Ino doesn't die with honor or glory. Instead she is just dead.

It goes like this: She forgets how to smile with kindness and learns only to bare her teeth.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
hemlock

Chapter Summary

Ino tries her best and she fails.
(Not exactly.)

Chapter Notes

War-torn future AU, time travel, Ino-centric. revamping for like the fifth time. i know this has been a very hard and annoying process I know it has spanned years and several mental breakdowns but I'm so grateful to you for sticking with me. I love you all so much.

thank you for your beta work on this chapter, gnurd!!!!

Ino-centric fic rec: Looking In (On the Outside) by Killaurey
song rec: Same Old Blues by Phantogram

part i. flowers

aSPhOdeL

[hemlock]
you
will
be
my
death

The world doesn't know it anymore, doesn't remember it, but Uzumaki Naruto's soft.

She thinks of the way the world must see him now—the way his world has changed from a place of softness to screaming metal. She thinks about what she can see across the children's faces, the way awe and fear hold equal space in their eyes when they watch him walk through camp. There's something in the way people recoil from him, the way the motion is the same as when they hide behind him. The people in camp are remnants of a village she once loved, the shards of a glass mirror that once was her life and she loved them. She loved them and that village loved her and Naruto loved it, too, but they never loved him.

She thinks about the ninja she fights beside but doesn't really know—were they in the chunin exams with her? Did she cross their path on a long ago mission to the Country of Grass? These people she doesn't know aren't afraid of her. She isn't afraid of them, either—no more than she's afraid of herself. They look at her with a kind of bare bones connection, the kind of thing born from blood and steel and holding strong even when there's nothing left. They have something stretched between
them, something created in battle and through shared injury, pulled sticky around them. They aren't afraid of her, even if they are afraid of Naruto.

But Naruto isn't like that.

Oh, physically, sure—he's a ninja, and there isn't anything soft about that, nothing soft about sharp knives and tight-knit muscle and the eyes, all angry and hard and painful, or the teeth, pointed and predatory and dangerous. She's even acknowledged to herself, objectively, that he's dangerous and deadly, that there's something unsettling about how he grins with all his teeth when he's standing over a dead body. There's nothing soft about him there, not physically, not bodily, not unless she took a knife and pulled his skin apart to the organs underneath, not unless she pulled at his tongue until she could show the world how easily it gives to a blade. It used to be the only thing she could think that would prove he's human, too, that he hurts, too, that he cries the same way they do—that he, too, is a human who screams and bleeds and howls.

But she isn't going to do that, so for the sake of things, no. There is nothing soft about him, not physically, not bodily.

The whole of the Elemental Nations might think him little more than a killer, than a weapon utilized in a time of crisis. The army he fights for might think he's a monster. Ino knows otherwise. She knows soft eyes and warm skin, cool hands and the slow pull of a brush before calloused fingers braid through her hair. She knows small smiles and hot, angry tears. Ino knows better.

(Sometimes she wonders if it's the opposite, if she's been wrong for years now and the things she thought she saw in him were never there at all. If he's a monster and she's an idiot and everyone else always knew, if he's been tricking her, if he's smiling to himself when they watch the sun go down not in an attempt at optimism but from the promise of more blood to spill. Sometimes she looks at him and she doesn't know what she sees.

There's no way to find out.)

Ino's always seen that vulnerability as somehow something private. His actions left the young, shiny boy forgotten in the face of them, left the kid forgotten for people who'd never spoken to him and never would. It seemed to those on the outside Naruto was immortal. Inhuman. The unscarred part of him has always seemed somehow secret to her, somehow sacred. The pulse under his skin and the softness of his hands; the way he'd go weak against her when they had a second away from the fighting, dead bodies in the grass and his hands sticky from blood, his face messy from dirt.

It occurs to her now it's never been a secret.

Naruto's face presses against Ino's shoulder, tiny pained gasps of air puffing against the bare skin of Ino's neck and it hits how alive he feels. In this moment where he is still breathing, where he's still moving and his skin is still warm, it seems impossible he would ever stop. Knives have split his skin and she's got a hand pressed to the side of his neck in some semblance of intimacy and blood bubbles up through her fingers and it's messy and she can feel more than hear him hissing in pain but he's still alive and that's what Ino thinks, what she fixates on. That's what sticks for her. Alive.

