flying colours, by the way.” Kakashi’s eyes closed, the only tell they had to know he was smiling.

Sakura straightened in surprise but blushed pleasingly at being recognised, “Thank you, sensei!”

“Eh? Sakura-chan’s your favourite!? I thought I was!” Naruto whined, more put out than he had any right to be. A cunning smile blooming on his face, he stepped closer to Kakashi, his gaze admiring. “Y’know, I always thought you were the coolest, Kakashi-sensei!”

“Oh? Is that so?” Kakashi hummed, considering. Then, having made up his mind, he shook his head, “It’s a little too late for flattery now, Naruto. Sorry, you’re last.”

Naruto’s face crumbles, “WHAT!? Come on! Damn it!”

It was a lie, they all knew it. Kakashi was fond of the three of them, claiming them as his most memorable students in all his years of teaching.

“So, what’s the hold up? Aren’t you supposed to be taking photos, now?” Kakashi asks, looking around at the other graduates who were taking photographs.

Rolling his eyes, Naruto nudged at him, “Yeah, but Sasuke won’t budge. Stubborn jerk, he is.”

“Hm? Is that true, Sasuke?” Kakashi peered down at him, and Sasuke couldn’t shake the likeness to when Kakashi would scold him in his school days.

Slumping his shoulders in defeat, Sasuke sighed and gave in, “Let’s just get it over with.”

“Is it alright if I join in, too?” Kakashi raised a hand, like a hopeless kid wanting to be picked on the sport team first.

Naruto hummed, assessing the situation, “I guess. Just stand in the back, okay?”
“The back?” Kakashi sounded so disheartened, Sasuke wanted to laugh.

“You’re the tallest, sensei! You’ll get in the way!” Sakura explained to him, which didn’t really seem to help Kakashi’s mood.

“What happened to my cute little students?” He lamented, but only Sasuke heard him. He offered no form of consolation.

Sakura placed them all in position. Naruto was on her right, Sasuke on the left, and Kakashi in the centre behind them. After finding her parents, she asked them to take the photos. Situating herself in the centre, she turned to her right and made sure Naruto wasn’t out of place, smoothing down his shirt collar and again, fixing his hair. Sasuke caught sight of Naruto smiling down at her, and his stomach clenched at such an enamoured expression.

“This sure is a different atmosphere to the last photo we took.” Kakashi mused as he watched them, and Sasuke too remembered back to that time. Sakura had been fawning about being in a photo with him, Naruto had been complaining about the same thing, and Kakashi had been relentlessly adamant on it.

“Oh, yeah! I really didn’t want to be in a photo with this bastard.”

“I still don’t want to be in a photo with you, idiot.”

“What’d you say!? Sasuke–!”

“Naruto! Stay still, or I swear–!”

Kakashi chuckled, “Bickering like always, you three never change.”

“Okay! Is everyone ready?” Sakura’s father called out, holding the camera up properly.

“Yes!” Sakura answered, giving Naruto one last look over before nodding and facing the front.

She had her arm linked with Naruto’s, Kakashi at the back had his hands resting on his and Naruto’s shoulders lightly. Sasuke stood with his hands in his pockets. Then, Sakura hooked her arm through his, pulling him in closer and shooting him an encouraging grin. Sasuke attempted one back, but accidentally locked eyes with Naruto when he made to look away. He smiled back at Sasuke under the falling cherry blossoms, the petals landing in his hair.

“Okay, here we go!” The call of the camera broke Sasuke’s stare, and he looked forward, “One, two, three!”

The camera flashed, a couple of times. Then, as quickly as it had begun it was over.

“Let’s all have a look!” Sakura said, thanking her dad and bringing the camera back.

Sakura looked the nicest, naturally, her smile sweet and happy. Naruto was beaming beside her, that bright grin of his never changing. Kakashi’s eyes were upturned in a smile hidden beneath his mask. Sasuke wasn’t smiling, but he had an open expression on his face. More open than he would’ve liked.

“Man, I don’t know how you pull it off!” Naruto sighed down at the camera, then looked up at Sasuke accusingly, “You don’t even have to smile, and you look good. If I tried that, it wouldn’t look good at all!”
Sakura took the camera back, going through each of the shots with a warm smile, “Sasuke-kun has always been that way. He’s very photogenic.”

Naruto then hummed, agreeing, “Damn, I don’t wanna imagine how good you’d look if you actually smiled. You could probably stop a war, or somethin’.”

Kakashi nodded, “Hm, that’s true. Sasuke does have a nice smile. On the rare occasion he shows it, that is.” He then grinned behind his mask and placed a hand atop his head–like one would do to a cute dog.

Sasuke, against his better judgement, felt embarrassed. He glared at Kakashi, to ignore the fluttery feeling Naruto’s words had given him. Naruto did that sometimes, he just flung stupid, little compliments Sasuke’s way without completely realising it. Sasuke had never been one to care much for compliments, save for the people he cared about impressing, like his father and older brother. It was annoying to care so much about them now when they came from Naruto’s mouth.

He knocked the hand off his head, “Don’t you have to be going, Kakashi?”

“Ah, you guys are lucky. I can stay long enough to get lunch with you. How about it?” Kakashi offered, his hands tucked in his pockets casually.

Naruto was the first to agree, “Alright! But it’s gotta be Sakura-chan’s choice.”

“Of course. Don’t worry, it’s my treat for you Sakura,” he said to her with an indulgent smile, and then turned that same smile towards Sasuke and an optimistic Naruto, “But, you two are on your own.”

Naruto drooped on the spot, crossing his arms petulantly, “Che’, you’re still stingy, sensei.”

“Come on, now. Don’t you remember who taught you the true meaning of ‘teamwork’?”

They all sighed. Of course, it was a lesson they could never forget.

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After the meal with Kakashi, they had returned to their home and gotten preparations ready for the dual party that would be held in the evening. They had stayed dressed in their formal clothes, as Sakura wanted to take more photos. Sasuke would try to avoid it where he could, he really wasn’t a fan of having his photo taken.

The party had been going for about two hours now, and it was fully dark outside. They were gathered around the living room floor. Sakura had gotten her wish, receiving two cakes, one for the graduates and one for her birthday, and everyone had a slice of each. Sasuke only had one, choosing the cheesecake over the mud cake.

“So, what are your plans now, Sakura?” Ino asked, also still dressed in her hakama.

Sakura beamed, eager to share her good news, “I’m really lucky, I was offered a position at Saint Senju’s Hospital when I worked there on placement. So, as a new graduate I can stay here in Tokyo.”

“What!? No way!”

“That’s amazing, Sakura!”
“Congratulations.”

“Sakura-chan is just that awesome! Nobody could turn her down, she’s the best up and coming nurse out there!” Naruto’s smile was dazzling, his arm wrapped around her snugly as he boasted on, proudly.

“Well, I didn’t get any offers yet, but I’m starting interviews soon anyway. Going in with confidence from the start is the best way to go!” Ino said, clenching a fist determinedly.

“That’s right! You can do it, Ino! I believe in you.” Sakura encouraged, and the two girls shared a smile.

“You will be a good journalist. Nobody has sharper skills than you. You can do anything, beautiful.” Sai complimented, making her blush and smile prettily.

“What about you, Shikamaru?” Ino then inquires, looking to him expectantly.

Shrugging, Shikamaru handed off the rest of his second slice of cake to Chouji, “I’ll find work when I find work. I’m not gonna stress about it.”

“You can be more serious, idiot! Be responsible, you’re a working member of society now.” She scolded, and Sasuke was reminded of a less intense version of Naruto and Sakura.

“I can’t believe you guys have graduated. Feels like just yesterday we were all in high school,” Kiba sighs nostalgically, “Man, we had some good times. I kinda miss it.”

Shikamaru scoffed, shaking his head, “Speak for yourself. Frankly, going to school and then university has taken up almost a quarter of my life. It’s been way too troublesome.”

Amongst the buzz of his old classmates, Sasuke felt glaringly out of place. Not that he’d ever fit in amazingly with them to start with, only truly connecting with Naruto and Sakura. The others were amicable enough, some more so than others.

His phone buzzing against his chest, Sasuke fished it out of his inner pocket in his jacket. Juugo’s name along with a text message had come up as a notification. Blinking in surprise, not altogether unpleasant, he opened it to read:

Juugo: Karin and Suigetsu showed up randomly, so now we’re having an impromptu Ghibli movie marathon. You are welcome to join us, although Karin says you don’t have a choice. Perhaps, you could stay longer after they leave.

Sasuke had to forcibly restrain from showing any sort of reaction. But, the words alone teased the corners of his lips tauntingly.

Sasuke: Sure, I’ll come. And stay. Be there in 20mins.

“I’m heading out.” Sasuke announced, momentarily catching everyone’s attention, all eyes on him.

“Aww, so soon?” Ino piped up immediately, pouting at him.

Waving his hand, Kiba shot him the side-eye, “Just let him go. Not like he’s the life of the party or anything.”

“And you are? The reason I ask is because, Kiba, you aren’t exactly the best conversationalist yourself. You haven’t even congratulated me properly yet.” Shino commented at his side, in that
cryptic tone of his.

“I already did! It’s not my fault you weren’t listening!” Kiba protested, irritable.

“You couldn’t repeat it for your childhood friend? What about the bond we share? At least Hinata remembered and bought me a gift. You didn’t get me a thing.” Shino countered, his disdain more than evident.

Kiba sighed harshly, and turned to face his friend purposefully, “Shut it, Shino! I remembered, alright? And I paid for all your food today! What more do you want?”

Ino rolled her eyes, which were glimmering sadistically, “Looks like someone’s out of sorts because Hinata had to leave early. Am I right?”

Stiffening in his chair, Kiba’s ears burned red in embarrassment, “What!? No, I-I’m not! That has nothing to do with it!”

Crossing his arms up over his head, Shikamaru leans against the back of the couch, “Just tell her you like her already. Take any longer and someone else will fall for her, and you’ll lose her before you even have her. Then you’ll be even more troublesome.”

“Yeah, it’s like when you see the sweetest looking cream bun in the bakery. If you don’t grab it quickly, it’ll be gone the moment you look away!” Chouji chimed in with, tucking into a 4th slice of cake with gusto.

Smiling in entertainment, Sai added in his two cents, “Kiba, are you really scared of asking a girl out? You must have even smaller balls than Naruto.”

Kiba spluttered, and now his face was reddening, “WHAT THE FUCK–!?”

Naruto’s fist slammed down on the floor furiously, “DAMN IT, SAI–!!!”

“Nobody asked me what my plans are after graduation.” Shino said to the lot of them, making many of them cringe from their lack of interest.

“You gotta speak up, man! I swear–”

“Do you really have to go?” Sakura asks, looking up at him with a hopeful smile.

Sasuke’s chest twinges guiltily, “Sorry.”

Breaking away from his argument with Sai, Naruto glared over at Sasuke, openly pissed off, “Geez, you’re always running off somewhere these days. What about Sakura-chan? We haven’t even opened her presents yet, and you’re bailing.”

Sakura placed a hand on his shoulder, rubbing softly to pacify him, “Naruto, it’s okay.”

In that moment, Sasuke could hear her disappointment. He pretended he didn’t, unable to offer her anything more.

Facing him with a smile, she granted him with a gracious nod, “Go ahead, Sasuke-kun. Have a good time.”

Coming to a stand, he ignored the fiery blue eyes scorching a hole through him. Did Naruto know where he was going? No, impossible, but he was probably getting ideas. Well, it didn’t make a
difference either way. Making his way up to his room, Sasuke changed quickly into a three-quarter long sleeve and some slim-fitting jeans. He refused to call them ‘skinny jeans’, no matter how much Karin persisted with it. Grabbing his wallet and car keys, he tucked it in his back pocket and headed back downstairs.

“I’ll be back late, so I’m taking one set.” The keys jingle when he takes them off the hook and cease only when he stuffs them in his other back pocket.

“Congratulations,” he offers generally to the recent graduates, then steps closer and touches Sakura on the shoulder, lowering his voice, “and, happy birthday.”

A warm smile lighting up her face, she nodded up at him, “Thank you, Sasuke-kun.”

His eyes strayed over to Naruto then, who was silent. But, disappointment was written all over his face. Giving the slightest shake of his head, Naruto glanced away and joined in the conversation that was starting back up again. Clenching his hand tightly inside his pocket, Sasuke remains unaffected as he descends the stairs and exits the house.

* * *

“Sasuke! You’re here!” Karin squeals at the door, wrapping around him like a koala and hugging just as tightly. Sasuke stands there and waits for it to be over, then walks inside and slides out of his shoes.

“Yo, you actually made it!” Suigetsu called from the living room, from his place on the floor in front of the TV.

Juugo greets him as well when he enters the house, then asks, “How was graduation?”

“Fine.” Sasuke replied, his tone clipped.

He was still seething at Naruto’s bad mood—apparently, a bad mood reserved only for Sasuke. He’d spent almost the entire day with Sakura, had wished her well and been there for her. And yet, Naruto wasn’t satisfied. Sasuke had his own friends, what was wrong with that? He hadn’t done anything wrong. So why was Naruto looking down on him? What more did he have to do? Clenching his jaw tightly and resisting against the urge to grin his teeth, he took a seat on Juugo’s cushiony couch.

From the bothered glances she kept sending his way, Karin obviously sensed his discontent. She didn’t bring it up, though. She couldn’t, not in front of these two. Instead, she plopped down beside him on the couch and deflected further speculation on the topic.

“We already watched Spirited Away, now we’re just about to start with Totoro.” She said, and Sasuke nodded, temporarily letting his bad mood disperse.

“Whose idea was this, anyway?” He asked, eyeing her.

Karin smirked, rolling her eyes, “I bet you think it was me, but it was actually this bastard right here.” She pushed her foot roughly on Suigetsu’s back, then left it there, using it as a footrest.

Looking over his shoulder, Suigetsu shrugged and grinned, “What can I say? I got a soft spot for the classics. Whoever says they don’t like these movies is either lying or a foreigner.”

Sasuke snorted, mildly surprised at seeing such a side of Suigetsu.
The man smirked, and his eyes glinted deviously, “Hey, Sasuke, been meaning to ask you. What’s your hair product of choice? ‘Cause I gotta say, it does a pretty good job, staying pointy like that all-day long.”

Turning his nose up, Sasuke was dignified when he clarified, “I’ll have you know, my hair is how it is naturally.”

“Seriously? Ha!” Suigetsu chortled, then cackled as he examined Sasuke’s hair again, “That’s hilarious! I really got the vibe you were a gel-or-no-go type of guy.”

Sasuke pulled a face at the mention of it, “Hardly,” then, giving Suigetsu a once over, he retorts with, “By the looks of it, you could use some.”

Karin laughed, her leg dropping down from the force of it. Even Juugo cracked a smile. Suigetsu offered up a snarky grin, taking it all in his stride.

“Hey, man. I can work the helmet-hair look.” He said, jabbing a thumb at his chest proudly.

“True. I can’t imagine you without bleach blonde hair.” Juugo nodded, and they all agreed on at least that much.

“What is your original hair colour, anyway?” Sasuke inquires, because he honestly had no idea.

Waving his arm dismissively, Suigetsu brushed the question off, “Nah, I’ll never tell. I’m gonna take that secret with me to my grave. There’s no pictures, so don’t bother looking. Nobody knows except me.”

When Sasuke and Juugo switched their gazes to Karin, Suigetsu sniggered while the woman herself couldn’t look more offended.

“Don’t look at me, you assholes! That freak is so extreme, he does his cock too!” She snarled, pointing at Suigetsu’s groin in disgust.

Juugo stared at him, disturbed, “Suigetsu, you’re unexpectedly abnormal.”

“Geez, thanks for telling everyone, you hag,” Suigetsu sighed, letting his head fall back so he was looking at Karin upside-down, “What about you? Ever heard of shaving, occasionally?”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Karin screeched, bringing her fist down on his head harshly.

“Shall we get started, then?” Juugo said, ignoring Suigetsu’s pained whimpers. Sasuke and Karin nodded, and they settled in.

After two more movies later, Karin and Suigetsu left, while Sasuke stayed. He turned to Juugo when they had finished cleaning up and had their lips pressed together in an instant. Wanting to let off some steam, Sasuke’s hands wove into his hair and tugged roughly. They moved it to Juugo’s bedroom, and this time they got fully naked together.

Juugo was hovering over him, their erections pressed together in his hand. Sasuke pushed up onto his elbows, connecting their lips in an aggressive kiss. Their skin pressed together, warming each other and working up a sweat that felt good in the chill of the night. Linking his arms around Juugo’s neck, not breaking the kiss, Sasuke flipped their positions and slid between his legs. He registered Juugo’s wide eyes before rubbing his thumb over both their slits sensuously. Moaning low in his throat, Juugo’s hand around them tightened and Sasuke gasped, breaking the kiss. Thrusting forward, he rubbed their lengths together and shuddered at the friction.
Reaching out, Juugo’s free hand reached for the lube again. Their earlier application hadn’t been enough, it seemed. He had to let go of their cocks to open it and squeezed more out onto his fingers and palm. When he had slickened up his own cock, he did the same for Sasuke, whose eyes rolled back at the cool touch. Grabbing onto Juugo’s sturdy shoulders, he used his leverage to move back and forth in rhythm, gaining traction between their bodies. Juugo kept one hand around their stiff cocks, and the other was digging into Sasuke’s hip. It didn’t take long for Juugo to come, and Sasuke followed not soon after, his body sighing at the much-needed pleasure.

“You’re lively tonight.” Juugo commented between his panting breaths, lying flat on his back.

Sliding off him, Sasuke sank down into the soft mattress beside him and mumbled, “I’m sexually frustrated. Just do your job.”

Juugo huffed out a laugh, turning to him with a smile, “Fair enough. Another round, then?”

Sasuke’s answer came in the form of crawling on top of Juugo, in the perfect ‘69 position. They did go for another round, and another after that. Not at the full-on sex stage yet, but Sasuke didn’t think it would take much longer. Once their bodies became more well-acquainted with each other, it would surely happen.

When he returned home just after 1 AM, the house was dark and quiet. Either the festivities were over or had been moved to another location. From what he could see with his shitty night vision, everything looked to be cleaned up. Sure enough, when he ascended the stairs and came up to Naruto and Sakura’s room, their door was closed—which meant they were inside sleeping. But then, as he moved to walk past their room, he heard distinct panting and bed sheets scratching. His eyes widened. They probably hadn’t heard him come in, given Sakura’s inflexible rule of ‘no sex while Sasuke-kun is in the house’.

Quieter than a mouse, he swiftly moved past and entered his room, shutting the door without so much as a squeak. Covering his ears with headphones and pressing play on his music straight away, he then went about getting undressed and ready for bed. He’d showered at Juugo’s and was now thanking himself for his foresight. He could stomach a lot of things, but this was his limit. Hearing Naruto in such a state was something Sasuke avoided in the extremes, fearing what his imagination would do and how his body would react. That was a level Sasuke refused to sink to. It was better never to know, and not think about it. And that’s what Sasuke did, lying down in his bed and closing his eyes, falling asleep to the music in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Naruto is a grumpy lil bean for most of this chap (¬_¬) Sasuke is suffering (as usual╥﹏╥), but at least Taka babes are there to cheer him up♡ and Sakura has graduated! This is only the start of many big changes to come (ノ・ェ・ ノ) I hope you guys liked it, and as always I greatly appreciate your wonderful support and comments! Thanks for reading! x

((BTW: I know Team 7’s house looks hella expensive and unrealistic in real life BUT this is fanfic and I make the rules and I say they live here and they got it cheap xD))

P.S. I love Shino, he is so underrated xd team 8 is cute, too! What team do you guys like best? ;3;
Until next time lovelies, take care xx
Coloured with your light

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, I'm back! It's been an intense few weeks with assignments and lots of travelling for me, but I finally have the next chapter ready for you all :) This is a chapter dedicated for our boys, because they deserve it ;w; hope you enjoy it!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The short-break after graduation and final exams was exactly that: short. Before they knew it, Sasuke and Naruto had commenced their final year of studying, and Sakura began working full-time at the hospital.

Currently, it was 12:34 PM and Sasuke was sitting at the table and working on drafting an essay. It was early days, but he liked getting ahead, planning the structure and identifying the critical points he wanted to discuss. Today was the one day of the week he didn’t have classes, so Sasuke decided to be productive—as if he could sit around doing nothing, anyway. Sakura was naturally at work, having left at 11 AM for an 8-hour shift today. And, Naruto had returned from a workout half an hour ago and was currently in the shower.

The scent of tea tree suddenly invaded his nose. Isn’t that...? Sniffing the air, Sasuke pinpointed where it was coming from. It was not the familiar honey and sandalwood aroma he’d gotten used to. Walking through the doorway, Naruto rubbed at his wet hair with a small towel, dressed in simple jeans and a t-shirt. He made a beeline for the kitchen, pulling out a jug of cold water and a drinking glass.

“Did you use my shampoo?” Sasuke asked slowly, his eyes piercing Naruto reproachfully over the top of his laptop.

Straightening up in place, Naruto looks up frantically and jumps to his own defence, “I had to use it! Mine ran out!”

Sasuke sighed, part-annoyed and part-something else he didn’t want to think about but made his stomach flip over, “You couldn’t have used Sakura’s?”

“And smell like roses and pomegranate?” Naruto answers with a raised brow, “Not really into the flowery or fruity scent, y’know.”

Sasuke eyed him a moment longer, then let it go as he returned his attention to his laptop.

Naruto’s aggravation at Sasuke the other day had seemingly evaporated into thin air, and he was as cheerful as ever. He was like that sometimes, venting his anger in one moment and then acting as if he’d forgotten all about in the next. Naruto claimed he didn’t want to be a downer, but Sasuke didn’t like it. Because he was sure a lot of the time, Naruto just pushed his feelings away and tried to forget about them, not dealing with what had upset him properly. It didn’t help that people expected it of Naruto to some extent—like it was his job to be endlessly optimistic and upbeat.

Well, Naruto could sweep it under the rug if he wanted. But, Sasuke was confrontational if nothing else. He’d rip up that rug and deal with all that was underneath it. Because the last thing he needed
was friction in their friendship.

“So, I was thinking,” Naruto began in a sing-song voice, and Sasuke barely suppresses a groan. *Here he goes again,* “Now that Sakura-chan’s graduated and working, we can spend more time studying together! What do you say we head to library soon and get started?” Naruto announced jovially, taking a sip of water he’d poured for himself.

Sasuke didn’t even grace him with a look, “No.”

Naruto drew back as if he had been slapped, nearly spilling his water all over himself, “What!?”

“Ask someone else,” Sasuke said, deleting a sentence from his document and frowning. He’d just typed the same idea twice—he was getting distracted.

“I can’t! They all get mad at me!” Naruto cries out, ambling over to the table and dropping into a chair beside Sasuke, “Just ‘cause I lose focus sometimes.”

Sasuke scoffs, “Constantly, you mean?”

Ramming his shoulder into Sasuke’s, Naruto tries again, “Come on! You know my style, and we work the best together!”

Although that was true, Sasuke shook his head, “We’re in complete different courses. Sakura at least shared your area of study.”

Giving him a sour look, Naruto chides him, “You bastard, quit that. In high school, you were great at biology and all that science-y stuff! You probably could’ve been a brain surgeon or somethin’ if you wanted.”

“High school level biology classes are different to an intense, university standard course,” Sasuke deadpans, unimpressed with the argument, “Besides, what will I get out of it? You know nothing about business, so you’re no help to me.”

“Oi! I know some stuff! I took the business subject with you back in high school! To cut corners you corner a market, right?” Naruto asserted, grinning overconfidently.

“You combined two expressions into one,” Sasuke cast him a disapproving glance, narrowing his eyes, “And you don’t know what either of those terms mean.”

“Lucky me, there’s this thing called an ‘answer’ page,” Naruto said, mockingly relieved as he wiped imaginary sweat off his forehead, “So, no problem! I can test you with questions and stuff!”

“Can’t you ask someone who’s actually in your class?” Sasuke tried, even though he knew it would be fruitless. Once Naruto had his mind set on something, he would persist with it until he got the results he wanted.

“You know how tight my schedule is. When they’re all free to meet up, I never am. I try and join ‘em when I can, but it’s not enough,” Naruto explains, his brows dipped downwards in that annoyingly endearing ‘kicked puppy’ look. Then, he raised his eyes to Sasuke and perked up again, “But, you’re always around! I can always count on you, Sasuke.”

“You won’t at least try studying by yourself?” Sasuke asks and he knows it’s a last resort. Asking Naruto to study was trying enough in itself. Asking him to study *alone* was damn near impossible.

“I’ve tried!” Naruto insists, as expected, “But I’m only good for about 45 minutes and then I’m
“All that discipline your mother gave you and you’re still like this.” Sasuke shook his head, feeling sympathy for Kushina. She blamed herself for Naruto’s bad habits, but it wasn’t her fault her son was an incurable idiot.

Naruto scowls at him, “Hey, shut up!” Then, after a period of silence passes between them, Naruto speaks up again. This time, his voice evened seriously, “It’s our last year studying, y’know? Before we become boring and get jobs, and responsibilities, and do all that big, important stuff.”

Then, blonde eyebrows were upturned in an almost sad expression as he went on, “I want us to have a good time together. You’ve always been there, growing with me and pushing me on. This is the end of an era for us, too. Once we graduate, I won’t get to compete with you anymore.”

Did the idiot have to sound so dejected? Sasuke should just ignore him, aware of how excessively sentimental Naruto tended to be about…everything. Yet, there was truth in those words. This was the last year their lives would be connected by a common factor: education. Things would change, had already started to change. Their friendship would survive it, though. Sasuke had faith in at least that much.

In his own way, Sasuke attempts to offer Naruto some condolence, “There’s still our workout contests. I can always beat you in any test of exercise, if it’s any comfort.”

“Who are you fooling, teme?” Naruto smirked challengingly, “You just can’t admit I finally caught up to you! I saw how shaky your legs were the other day after that set of fifty squats.”

Sasuke stiffened at having been caught in a moment of weakness. He didn’t think Naruto had noticed at the time, but that was clearly wishful thinking.

“– and you looked so lame! Like a baby deer walking for the first time.” Naruto snorted, having way too much fun at his expense.

“And you still can’t keep up with me during long distance running. By the end of it, you sound like you need an oxygen mask.” Sasuke rebutted, his eyes sparking competitively.

Only Naruto could bring out this side in him. He was the one person who could break through Sasuke’s calm, unruffled demeanour and get him to react, and Sasuke knew that. It maddened him as much as it fascinated him.

Naruto shot back, “I’m the best at the sprints, though!”

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke raises his chin haughtily, “In your dreams, loser.”

“So, we gonna study together or what?” Naruto asked, catching Sasuke off guard from their pithy banter. Staying quiet, Sasuke weighed the pros and cons. Even though he preferred studying alone, having a partner occasionally working alongside him had its benefits. And this was Naruto he was talking about, they were clearly comfortable with each other. But still, he wasn’t sure…

“Please, Sasuke. I promise I won’t be a nuisance! Not unless you act like a jerk first and you deserve it!” Naruto declared, his hands pressed together in front of him and his eyes shut tightly.

Sasuke pursed his lips, sighing as he looked away, “Fine.”

“Yosh!” Pumping a fist in the air, Naruto beamed at him gratefully. It was embarrassing being the only focus of Naruto’s attention for extended periods of time. When he was like that and it was just
the two of them, it made Sasuke feel all fluttery inside.

“I’m going to the library in twenty minutes. You’re coming, I assume?” Setting about saving his draft to a USB drive, Sasuke decided to take a short break before leaving.

Naruto nodded, picking up his glass of water, “You bet! Just let me drink this and get my stuff together, and we can go!”

*  

They booked a group room in the library, a small room that could be shut off and groups of students used when they wanted to study in a quieter space. Naruto would be more focused if it was a less larger space, and Sasuke frankly liked the privacy of it.

About an hour in, Sasuke had finished with quizzing Naruto and they were taking a short break. He’d done okay with it, and Sasuke was secretly impressed with how much he knew when he was given the chance to express it.

Taking off his glasses for a moment, Sasuke rubbed at his eyes, trying to get some moisture back into them. He’d left his eyedrops at home, of course. Getting dry eyes was easily Sasuke’s pet peeve about himself, in a physical sense. It was just so irritating.

“Heh, it’s still weird seeing you in these.” Naruto stated, picking up his glasses and observing them in wonder.

“I’ve had them for four years already, moron.”

Sasuke realised he needed glasses in his last year of high school when he had to be about an inch away from his computer screen to read anything. His father didn’t wear any, and his mother hadn’t either. It was due to all the excessive strain he himself had put on them, rather than a hereditary issue. Or so he was told.

Inspecting the glasses more closely, Naruto hums, “Yeah, but I’m still not used to them! Maybe ‘cause you always squirrel away to study, and you don’t wear them that much at home.”

Sasuke shrugs, resting his chin in his palm, “I only need them when I’m working with a computer. It’s not as if I’m half-blind.”

Sliding the glasses onto his face, Naruto’s thumb and pointer finger formed a V-shape, framing his chin in a ‘cool-guy pose’.

“Do I look like the main character of a manga, now?” Naruto asked him, grinning like a fool.

Sasuke stares back stoically, “All I see is an idiot.”

“Can you see anything without these? Man, your eyesight sucks.” Naruto said, squinting his eyes as he surveyed the space around them.

“Keep them on any longer and so will yours.” Sasuke remarked, his hand reaching out palm-up and waiting.

“No way! My eyes are super sharp, just like a hawk’s!” Naruto said proudly, finally taking off the glasses and handing them back, “Glasses aren’t my style anyway, y’know. Don’t have the ‘look’ for it.”
After giving the glasses a decent clean, he pushed them back onto his face and swept his bangs out of the way.

“Now *that’s* the ‘look’!” Naruto declaring, pointing at his face and causing Sasuke to blink confusedly.

“What?”

“Come on, you know! The ‘I’m smart and serious, don’t underestimate me’ look, but mixed together with that mysterious, look-but-don’t-touch kinda vibe. I just can’t pull that off.” Naruto exhaled, as if lamenting a great loss.

Sasuke filtered through all the nonsense babbling to pick up on one specific thing Naruto had said. A smirk dragged the corner of his lips up, as he says, “You finally acknowledged I’m smarter than you.”

Freezing up at his mistake, Naruto slammed his hands soundly on the desk, trying to backtrack, “Wait–no! Ah, th-that came out wrong! I just meant that–!”

“T ook you a while. Better late than never, though.” Sasuke preened, feeling rightfully smug.

Naruto glared at him, “You damn bastard.”

“Come on. My turn,” Sasuke prompted, pushing his textbook towards Naruto and waiting to be quizzed, “and don’t ask stupid questions. Just read what’s written and don’t try to create your own.”

“Man, you’re so bossy. Just as bad as Sakura-chan, I swear.” Naruto grumbled, scanning through the book as he looked for appropriate questions.

Another hour later, they finished up with Sasuke feeling mixed emotions. He’d gotten quite a few correct but had still answered more than a few wrongly. His problem was overthinking, something he needed to work on.

“Don’t be a self-tyrant, *teme,*” Naruto said, noticing his displeasure, “you got the majority of those correct. You’re doing just fine.”

Sasuke frowned, knowing Naruto was right. He only needed more revision of certain topics, and that would be easy to do.

“You know what? We need to take a break.” Naruto yawned, extending his arms up over his head in a stretch. Sasuke’s eyes followed the motion, watching the way the muscles in his arms contracted and how his body moved.

*Stop it, you’re staring,* a voice nagged cautiously at him. Sasuke quickly averted his gaze before he was caught, “How long?”

“Long enough for me to take a leak and for the both of us to grab something to eat.” Naruto proposes, cricking his neck from side to side and sending Sasuke a thumbs-up.

Fresh air sounded appealing, so Sasuke acquiesces, “Alright, but we’re bringing the food back here.”

“Deal!” Naruto agrees instantly, grabbing his wallet and key card with Sasuke doing the same.
Naruto had their snacks, which consisted of melon pan, a couple packets of pocky, some salted chips and daifuku. Sasuke held onto their drinks, an iced tea for him and a milkshake for Naruto. When they walked out of the 7-Eleven, he recognised a group of people heading their way. Karin, Suigetsu, and Juugo.

“Isn’t that Karin?” Naruto asked, noticing straight away. Before Sasuke could answer, Naruto was calling out, “Oi, Karin! Hey! Karin, over here!” he had his hands cupped around his mouth, the plastic bag of food dangling on his wrist.

Sasuke wished, not for the first time, he could switch Naruto’s volume off. People were looking their way, and Karin had recognised her cousin. Her eyes flicked over to Sasuke, and chances of a clean escape vanished. She hurried over, the other two following behind her at a slower pace.

“Sasuke! What a surprise to see you here!” Karin simpered sweetly, placing a hand on his arm in greeting. Sasuke nodded at her, and she smiled.

“I’m here too, y’know,” Naruto huffed, on the verge of a pout.

Rolling her eyes, she looked to Naruto and tugged on his fringe teasingly, “Yeah, yeah. You too, I guess.”

“This is your cousin you mentioned, right?” Suigetsu asked Karin, tilting his head as he looked at the blonde, “Naruto, wasn’t it?”

“That’s me! And you are, uh…?” Naruto peered at him, trying to recall his name.

Just as Suigetsu opened his mouth, Karin cut in, “His name is Suigetsu, but you can just call him by ignoramus.”

Suigetsu placed a hand against his heart as if wounded, “Aww, I’m hurt Karin. Don’t give out my secret nicknames so easily.”

Karin shrugs, “Why? It’s no secret you’re an irritating dumbass.”

“Hey, you’re Juugo, right?” Naruto asked, his attention now on the taller man, curiously.

Juugo nodded, and Naruto’s expression turned sheepish, “I’m really sorry ‘bout that night, a couple of weeks back. It’s just, it looked different from where I was standing, and I didn’t understand a lot of things.”

“That’s alright. I’m sorry for my behaviour, as well. I don’t usually like people seeing me in such a state.” Juugo said, looking bashful and humble. It was an odd sight on someone of his stature, but Sasuke reasoned once you got used to it and got to know him more, it was impossible to imagine Juugo any other way.

Naruto aims a friendly grin at him, “Don’t worry about it!”

“So, you’re Naruto. It’s kinda hard to believe a guy like you is besties with Sasuke.” Suigetsu smirked sadistically, and Sasuke directed a stern glare towards him, “I mean, he’s pretty serious and just minds his own business. But, you seem like his total opposite. Chatty and happy, a real sociable guy.”

His bleached eyebrows rose, voice lilting up with thinly veiled interest, “What’s the attraction here,
Suigetsu was unaware about his true feelings concerning his best friend. Karin wouldn’t have said anything, either. Despite all the times she threatened to tell Naruto, he knew she would never do it. She was a true friend in that way, honouring Sasuke’s wishes above all else.

No, this was merely Suigetsu being himself. He was the type of person who said aggravating things for the hell of it, to wind people up and see what reaction he’d get.

Before Sasuke could reign him in, Karin was already on it. Pinching his ear between her nails, she tugged and pulled him back as roughly as she could, “You bastard! Sasuke’s more amazing than you could ever understand! You’re lucky he even bothers to waste his time on you losers!”

“What did I do!?” Naruto cried, completely lost.

Karin zeroes in on her cousin, pointing her finger at him accusingly, “Especially you! You airheaded, lousy, shit for brains–!”

“Karin, I think you’re cutting off the circulation.” Juugo commented idly over Suigetsu’s choked groans.

Sighing in defeat, she let go and Suigetsu almost dropped to his knees, clutching at his throbbing ear.

“Fucking crazy bitch! You almost drew blood!” Suigetsu gasps, touching around the red area gingerly and shooting Karin the filthiest look.

Karin doesn’t even grace him with a single glance, examining her nails instead, “You bought it on yourself, dumbass.”

“Are you guys going out?” Naruto cut in, his eyes flicking between them shrewdly.

“Hooking up, though I don’t know the fuck why sometimes.” Suigetsu corrected, giving Karin a venomous side-eyed glare to which she paid no mind.

“Eh!? When did that happen? Karin, you didn’t tell me!” Naruto wails, looking at her like she left him out of something big and important.

Scoffing, Karin brushes him off, “I don’t have to tell you shit. You’re way too invested in everyone’s personal lives, weirdo.”

Naruto balks, “But you’re my cousin!”

Karin shakes her head disagreeably, “Normal cousins don’t care about this type of thing.”

“My only cousin!” Naruto emphasised, his arms flinging out either side of him incredulously.

Karin sighed, looking very close to snapping again, “I know, don’t remind me.”

“You’re wasting time, idiot,” Sasuke addressed Naruto, putting a hand on his hip impatiently, “stop talking already and let’s get back to it.”

“Wha–Sasuke!” Indignant, Naruto stepped closer to him and raised his fist, shaking it in a near comical fashion, “Don’t be a rude ass. I was just getting to know your new friends!”

“It’s okay. We actually have somewhere we have to be, as well,” Juugo offered, and Sasuke was
grateful for his gentle persistence that could persuade just about anyone, “but it was nice getting to meet you properly, Naruto.”

“Yeah! Definitely!” Naruto said, all smiles again, “I’ll see you guys around, I guess. Take care on your way.”

“Haha, this guy is too much!” Suigetsu laughs, clapping a hand on Naruto’s shoulder in farewell, “thanks. You better take care too, you know how pissy Sasuke gets when he’s off his high-horse.”

Sasuke glared flatly at him, whilst Karin’s left eye was twitching up a storm. As she made to follow them, she whispered lowly so only Sasuke could hear, “Don’t worry, I’ll beat the shit out of him later.”

Holding back a huff of amusement, Sasuke answers, “That’s not necessary.”

“I know, but I’ll do it anyway,” Karin was smiling deviously, so Sasuke gave up. She then faced her cousin, punching him in the arm to get his attention.

“Ow! Karin, you don’t have to hit so hard!” Naruto whinged, making Karin sigh heavily.

“Whatsoever. Just take care of Sasuke on your way back, okay?”

“Oi, aren’t you ever gonna tell me to take care?” Naruto questioned, though even he seemed sceptical of such a thing occurring.

Karin hummed, then pinched his cheek none too gently before taking her leave, “Maybe one day, when you deserve it.”

“Geez, thanks. I’ll look forward to that day.” Naruto called back sulkily, rubbing at his cheek. But, he was waving goodbye to the three of them with his other hand as they made their way down the street.

When they were gone, Sasuke led the way on their short trek back to the library. As they walked through the streets, Sasuke realised that unexpected meeting had gone better than any planned one could have. Naruto seemed to get along with his friends easily enough, despite the earlier friction unintentionally caused between them.

“So, they’re your new friends? Karin introduced you to them, huh?” Naruto asked, talking in that interested-but-trying-to-hide-it way.

Sliding his eyes over to him, Sasuke retorts with another question, “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Naruto said, shaking his head, “it’s just that you already have friends. I don’t want you to forget about them.”

Now was the time he had to make it clear to Naruto. Since the end of high school, Sasuke had just gone with the flow and let himself be somewhat included in their group whenever they got together. But, Sasuke was older now and he had friends of his own. He would always be there for Naruto and Sakura, but the rest of his old school mates were simply not on his ‘care radar’ as such.

Turning to him, Sasuke is blunt when he says, “Naruto, they aren’t my friends.”

“What? Of course, they are! They like you!” Naruto exclaims, the bag swinging in his arm due to his exaggerated hand motions.
“They tolerate me.” Sasuke corrects, simply.

Naruto frowns, losing his vigour, “Don’t say that.”

“It’s okay, I don’t care.” Sasuke said, and he truly didn’t. That wasn’t the problem, though. The problem was that Naruto did care. He cared too much, and that was why Sasuke had hesitated in telling him for so long.

“Damn it, I really wanted it to work out,” Naruto said, his tone downtrodden, “I just thought if you kept hanging out with them, you’ll all become better friends.”

Sasuke blinked, not anticipating this. Was this the reasoning behind Naruto’s persistence? Even though Karin had told him Naruto was supposedly ‘jealous’ he was spending time with other people, Sasuke hadn’t believed that was all there was to it. Petty was not a word he could associate with Naruto, and he never got upset over meaningless things. Here was the proof. Naruto was aware of the tension in their little group and had been trying to rectify it. So, he did notice.

“And then I figured that maybe once they got to know you better, they’d realise how great you really are. Y’know, on the inside,” Naruto continued, thumping a fist lightly against his chest, “that you’re more than what people see.”

In that moment, Sasuke knew that no one could ever see him as purely as Naruto did. He didn’t live up to those praises often enough, and Sasuke shied away whenever Naruto talked about him like this. I don’t deserve it, he thought.

“Some things in the past can’t be forgiven. I don’t blame them, I wouldn’t.” Sasuke concedes after composing himself, because despite what other people say or think–he is not faultless.

“You’re not a bad person. You made mistakes, but who hasn’t?” Naruto says, his voice fervently believing as they stop to wait at the pedestrian crossing. He defends Sasuke consistently, even against Sasuke himself.

“Not all people can get along so easily. If they don’t warm to me, then I don’t care to change that.” Shrugging, Sasuke looks out at the road and the bustling traffic.

“I know, Sasuke. You gotta be yourself around your friends, or what’s the point?” Naruto replies understandingly, drawing Sasuke’s focus back on him, “And I’d never ask you to change, not for anything.”

The crossing then turned green and they moved, walking over to the other side. Once they turned the corner and the university’s library came into view, Naruto continues with their conversation, “It’s just–I don’t want anyone thinking badly about you. We’re not our past, that’s why it’s called the past. You’ve had it rough, and you got through it.”

Sasuke’s memory remembered back to some of those ‘rough’ times. Quick flashes of the P.E. change room, the hospital, his brother’s face, and more. He let the moment pass and the flashes faded away.

Naruto was still proceeding with his mini speech, “Even though you don’t think so, you’ve come a long way from back then. You’re a good friend, Sasuke, trust me. And you know I know everything, so you gotta believe me!” Naruto jabbed his thumb towards himself and sent him a lopsided smile.

Sasuke looks at him for a moment, then glances down, muttering softly, “Naïve as usual, usuratonkachi.”
He has given lots of people plenty of reason to dislike him, detest him and not want anything to do with him. In high school especially, Sasuke had been...lost. Lost, and on the verge of break down. It was thanks to Naruto he had reformed himself and could live peaceably, now. Naruto was the one who didn’t let him go, had refused to.