This alive part of him—it has never belonged to her. Now it's rotting and dying and slipping between her fingers and it feels like she's burning, like a scar is starting to tingling against her spine. He never belonged to her. Naruto's dying. He is not immortal. It was never a secret. His dead body will rot.

Ino holds him and thinks of Madara and burns. Naruto was never hers. His life belongs to his killer.

He tries to lift his head out from the crook of her neck, away from the soft part of her between a
harsh jaw and strong shoulders. It's a struggle, and his cheek falls against her forehead and it seems as though time has stopped. "Run," Naruto murmurs, voice weak and blood dribbling from his mouth, staying upright only by leaning against Ino. "Run, Ino."

His blood's splattered across Ino's body, staining her clothes and splashed across her cheeks, leaving her skin feeling hot and touched and tainted and dirty. Her fingers convulse momentarily, fingernails stabbing into his shoulders instead of forming tiny crescent moons in her palms. "No," Ino says and it isn't to Naruto. He isn't supposed to die.

A part of Ino has never been meant for war. A part of her has never been fit for a shinobi and there's no insult in that. This world is cruel and she has never wanted it. She wants to gag, wants to stumble back in something like shock or disgust or fear. A part of her feels so, so dirty, with his blood smeared across her skin and his breath still feeling warm against her neck and she suddenly isn't sure if she's ever felt like this before. People die in war and Ino's watched them do it. She's helped fling her friends into unmarked mass graves she's seen them later the way grass grows over the dirt and animals bite at the stems even though it's rotted she's watched the funeral pyres go up with a backdrop of the moon dipping below the horizon she's watched people die. She's killed them, too. People die in war and Ino knows this.

Naruto always felt different to her. She sometimes thought fate, destiny, the world would keep him alive. He always felt different to her. Even when she had the nerve to think his softness was a secret for her alone she still felt as though he were something ethereal. The part of her not built for war is thinking of funerals and caskets, of gravestones and her demolished village, and this part of her thinks, We deserve better.

Naruto deserves better, this part of her says. Another piece of her writhes, hot and harsh and angry because she was an idiot and she thought Naruto was forever and that he was going to save her and he isn't. He's dead and no one will save her and she couldn't save him, either.

Naruto gasps out another breath, lips brushing against her hair, and his body slumps against her as his breath stills. She thinks about all the things they never said and the way there's blood drooling from his mouth and staining the underside of her chin. She thinks about the things she's lost the homes that have burned the friends who died and he's all she had left. There's still a warmth to him and Ino is clinging, now, and it isn't fair he's all she had left it isn't fair she needs him—he is all she has left—and he's limp and dead and Ino isn't allowed to need anyone.

The part of Ino unfit for war dies with him, and she pushes at his shoulders, pushes at his limp body, pushes until the weight of it falls away from her. Naruto falls to the dirt. Dead.

It's almost as though she's forgotten to breathe. She chokes past her closed throat.

Uzumaki Naruto's dead. The sentence itself has an eeriness, a wrongness. Naruto-is-dead. It isn't right. The world can't continue without him. A world without Naruto—it's the strangest thought she's ever had. He's all she has. Had.

A twig snaps, and the world starts again.

Ino runs.

She has no time for tears and even as they blur her vision she refuses to let them fall. She'd rather her cheeks bloodied than marred with tracks of salt. She has no time to cry for Naruto, not when she would be crying for herself, for her death realized. He tried to protect her, always acted as a wall
between Ino and the war, between Madara's rising age of supremacy and the army he led. She's one of the last relics of Konoha, of their past, and he's done his best to preserve her.

(she is going to scream)

Ino doesn't have time for this.

She lunges into the trees, a tiny jet of gray flashing through the forest with a speed rarely matched, and this is a charade, she thinks, as she swings higher into the trees, long hair curling down her shoulders. This grand game of pretending she can escape will eventually grow old but she goes higher and higher, the branches getting thinner and thinner, and the sky closer and closer.