“It’s called being positive, jerk,” Naruto retorts, elbowing him in the ribs as they approached the doors to the library, swiping themselves in with their cards, “but alright, I get it. You’ve got those guys now. As long as they accept you, then I’ve got no right complaining.”

Naruto then poked Sasuke’s cheek, adding, “And it makes me glad they can see your good sides, ‘cause you can be so broody, y’know? Not a lot of friends can put up with that every day.”

Slapping his finger away, Sasuke frowns, “Look who’s talking. For someone supposedly at the top of his class, you burn your tongue eating ramen. Ever heard of impulse control, moron?”

“Shut it! It’s not my fault! They say on the packet it’s fine to eat in three minutes. Well I waited the damn ‘three minutes’ and it was still hot! I don’t even know why they say it in the first place—“ Naruto was ranting on and on, and Sasuke let him go for once, watching him instead.

That wasn’t how Sasuke wanted to respond. What he had meant to say to Naruto was that he didn’t have to worry. To tell Naruto that he wasn’t replaceable, that he was his best friend. He had wanted to say it was okay to express those other feelings, and that Naruto didn’t have to be so cheerful all the time. But, Sasuke’s emotions were his weakness, and he lacked the ability to express them as efficiently as Naruto could. As usual, he couldn’t move past his own issues to comfort the one person who was always there for him. Familiar bickering and trading insults was the best he could do.

Returning to their room, they settled back in and pulled out the snacks. Since Sasuke wasn’t fond of eating and typing at the same time, he ate first and let his brain have a longer break.

“So, Karin and that guy? Suigetsu, right? They seem kinda...volatile.” Naruto said, scratching his head uncertainly as he leaned back in his chair.

Sasuke snorts, amused at the tameness of the term, “You have no idea.”

“Karin’s even harsher than Sakura-chan. I hope he can take it.” Naruto sighs, picking up his milkshake and taking a long sip through the straw.

“Don’t worry, he’s a masochist. Suigetsu’s into it.” Sasuke dismissed, pulling apart his melon pan and eating a mouthful.

Naruto choked on his drink, coughing and thumping a fist on his chest, “Jesus, Sasuke! Don’t say shit like that with a straight face!”

“It’s true, though.”

“That doesn’t matter! Don’t you have a sense of time and place? Geez!”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing you lecture me about that,” Sasuke said, an irate glint in his eye, “You, who stood up during a standardised test and announced how it wouldn’t beat you back in elementary school.”

“That was a long time ago!”

“And you still haven’t changed.”
They quarrelled like this the rest of their snack break, although it was all in jest. They rarely fought with each seriously, these days.

*

Two and a half hours later, they were studying well. At present they were working side by side in silence, reading through their respective textbooks and jotting down the notes they needed to. Naruto was slouched over and yawned quietly into his hand before lazily flipping to the next page. His pen hovering over the page, Sasuke’s lips downturned, that was the third one in five minutes, what’s up with him?

Not only now, but throughout the day Sasuke had noticed Naruto’s weariness. And noticing that Naruto was tired only ever happened when Naruto was well and truly scraping the bottom of his energy reserves.

“Why are you so tired today?” Sasuke questioned, his worry coming through as irritation.

Bringing two fingers to his lips, Naruto shot him a sly grin, “Secret.”

“If you fall asleep I’ll hit you in the face with this.” Sasuke warned, pointing to his business studies textbook that was over 1000 pages and thicker than his wrist.

Waving a hand at him, Naruto mumbles back, “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

Naruto didn’t yawn again, so Sasuke didn’t pay him any mind as he went back to his work. He didn’t look up until he was finished answering the questions at the end of the chapter. Satisfied at getting them all correct, Sasuke rolled his shoulders back and took a drink from his water bottle.

“Another half an hour and we can go. What do you think?” Sasuke proposed, in the mood to get home and settle in for a leisurely evening.

When he received no response, Sasuke glanced sideways, “Naruto?”

He was asleep. Sasuke wondered why he even bothered with the threats sometimes, it was like Naruto never learned. With his arms crossed as a makeshift pillow, Naruto slept with his face turned towards Sasuke. As if he had been watching him before drifting off. His blonde fringe had fallen over his eyes, messy as usual. Sasuke noticed the dark rings under his eyes and frowned. Was Naruto not getting enough sleep? Was he worried about something?

Before he could think about it, his hand extended out, the tips of his fingertips a centimetre away from Naruto’s face. Then, Sasuke was frozen. What was he doing? Twitching away, his fingers curled inwards and he slowly brought his hand down.

Fingers sliding over the textbook, he picked it up and hovered it over the back of his blonde head. A few seconds pause, before Sasuke brought it down hard and fast.

Jolting upright violently, Naruto’s arms flailed, sluggish and slow as he cried, “ARGH! Fuck–oww! Damn it! That hurt, asshole!”

“You fell asleep, I woke you up. It wasn’t in the face, so be grateful.” Sasuke explained, dropping the textbook back on the desk.

“Che’, like hell I’m gonna thank you for abusing me.” Running a hand through his hair, Naruto winced and Sasuke assumed a lump must have been forming.
“Isn’t it nothing compared to Sakura?” Sasuke replied, lifting a questioning eyebrow at him.

Stiffening at the mention of his girlfriend, and her very well-known firm approach, Naruto smiled nervously, “Y-You’re right,” then, Naruto slumps and throws his arms up to the ceiling hopelessly, “But, why can’t anyone teach me without hitting me?!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes at the dramatics, “It’s your fault, idiot. Anyway, I said we can go in half an hour. Does that suit you?”

“Yeah, I’m good with that.” Naruto said, and perked himself up with chewing a stick of gum.

About twenty-five minutes later, the two of them had called it a day, packing up and on the bus home. It had been a productive day of study, and Naruto’s complaints had been kept to an unusually low minimum.

When they got back to their house, it was a quarter past six, and Sakura wasn’t home yet. Naruto asked if they could wait for her until they started preparing dinner, and Sasuke agreed to it. However, forty minutes later and Sakura still hadn’t shown up. Traffic was always moving in Tokyo, so it was understandable. Then, close to 7:30 PM, they heard a familiar lock open and voice call out:

“Tadaima! Naruto! Sasuke-kun!”

Sakura was home.

“Okaeri, Sakura-chan!” Naruto greeted her at the genkan, beaming at her before wrapping her in a hug, “How was your day?”

“Busy! And tiring,” she sighed, slipping off her shoes and moving into the warmth of the house, “three people threw up on me today and the last one got in my hair. I’m a mess, really.”

“You still look cute, Sakura-chan.” Naruto said gently, in his typical charming-without-trying way.

She smiled prettily at him, then rolled her shoulders back as she shuffled into the kitchen, “Okay! First, I need a coffee. Then, a nice, warm bath to wash off all this dirt.”

“You should eat first, y’know. Me and Sasuke were waiting for you so we could all eat together.” Naruto swept his arm over to where Sasuke was situated on the couch, throwing him a grateful little grin.

“Oh, that’s sweet of you two,” Sakura smiled, heating up her coffee, “But, I already ate at work. The meals are cheaper for us and I was starving.”

“So, I’m fine. I might just relax in bed.” Sakura said, and as soon as her coffee was done she picked it up and brought it to her lips, sighing in relief. Sasuke could relate to that feeling. Coffee was the single most energising and relieving thing he had unfortunately developed a taste for.

“Are you sure?” Naruto asked, a hint of wistfulness seeping through as if he hoped she would change her mind and say the opposite.

Sakura smiled, squeezing his arm as she passed him by, “Mhm. You guys go ahead and have what you want. I’ll see you later.”

Naruto watched her leave, a woeful glint in his eyes. Sakura had unsurprisingly become a lot busier due to her job. Working as a nurse, her hours varied all the time. She could be rostered on an all-
nighter or be out all day. Sasuke saw her much less now, but at least once a day. He imagined
Naruto was seeing less of her as well, his only advantage over Sasuke being they slept in the same
room together. Naruto never said anything and would never complain about Sakura doing what she
loved. He supported her unfailingly, devoted to a fault.

But, Naruto was more sensitive to being alone than other people were. Mainly due to his
childhood, and how other people had treated him in the past. He just needed time to adjust to this
change, and everything would be alright. Until then, Sasuke would keep him company. As
annoying as Naruto could be, he was always there for the people he cared about when they were
down. If Sasuke couldn’t return the favour for him, then he didn’t deserve to be called Naruto’s
friend.

Moving off the couch and over to where he was, Sasuke cuffs him up the back of the head, “Come
on, idiot. I’m not eating by myself.”

“Ouch! Bastard! You hit there on purpose!” Naruto cries, a hand flying to cover the sensitive spot
on his head.

The pain appeared to pass as Naruto glanced back to the stairwell Sakura had just climbed up. His
hand slowly fell by his side, and blue eyes were downcast.

“Sorry for making you wait, Sasuke. It turns out we could have eaten before.” Naruto apologised,
stuffing his hands in his pockets glumly.

“Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t that hungry.” Sasuke was lying, but he couldn’t deal with that
look on Naruto’s face. Like it was his fault.

Rapping the back of his knuckles against Naruto’s chest, he draws those eyes back up to him,
“You’re helping me cook and we can both wash up at the end.” Sasuke says this decisively, with
no room for argument.

Naruto blinks at him a few times, and his expression shifts into one of relief and gratitude. So
warm. Then, blue eyes sparkle hopefully as Naruto asks, “Hey, hey! Can we get take-out instead?”

Sasuke dismisses the suggestion instantly, “No, we ordered food yesterday. We’re not having it
two days in a row.”

“Che, you’re so damn stingy sometimes.” Crossing his arms, Naruto pouted like a child.

“No need to thank me when you live a long life because of low blood pressure and cholesterol
levels.” Sasuke countered with, earning a squinty-eyed glare in return.

Cooking with Naruto was a gamble. It could either turn out fantastically or break out into a war
zone. It couldn’t be helped, though. They had to eat, and they both had to do their fair share.

“What are we gonna make then?” Naruto inquired as they both wandered into the kitchen.

“Soba noodle salad,” Sasuke says, starting to pull the ingredients they’d need from the fridge and
cupboard, “with teriyaki chicken.”

“Does it have to be a salad?” Naruto whines, grabbing out the saucepan to set on the stove as well
as the cutting boards.

Sasuke sent him a withering glare, dropping the packaged meat soundly on the chopping board in
front of him, “Stop complaining and cut up the chicken.”
Groaning, Naruto removed the chicken and picked up the knife, “I gotta get more meal ideas than ramen. You guys never let me pick what we have, y’know.”

“You should be thankful someone is worrying about your diet. No wonder you can’t outrun me, you live on saturated fats.” Sasuke criticizes, making a start on chopping up the cucumber.

“Hey! Don’t give me that! I’m in great shape!” Ever eager to brag, Naruto threw his arms out either side of him in a display that clearly said, ‘Look at me, I work out every day!’

Sasuke levelled him with a dull-eyed stare because he did the exact same thing. And, he maintained a healthy, well-balanced diet. What made it even more vexing was the fact that Naruto had very high stamina, even when he ate crap food. Sasuke had given up on determining where the source of all that energy came from a long while ago.

About half an hour later, they were finished and had the food plated up ready to eat. Luckily, their cooking hadn’t turned into a war zone today. Any time food wasn’t getting thrown, burnt or all over the floor and kitchen was a success in their case. Seated at the table, they expressed thanks for their food before digging in.

“Oh, it’s good! Even with all the vegetables!” Naruto was wide-eyed as he ate more, his cheeks full like a chipmunk’s as he chewed it up.

Sasuke gives him a look, “Imagine that.”

Rolling his eyes, Naruto tried looking annoyed but ultimately failed when he let out a small chuckle, “We had a pretty good day together, eh?” he grins at Sasuke over the top of his bowl, and Sasuke is frustratingly weak to such a mundane action coming from Naruto.

He inclines his head, agreeable, “It wasn’t bad.”

“Right! We should do stuff like that more often!” Naruto suggests cheerfully, twirling the chopsticks through his food, “Soon we’ll be smart enough we won’t need to study anymore. We might even miss it one day, y’know.”

“As if you’ll miss it,” Sasuke sneers, not buying any of it for a second, “Don’t lie, idiot. You’re not the diligent type.”

He was, but Sasuke wouldn’t be telling him any time soon. It only pushed Naruto to work harder, proving Sasuke wrong.

“But, I had fun studying today! Y’know, the two of us working together. Just like old times, huh?” With a chuckle, Naruto smiles at nothing in particular—reminiscing to their school days, most likely.

Sasuke paused, his chopsticks hovering over the bowl, “Did you really say studying was fun?”

“Heh, yeah. I’m kinda surprised, too,” Naruto laughed, shaking his head at himself. Then, those bright eyes were on Sasuke. A magnificent smile took over his mouth, as he declares so sunnily, “Guess you just bring out the best in me!”

Sasuke’s eyes widened, and it took great effort on his part not to immediately break his gaze with Naruto. His throat was so dry, and his bangs thankfully hid his pink ears. Thank god it hadn’t travelled to his face, Sasuke wouldn’t survive the utter humiliation. He hadn’t blushed openly in front of Naruto since he was 12, and he wasn’t about to start again anytime soon.
A small smirk settling on his lips, Sasuke takes a sip of water before replying, “Hn. Rather than that, isn’t it my overwhelming intellectual skill that’s spilled over onto you?”

“Bastard! I’m just as smart as you, y’know!” Naruto objects instantaneously, like he always does, launching them into another round of bickering.

The rest of the dinner, and even the washing up afterwards continued in a light-hearted manner—despite Sakura’s absence. It had been some time since he and Naruto had spent a day together like this. Though he had been hesitant at first, Sasuke was glad he agreed. Above all else, Naruto was his closest friend. It was reassuring to know they hadn’t changed, that their bond was still there, familiar and warm. When they smiled together, laughed together, everything felt easier. Perhaps these study sessions wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Couldn’t resist the cliché watching-your-crush-sleep-with-heart-eyes scene *w* Also is anyone else salty about how Kishimoto basically did NOTHING with the fact Karin was an Uzumaki??? Like Naruto?? I think their relationship dynamic could have been so hilarious and heart-warming ^3^ hope you all liked the fluffy chap! Fair warning that next chapter will be a lot less fluffy :( brace yourselves! Thank you for reading and as always take care xx
Beginning's end

Chapter Notes

Oh, my…200 kudos for this fic!?! ://;/; Thank you all so much!!! Aww, it makes me so happy ( ^▽^ ) I’m sending all my love and thankfulness to every single one of you sunshines! I am so so lucky to have your support ♥ and now I present to you…the chapter! Happy reading~

Note: In Japan, the voting age is 18, but 20 is still considered the year for Coming of Age :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke needed to set the record straight, to justify to himself just why he was doing what he was doing right now. I’m not an eavesdropper, he tried to convince himself. He really wasn’t the type of person who got pleasure or enjoyment from listening in on other people’s conversations. It just so happened that now, he was in a precarious situation and he felt it would be wrong to announce his presence suddenly.

As it was, Sasuke was standing mid-way down the staircase–out of their line of vision but he was still able to see them–and coincidentally, Naruto and Sakura were having a rather loud conversation. Sasuke had been coming down from upstairs to get ready before heading into university. However, he’d overheard his two housemates in the middle of an unexpectedly tense discussion.

Not wanting to intrude, Sasuke found himself rooted to the spot. He contemplated going back upstairs, but what if they creaked and they heard him? So, what else could he do but stay hidden and wait for them to finish talking?

Yeah…Sasuke wasn’t convincing himself all that well. Nonetheless, he’d committed to this course of action, so he’d stick with it. As it was, Naruto was pestering Sakura about going on a date, and Sakura didn’t seem to be interested. It was strangely reminiscent of their high school days.

“It’s my day off, the last thing I want to do is go out!” Sakura said, her thin brows angled down in a frustrated glare.

“Can’t we do something together?” Naruto persisted, his voice steady and earnest to draw them away from increased conflict. Short-tempered as he was, between himself and Sakura, Naruto was surprisingly the more level-headed one.

“We’re sitting here together, relaxing. What’s wrong with that?” Sakura asks, shrugging off Naruto’s request.

“Oh, well I was thinking something more exciting, y’know,” Naruto confesses hesitantly, then ventures, “I could treat you to a nice meal, wherever you want. Just you and me.”

“Oh, please,” Sakura rolls her eyes at him, “I know what you really want, and I’ll save you the trouble by telling you now that it’s not happening. I’m not in the mood.”
“Right, because everything depends on you and your moods.” Naruto grumbles, abandoning his attempts to smooth things over.

“Excuse me!?” Sakura’s voice was as sharp as a razor, and Sasuke repressed a sigh.

Naruto and Sakura fought, like every couple did. However, since Sakura’s graduation and subsequent entrance into the work force, their fights had increased. They were only over small, insignificant things that were usually resolved and forgotten about the next day. But this one seemed like one of their more serious disagreements.

Sakura sighs, long-winded and irritated, “I don’t have as much time on my hands as you do, Naruto.”

“You know I don’t just sit on my ass doing nothing all day. I’m out every day, too! You know what it’s like, or did you forget you were a student not so long ago too?” Naruto counters with, fuming.

“I know that, I know how hard you work,” Sakura affirmed, and Sasuke could sense the building frustration brewing between them, “but I work back-to-back shifts and my schedule is always changing. It’s not constant like yours, and I get tired a lot easier these days. So, try and be a little considerate!”

“I am!” Naruto says, exasperated, “All I said was that we should go on a date! Sorry if I’m disappointed you shot it down in flames ten seconds flat.”

“I didn’t say no! I just said not today.” Sakura insisted, adamant.

“It’s been two weeks since we’ve done anything, did you know that?” Naruto questions lowly, and it creates a noticeable break in the conversation. Sakura looks at him properly, some trace amounts of guilt found in her face.

“I miss you, Sakura-chan,” Naruto murmured softly, sweet enough to melt any woman’s heart, “I miss being with you, y’know.”

“I know, Naruto,” she sighed, placing a hand on his cheek, “just–let me have some space. We’ll do something later, okay? I promise.”

Remembering what he had initially come down for, Sasuke stopped eavesdropping and walked into the room. The two of them had finished talking by the time he was out there, but they were sitting in silence–unusual for Naruto and Sakura. They were both such vibrant people that when things went quiet, one could tell something was wrong.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto smiled at him, looking as cheerful as he ever did. The smile didn’t reach his eyes, though. That was Sasuke’s only tell since Naruto used his smile as a shield much too often, “going somewhere?”

“I’m heading to the gym now,” Sasuke said, filling up his water bottle at the sink, “are you still coming or not?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Naruto giving Sakura a look. Sakura didn’t seem to notice, lounged back in a pillow on the couch with her face buried in a book.

“Yeah, I’m in,” Naruto sighed, heaving himself off the couch with a deep sigh, “just let me get changed and I’ll grab my stuff.”
When Naruto left the room, it was silent again. Not uncomfortable, but uncommon. Sakura liked to chat, but today she was quiet and reading, keeping to herself. *Her stress levels must be exceptional,* Sasuke thought to himself. It was only when Sakura felt overstressed that she slowed down, needing time to herself to recharge. Sasuke didn’t have a problem with that, but Naruto was a different story. He got his energy from being around people, and when left alone he’d start feeling down and somewhat disconnected.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Naruto came plodding into the room five minutes later, dressed in his gym gear and making a beeline towards the couch. “I’ll see you later, Sakura-chan.” Naruto bid her goodbye, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

She reached out and squeezed his hand, “Have a good time.”

Sasuke stood still as Naruto walked past him, his gaze lingering on Sakura for a few seconds. Then, he swiftly turned and followed Naruto just as he opened the door. The two of them headed down to the train station, and it was as if Sasuke was going by himself, what with how silent Naruto was. Taking subtle glances at him during the train ride, Sasuke noticed the clouded look in blue eyes. A sign of pensiveness, which meant Naruto was getting caught up in his head about something. Whatever it was, perhaps their intense workout routine would help Naruto work off some steam and sort himself out.

* 

Reaching the 10-kilometre mark, Sasuke sat up straight and let his legs spin madly as they slowly lost momentum. He was on the exercise bike, with sweat dripping down his chin and panting loudly at the exertion. Glancing to his right, he saw Naruto still had a kilometre to go, and felt an ugly scowl come over his face. Whatever had Naruto so preoccupied was heavy enough that not even exercise could clear his head.

Usually, he bested Sasuke in about half of whatever exercises they had in their schedule for a session. But today, Sasuke was beating him out in everything. Even the weight lifting, which was something he rarely got more reps in than Naruto. It only fuelled Sasuke’s energy more, his irritation and frustration making him go harder and faster. Coincidentally, Naruto seemed to be losing ground the more they went on. The fact that Naruto was obviously bothered but not saying anything was bad enough, but Sasuke felt like he was competing with himself. If Naruto wasn’t even trying to beat him, then Sasuke didn’t see why he’d come in the first place.

“This is pathetic,” Sasuke glared, pissed off at how much more time Naruto needed when Sasuke knew he could go faster, “are you really trying? Or are you doing it on purpose?”

“Shut up,” Naruto glowers at him, then drops his head and pants some more, trying to catch his breath, “it’s just one of my off days, alright?”

“What did you come if you didn’t feel like it?” Sasuke shot back, still annoyed.

“Endorphins will kick in later,” Naruto shrugged, grabbing his towel and wiping the sweat from his face, “even though I didn’t meet my usual standard, any exercise is good exercise.”

It was more than just an ‘off day’. Naruto had been a lot less energetic, as of late. Ever since their first study session a month ago, Sasuke noticed a decline in Naruto’s usual liveliness. It could have been his hectic lifestyle finally getting to him, but Naruto had always managed it before. Did that mean he was he upping the amount? Had he squeezed even more into an already tight schedule? And what was it that he couldn’t he tell Sasuke about it? Sasuke frowned disapprovingly, not liking the thought that Naruto was hiding something from him.
“I’m done,” Sasuke states, standing up from the bike and gathering his towel and drink bottle together, “if that’s the best you can do, I’m not interested. I’ll save us both the trouble and wasted effort.”

“Wow, you’re so considerate,” Naruto comments, sarcasm dripping in his voice as he also gets off the bike, “thanks, Sasuke. What are friends for, right?”

Sasuke frowned to himself. That reaction right there was another sign. Usually when Sasuke said things like that, Naruto rose to the challenge and fought to prove him wrong. When he didn’t, then something was seriously troubling him.

“I’ve got somewhere to be, anyway.” Naruto concedes, and they both walk over to the storage lockers.

“Where are you going?” Sasuke was pretty sure Naruto had said his class didn’t start for an hour.

“I’m gonna go meet up with a few friends before class,” Naruto answered, opening up his locker and pulling out his gym bag, “they wanna go over some stuff and asked me to join them. I’d be an idiot to refuse that kind of offer.”

“You already are an idiot. That doesn’t change, no matter what choices you make.” Sasuke asserts, refilling his bottle at the nearby water fountain.

Naruto rolls his eyes, depositing his towel and bottle in the bag, “Yeah, yeah. In your eyes, I’m always gonna be an idiot. Got it,” he grabs his clean clothes and zips up his bag, “I’m also gonna be late for dinner, so you and Sakura-chan can go ahead and eat. I’m not sure when I’ll get back.”

“Doesn’t your class only last two hours?” Sasuke questioned, suspicious, “what else are you doing?”

Grinning, Naruto shook his head, “Oh, y’know. Idiot stuff.”

“Fine, whatever.” Sasuke muttered, trying to act unbothered.

Naruto waved to him over his shoulder, sauntering off to the shower rooms, “See ya, Sasuke.”

Sasuke’s nod is delayed when he forces out, “Later.”

Then, Naruto is gone and Sasuke turns around, unlocking his locker. Why was Naruto being so secretive? He wasn’t very good at making or keeping secrets, his honest nature winning out every time. So, whatever this was that was going on was something important if Naruto was actively taking measures to keep it undercover. Trying to ignore the unease he felt about it all, Sasuke decided he’d shower at home and gathers up his things.

*

Sasuke was on his own today. Sakura was busy working, and Naruto had a workplace learning placement day, which meant he’d be out all daylight hours and for most of the evening ones. The future life of a paramedic, Sasuke mused dully. He looked at his desk calendar, staring at today’s date longer than he usually would.

June 9th.

Today, it was Itachi’s birthday. Wherever he was, he had just turned 28 years old. It was now ten years that marked his abrupt departure from Sasuke’s life. Itachi hadn’t even been an adult, only 18
years old, when he left. A decade had already passed since Sasuke last saw his brother.

His father let the day pass by unsaid, as if he’d forgotten about it. Sasuke knew he hadn’t. It had been the way his dad had always coped with it, treating Itachi’s departure almost like a death. When he accidentally (or purposefully) brought Itachi up in conversation, his father closed off and didn’t speak again until the topic had changed.

When he was younger, Sasuke had hated that. Like his dad wanted to pretend Itachi didn’t exist anymore. But now he was older, and he’d come to understand that Itachi’s loss was a load that always weighed his father down—even if he didn’t always show it. Most likely, he blamed himself for not being able to stop Itachi from leaving. Sasuke didn’t blame him, but he wasn’t a parent either, and he couldn’t understand how it would feel to have your child disappear without a trace for years.

It was the not knowing that hurt the most. Itachi could be overseas in another country, or even dead for all they knew. He did want for Itachi to come back, but Sasuke was starting to think he never would. The older he got, the more resigned he grew. His hope wasn’t gone, but it wasn’t as eager as it had once been, either.

Grabbing his wallet and house keys, Sasuke left the house and headed down to the train station. Half an hour later, he arrived at Nippori station. Near the East exit, he sought out the shop, Habutae Dango. He went straight past the newer, more modern second shop, walking the extra five minutes to get to the older one. He used to visit this same shop with Itachi sometimes, in the spare moments he had to spend with Sasuke. It served dango, both yakidango and an-dango. What made it unique was the small garden and koi pond it had, where people could sit together and eat their dango outside if they wished. Sasuke wasn’t even all that fond of the dessert, but it had been (still was?) Itachi’s favourite food. So, Sasuke relented and only ever ate it on this day.

After ordering one serving of both types of the dessert, as well as some green tea, Sasuke chose to eat it outside as the weather was fine enough for it. He sat near the pond, watching the koi fish swim around. Before eating, he said his thanks for the food, his hands pressed together, and his eyes closed. When he opened them, he didn’t start eating right away. Instead, he looked up to the sky, watching the clouds.

“Itachi,” he said, searching out a name that would never return his call, “happy birthday.”

I miss you, Sasuke thought, I hope you’re doing well. Memories of his childhood flashed across his mind, when Itachi was still around. Playing in the garden of their house on sunny afternoons, their mother’s nagging that Itachi had homework—but the way she’d tilt her head, smile and give them five more minutes. In kindergarten when they’d been asked to draw the person they admired the most, Sasuke had shyly shown his brother and Itachi smiled, pinning the poorly drawn picture of himself up in his room. The night before Itachi left, when he’d poked Sasuke’s forehead like so many times before. Except back then, Sasuke would’ve never believed that would be the last time.

Sighing softly, Sasuke looked down at his plate and picked up the dango. A memory surfaced of Itachi and his stricken face, debating over which one to eat first, surprisingly serious over such a menial thing. It almost made Sasuke smile, as he bit into the sweet food. It was a wonder he could even remember his brother’s face. He still had pictures of Itachi kept away, but Sasuke didn’t look at them. It hurt too much to see his face and know he wasn’t here anymore. Yet, Sasuke couldn’t bear to dispose of them either.

The chime of his phone pulled Sasuke out of his memories. He blinked rapidly, coming back to the present. Glancing down at his screen, his posture straightened when he saw Naruto’s name. Curious, he put down his food and unlocked the phone, opening the message.
Naruto: I just now checked the date and I’m sorry for not being there ;_; if you need to talk, just hit me up and I’ll pretend it’s an emergency call ( ^_^) b

Staring down at the screen, Sasuke was honestly surprised. He hadn’t been expecting anything from Naruto today. With so much on his plate already (and a secret he wouldn’t budge on divulging to Sasuke), Naruto shouldn’t have enough energy to run around checking up on his friends. Despite popular opinion, Naruto did have his limits. Yet, Sasuke couldn’t deny the relief that flickered through him. When Naruto showed concern for him, he couldn’t help it. Sasuke frowned, conflicted, as he breathed out a sigh through his nose. Then, he tapped his fingers across the screen to reply.

Sasuke: Get off your phone, idiot. I don’t want to talk to you.

Being blunt was Sasuke’s only option, and his preferred one. Even if he did want to talk with Naruto, now was not the time. While he might be free, he knew Naruto was doing his placement work and if he was caught slacking and got into trouble Sasuke would not be happy–especially if he was part of the reason for it.

Unsurprisingly, Naruto couldn’t take the hint.

Naruto: (( ;”Д” ;) so mean, S’uke! I saw a cat that looked just like you and I was gonna send you the pics, but now I’m not cuz your mean T Ϲ T

His fingers hovered over the screen, and Sasuke just couldn’t help himself as he sent another text.

Sasuke: Usuratonkachi ( _ )

Naruto: OMG! You used kaomoji! ☆ Aww, it looks just like you! (*肺炎ヴ)v

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke should have expected Naruto would find amusement in that. Not being overly fussed with using kaomoji in his texts, Sasuke left it up to the person to figure out the tone of his words. If people couldn’t understand a message without a silly electronic face accompanying it, that wasn’t his problem. On the scarce occasion, he’d send a text with kaomoji to Naruto. Just because Sasuke would get so done with him, and he needed Naruto to visualise the face Sasuke was giving him–like at this moment.

Sasuke: Stop comparing me to everything you see.

Naruto: But it does!! And the cat does too!!! I’m not kidding, y’know!

Naruto then proceeded to send through three separate pictures of the same cat, and since he was alone Sasuke let his lips curve slightly. It was a black cat, with a stripe of white of fur on its nose. Sasuke had no idea how it resembled him, but he did enjoy the pictures. Naruto knew his weakness for animals and exploited it whenever given the chance.

Sasuke had accidentally revealed the significance of this date to him, years ago when they were still in high school. From what he could remember, they’d be in a heated argument over something, and Sasuke had snapped and let it slip in his fury. He’d never mentioned it again after that, but Naruto never forgot about it. Give him historical dates to memorise and Naruto would be hopeless. But, when it came to dates of personal significance to himself and those around him, Naruto’s memory was like a steel trap.

Naruto knew all about Itachi and what had happened back then. Since finding out about him, Naruto didn’t force Sasuke to deal with Itachi’s loss in any specific way, but instead made himself into a non-judgemental person Sasuke could confide in if he ever felt the need to. It was extremely
rare that Sasuke did so, and he thinks the last time he even mentioned Itachi to Naruto was two, maybe three years ago. He didn’t talk about his brother, but that didn’t mean he forgot about Itachi.

Sasuke chose not to reply to the pictures, knowing it would only encourage Naruto to stray from his work and strike up a longer conversation. But, Sasuke felt some of the sullenness lift from around him. Even the *dango* tasted a bit better, and the green tea was particularly pleasing. A warm, spring breeze blew over him, and brought with it the aroma of blossoming flowers. It was Itachi’s birthday, that was true. But it was also another day of Sasuke’s life, and he’d learnt that new days would keep on coming, no matter what.

* 

“I can’t believe you lost my scarf!” Sakura hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Naruto protests immediately, “It was an accident!”

This time, Sasuke wasn’t eavesdropping on them. He had been sitting on the couch, enjoying the quiet and watching a movie on Netflix when Sakura stomped into the kitchen with Naruto right on her heels. *Are they having another fight?* Sasuke wondered, keeping his eyes on the screen but only listening to the movie with one ear now.

“Ino gave me that scarf as a gift when she came back from visiting Paris,” slamming the chopping board down the bench, Sakura pulled out all the utensils noisily, “it was really special to me— and now it’s gone!”

“I’m gonna find it for you, I promise,” Naruto followed her into the kitchen, his forearms resting on the counter as he watched her like a sad puppy, “I’ll check out their lost and found, someone must have found it.”

Sakura sent an icy glare his way, turning around to get the ingredients from the fridge, “If I found a nice scarf like that, I wouldn’t have any intention of handing it in.”

“Sakura-chan, I’m really sorry.” Naruto sounds it too, looking miserable with himself.

Sasuke didn’t think the blonde had ever given an insincere apology in his life. That was something Sasuke secretly admired and sometimes envied about Naruto: he knew when he was wrong and was able to admit to it without his pride or ego getting in the way.

“I know you are,” Sakura nods, not looking at him while she rinses the vegetables under the tap, “but I’m allowed to be upset. I don’t even know what I should say to Ino. It cost her a lot of money...”

Silence entered the conversation, settling uneasily between them. Sakura continued with her preparations for their dinner, and Sasuke wouldn’t dream of offering to help. She looked like she needed space, so he’d just do the washing up. Naruto hovered on the spot, looking earnest to help but uncertain about what he should do.

“I’m busy right now,” Sakura was chopping the carrots now, focused on slicing them evenly, “go and do something else until dinner’s ready.”

“O-Okay,” pushing himself off from the counter, Naruto pulled his phone out from his jeans pocket, “I’m gonna call the bus line now and see if anyone’s found it yet.”

Sasuke watched him leave, taking in his slumped shoulders and the way he tiredly ruffled a hand up the back of his head. Naruto had been careless, but he was clearly upset at what he had done. He
wasn’t like a lot of people, who only worried about keeping their partner happy to maintain the peace. When it came to things like this, Naruto genuinely cared about fixing his mistake and making things right.

“What’s wrong, Sasuke-kun?”

Sasuke refocused his gaze, glancing over to her. He didn’t like getting himself involved in their fights and wasn’t one to take sides. However, she’d caught him out and Sasuke decided to try diffusing the situation.

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“Maybe, but he stilled acted thoughtlessly,” Sakura says, setting the pan on the stove and spooning in some cooking oil, “I’m not finished being angry, so I can’t forgive him yet.”

Sasuke nodded and didn’t say anything more. He wouldn’t dare think of saying she was overreacting. Something trivial like losing a scarf wouldn’t matter to him. There were plenty of them around, after all. But, he supposed to Sakura, she had attached meaning and sentimentality to the piece of clothing. Ino was Sakura’s closest female friend, the person she could share things with that Naruto and Sasuke just didn’t get because of the simple fact that they were men. The scarf was a special gift from one of her best friends, and her boyfriend had gone and lost it. Conflicting feelings were bound to crop up on all sides.

Even so, Sasuke hoped this fight wouldn’t last too long. All this fighting was having a negative impact on them, himself included. Twenty minutes later, Sasuke had finished his movie and not a few minutes later, Sakura pulled off her apron and nodded.

“Alright, it’s all done,” Sakura announced, turning off the stove, “Sasuke-kun, can you please tell Naruto for me while I serve it up?”

Sasuke nodded and headed upstairs where their bedrooms were. The door was open, so Sasuke raps his knuckles against it and says, “Dinner’s ready.”

Naruto, who had been staring down at his phone in thought, jolted and looked up quickly, “Oh, okay.”

“What have you found out?” Sasuke asks, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed.

“Well I called the bus line and they said they haven’t received any scarves matching its description,” Naruto mumbles, looking down at his phone he clutched in both hands, “I’m such an idiot.”

“This isn’t news,” Sasuke said, ignoring Naruto’s glare as he took a seat next to him on the bed, “but I’m glad we’re on the same page, now.”

“I shouldn’t have taken it off,” Naruto was shaking his head, frowning at himself, “I shouldn’t have even taken it to begin with this morning. Just ‘cause I was too lazy to find mine.”

“You didn’t do it on purpose,” Sasuke said, trying to console him, “Sakura knows that. But neither you nor she can help her initial reaction. She’s angry now, but she’ll calm down.”

“Wouldn’t blame her if she stays mad,” murmurs Naruto, fiddling with the charms attached to his phone, “I really messed up.”

“Do you remember when Sakura lost the necklace you gave her?” Sasuke asks, recalling it himself.
It had been a year ago, on Sakura’s birthday. Naruto had bought her a simple but lovely necklace, a sterling silver heart charm attached to a matching chain.

“The silver heart one, right?” Naruto clarifies, glancing to Sasuke unsurely.

Giving a single nod, Sasuke continues, “You were mad because you thought she didn’t really like it and treated it too carelessly. On top of that, she had no idea how many hours you worked to afford it.”

Naruto had taken up a part-time job with his godfather, Jiraya. The man was an author and wrote novels of a sexual nature. When Naruto nicknamed him the ‘old pervert’, he did so with good reason. Sasuke wasn’t all too fond of him, and he’d gotten the feeling from Jiraya that this was mutual. When Naruto needed money, Jiraya would make him do any number of tasks – they could be completely random or related to his writing. Nevertheless, Naruto got paid for it. He’d worked himself so hard to afford that necklace for Sakura.

Noting Naruto sat up straighter in interest, Sasuke went on, “She spent the rest of the day retracing her steps, looking for it. She did all that, but still couldn’t find it.”

When she couldn’t find the necklace anywhere, she came to Naruto crying and guilt-ridden, desperately apologising to him for being so useless. And Naruto had just hugged her tightly and apologised for yelling at her on her birthday.

“You forgave her in the end, and everything was okay,” Sasuke looked at him, imploring, “so, if you can’t find it, it’s not the end of the world.”

Blue eyes blinked back at him, and he could see it was all making sense to Naruto now. He would get so caught up in his feelings sometimes, that Naruto forgot to think logically about things. It was the way Naruto just was, his emotions always coming first for him.

“Thanks, Sasuke,” Naruto then smiled at him, and it reached all the way to his eyes, “I dunno how I’d live without you, y’know.”

“All I did was speak common sense,” Sasuke shrugged, breaking eye contact to get away from that smile, “that’s not supposed to be a special skill.”

Naruto sighs lowly, humming in agreement, “I just hate when she gets mad at me, so I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Sasuke shakes his head, “As to be expected of you, moron.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know, I’m a hopeless moron,” leaning against him, Naruto and his smile moved closer to Sasuke’s face, “but that’s why I’ve got you, ba--ka.”

Sasuke stared at him, unable to respond. Why did Naruto have to say such things so easily? Like it was nothing for him to sit there and say that he didn’t want to imagine life without Sasuke. When Sasuke couldn’t even say ‘thank you’ to Naruto for any of the countless things he does for him. Even Itachi’s birthday a few days. Sasuke hadn’t said a word more to him about it. Did Naruto know how much it meant to him that he remembered? Did he know that a few simple texts were the only reason Sasuke had to smile on that day?

Knowing Naruto for as long as he had, and as well as he did, Sasuke didn’t think so. Naruto was the physical embodiment of ‘oblivious’, and Sasuke had hidden behind that obliviousness before. Even depended on it to some extent when it came to his feelings for his best friend.
“Come on, let’s eat!” Rising to his feet, Naruto ruffled Sasuke’s hair to which the latter jabbed Naruto in the ribs deftly. They swatted at each other like children all the way down the stairs, and Sasuke felt quietly pleased with himself for cheering Naruto up. Even if it was only a little bit.

*

The sky was clear this morning, sunlight shining through Sasuke’s bedroom window brightly. Leaning back in his desk chair, Sasuke felt the stiffness in his joints. He grimaced and knew he should probably get up and move around soon. But, he was in the middle of typing up his essay and on a particularly good train of thought.

Three knocks sounded on his door, startling Sasuke out of his thoughts.

“Yeah,” he answered, making sure to save his work. Whether it was Naruto or Sakura, he was sure either one would be up for a chat, so he prepared to set his work aside for the moment.

“Hey, Sasuke,” it’s Naruto, and–he looks nervous, “are you busy?”

Intrigued, Sasuke swivels his chair around, facing him front on, “That depends. What do you want?”

“Uh, well,” Naruto pauses, standing in the doorway awkwardly. Biting his lip, he inhales lowly and continues, “it’s just–I kinda wanted to talk with you about something.”

Eyes sparking at the specific phrasing, Sasuke raises a single brow, “Does this have to do with how secretive you’ve been, lately?”

“Oh, you noticed that, huh?” Naruto laughed, rubbing a hand up the back of his head and mussing up his hair.

Sasuke rolls his eyes, “Obviously. How long have I known you, idiot? You think you can hide anything from me?”

“But you didn’t figure it out on your own, did ya?” Naruto counters, an anxious smile taking over his face.

“Naruto,” Sasuke said, and that was all he had to say. It was rare that Sasuke called him by his actual name, and something Sasuke only did when the situation between them was charged.

“Alright, I’m sorry,” Naruto sighs, moving into his room and sitting down on Sasuke’s bed, “but I had to keep it to myself for a bit.”

“Tell me.” Sasuke demanded, because Naruto had the tendency to beat around the bush if he wasn’t interrupted. Luckily, Sasuke had no such care for preserving social manners in conversation and cut him off without a second thought.

Resting his elbows on his knees, Naruto leans forwards and hums, “Thing is, I’ve been picking up a few shifts with the old pervert lately.”

So, that was it. Naruto was working casual shifts under Jiraya again. On top of his university course, his study sessions with Sasuke, and all his social commitments. That explained Naruto’s increased tiredness. He’d been working extra hours in secret. Looking at him properly now, Sasuke could tell he was exhausted.

“How many is a few?” he asks, eyes narrowed and voice sharp.
Blinking in confusion at the question, Naruto shakes his head, “Oh…well—that’s not—”

“Your schedule is full enough as it is. What are you doing, adding even more into it?” Sasuke interrupted again. Anger was gradually filling him, and Sasuke knew it was somewhat unreasonable on his part. He couldn’t tell Naruto how to live his life, but Sasuke just couldn’t stand seeing him push himself over his limits so thoughtlessly. With so little care for himself.

Surprisingly, Naruto nods, agreeing with him, “I know, it was a really dumb move—”

Sasuke grit his teeth, unsatisfied, “It was idiotic. You’re not a superhero, so stop acting like you can do everything.”

Sighing, Naruto sits up, holding his hands in the air in surrender, “Look, I know I wasn’t handling it that great, but it’s over now. I managed to save up enough, and,” When Naruto paused, Sasuke lifted his chin expectantly, waiting. His earlier nervousness seemed to have vanished, and now Naruto looked excited, “I’ve got something to show you.” Beaming ear to ear, Naruto sounded sprightlier than he had all week. What has he done now?

Standing up from the bed, Naruto reaches inside his pocket and pulls out a small box. Sasuke’s eyebrows dipped, restlessness rippling through him. He didn’t let his mind get ahead of himself, waiting patiently to see what this was all about. It could be any number of things, he reasoned. Then, Naruto stepped closer to him and slowly opened it up, revealing what was within.

Nestled in the silk lining of the small box, two matching golden rings were perched and shining up at him. Engagement rings, his mind supplied numbly. Naruto had bought a pair of engagement rings. Sasuke felt his body freeze up, cold dread pooling in his stomach and weighing him down. Like stones were tied to his feet, and he was sinking down.

Leaning forward closer, Naruto is buzzing with anticipation as he asks, “What do you think?”

“Are you…” Sasuke trailed off, his voice failing to finish the rest of the sentence. Even his voice was freezing up, his vocal chords ready to snap. It was like his body was shutting down on him, but he was still conscious and breathing.

Naruto understood his unfinished sentence, smiling and nodding, “Yeah, I’m gonna ask Sakura-chan to marry me.”

Chapter End Notes

*inhales* NARUTO WHAT ARE YOU DOING?? WHERE THE HELL DID THAT COME FROM??! JUST-NO! *flails*

…anyway, I hope I didn’t shock you guys too badly with that last scene ;-; sorry to leave you hanging like this gaaah all I can offer you is virtual hugs and cookies, but they’re here if you want them! •ระยะๆ .HTTP

Next chap: features even MORE angst. Stay tuned ■ ); Look after yourselves and I can’t wait to see you all next update! – Hime ♥ xxx
It can't get worse

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Gosh, it's been so long...I didn't mean to go away this long, I'm sorry ;-;
university finished for me back in the end of October, and since then I've been
working two jobs over the Christmas break! So tired...o-O but ready to update this
story! I missed my boys ;3;

I admit I've been caught up in Voltron for the past few months and the lead up to the
end of it...and then S8 came out. I think we just all expected more than what we
got...and I'm still not okay about Allura :(" (but anyway, that's another talk for another
fandom!

Hope you all enjoy this update, and finally see Sasuke's reaction to it all! (and what
happens next...dun dun!) Thanks for stopping by and I hope you have a pleasant
reading~

Warning: sexual scene

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt like his ears were stuffed with cotton wool. The rings shone up at him shamelessly, flaunting
their excellence in his face. This couldn’t be real. It wasn’t real, was it? It had to be a dream. But
then, Sasuke didn’t know if he could dream up something like this. Sasuke was silent, and Naruto
didn’t take any notice of it as he went on.

“I know things have been kind of tense between me and Sakura-chan lately,” Naruto explains,
looking down at the rings, “but, this is what couples do. We’ve lasted so long, we always pull
through for each other. This is the next step for us, it’s gotta be. I want us to be together forever.”

Together forever.

Was this a joke? Another prank, perhaps? Was Naruto messing with him?

But the rings...they were right there in front of him.

Blue eyes darted up to meet his, and Naruto asks in a hopeful voice, “So, what do you think?”

And above all else, Sasuke wanted to congratulate him. He wanted to smile at Naruto, wish him to
do his best and tell him that Sasuke would support him with whatever he needed. Sasuke wanted to
act how he had been until now—that is, pushing down his feelings for Naruto’s sake.

But, Sasuke couldn’t do it. Even knowing he should, he couldn’t.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, Sasuke stares Naruto down, “This is laughable.”

He just couldn’t support the idea of Naruto getting married.

Naruto blinked rapidly, confusion marring his features at the response, “Huh?”
“Is this your solution?” Sasuke asks, his eyebrows rising in cruel disbelief, “Propose and make everything better?”

“What?” Naruto’s mouth is half open, as if he wants to say more but has nothing coming to mind.

Sasuke shakes his head, breaking eye contact to glance out his window, “I’ve never heard anything more ridiculous in my life.”

“You wanna say that again, Sasuke?” Naruto dares him to answer, his voice quiet and steady.

“Is this all it takes to get a marriage proposal from you? Just because you’re fighting with Sakura?” Sasuke demands, incredulous at the very idea of it.

Naruto’s face twitches, and he snaps the ring box shut, “I’m not doing it because of that!”

“You think marrying her will change anything? What, you’ll live happily ever after together, never to fight again?” scoffing, Sasuke swiftly stands from his chair, the itch of rising conflict making him unable to remain still, “You’re as empty-headed as ever, I see.”

“What the hell is your problem!?”

“Marriage is a fool’s notion.” Sasuke hisses, unable to tamp down his scorn.

Naruto bares his teeth angrily, “There’s nothing foolish about wanting to spend the rest of your life with someone you love, and who loves you!”

“This is stupid, even for you.”

“No, you know what’s stupid, Sasuke?” Naruto counters, “Whatever the hell you’re doing with Juugo. What kind of relationship is that?”

How dare he, Sasuke thinks, furious. How dare Naruto start throwing out judgement on his relationship with Juugo.

“I told you, but your slow-witted mind can’t seem to comprehend,” Sasuke growls at him, getting agitated, “it’s none of your business. What I do and who I do it with is for me to decide.”

“It’s clearly all physical,” Naruto states, his eyebrows drawn together crossly, “that type of thing can’t last forever. It was a bad idea from the start, so why don’t you just cut it out already?”

Sasuke’s lip curls, his thinly veiled anger becoming more apparent by the second, “You don’t have authority on my relationships with other people, so shut your mouth.”

“You’re a fucking hypocrite! You’re doing the exact same thing with me and Sakura-chan, acting like you know our relationship better than we do!” Naruto’s voice climbs higher, his frustration palpable in the way his body vibrates with it.

“I know what I’m doing,” Sasuke snaps, “the same can’t be said for you.”

“I’m serious. I’m gonna marry Sakura-chan, I mean it!”

“Listen to yourself. You sound like a child,” Sasuke condemns, digging himself deeper into the hole they’d fallen into, “the real reason you’re doing this is because you can’t stand being on your own.”

That is all it took to stop Naruto, the jarred expression on his face sign enough that Sasuke had hit
the target.

“Sakura’s working, you’re not. She has a job now, and new responsibilities. You’re just a student. Every aspect of your life that you complain about is nothing to her.”

Sasuke couldn’t stop. The words were like acid on his tongue, but he spat them out viciously one after another.

“You’re immature enough as it is. Imagine how she must feel, being surrounded by competent and accomplished men all day. Then, she comes home to her boyfriend, a slacker university student. It must be disappointing for her.”

Even as he saw the obvious anguish on Naruto’s face, that only fuelled him to keep going. Sasuke knew how to hit people where it hurt, and Naruto was no exception to this. No, if anything–he knew how to hurt Naruto the most.

“You’re scared she’s getting sick of you and that sooner or later, she’ll break up with you. So now, you’re trying to keep her stuck at your side any way you can. It’s pathetic.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Naruto’s voice roared at him, his eyebrows dipped in anger and his eyes almost slits.

A brief silence passed through the room. Not even the ticking of a clock could be heard, just Sasuke’s ceiling fan spinning above their heads.

Then, Naruto spoke up, a tremor trickling through his voice, “You don’t get to speak for Sakura-chan. You don’t know anything.”

“When all that crap went down in high school,” Naruto says, and Sasuke can’t stop himself from stiffening, “she was always there for me. We got through it together, so don’t you dare say she’s that shallow.”

“People change, or so you always say,” Sasuke says, the bitterness settling in, “and when people change, so do their feelings. Nothing lasts forever, yet you delude yourself into thinking everything will stay the same and everyone will play into your little fantasy.”

“Promises and pretty words don’t fix anything. All they do is give you comfort because you think you’re helping when you’re just prolonging time before the inevitable happens,” Sasuke sneers at him, scornful, “Grow up, Naruto.”

Then, there is a lull in their onslaught of verbal barbs. Everything is quiet, but the electricity in the air sizzles dangerously. If they were still teenagers, at this point one would taunt the other and they’d break into a physical fight. They weren’t teenagers anymore, though. He and Naruto were adults, and adults don’t give in to those immature urges so easily. Still, the bitter tang of their fist fights was nothing compared to this. Somehow, he and Naruto inflicted more damage on each other with mere words than any punch or kick ever could.

“Don’t you fucking tell anyone,” Naruto demands of him, his quaking voice belittling his attempt at intimidating Sasuke. His emotions always overwhelmed him like that, and that was one of the reasons Naruto was opposite to him – because Sasuke could be stoic whenever he chose whilst Naruto failed at it.

“I don’t even know why I told you. Guess I thought you’d be happy for me, but that’s fine,” clutching the ring box tightly in a closed fist, Naruto made to leave. Stopping at the door on his way out, he cast a glare over his shoulder, “so thanks, Sasuke. For telling me what you really think,
like always."

Then Naruto was gone, the door slammed, and Sasuke was alone. A second wave of realisation washed over him now, as he dropped down like a stone on his bed. He hunched over his knees, linking his fingers together if only to make their shaking less noticeable. For how long he sat like that, Sasuke didn’t know. But, soon enough his joints ached, and he hazily decided that he should try and do something productive. Returning to his essay, Sasuke found himself staring at the screen, the cursor blinking at him. Waiting for him to type something, but Sasuke’s head was like the inside of a balloon. No, rather it was like a balloon that had been pierced and deflated. Devoid of any use whatsoever.

*What the hell just happened?*

Sasuke and Naruto kept clear of each other after that, despite being in the same house. Sasuke refused to leave his room, and even stopped drinking his water. The bathroom was in between their rooms, and Sasuke wouldn’t risk it.

However, this avoidance was short-lived when Sakura arrived back at lunch time. Since they’d all be home at the same time today, the three of them were going to make and eat lunch together. But now, Sasuke didn’t even feel like looking at food.

“Sasuke-kun,” a light rap of knuckles on his door accompanied her words, and Sasuke inhaled slowly before going over to open it.

“Are you ready for lunch?” she asked, smiling easily at him, “Naruto said you were studying, so we can wait if you need a little more time.”

Breathing out a muted sigh through his nose, Sasuke replies in his usual, steady voice, “No, I’m coming.”

“Okay, just come down when you’re ready!” Sakura adds placatingly, turning around once Sasuke had nodded, closing his door again to pull himself better together.

Sasuke didn’t want to eat a damn thing, but more than that he didn’t want Sakura to think anything was wrong. Getting her involved would only further complicate things, and that was the last thing Sasuke needed right now. Perhaps, he and Naruto could pretend like nothing had happened. That was, if Naruto could keep his loud mouth shut. Because if Sakura figured out they were fighting, she would want to know why. And Sasuke just wasn’t ready to approach the situation without blowing his damn lid off. Again.

Blue eyes clash with his the second he steps into the kitchen. They stare at each other, steely and silent and fleeting, but the message is clear: *make lunch, and stay out of my way.*

Slamming the saucepan on the bench top harder than he’d meant to, Sasuke kept up an unaffected appearance as he turned on the hot plate. Sakura smiles at him a little unsurely, whilst Naruto’s shoulders tense but he doesn’t say a thing.

“Geez, are you guys bickering again?” Sakura chuckles, but it sounds jerky. Like a car that’s trying to start its engine after weeks of being stationary, “what’s it about this time?”

If it was another one of their meaningless squabbles, Naruto would have jumped to his own defence, slashing Sasuke as a ‘bastard’ or a ‘jerk’ or any other derogatory name under the sun. Then, Sasuke would correct Naruto that it was in fact *his* fault and list off the reasons why.
But, this wasn’t a squabble. It was…it was one big mess. Because of that, both he and Naruto kept
tight-lipped and passive aggressive. Sakura’s eyes widened at their abrasiveness, and she was
probably beginning to realise this was more than it seemed.

The rest of the time spent preparing lunch was split between Sasuke telling Naruto everything he
was doing wrong, and Naruto fighting him at every turn. Even if Sasuke was advising him on the
correct way to cut up ginger, Naruto would stubbornly do it his own way. Granted, Sasuke injected
demeaning sarcasm into every word, making Naruto seem like an idiot for not knowing already.
But still. It was suffocating.

When they all sat down to eat, an uncomfortable silence settled between the three of them. Sasuke
hated it. He wanted to walk out, but his stubbornness and pride wouldn’t allow it. If he was going
to storm out, he’d be damned if he did it before Naruto.

“You overcooked the vegetables,” Sasuke says abruptly, scathingly, screwing his face up at the
discoloured carrot and broccoli he can see wilted on his plate, “it tastes awful.”

Naruto is seething down at his plate as he gives a frustrated reply, “Maybe if you’d have let me
cook the damn vegetables instead of bossing me around every five seconds, I would have done a
better job.”

“Hi- Hey, come on, you two,” Sakura tries to mediate, offering a tense smile, “it’s not that bad, and
we were looking forward to this. So, let’s just have a nice lunch together, neh?”

Sasuke’s eyes slide to the side, the urge to strike too strong to hold within him, “Some people make
a habit of holding onto their grudges. It’s pathetic, really. What’s done is done, it’s in the past. So,
just move on.”

A fake chuckle tumbles from Naruto’s mouth, and he shakes his head before pinning Sasuke with
an intense glare, “Y’know, that’s really funny coming from you. Since, if I remember right, I’m
always the one stepping up and apologising to you first.”

“Those who cling to the past and what they love are childish. You’re still naïve, Naruto.” Sasuke
chides, evading the verbal barb Naruto had thrown his way.

“If you can’t have a little faith in others, you end up all alone. People who look out for themselves
and only worry about themselves deserve everything they get.” Naruto shot back, his fingers
clenching around the chopsticks tightly.

“When you define your worth in others, you’ll never be a person that’s needed. You become a
person that needs everyone, and nobody needs a person like that.”

“Sasuke-kun…!” Sakura cried, shocked at Sasuke’s austerity.

Naruto is already firing back at him, “If people who only worry about themselves don’t care about
what happens to other people, then why should anyone care what happens to them?”

“Stop it! Both of you!” Sakura was now shouting, her strict voice stifling over the top of theirs,
silencing them.

Glancing between the two of them, concern shines in her eyes, “What’s going on?”

As much tension as there was between them, Naruto and Sasuke were steadfast. Even if the fight
partly involved her, she couldn’t know. If anything, Sasuke was a man of his word. Despite his
vehement objection to the idea, he would not tell Sakura anything. It wasn’t his right.
“Sorry, Sakura-chan. You can’t help this time,” Naruto tells her, but his piercing eyes don’t stray from Sasuke, “Not unless you can magically pull out the stick he’s got rammed so far up his ass. Or, maybe find him a cure for being so fucking bitter and repressed.”

“Even better, you could beat some sense into his useless, half-witted brain,” Sasuke snaps back, his insides churned up from how wrong it felt to fight with Naruto. But, he kept going, “I’d say you’re as dumb as a pole, but a pole can hold up a sign that people rely on for directions. You can’t even tell fantasy from reality, so how could anyone ever rely on you?”

Slamming his chopsticks down on the table, Naruto stormed off, his footsteps reverberating on the staircase.

Sakura hastily tried calling for him, tripping over her words, “N-Naruto, come back! I wasn’t finished—!”

He gave her a reply in the form of a slammed door, and when Naruto was this angry there would be no mediation. It was a useless effort.

Sasuke wasn’t hanging around. At the genkan, he shrugged on his coat and prepared to leave.

“Sasuke-kun, wait!” clambering after him, Sakura follows Sasuke to the door. He doesn’t stop to wait for her.

“We-we can talk about this, just tell me what happened. If we can just figure it out together, I’m sure it will be fine.” Sakura says, as if words alone could mend what had been torn between them.

With his back to her, Sasuke doesn’t even cast her a glance as he says coldly, “Naruto’s right. You can’t help, so stay out of it.”

Her hurt expression was the last thing he saw when he banged the door shut.

*

Sasuke arrived at university just after the lunch rush was over, retreating to the upper level of the library and situating himself in the most isolated section he could find. What better way to distract himself than by throwing himself into study? This time, however, Sasuke focused on catching up on some readings he’d been putting off, not having enough focus to write his essay.

He didn’t realise it was encroaching on evening until he stopped for a bathroom break. Students had desk lamp lights switched on, as the natural light from outside was starting to fade. Glancing out the window, Sasuke noticed the last straggling rays of sun were slipping away, and then checked his phone. 7:23 PM. Also, two missed calls and a text message from Sakura. Nothing from Naruto. That was more than fine with Sasuke. If Naruto did try to call or text him, he would just ignore it.

Given what had transpired today, Sasuke knew that he wasn’t going home tonight. Imagining it was bad enough. Sakura crowding him, fussing over him and talking non-stop, trying to convince him to be the ‘bigger person’ and take the first step. Naruto’s passive-aggressive mood that Sasuke could just picture him in—glaring at Sasuke silently and slamming cupboard doors, the fridge door, his bedroom door—making a show of how pissed he was but not saying a word.

He considered going to stay with his father overnight, but Sasuke didn’t like dropping in so unexpectantly. His father was a busy man, and one who appreciated schedules and forethought. Sasuke had a streak of impulsiveness from time to time, however – like now – and got himself into these situations. Karin was not an option either. She’d just interrogate him and spend the night
repeating herself. Suigetsu was off the table as well, by default. There was no way Suigetsu would let him stay without informing Karin, and he’d be no further ahead.

But, there was a person Sasuke knew he could count on.

_Sasuke: Hey, it’s been a while. Mind if I come over?_

_Juugo: You don’t have to ask. I’ll be home from work after 5, I’ll see you then._

_Sasuke: Thanks. Later._

At 5:30 PM Sasuke showed up, thoughts of their fight and Naruto’s face still swirling around in his mind. When Juugo opened the door, he didn’t even give the man time to greet him. He pushed their lips together, his body sliding up against Juugo’s and stepping his way inside. Juugo accepts this willingly, and Sasuke kicks the door behind them closed.

They move without words towards the bedroom, and Sasuke spends the next half hour in bliss. Juugo takes him into his mouth roughly, and it’s good, the force behind it and the way his fingers dig into the soft skin of his thighs is _good_. He pins Sasuke’s lower body down to the bed with his forearms, and as much as Sasuke tries to raise his hips, Juugo is firm and unrelenting. His hands grip vibrant, orange hair, as his pleasure climbs higher and higher, moans tumbling out of his mouth uncontrollably. One of Juugo’s hands leaves his thighs, and he can vaguely make out that he’s jerking off. That somehow turns Sasuke on more, to know that Juugo is getting off on seeing him like this.

He feels desirable, he feels powerful. Sasuke comes with a keening cry, his back arching off the bed. Juugo takes it all, swallowing, and then pulls off, coming with a low-pitched moan onto the sheets. They’d been so desperate, they hadn’t even put on condoms. It was no big deal, they were both clean and healthy, but it did help save a lot of cleaning up. Sasuke didn’t really mind at this moment, his head still swimming with the high of his orgasm. _God, it felt amazing._

“So, what’s going on?” Juugo asks some time later when they’ve both calmed down and settled. He’s lying horizontally on the bed and gazing over at Sasuke curiously.

_Sasuke’s sitting up with his back resting against the headboard, and he stiffens, “What?”_

“I can tell when something’s on your mind.”

“I only had one thing on my mind just now, Juugo.”

Juugo smiles at him indulgently, and goes on, “Not just now, but before that. When you walked in the door, you seemed preoccupied for a moment. I know this is also one of your free days. And I’m happy to see you, but I didn’t think I would be honest.”

Sasuke deadpans, the memories slowly filtering back in, “I have no desire to be at home right now.”

“I see,” Juugo hums, then moves to sit up as well, sitting side by side next to Sasuke, “are you alright?”

Sighing deep and long, Sasuke runs fingers through his hair, pushing it out of the way, “Naruto is an idiot. I get tired of it. That’s all.”

“Is he a difficult person to live with?” Juugo queries, and Sasuke snorts.
“He’s hopeless. Even if he’s an adult, he’s the type of person who just doesn’t grow up. Stupidly optimistic about everything and refuses to be rational. I really can’t stand that.”

So, Sasuke went on to tell Juugo all about their fight (minus the part about Naruto’s engagement plans), and how stupid Naruto was. How stupid he is, constantly. Juugo doesn’t say anything, he just listens. And when Sasuke’s done talking, he’s still quiet for a moment.

Then, he says in a soft voice, “Your feelings run deep for him.”

“What feelings?” Sasuke questions, his defences springing up.

“For Naruto. You care about him very much, don’t you?” Juugo asks, and it’s so innocently asked that Sasuke is momentarily speechless.

Looking down at the sheets, Sasuke tries to brush it off, “I didn’t say anything like that.”

Juugo shakes his head, “You didn’t have to say anything. The way you talk about him is enough for me to know. You don’t talk about anyone, Sasuke.”

Juugo…could see it?

What the hell?

First there had been Karin, and that alone had been bad enough. And, though Sasuke couldn’t confirm it, he had a suspicion that Gaara knew more than he let on. If their last talk had been any indication, Gaara had figured out at least that Sasuke’s feelings were deeper than he’d originally thought. And now, Juugo. Three people. Fuck.

Was he that transparent? When Sasuke was so careful every damn day not to show too much or feel too much. It exhausted him, the effort it took to pretend. The strain in every smirk he pasted on his face, and the ache in his chest every time they touched. A laugh like a song in the distance, and a warm smile that he could never return. Over and over, he was reminded. Sasuke could never completely forget. And he shouldn’t. He should know by now that he and Naruto were friends.

Friends. And that was all they would ever be.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to worry,” Juugo’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts, glancing up to see him smiling reassuringly, “I won’t tell anyone. I don’t really know your friends that well anyway, and the only other people I could tell would be Suigetsu and Karin. I won’t say anything.”

“Just Suigetsu.” Sasuke corrected.

“Of course. I forget how close you and Karin are.” Juugo smiles, and it’s fond, “now I see why she’s always so considerate of you. She really cares about you. In any case, I think it’s accurate that Suigetsu’s out of the loop. He talks big, but he’s kind of a dunce, right?”

Sasuke cracked a smirk at that. Then, it slips away, and Sasuke feels worry bleed into him, “Juugo,” Sasuke starts, stopping to find the words and hastily pulling them together, “this doesn’t—”

“I understand,” Juugo answers for him, knowing what Sasuke is trying to say, “if you are concerned about me, don’t be. I don’t have feelings for you. I know what our relationship is, and I’m comfortable with it. As long as you are okay with it, I see no reason to stop. Only if it hurts you, then I’d be more than fine to stop.”

“No, that won’t happen,” Sasuke wouldn’t ruin this. Juugo was a good person, and Sasuke refused to use him away when he was done. More than that, Juugo was his friend. One that he could always depend on, in times like this. Non-judgemental, and welcoming, “I’m happy with our arrangement.”
It’s silent again for some time, but it’s Juugo who speaks up first, “He is out of your reach, just like Kimimaro is for me. But, Naruto is still with you.”

“If you consider telling him how you feel, then you can be free of that heavy burden you carry. If Naruto knew how much pain you’re in right now, I think he would be very saddened. He seems like the type of friend that would do anything he could to help you. He might even be able to understand you if you let him.”

He had never considered telling Naruto. But that was mainly because Sasuke hadn’t counted on these feelings lingering for so long. Rather than growing out of a silly crush, the opposite had happened. He liked Naruto.

More than he’d ever liked anyone.

“How is it alright if I stay here the night?” Sasuke questions, putting an end to the topic of conversation. He’d had enough of thinking about it for now.

Juugo nods, “Yes, you can stay as long as you wish. I was just about to get something to eat, something delivered,” Juugo says, pulling out his phone and a menu he pushes towards Sasuke, “are you hungry?”

Remembering he hadn’t finished his lunch, Sasuke nods, taking the menu and scanning it for something he liked. He had to remember to eat, some food would probably do him good right now.

* Sakura’s texts came pinging in again after dinner, and he could feel her worry through the words.  
Sakura: Please, just let me know if you’re coming home tonight and that you’re okay. Naruto won’t talk to me and acts tough, but I can tell he’s starting to worry – even if he’s still mad. You don’t have to say where you are, but please give me something, Sasuke-kun.

Sasuke decided to respond, if only to get her to stop with the messages. With a spike of vindictiveness, he punched in the detail of where he was. Because if Sakura told Naruto, and she very likely would, Sasuke wanted to rile him up all over again. Even when they were apart, Sasuke could still rub salt in the wounds. His anger at Naruto had not quelled, not in the slightest. A burning fire beneath his skin, flickering now rather than the flaming inferno it had been a few hours ago.

What the hell is that idiot doing with his life? Sasuke’s body tensed, his face tightening and eyes narrowed. Closing his eyes for half a second, Sasuke pushed it to the back of his mind, focusing on finishing the message and sending it off to Sakura.

Sasuke: I’m not coming back. Staying over at Juugo’s. See you tomorrow.

He would be going back home tomorrow, not keen on imposing any further on Juugo. Even if he was kind enough not to mind, Sasuke minded. Besides, he needed to confront this situation head on and straighten things out. Sasuke needed to talk to Naruto, despite his furiousness at the other man. Letting this lie was not an option.

Sakura: Thank you. Please take care of yourself until then and call me if you feel like talking about what happened. Remember, I’m here for you too. Goodnight.

Just earlier he’d brushed Sakura off so coldly, and here she was trying to comfort him and be there for him.
Why are you so petty? A question he’d ask himself over and over. And still, he never changed.

That night, Sasuke dreamed of Naruto and Sakura getting married. It was a western-style wedding, as Sakura was dressed in a beautiful, lacy white dress. Naruto as well. He was dressed in a black suit, the colour an unusual contrast with his typical brightness but not an unpleasant one. Naruto was unique in that sense. He was able to breathe life into the most mundane of things.

A simple, but beautiful ceremony. It suited them well – not overly traditional, but with a subtle formality to it that spoke of the underlying importance of this day.

It was the type of dream where no words were said, but they didn’t need to be. The smiles on their faces, their hands entwined, and the brightness of it all said more than enough.

Sasuke woke up quietly, not jolting to wakefulness or gasping for breath. His pillow was wet, and under his eyes, his cheeks felt sticky. Flipping his pillow over, Sasuke sighed at the cool touch of it against his wet face. Pulling the covers up closer, he burrowed inside and closed his eyes. He hopes he won’t dream this time.

Chapter End Notes

...so like, gotta have that Naruto and Sasuke conflict, right? Haha...right? *nervous smile* I know things look bad now, and they are, but it's okay *hugs you all*

I probably won't update this story again until the new year, so this is the last chapter of Growing Pains for 2018! Thank you all for reading and supporting my story, the best part of writing is sharing it with wonderful, precious readers like you :) hope you all have a happy Christmas holiday time, and best of wishes for the new year!

--Hime xx
Out of reach

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! It's been a while, hasn't it? ^^ well, I have no excuses as usual, but I'm happy to be in a position where I can get back to writing now! I never like to rush myself with my fics (as some of you probably know really well at this point TwT) and make sure what I post is up to as good a standard as I can give. I'm sorry it's not as long as usual, but I hope it's still okay ;3; please enjoy this update, and happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up the next morning, Sasuke felt normal. The first few seconds after waking up was something he had learned to appreciate, and wished would last for much longer than it did. All too soon the realisation and memory of what had happened came back to him, and he was both amazed and annoyed the human mind could comprehend so much in the first few minutes of waking from sleep.

He checks his phone as a distraction, which proves futile as he notices a notification from Naruto. It was sent about 20 minutes ago, and Sasuke clicks on it before he can put his phone back down and pretend to ignore it.

_Naruto: Meet me at uni around 2 near the dining hall_

Sasuke would admit, he was surprised. He didn’t expect Naruto would want to talk to him again so soon. All the bad things Naruto had said to him yesterday paled in comparison to the merciless verbal beatdown Sasuke had given him. Then again, Naruto had always been the first to throw up his arms asking for a truce. Sasuke hated that, hated how his worthless pride made their friendship seem so one-sided sometimes. It wasn’t. Naruto knew that, but Naruto also knew how Sasuke rarely regretted anything he said, angry or otherwise.

Even now, Sasuke doesn’t reply to the message. Because he knows Naruto will check it to see if he’s read it, and that will pass as an answer all on its own. So, Sasuke goes about his day. He thanks Juugo yet again for his hospitality, and is met with a smile and a nod.

He drops into university at around 11 AM, and since he has nothing better to do he borrows one of his prescribed texts from the library and starts reading through the chapters assigned for next week. Nothing wrong with getting ahead, right?

When 2 o’clock finally rolls around, Sasuke exits the library and makes a beeline for the dining hall. He is about to go inside when he spots Naruto standing off to the side, leaning against the personal lockers and where the vending machines were located. Swerving away from the dining hall entrance, he makes his way over to him. The eye contact they share is the only greeting they give each other. They don’t bother with formalities, because they’ve both never been good at being anything close to ‘formal’ around each other.

“You are really set on doing this?” Sasuke is the first to speak, because he had to ask. He had to know. 

Above all else, above the mocking and the degradation and the condemnation he had thrown
Naruto the day before, he needed to make sure Naruto knew what he was doing. Because with something like this, there was no way of going back without someone getting hurt.

Naruto’s eyes are locked on his as he answers, “I am.”

Sasuke pushes past his anger and asks his next question, “And you haven’t told anyone?”

“Besides you, just mum.”

There was a flicker of hesitation, before Sasuke probes further, “What did she say?”

“She was surprised, but happy. She told me if my dad had asked her earlier, she would have said yes in a heartbeat,” Naruto isn’t smiling, but there’s a softer look in his eye than there was before. It tended to happen whenever his father was mentioned in conversation, even in passing.

Sasuke expected no less. Unlike himself, Kushina wished truly for Naruto’s happiness. From the bottom of her heart. A mother’s love was the purest kind there was.

A wry, half-smile curled around Naruto’s mouth, as he muses aloud, “It’s funny, she always told me to find someone like her. Guess I listened to her, for once.”

Sakura resembled Kushina in many ways. Her headstrong attitude, her passion for her career, even her mild violent tendencies from time to time. They got along well together, as one could expect. Together, the three of them looked like a family.

“I love Sakura -chan,” Naruto declared, and it had never hit so hard.

Maybe it was because Naruto was telling him, rather than Sasuke overhearing him say it. Naruto was telling him that Sakura was the person he was in love with. In all the world, Naruto had narrowed his romantic love down to a single person, focusing on giving all of it to her and he sounded so sure of himself. Sasuke fundamentally knew he loved Sakura, but it was a different kind of pain having the words spoken to him, of being told. Naruto said it so easily, without any idea of what those words did to Sasuke.

“I’ve always loved her, and I just wanna make her happy. As happy as she makes me, every day,” Naruto tells him, his lips curling in a natural smile just from the mere mention of her, “and if she says no, then it’s okay! It just means she’s not ready yet, and I’ll wait for her. As long as it takes.”

Sighing, Sasuke shakes his head lightly, “Your feelings aren’t the problem. I don’t agree with marrying so young. You can’t possibly know at this age what you want, or what Sakura wants.”

Naruto blinks at him, like the answer is obvious as he says, “But, there’s no one else for me out there.”

Sasuke ignores the way his heart squeezes, still not finished with his counter arguments, “If you believe that, then why do you have to ask right now? Why not when you’ve graduated? Why not until after you’ve both built careers? Why does it have to be now?”

And again, Naruto formulates a response so easily, blowing away all of Sasuke’s doubts with one breath, “Because, I don’t wanna spend another second without her if I don’t have to.”

Sasuke had been foolish. Living in limbo for so long, he’d naïvely centred his thoughts in the present. But, that was over. Naruto was a temporary bliss, like the stillness of the world just before dawn. Eventually, dawn broke and the world woke up. This was Sasuke’s wake-up call, and he hadn’t been prepared at all.
Until the end of university, he’d said. And then, what? He hadn’t thought about it, had chosen to ignore it and live in the now. But the future that seemed so far away was here, and a new future was teetering on the horizon. A future where Naruto was not his constant, a future that he walked alone.

Sasuke doesn’t realise silence had settled between them until Naruto speaks up again, his voice sounding so loud in Sasuke’s ears even though he was speaking at a regular volume, “Whatever her answer is, I’ll accept it. I never quit, and definitely not without trying. If you don’t even try, you won’t know what you’re missin’ out on.”

Juugo’s words from last night scattered away, like dust in the wind. He couldn’t do it. He wasn’t like Naruto. Because, even if Sasuke tried now, his feelings would never make it across to him. Naruto had flown too high in the sky, and Sasuke could never reach him from the ground. He’d wasted all his time on waiting for too long, dwelling on some baseless hope that maybe they could somehow always be together.

Sasuke returned home that same day, and he and Naruto went back to normal. Although it wasn’t normal, because Sasuke could feel the imbalance between them. The rift hadn’t completely sealed yet, their fighting over but the hurt still lingering. Even with Naruto’s passionate words and his true heart, Sasuke couldn’t give him his support. Marriage at their age was ridiculous, they were only just starting to really mature. He wouldn’t pretend he was okay with it because he wasn’t.

Just as Naruto claimed he wouldn’t change his mind on the matter, neither would he. So, Sasuke kept his silence. It was the most he could give to Naruto. Not being openly antagonistic, but not cheering him on, either.

And he could see how much that hurt Naruto. He wasn’t blind, he knew. Even if Naruto covered it up with well-placed smiles and cheerful jokes, Sasuke could see it. Feel it, whenever he was alone with Naruto and they had nothing to say to each other. Sakura’s presence was the only real time they talked, falling into a routine of what their normal friendship used to look like.

“I haven’t seen you guys fight that badly in so long. I was really worried.” Sakura said, smiling in relief as she washed up the plates from dinner.

“Sorry, Sakura -chan. You don’t have to worry anymore, we’re done fighting,” Naruto says in his usual reassuring voice, with a smile to match.

Done fighting? Yes. Finished forgiving? No. Far from it.

Later that night, after they had an amicable dinner together, Sasuke calls his father.

“Tou-san, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“May I move back home for a short while?”

The roots had grown too deep. He needed to pull them out, before they twisted further around him. Or he’d suffocate.

* 

“You’re leaving?” Sakura asked, distraught.

The following morning, when they had all woken up at the same time in preparation for the day,
Sasuke had revealed his plans to them. The two of them were currently sitting side by side on the couch, with Sasuke seated in the armchair off to the side.

Sasuke nods, and clarifies, “Temporarily.”

Her emerald eyes widened in disbelief, “B-But, this is so sudden.”

“For how long?” Naruto asks, and his reaction is surprising. He’s calm, composed, and would have had Sasuke fooled if not for the angry glint in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” and Sasuke really doesn’t know, he didn’t put a timeframe on it. He just needs to get away, to be by himself for a while and figure out what the hell to do with his feelings.

“Is this because of your fight the other day? Or is this what you were fighting about?” Sakura questions, gaze jumping from Sasuke to Naruto, worried that she was once again being left out of the loop.

“I didn’t know he was gonna do this, Sakura -chan,” Naruto says, turning to face her to show his honesty.

“I thought you two had worked it out, I thought everything was okay. But now you’re doing this, Sasuke-kun. Just how bad was it? Why can’t you tell me?” Sakura’s eyes are begging him to answer her, and she leans in closer, as if by doing that he’ll change his mind.

Nothing was going to change his mind, not about this.

So, Sasuke faces her head on, and explains calmly, “That argument is in the past, and this decision is separate from that. It’s got nothing to do with you, or Naruto.”

Lies. It had everything to do with both of them.

“You’re really gonna go?” Naruto finally speaks up, an edge of harshness to his voice. Sasuke can see the concern there, but he can see the anger is still there too.

He and Naruto hadn’t completely reconciled yet. It was the first time Naruto had addressed him directly in days, instead of talking around him. With those fierce, blue eyes locked on him, Sasuke’s heart wavered. But, that was even more reason he had to stop everything now.

“Yes.”

And Naruto was easily provoked, gritting his teeth in frustration as he lashed out, “Just like that, huh? You’re not even gonna leave us with an explanation?”

“All you need to know is that I’m doing this for myself, and not for anyone else. It’s not the end of the world, and it’s not me trying to cut my bonds with either of you,” Sasuke explains, taking the effort to look both of them in the eye, “I would just appreciate some distance right now.”

Naruto hadn’t proposed to Sakura yet, and part of Sasuke wondered why. During their last, real conversation, Naruto had been so sure of himself. Sasuke had assumed he’d be proposing any day now, but Sakura’s finger remained bare and she was blissfully unaware of anything.

Sasuke continues, “I will continue paying my share of the rent while I am away.”

“Th-That’s not important, Sasuke -kun,” Sakura insists in a tearful voice, but she doesn’t let any fall as she swallows and says to him, “You can come back anytime you want to, okay?”
He nods at her, because that was the polite thing to do (even if he had no intention of coming back until he was sure of himself), “Thanks.”

And with that finished, Sasuke left the room to finish packing up his stuff.

*

The next week went by in a hazy blur. He had met up with Naruto and Sakura once, and that was for lunch, a brief and awkward affair. It was so different to see them when he didn’t live with them. Through this separation, Sasuke realised that it was only because of their living arrangements that he ever saw Sakura and Naruto at all. Like himself, they were busy people, and their schedules didn’t align.

But, it was the distance that Sasuke needed.

It was at the end of his second week living back with his father, that everything went to shit. Again.

“I’m back,” Sasuke announces his presence, aware his dad was working from his home office today. He takes his shoes off in the genkan, not noticing that another pair of shoes were also there. A pair of shoes that didn’t belong to Sasuke, or his father.

His father greets him in the entryway, and Sasuke is a little surprised he’s not back in his office, “Sasuke, you’re home early.”

Sasuke nods, rubbing at his eyes tiredly, “My afternoon lecture was cancelled. I decided to come study at home.”

Sighing, his father looks strangely resigned, “I wish you had called, first.”

“Why? Do you have company?” he asks, curious because his father having guests over was as rare as Sasuke eating a block of chocolate.

Standing tall as if he was bracing himself, his father placed a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and says, “Sasuke, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Sasuke blinks at him, because he’s so serious all of a sudden. Not that his father wasn’t serious most of the time, but this kind of serious was different. It was almost grave, and Sasuke knew what he was about to say was no small matter. It was important, so Sasuke gave him his full attention and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Your brother is here.”

Four words. It was only four words his father had said, but those four words carried as much weight as the universe. Because to Sasuke, he had never dreamed of hearing them again in his lifetime.

Gauging Sasuke’s response, his father sighs again and turns his head over to where the kitchen is, “Itachi.”

And then, Sasuke believes that he must be dreaming. This has to be a dream, because the reality of his older brother walking out of their kitchen and towards them was too much to take.

“Hello, otouto.” Itachi said, his voice deeper than the last time Sasuke had heard it.
Sasuke’s eyes grew monstrously wide, his backpack sliding off his shoulder and dropping to the ground.

“Itachi…?”

“I’m home.”

How long had Sasuke imagined Itachi being here, saying exactly that? But now it was happening, it was like Sasuke couldn’t breathe. He wanted to be anywhere else but here, and he didn’t want to see Itachi’s face. The shock was dispersing to make way for anger, because how dare Itachi just show up and act normally, as if nothing hadn’t fucking changed in the decade they’d been apart.

“What...what the hell are you doing here?”

“Sasuke,” his father’s stern voice calls for calmness and understanding. But no, not right now. Sasuke couldn’t do it. He couldn’t stand there and be unaffected with Itachi right in front of him.

Sasuke turns his anger on his father now, because he was acting far too calm for someone who hadn’t seen their oldest son in years, “Did you know, tou-san?”

His father doesn’t retreat from the confrontation, and nods, “Yes.”

Sasuke feels the hurt slicing through him in a jagged line, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were only a child, and you didn’t need to be involved,” his father tells him, and great, this is such a great fucking family dynamic.

And while Sasuke admits he might not be the best when it comes to his feelings, his father and brother are ten times worse. The way they can act so unruffled, getting on with business as usual...Sasuke hates it. Everything right now feels like a nightmare that he can’t get away from.

Sasuke picked up his backpack and left without a single glance at either of them, despite his father calling him back. He needed to get out, go somewhere, anywhere. He couldn’t stay there and see Itachi and not break apart. This was too much.

Sasuke clenched his throat muscles tightly, the burning sensation on the rims of his eyes annoying him. At this moment, Sasuke wanted so badly to go to Naruto. More than anyone, he would understand what this meant to Sasuke, and know what to say to put him at ease.

But, he couldn’t. His best friend still hadn’t completely forgiven him, and Sasuke wouldn’t force him to just because his life had gone to shit, again. This was how it was supposed to be, and Sasuke needed to start getting used to it. When Naruto was married, Sasuke couldn’t expect him to keep supporting him whenever things got hard. Sasuke was fine on his own. Some people, like him, were just meant to be alone.

Now...where to go?

Sasuke didn’t want to see his friends. Couldn’t, wasn’t able to withstand the idea of staying over with one of them and have them hovering over him, worrying and waiting to know what was going on. His feet are already taking him to the train station, so he supposes he’ll decide once he gets there.

When he arrived, he checked all the destinations in the board above his head, a thought came to
him. Near the airport, there was a capsule hotel. If he called now, he could probably make a booking for an overnight stay.

Pulling out his phone, Sasuke dials up the operator and asks the number for the capsule hotel near the airport. He ignores the missed calls from his father, and he ignores the way his hands are trembling as he makes the call and books his room for the night. Things were messed up even more than before, and Sasuke was honestly just sick of the people in his life. He loved them, but they were always causing him pain. Blinking back the hot tears welling in his eyes, Sasuke gets on the next train going to the airport. He can’t wait to get there and go to sleep. That way, the agonising ache in his chest will stop for a while.

Chapter End Notes

...and that is how I make my entrance after months of silence...leaving you guys on a cliffhanger and more heartbreak ;___; I am an awful person I'm so sorry hahahah but I hope that the time until my next update won't be as long so i'll try not to make you all wait  thanks for coming back to read this, and hope you all take care!

- Hime ♡♡♡
Reunion

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! :) here we have an emotional chapter ahead, so make sure you have your pet close by to cuddle or some warm tea/coffee to cheer you up if you need it ;w;
I hope you enjoy your reading and as always, thank you all so much for your support~

Warning: mentions of self-harm and depression, so please read with caution if this may affect you ♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sasuke woke up the next morning, it was like his body was on autopilot. He had a class at 9am, and it was just after 6:30 now. He’d have enough time to wash his clothes while taking a shower. Spending the night in a capsule hotel, while convenient, was also impulsive and Sasuke hadn’t had time to pack a fresh set of clothes for the next day. He hadn’t really been planning ahead when he stormed out of his family’s house.

Sasuke thought about maybe grabbing a couple of onigiri from the convenience store when he got to university, but he honestly didn’t feel hungry. He knew he should eat, having skipped his dinner last night as well. So, instead he opts to get a large long black coffee at the 7-11 after he checks out of the capsule hotel. His phone was turned off, tucked inside his back pocket. The thought of talking to anyone right now was too overwhelming, too confronting, and too real.

Going to his lectures would help take his mind off of everything, at least for two hours he could focus on something other than his problems. The bus ride to university passed by in a haze, his mind still foggy even though he was trying his hardest not to think about anything. All too soon the bus stopped, and he arrived. It was 8:50am, so he had ten minutes to get to class. Luckily, he’d grabbed his backpack when he left yesterday, which had his laptop, notebooks, and refillable water bottle inside.

White noise surrounded him, the voices of other students lost to him. However, one voice got through to him straight away. A familiar voice, calling his name:

“SASUKE!”

Sasuke’s body stopped of its own volition, raising his eyes to scan the crowd for him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Naruto was running over to him. The person he had wanted to see the most was right in front of him, and the fact that they weren’t on the best of terms lately vanished from his mind. All that he could see was Naruto, and with just that Sasuke felt like he was tethered back on earth again.

Stopping in front of him and panting heavily, Naruto straightened up and faced him with a seriousness that drew his brows down, “Sasuke, is it true?”

The question gave Sasuke pause, but his mind was having trouble focusing as it was. In any other situation, if Naruto asked him a question like this without any context, it would take Sasuke a while to catch on. He knew, though, that it was different this time. Because, somehow, Naruto had found out what had happened. He’d found out, and he’d come to Sasuke’s side straight away.
Noticing Sasuke’s state, Naruto tries to bring him back with another question, “Your dad called me and I...Sasuke, is it-is it really—”

“Itachi,” Sasuke finished the question for him, his voice coming out softer than he’d intended, but his answer was certain, “he’s back.”

Naruto’s eyes lock with his eyes, and they stare at each other for a while after that. He understands Naruto’s shock - Sasuke was still in a state of shock, and he’d known since yesterday.

Then, Naruto seems to reach his own conclusion, squaring his shoulders and giving a small, resolute nod, “Okay.”

He takes Sasuke by the hand and leads him out the way he had just walked in towards the campus, towards the exit.

“Classes—” Sasuke starts to say, not sure what else to add but feeling like he should at least mention the reason why they were both there.

“You’re ditching them. I’m ditching mine. We’re both gonna ditch, okay? Everything’s uploaded online anyway, no big deal,” Naruto dismisses his worries away with ease, pushing them out of Sasuke’s reach and he breathes a silent sigh of relief. Sometimes, Sasuke reflects idly, he can be just as bad as Naruto: he won’t give himself a break until someone tells him (or forces him) to.

So, Sasuke gets back on the bus he had just gotten off, since it goes past Naruto’s (their?) neighbourhood on its next route. He gets a double take from the bus driver, but with Naruto tugging him along and his energy at an all time low, Sasuke can only follow along quietly. They sit down and don’t say a word more until they get off at their stop.

Naruto starts talking again as he unlocks the door and they make their way inside, “Sakura -chan’s out all day, so it’s just us here.”

Sasuke doesn’t nod or give a verbal response, but flicks his eyes over to Naruto to let him know he heard. Stiffly, he slides his backpack off and takes a seat on the sofa, while Naruto moves about in the kitchen.

“How did you find out?” is the question Sasuke asks instead, as he picks up the glass of water and takes a long sip.

“I heard you didn’t come back home last night. You have your dad real worried, y’know,” a troubled expression settles on Naruto’s face, as he drops down beside Sasuke, “he called me at around 2 AM, asking if you were over here. When I asked why, he tried real hard to avoid answering me. But somethin’ I said must have gotten to him, because soon he was telling me Itachi was back. So, I promised him I’d find you today no matter what.”

Pulling out his phone, he shows Sasuke his text messages page, “I already told him you’re with me, but you should call him later. I’ve never heard him sound like that before. Where did you go, last night?”

“Capsule hotel, near the airport,” Sasuke mutters, staring down at his lap tiredly, the exhaustion of
the past few weeks catching up to him now that he was stopped still in a safe, comfortable place, “How did you know where I’d be?”

“Because I know you. And I knew that even if the world turned upside down and inside out, you’d show up to your classes today,” Naruto says lightheartedly, and Sasuke catches a glimpse of his slight smile before it vanishes and is replaced with concern, “I’m just glad I remembered your schedule by heart, saved me a lot of time.”

Awkward silence fell between them then. Naruto had gone out of his way to find him today, and Sasuke had gone with him without so much as a protest. Clearly, they couldn’t continue their passive-aggressive fight-not-fight thing they had going on. They’d have to talk about it, and for once, Sasuke was going to take the first step.

Wanting to clear the air on his feelings, Sasuke inhales slowly and deeply, then says, “I want you to be happy. Sakura, as well. Even if I wasn’t as supportive as I could have been, I wouldn’t lie about that.”

Naruto surprises him by smiling in his direction, full of understanding, “I know. I never doubted you of that, Sasuke.”

Sighing harshly, Naruto pushed a hand through his hair, messing it up, “I’m sorry. I’ve been a real jerk lately, I know I have,” the sudden admission of guilt leaves Sasuke speechless, but that doesn’t matter since Naruto isn’t finished, “The reason I got so mad at you, is because there’s this small part of me that knows you’re right.”

And, there it was. The real reason why Naruto had reacted so angrily. Why he had let Sasuke move out, keeping his doubts to himself but unable to resolve them on his own. It all made a lot more sense now, and Sasuke felt like the curtain was lifted on everything that had been foggy and dark before.

Naruto chuckles wryly, a dry sound that is no match against the sound of his real laughter, “Guess it doesn’t matter how old I get. Deep down, that lonely kid who craved nothing but attention and love still lives inside me.”

Sasuke feels a pang of sadness, an image of a lonely, small Naruto sitting on the swings at their old elementary school coming to the forefront of his mind. Damn it, why did he have to see that now?

“What if Sakura -chan does meet a man who’s better for her than me?” Naruto asks him, although he’s not looking for an answer. It’s like Naruto thinks it’s an inevitability, which just isn’t true. He continued, “I can’t really offer her much right now, and I’m not the smartest or best-looking guy around. She’s way too amazing, sometimes I think she doesn’t deserve to be stuck with a loser like me.”

Sasuke hadn’t ever realised Naruto could feel so insecure. His relationship with Sakura was something he’d taken great pride in. It was strong and built on the foundation of their friendship, that even Sasuke hadn’t questioned Naruto’s confidence in it. All this time, Naruto had these fears festering underneath the surface. As good as people liked to say Sasuke was at concealing emotion, Naruto masked how he felt just as well. Perhaps, even better. Since he could do it with a smile and a laugh and have everyone fooled into thinking he could never be anything other than fine. How Naruto still questioned his worth, even believing he had none at times, was unacceptable to Sasuke.

“And then I started venting all my shitty feelings out on you, and things got worse between us. I kept trying to get up the nerve to talk to you, but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t fix it, and then you left,”
he can sense the building frustration in Naruto’s voice, the way his feelings are beginning to get the better of him, and Sasuke is startled to see tears welling in his usually bright (so bright) blue eyes when he looks at him, “I-I didn’t want you to go, Sasuke. I miss you.”

Sasuke is silent, the honest admission striking his heart in a painfully tender way. Naruto always had a direct line to his heart, and it wasn’t fair how he used it like this, even unknowingly.

Taking his silence the wrong way, Naruto chuckles weakly and wipes at his eyes clumsily, “Heh, see? Even now, I’m so goddamn clingy. I can’t stay on my own for too long and end up annoying you guys even more. You’re right, it’s really pathetic.”

“Is that why you haven’t proposed?” Sasuke asked, the guilt weighing down on him suddenly. Is it because of me? Because of what I said?

When Naruto doesn’t respond, that is all the answer Sasuke needs to know his suspicions were right. Needing to mend this rip between them, Sasuke swallows down his pride and personal feelings, so he can reach out to Naruto like he had done so many times for Sasuke, “Your connections make you strong, they always have. So many people have relied on you, and still do. Kushina -san, Sakura, all of your friends.”

_Naruto, I’m sorry. I can’t help it._

“And even now, you are still my closest friend. If it wasn’t for you not giving up on me, I probably wouldn’t be here right now,” Sasuke tells him, straightforward and honest, because deep in his heart, Sasuke really believed that to be true. Naruto had saved him, more than once, over the years ever since they had known each other.

_I don’t want to get left behind by you after all._

“Sasuke…”

“You will never be alone,” he tries to give him a smile, doesn’t quite manage it, although Sasuke thinks (hopes) his face looks relatively open and kind, “But, if you ever find that you are, then I’ll be the one to stand by you this time. I won’t cast you away, _usuratonkachi._”

His jaw trembling, tears spilled over Naruto’s eyes and he clenched them shut quickly. Too many times in their lives, Naruto had suffered because of him. And every time, Sasuke felt the knife in his heart dig deeper. How many times more would he hurt Naruto? How much more did Sasuke have to hurt him to understand that Naruto would follow him despite the pain it brought him?

Lunging forward, Naruto wrapped his arms around him and shuddered, holding on tightly. Sasuke let himself be hugged, his hands hovering at Naruto’s sides hesitantly. Lightly, Sasuke pressed the tips of his fingers against his back, slowly letting his palms rest against it as well. Naruto let out a quiet, shaky sigh and the tension seeped out of his body, as he hugged Sasuke tighter. The heaviness had lifted, and things were bearable once more. Closing his eyes, Sasuke stayed there, in his embrace.

“I’m sorry, S-Sasuke. For all the th-things I said, I-I’m sorry,” Naruto blubbered into his shoulder, his arms wound so tightly around him, like he’s worried Sasuke will disappear if he lets go.

“Me, too,” Sasuke murmurs softly, one of his hands patting Naruto’s back slowly, comfortably.

Just this once was okay, wasn’t it? Even if it was only for a little while, Sasuke just wanted to be close to him. So badly, so horribly, and so deeply, he wished he could take Sakura’s place. How long they stayed like that for, Sasuke couldn’t say. It felt like all the time in the world stopped, but
even then, it was over too soon.

Naruto pulls away first, and Sasuke leans back accordingly as well, never crossing over the line he set for himself, “Damn it, I shouldn’t be the one getting comforted here,” Naruto seems cross with himself, his focus switching fully to Sasuke now, “How do you feel? Are you okay?” Naruto’s hand landed on his wrist, and Sasuke could tell it was an unconscious gesture.

Of course, because Sasuke’s depression never went away. It lingered over him like a stormy, black cloud, waiting for the moment it can rain down on him again. It made sense that Naruto was concerned, and why his father had been calling around to find out where he was. He felt bad for his thoughtlessness, but it wasn’t like he had been having suicidal thoughts.

“I don’t know. It’s still difficult to process,” Sasuke sighed, his heart clenching as he remembered seeing Itachi’s face, “I came home early, and Itachi was there. In the kitchen.”

“Shit,” Naruto looked as shocked as Sasuke had felt at the time, so Sasuke goes on to tell him what had happened that led to him leaving. Then, he said bitterly at the end, “My dad knew. All this time, he knew where Itachi was. What he was doing, how to contact him.”

“You don’t have to forgive them yet,” Naruto advises him, which isn’t what Sasuke had been expecting to hear from him. His confusion must show on his face, because Naruto continues, “Y’know, I was angry at my dad for a long time.”

Sasuke straightened, because it was rare that Naruto ever talked about his father. The same way Sasuke didn’t talk about his mother—because even now, it was still painful sometimes. This, though. This was something Naruto had never told him before.

“Even though he was gone, I couldn’t forgive him. It wasn’t fair of me, and I knew that, but I couldn’t help it. Since I couldn’t really remember him, it was easier to feel angry at him when I saw how hard it was for mum, because she’s always been there for me,” Naruto’s eyes soften at the mention of Kushina, despite the sadness buried within them, “I wanted to yell at him, ‘Why aren’t you here? Don’t you care about what happens to us anymore? How could you leave mum all alone? You died a hero’s death, so what?’”

It was surprising to hear Naruto saying all this, because Sasuke knew how much he looked up to his father. Everyone did. He was a hero, after all. Having been head of the Fire Department in Tokyo, Naruto’s father saved hundreds of people during his life and was admired by many, even years after his death.

“But, family is forever. The older I get, the more I understand him. I looked at the pictures and videos we had from when he was alive, and I could see how much he loved us. And I started to believe that he wouldn’t have left us willingly. He didn’t go in there expecting to die, he was only trying to protect everyone. He did that, and I’m proud of him for it,” Naruto smiles then, and it’s as brilliant as the first light on a cloudy morning, “I’m proud to call him my dad, y’know. So, I made my peace with him and eventually I forgave him. Turns out, I just needed more time coming to terms with it. Gotta go through the hurt to make it to the other side, y’know.”

Leaning over so that their shoulders pressed together, Naruto regards him with nothing but empathy, “So, you don’t have to put up this front, teme. It hurts, and that’s okay. You just go ahead and let it hurt for as long as you want. I’ll ride it out with you. Then, when you’re ready for it, you can forgive them.”

Sasuke pressed his lips together tightly, looking steadfastly down at his lap and trying to blink away the wetness in his eyes. He’d already done his crying, so what the hell was this? Ugh, he
hated it. Even worse, right in front of Naruto.

Yet, Naruto didn’t say a word. Only shifted over closer and placed a hand on Sasuke’s back. It stayed there for a while, just a solid weight against him. Then, he started rubbing circles on his back slowly. It was moments like these that made Sasuke remember as childish as he could be, Naruto had matured quite a lot. He was an idiot, but he knew how to be there for people. Already, Sasuke felt that everything wasn’t as overwhelming and out of his hands as before. Fighting with Naruto had taken a greater toll on him than he’d realised. With Naruto back by his side, he could gather his thoughts somewhat, as opposed to the jumbled mess they had been last night and this morning.

“Hey, you wanna know something dumb I did the other day?” Naruto’s arm moved from his back to drape over his shoulder, as he launched into his story-telling. “So, I finally tried that super spicy ramen challenge that was real popular for a while,”

“I was eating down at Ichiraku’s, and I got through the first bowl pretty fast thinking, ‘hey this isn’t all that bad, I can totally do this!’ and so I kept going. Then, just as I went to start my second bowl, my mouth was on fire! I hadn’t even poured myself a glass of water before I started, so I was leaning across the counter, half-dead and begging the old man to get me some because literal steam was coming out of my ears.”

Against all his reason, Sasuke’s lips quirked up. Naruto caught his smile, slight as it was, and gave him a sheepish one in return.

“It was so embarrassing! And it wasn’t the people staring at me that was the most humiliating, but that I always eat at least five bowls of ramen when I go to Ichiraku’s. I felt like such a failure not even finishing two bowls of spicy ramen. Me, Sasuke! Can you believe it? I feel like such a fraud! How could my longest love, my precious ramen, do this to me!?” Naruto exclaimed woefully, his other arm outstretched longingly in front of him as he looked at something that Sasuke couldn’t see - probably bowl upon bowl of ramen stacked in front of him.

“Let me guess, you’re going to try it again?” Sasuke already knows the answer, because just as often as he could be unpredictable, Naruto could be very, very predictable.

“Course! I need to reclaim my honour! Even if it hurts like hell the next day, I’ll do anything for ramen!” Naruto declared boldly, slamming his fist over his heart for added emphasis.

Sasuke snorted weakly, shaking his head, “Too much information, usuratonkachi.”

“Don’t make bets you can’t win.”

“Oh, I’ll win. You might have a taste for the spicy stuff, but ramen is my life. I won’t lose to anyone. I refuse to!”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke glances down at the plate and picks up an onigiri, taking a bite. Even if his appetite wasn’t huge, he felt like he could do with something in his stomach now. A comfortable, easy silence falls between them while Sasuke eats, and it almost feels like the past few weeks hadn’t happened. But, they had, and the two of them had made it to the other side and were even stronger than before.

“I guess Itachi is staying with your dad?” Naruto asks, not even trying to hide his curiousity. At
Sasuke’s hesitance to answer, Naruto issues him a demand, “Stay here. ‘I know you’re gonna go back eventually and see him, and I don’t wanna stop you. But until you’re ready for it, hang around here. It’s still your home too, y’know.”

Swallowing down the last of his onigiri, Sasuke ponders on it, and finds he doesn’t oppose it. Now that the tension was gone between them, he felt like he could handle a few days back with Naruto and Sakura. At least until he worked up the nerve to face his father and brother.

He nods his assent, and ignores Naruto’s overly pleased expression. He can’t hold back on teasing Sasuke though, as he says obnoxiously, “You look like shit, by the way.”

Never one to back down, Sasuke gives it right back to him, “Same to you.”

Naruto narrows his eyes at him and gives a lofty sigh, “Yeah, I know. That’s your fault, bastard.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow questioningly, “My fault?”

Scowling at him, Naruto grumbled, “Of course! Like hell I could go back to sleep after that phone call. Making me stress about where your stupid ass was all night, and you call me impulsive!”

“I had a plan. At least I’m not recklessly impulsive, like you,” Sasuke says, raising his chin haughtily because he knew how much it pissed Naruto off.

“Teme! Only you can make me worried out of my mind and pissed off at you at the same time. It’s not a good look on me, y’know!” Naruto wailed, his arms flailing around uselessly. When Sasuke only scoffs at him, he sighs deeply and leans back into the sofa, “I even snapped at Sakura -chan this morning, just because she was asking me about it all.”

That makes Sasuke feel bad, so he lowers his head apologetically for causing unnecessary trouble between them, “I didn’t mean to get you involved.”

However, Naruto is quick to assuage him of any guilt, bright and smiling at Sasuke reassuringly again, “Hey, don’t get all gloomy on me again. I don’t want you to go through this thinkin’ you’re alone. ‘Cause you’re not. I’m always here for you, Sasuke, no matter what.”

Sasuke didn’t have anything to say to that. No sarcastic comeback, no rude brush-off. Because he could see with his own eyes how much Naruto meant it. And when Naruto said things like that, Sasuke’s heart would shift, open and vulnerable in his chest. It had been so long, and Sasuke was exhausted, and he couldn’t fight against it. Again, and again, Sasuke would always fly a little too close to the sun. He never learned any better, no matter how old he was.

“Anyway, I’m gonna crash for a while. Now that I know you’re safe and you’re here, I feel like I can relax,” standing up, Naruto stretches his arms up over his head and yawns, “You should go take a rest, too. Your bed and all that is still made up, so feel free to go and sleep.”

“Thanks. I’ll wash these up,” Sasuke stands as well, making his way to the kitchen to wash up and get some more water. He is granted with one last parting smile from Naruto as he leaves the room. How easy it was for Sasuke to breathe again, just from seeing his face.

* 

As soon as Sasuke entered his room, he made a beeline for the bed. He propped his pillows against the headboard and slipped under the covers, relaxing into the soft mattress with a sigh. As much as Sasuke wanted to lie down and sleep, his talk with Naruto had made him more sympathetic to his family’s well being. Despite how conflicted and upset he felt, Sasuke didn’t want to torture his
father and worry him any further.

So, after taking three deep breaths, he tapped on his father’s name and brought his phone up to his ear.

His father picked up after two rings, offering him no greeting or reprimand, “Sasuke.”

“Hello, tou-san,” Sasuke replies, his voice coming through steadily.

“Where have you been? You leave without a word, and don’t pick up your phone? You are not this irresponsible, Sasuke,” now the reprimands were coming, and even though his father’s tone was stern, Sasuke could hear his unease.

“I was in shock and, I-I wasn’t thinking clearly,” Sasuke faltered, doubting his actions were right and worrying he had only made the situation worse.

His father sighed, although it wasn’t in disappointment; rather, it was a sigh of relief, “Where have you been?”

“I stayed in the capsule hotel near the airport last night. I’m with Naruto, now,” Sasuke explains, looking around his room and watching the sun shine through his curtains.

“Yes. Regrettably, I had to rely on him to find you. I’m your father, and I couldn’t even reach you. So, instead I was forced to involve your friends and cause them concern, too.”

“It wasn’t my intention.”

“Do not act so thoughtlessly again. The state you were last night was not appropriate for you to be out on your own.”

His father knew better than anyone just how much he struggled with his mental health. After all, he was the one who had paid for all of Sasuke’s medications and therapy sessions. He had done everything he could as a parent to get Sasuke the help he needed. And it had helped, even though Sasuke had resisted his efforts so fiercely as a child. To the point that now Sasuke was on a lower dose of meds for his depression and only went to therapy sessions once a month, sometimes less and only if he felt like he needed them.

So, Sasuke could only imagine the kinds of scenarios that had been running through his father’s mind last night after his abrupt exit. Sasuke hung his head, biting his lip and swallowing past the lump in his throat. That hadn’t been fair, even if his father had done something wrong. I’m an awful son, Sasuke curses in his head, when would he stop being the selfish person he was?

“I’m sorry, tou-san,” it’s all Sasuke can say, and he makes sure to mean every word.

There’s silence on the other end of the line for a while, but Sasuke can still hear his father breathing so he knows he’s still there. Just when Sasuke is about to ask if he’s okay, his father clears his throat and asks his next question, “When are you coming home?”

Sasuke presses his lips together, no date or day coming to mind, “I don’t know.”

“Itachi has said he will leave if his presence is too much for you.”

“No! He-He doesn’t have to do that. He’s your son, too,” the last thing Sasuke wanted was for Itachi to leave again. Even if he couldn’t face his brother right now, Sasuke needed him to stay where he was. If Itachi disappeared or went out of contact again, he wouldn’t be able to deal with
that. Letting out a shaky sigh, Sasuke tries to form his thoughts into words, “I just-I need to be on my own right now. I’m expecting a proper explanation from both of you, and I’m upset that you lied to me about Itachi. So, I will come back, just not yet.”

There’s another pause, but it’s not as long this time, and his father accepts his words without question, “Alright, Sasuke. I need you to keep in contact, though. Don’t cut yourself off like that again.”

“Okay.”

“Take care of yourself, son.”

Sasuke’s throat closes up, his emotions getting stirred up again. It’s not as if he wants to keep this distance between them all, but he...he needs time. As long as his father and Itachi would wait for him, that’s all he could ask for.

He nods, even though his father can’t see him, “I will. You too.”

Ending the call, Sasuke stared down at his screen numbly. Then, he switched it off and put the phone on his bedside table. Repositioning his pillow so it lay flat, Sasuke lay down and pulled the covers up around him, closing his stinging eyes. Even though he’d slept a little last night, his exhaustion levels were still high. It doesn’t take long before he’s asleep, his mind blank and his sleep restful.

When he wakes up again, he glances at his bedside clock and notes it’s after 3 o’clock. I slept for 5 hours, and although he’s still undoubtedly tired, Sasuke feels a lot better. As he made his way back down to the living room, he saw a head of pink hair twirl around to face him.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura rushed up to him, wrapping him in a tight hug, “thank goodness, you’re alright!”

Sasuke pats her on the back lightly, his way of apologising for worrying her too. He spots Naruto sitting at the table on his laptop, and wonders when he got up. It was nice of the two of them to let him keep sleeping.

When Sakura pulls back, she holds onto his shoulders, peering into his face with that knowing, medical glint in her eyes, “You look so exhausted. I think you should take the day off from classes tomorrow as well. Are you going to stay here?”

Just as Sasuke opened his mouth, Naruto cut in for him, “Yes, he is. And that’s a good idea, Sakura-chan. Since it’s your day off tomorrow, you can watch him.”

Sasuke shoots him a tiny glare, and is met with an all too satisfied grin in return. Sakura takes her hands off his shoulders and puts them on her hips, nodding decisively, “Okay! That’s the plan, then! I’ll just go and take a shower, and then maybe we can all have a cup of coffee and relax a bit.”

Showing a thumb’s up from over the top of his laptop, Naruto agrees wholeheartedly, “Sounds good to me!”

Maybe it was the fact that his tolerance levels were extremely high due to his tired and emotional state, but Sasuke didn’t even have it in him to argue any more than glaring at them both. They were always too fussy over his health, damn medical science students, Sasuke sighed.

Once Sakura left the room, Sasuke ambled over to the table and sat down opposite Naruto. He
pulled out his phone, checking the emails he’d received from his lectures and replying to them while Naruto typed away like a mad man. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped, heaved a deep sigh that practically said ‘I’m done!’ and shut his laptop lid with more force than necessary.

“Everything okay?” he asks, having sent off the last email to his lecture and glancing at Naruto suspiciously.

“Writing medical reports is a nightmare. Be glad you won’t ever know the horror and pain of it all, Sasuke-chan,” Naruto taunts childishly, making Sasuke’s eyebrow twitch at the annoying nickname.

“You’re exaggerating. From what I understand, it’s only factual information and results you’re writing down. Not like you have to use your brain that much,” Sasuke says objectively, but Naruto groans all the same.

“Man, it sucks. I’m way better at giving verbal reports! All these technical terms and uptight language is making my head hurt!” he pouts and rubs at his eyes like a little kid, and in the moment his eyes are closed, Sasuke smiles at him briefly. When he opens them again, Sasuke’s face is staring back at him neutrally.

“Hey, about Sakura- **chan,**” Naruto started, and Sasuke paid attention, “I think I’m going to wait, after all.”

Sasuke’s eyes grew wider in understanding, “You mean the proposal?”

Naruto nodded, smiling bashfully, “After all that’s happened, I feel like everything’s clear now. I know Sakura- **chan** won’t get sick of me so easily. She’s been putting up with me for this long, right?”

“Guess I was panicking,” laughing, Naruto shook his head at himself, “I mean, I’m gonna ask her someday. Just not yet, y’know. I’m happy with the way things are right now!”

Sasuke kept his face expressionless, despite the sharp sting those words brought him. I’m gonna ask her someday. Of course, Naruto was so in love with Sakura. He would wait forever for her, and no other person caught his heart as she did. One day, they probably would get married.

But one day was not today, and Sasuke didn't have the energy to waste worrying about it anymore. Itachi was now a constant weight on his mind, and would continue to be until the next time they met. For now, he would spend time with his friends and enjoy a nice, decent cup of coffee.

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Two weeks had passed since Itachi’s return, and Sasuke was finally ready to deal with everything and reunite with his family. Naruto had insisted on accompanying him on his way back home. He claimed it was because he wanted to ensure Sasuke would be alright, and whilst that was true, Sasuke sensed another reason. He surely wanted a confrontation with Itachi. When they were kids, Naruto hadn’t interacted with Itachi all that much, but they’d gotten to know each other when Itachi would come to pick Sasuke up after school. Since he’d come late, Sasuke was often stuck waiting with Naruto, whose mother also came to pick him up late after school when she had finished work.

When Sasuke had been self-harming, and after Naruto had found out about it, they had grown closer. One day, when Naruto had innocently asked where Itachi was and why he wasn’t picking him up anymore, Sasuke had burst into tears and told him everything. Sakura knew that Sasuke had
an older brother named Itachi and that he was out of the picture of Sasuke’s life, and that was about it. He’d told her the details during his two weeks’ stay with them, minus the details about his self-harming. There were some things Sasuke just couldn’t share openly, even with the people he was closest to.

So, here they were: in front of Sasuke’s family house, just about to go in. As Sasuke raised his finger to press the doorbell, he hesitated, and chanced a glance in Naruto’s direction. Faced with his firm resolve and supportive nod, Sasuke found the last drop of courage to press the doorbell and await the moment of truth.

“Sasuke, Naruto,” his father greeted as he opened the door and stepped to the side courteously, “come in. I have prepared some tea, so let us sit for a while.”

His father doesn’t wait as he walks back to the kitchen, leaving Naruto and Sasuke in the genkan to remove their shoes. Sasuke feels the tension bubbling under his skin: Itachi is in their house, Itachi is home, and even though it’s been two weeks it’s still sinking in for Sasuke that his brother is actually back - possibly for good.

“You okay?” Naruto’s voice cuts through his endless thoughts before they can spiral.

Sasuke manages a brief nod, “Yeah.”

“You don’t have to stay. Just say the word, and we can bail asap,” Naruto reminds him (for the fifth time this morning, including during the train ride over), but Sasuke appreciates it.

He nods again, the muscles in his face relaxing a bit, and he steps into the house, “Let’s go.”

They followed the hallway all the way up to the living room, and Sasuke saw him: Itachi was standing near the doorway of the kitchen, his eyes already on Sasuke the moment he stepped into the room. It was weird the amount of relief Sasuke felt at seeing him there. Even though he’d known Itachi was still staying with his father, who had kept Sasuke updated during his time away, seeing really was believing. The anger and the hurt were still there inside him, but he was also glad to see his brother’s face once more and know it wasn’t a dream.

Naruto, however, was practically bristling with the beginnings of anger, “So, you really are back.”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” Itachi said, eyes flicking over to the blonde and his face perfectly impassive, “I remember you.”

Since Itachi had a photographic memory, there wasn’t a lot of things that he could ever really forget. Remembering faces and names were as easy as breathing for him, “You are now good friends with my brother, correct?”

“Of course! Unlike you, I wouldn’t abandon Sasuke. Not now, and not ever!” Naruto declared, leaping to Sasuke’s side without hesitation.

“Is that so?” Itachi stares him down, and Naruto stares right back. Sasuke’s eyes dart between them, their determined spirit something his brother and Naruto shared in common. Then, Itachi shows a small, brief smile and says, “I’m glad, then.”

Naruto’s anger melted away to be replaced by sheer puzzlement. He peered at Itachi like he had just grown a third eye on his forehead. Just then, his father re-entered the room carrying a tray full of mugs of green tea. Then, everyone took a seat. His father sat in his armchair, Itachi in the other guest armchair, and Naruto and Sasuke sit together on the three seater couch. The four mugs of tea sat on a tray on the coffee table, each of them taking one and sipping at it in silence for a while.
“Naruto, thank you for everything you did a couple of weeks ago. I appreciate you looking out for Sasuke when I have failed in doing so.” Fugaku inclines his head gratefully in Naruto’s direction, the gratitude tangible in his voice.

“Er, that’s alright,” Naruto said, scratching at his head unsurely - which was a fair response, since it was awkward to have a distinguished man like Uchiha Fugaku thank you for your efforts and essentially say you did what he couldn’t. Naruto was Naruto, though, and he handled it in a way not many others could, “Sasuke makes fun of me all the time ‘cause I’m impulsive, but he’s just as bad as I am! That’s why I can keep up with him, since we’re more similar than he likes to admit.”

Naruto turns to him with an obnoxious, teasing grin, and it makes Sasuke want to smile back. He doesn’t, because he’s still tense in the presence of his brother and father, but a corner of his heart warms at Naruto’s efforts to cheer him up. They both find comfort in their back-and-forth bickering, the familiarity of it always welcome between them.

“If I ever become as similar as you, I think I’d rather be forced to eat ramen for the rest of my life,” Sasuke confesses, glancing sideways and taking a sip of tea while Naruto squawks in the background.

“Bastard! I know you like ramen, you just like makin’ me mad more by insulting my all-time favourite food!”

Another bout of silence settled among them, but it wasn’t as uncomfortable this time. Eventually, they all finished their tea and had nothing to hide behind any longer.

“Sasuke, can you help me carry these to the kitchen?” his father asked abruptly, standing up with his and Itachi’s mug in his hands. Sasuke gives a hesitant nod, picking up his and Naruto’s mugs and leaving the room. It felt awkward leaving Naruto sitting there with his somewhat estranged brother, but Sasuke couldn’t ask him to follow them into the kitchen, could he?

“Why did you need me to help with this? Didn’t you carry them in on a tray?” Sasuke inquires, setting the mugs down on the sink as his father filled it up with soapy water.

“I suspected that your brother and Naruto wanted to talk without either of us there, so I removed us from the situation. They should be finished soon,” his father didn’t look up from his task as he answered, and Sasuke hid his surprise at how astute he was. Of course, he’d known Naruto wanted to have words with Itachi, but he hadn’t thought to give them the space to do that without Sasuke there. Sasuke found he didn’t like not knowing what they were saying.

Another two minutes passed, and Sasuke couldn’t stand the waiting anymore. While his father was preoccupied with rearranging the mugs in the cupboard, he slipped out of the kitchen silently and made his way back to the living room. He stopped just outside the doorway, not showing himself just yet as he listened to the two of them talking (his father had been right, after all).

“Are you staying this time? Or you planning on dropping off the face of the earth again?” Naruto hissed, his voice low and harsh.

“I have no plans to be anywhere else. Tokyo is, and always will be, my home,” Itachi doesn’t falter, his ability to remain so calm and objective a trait that so few possessed.

“Good. Because Sasuke needs you, he’s always needed you. Nobody can fill in that space you left in his heart. You’re his brother, so you better act like it now,” Naruto tells him, no - he’s admonishing Itachi, almost making a demand of him. Is he crazy or just infinitely stupid? Sasuke questions, then realises the pointlessness of such a question. It was both, obviously.
Then, Naruto’s voice changes, becomes lower and softer, like he has something he wants to protect, “He’s been through so much shit, and I wanna tell you all about it. Just so you’ll really understand what you did to him when you left. But, I’m not gonna. ‘Cause that’s his story, and I’m not gonna tell it if he doesn’t want you to know.”

There’s a pause in the conversation, and just when Sasuke is about to walk out, Naruto speaks again, “And if you ever hurt Sasuke again, I swear I won’t forgive you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less, Naruto,” is his brother’s response, and Sasuke cannot contain his silence any longer. He re-enters the room naturally, as if he had just come back from the kitchen. He sees Naruto is already standing up, and Itachi is looking over at Sasuke again.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto comes up to him, “I’m gonna get going, now. You good?”

Replaying all of Naruto’s words to Itachi in his head, Sasuke wants to offer him some reassurance. So, he nods confidently, keeping his stance deliberately relaxed and open, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

It seems to help, but Naruto can be kind of a busy-body, so he persists again, “If you need me, just call. You know you don’t even have to ask, it’s-”

“-it’s my home, too. Yes, I know,” Sasuke rolls his eyes, but there’s a small, barely there smirk tugging at his lips. Typical Naruto , he thinks fondly. He waves goodbye to Sasuke’s dad on his way out, thanks him for the tea, and in the next moment he’s out the door.

With Naruto gone, the three of them sit in the living room, each on a different chair. Sasuke has his arms crossed, shoulders squared in deceptively strong body language. In reality, Sasuke was trying to shield himself in case he got hurt again. He doesn’t make any moves to start the conversation, waiting for either of them to speak up first.

His brother is the one who does, and he gazes at Sasuke with an inscrutable look, “You’ve grown so much, Sasuke.”

“I was 12 years old the last time I saw you. It’s obvious that I would change,” Sasuke retorted, not wanting to sound bitter but feeling strangely defensive. Nobody says anything more, so Sasuke continues, “I want an explanation now. From both of you, and don’t leave anything out. If I find out later that you did, I don’t know if I’ll be able to trust you anymore.”

“We swear to tell you the whole truth, Sasuke. No more hiding,” his father assures him, accompanied by a nod from Itachi.

“Why did you disappear? Why did you leave without a word, and refuse to contact me at all?” Sasuke directs the question to his brother, eyes narrowing in accusation, “I assume you’ve been in contact with dad without my knowledge. Do you know how angry that makes me?”

“I’m sorry, Sasuke,” Itachi bows his neck lowly, and holds it for at least a minute before he raises his head to continue, “I was tracking down the man who killed our mother. All these years, I’ve spent training and working undercover doing detective work to advance among the ranks and find him. As of now, I’m not working on any assignments for an undetermined period of time, so that is why I am here.”

His eyes grew as wide as saucepans, and Sasuke felt his mind flashback to that time when he was 10 years old. When he had lost his mother because a man had decided for no reasonable reason that her life was ready to come to an end. How he’d suffered because of that man, and even more than he’d first thought: first, he’d taken Sasuke’s mother, and he’d taken his brother away from him as
Sasuke turns to his father then, eyes burning with accusation, “Why did you keep this from me? Am I not part of this family?”

“You were only a boy at the time. Itachi and I both agreed it was best you didn’t know of his whereabouts until he had achieved his goals,” he replied, linking his hands together in front of him, “Moreover, we didn’t want to put you in a position where you might be in danger. Neither of us were willing to take such a risk, even at the cost of lying to you for so long.”

It was times like these when Sasuke missed his mother the most. He was more like her in terms of personality, because whilst she had been a very intelligent woman, she had not been so full of hard logic that she let it dull her emotions. She smiled when she was content, and she laughed when she was happy. When he tried to stifle his cries as a child, she would cup his cheeks and tell him it was okay to cry if it made him feel better afterwards.

Then, a phone rings, and since he doesn’t recognise his or his father’s ringtone, he’s on Itachi like a hawk, “Who is that?”

After glancing at the caller ID, Itachi sets the phone down and lets it continue to ring until it goes to message bank, “My work partner, Kisame,”

“Why is he calling you? I thought you said you’re not working,” Sasuke points out, brows drawn down in irritation.

“Kisame considers us as friends, and I don’t find his company intolerable. I also believe he wants to meet you, the younger brother who I was always talking about,” Itachi responds simply, and words unfortunately make Sasuke’s heart beat faster hopefully.

“Did you really talk about me? It felt like you’d basically forgotten I’d existed for all these years,” he mutters, frowning down at his hands anxiously.

“I always thought about you, Sasuke. Part of the reason I could continue my mission was because I had started it for you,” Itachi admits, drawing Sasuke’s eyes back up to his, “I know you were traumatised by mother’s death the most, and I wanted to bring justice back to our family. I had father tell you that the killer was already dead, so you could find your own path for the future without the need for revenge clouding your vision.”

Sasuke’s hands start to shake, the onslaught of long sought after truths taking its toll on him, “So many lies. Why couldn’t you have just told me the truth?”

“It was confidential information, and sensitive at the time.”


“By the time I found him, little over a month ago, he was already dead,” a heavy silence follows Itachi’s words, Sasuke filled with shock and their father silent with his eyes closed in a semblance of pain, “Electrocuted by faulty wiring in his hideout apartment. I can go over the case with you in full detail from start to finish, if you’d like.”

Shaking his head, Sasuke holds up a hand to stop Itachi from saying more on the topic, “No, not now. Later. I just...I just need a moment.”

He couldn’t believe it. Even after his brother had dedicated so many years of his life to tracking their mother’s killer, and the moment he had a solid lead on him...he was already dead. It had been
a useless but noble endeavour, and what hurt the most was that even though Sasuke was angry, his heart ached for Itachi and he wished that he hadn’t wasted all that time doing it for Sasuke.

“Why couldn’t we have all stayed together? We could have come with you,” Sasuke’s hands squeeze his thighs, as he tries to rein in his emotions but he can feel them about to erupt any second now.

“I wanted to give you your childhood. You didn’t deserve that kind of life, living looking over your shoulder and suffering from the need for vengeance clouding your mind,” Itachi said, and although he clearly had regrets, he seemed certain he had made the right choice.

It was vindictive what Sasuke did next. He hated himself for it, but Itachi would find out sooner or later if he didn’t know already.

“Do you really think you stopped me from suffering?” he asked mockingly, huffing a laugh that was all air, “Mom died, and not even two years later you left as well! Without warning, without saying goodbye...do you even know how alone I felt?”

“The loneliness almost killed me!” Sasuke pushed up his sleeves roughly, revealing his bare, scarred wrists to Itachi, “And you say you did this for me!?”

His father was gazing at him with a solemn expression, looking as if he wanted to speak but he was holding his tongue. As for Itachi, tears were sliding down his cheeks, his eyes creased in deep sadness. Itachi had always been a silent crier. Not sobbing or wailing like Sasuke did, but crying with tears streaming down his face and his lips wobbling so unsteadily it looked like his whole body was trembling.

“I...I am utterly, hopelessly sorry. Sasuke, I can never-never ask for your forgiveness, but please...please, allow me to keep apologising to you for the rest of my life,” Itachi is begging him, and he doesn’t think he’s ever heard his older brother sound so desperate and hopeless.

Damn it. Now, Sasuke was crying as well. His anger had blown through like a hurricane, leaving heaps of deep sadness and raw pain in its wake. He didn’t care if Itachi had made countless mistakes and missed out on so much of Sasuke’s life. All he wanted was for his big brother to stay with him, to make their family a little bit more whole, to fill in that space in his heart once more that only he could fill.

“You better spend the rest of our lives making it u-up to me,” Sasuke sniffed, choking on the words as sobs got caught in his throat and tears blurred his vision, “if you even think of leaving me again, I won’t even let you s-say sorry.”

“I won’t leave you. I will always be right here for you from now on, whenever you need me. Whatever you want, I will do it,” Itachi stands from his seat, moves over slowly to get closer to Sasuke, “I will love you always, Sasuke,” when he extends out a single finger to touch the back of his hand, Sasuke sobs again and clutches the hand in his in an iron grip. Itachi wraps both his hands around Sasuke’s one, squeezing warmth and gentleness into his skin.

Sasuke wasn’t nearly as considerate, holding onto Itachi’s hands with enough force and tightness to leave them both with bruising. That didn’t matter though, because that kind of pain was nothing compared to losing Itachi a second time. Now that he had his brother back, he wouldn’t let go of him ever again. Their father is there as well (when had he moved over to them?), placing one hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and the other on Itachi’s.

A lot of things in Sasuke’s life weren’t perfect; it was messy, it was hard, and it was painful. But,
in this moment, he felt like something was finally falling into place for him the way it was supposed to. And Sasuke was glad he was alive, because otherwise he never would have known this kind of miracle was awaiting him.

Chapter End Notes

There we go, some fluff for all you sunshines because honestly you guys deserve it ^__^ ...and well, some angst in there too of course x), but we have to take the bitter with the sweet, right? But at least some things were resolved, and we don't end on a sad chapter (for once! lol) if you want more information about Mikoto's death, I'm sorry but you guys will have to wait a bit more ;_; but at least Sasuke can feel a bit of closure from all this soon, poor baby ;3;
Hope you are all doing okay, and take care until next time! x

- Hime ♡♡♡

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