(she thinks of bloody lips pressing into her hair, of a hand against her cheek and so fucking much unsaid)

Branches stab at her arms and she can't tell what's her blood and what's his, her muscles going reckless, a kind speaking not of carelessness but instead a sort of apathy and maybe she is giving up. Maybe they did die in vain. She feels nearly empty now, and a void running through her is peeling the thin layers of her skin, leaving only a small voice, whispering, "Run, Ino," on a loop in her ears.

(I'm sorry, she thinks, and she means it.)

And Ino does not have time for this because Uchiha Madara is coming to kill her and she's halfway to a tree branch when a knife catches her shirt sleeve and her shoulder is pinned she rips away, the cloth tearing, and she knows he doesn't miss and—

Yamanaka Ino is going to die.

Maybe it is giving up and maybe those before her died in vain. Maybe it is. But he's stronger and better and going to kill her and if he could kill Naruto—and he did kill Naruto she knows it she was there she watched—then of course he can kill her. Ino's last thread was Naruto but even she can admit it, can admit that when his eyes were red from a monster he killed and kunai could bite into him only to be spat out and for the skin to seal shut a second after she can admit it. He's terrifying and he's dead. Ino doesn't want to die and it isn't about that. Her wants don't matter here and maybe they never did. Uchiha Madara's picked off the shinobi of the Elemental Nations in roves. He's swept through their forces as though they were grains of sand to an ocean and a kunai catches her tunic at the neck, her head jerking from the force of it and hitting against the tree trunk, her feet pointing down so she's stretching out her toes. She can just barely brush the branch a bit behind her. It isn't enough to gain a hold, isn't enough to stand, and she's hanging from a strip of fabric.

She writhes, twisting, her shoulder straining and—

A kunai goes through her wrist, cutting through it to the bark. Her shirt rips; she is hanging from her wrist, from her own flesh. She can hear the way her skin pulls, the way the muscle inside her tears from the force.

(it hurts. it hurts and hurts and hurts and hurts and hurts and—)

Ino screams.

For a moment she thinks she might have gone blind. The world is all white noise, all black dots and sharp rasps and Ino can't stop looking at it, at the kunai handle dipping into her wrist and the blood. She tries to twitch her index finger and finds that she can't.

A choked breath leaves her mouth. She makes a noise somewhere between a moan and a howl. Skin
touches skin; a hand roughly pulls Ino's face up. "Hello, Ino," Madara says, and Ino can't speak. She stares at him, looking into the strangely, disgustingly enchanting corpse eyes of the Uchiha, watching the cruel smirk tilt across his face.

Uchiha Madara's hand reaches out and traces her cheek, one bare finger inching over her skin and he might as well be made of flames for the trail of burns he inks across her jawline. Stings follow his touch—singes blossoming in the path he left on her skin. His hand travels down to her neck, his thumb smearing the blood still drooled over her. Two of his fingers trace the necklace looped around her neck, and she can't breathe.

Yamanaka Ino isn't the sentimental type.

There are some people who need snowglobes to ground themselves, need figurines scattered along bookshelves and tabletops, bracelets to cling to and rings to tug on. Candles to litter desktops and colorful pens to stuff into cups. Notebooks and baby blankets and keychains. There's little value to place on them. She imagines in a different life they would have meant more to her. In another world, as another girl, she might have been the type to rub gently on a wedding ring or carefully tie back frilly curtains. Ino has no curtains and she had no wedding. She's not the sentimental type and this necklace is ages old, just a green crystal that could've bought mountains once and a worn brown string of leather.

There's still something dehumanizing about it, about the loss of physical objects and material comforts. There's something animalistic and wrong about living in the forests with her only comfort the skin over her bones. There's something painful about it, and as the cord of Ino's necklace snaps easily under Madara's hand, the sting goes from her stomach to her toes.

Uchiha Madara smiles.

It is an ugly thing.

"Goodbye, Ino," he says. Maybe this war has gone on long enough for him to consider himself of value to her, for him to think they have a connection, but it makes Ino feel sick, like just by saying her name he is tainting her, poisoning her with the madness running through his own veins. Ino can see all the evil she's ever known stacking itself across his face right in this moment of small peace in which he has not yet killed her and she watches the shades of black curl around Madara's expression like plastic wrap.

He's going to kill her. She's going to die.

Time slows. It feels as though she's only a witness, watching her own body. He leans closer to her, just inches away, and there's a knife in his hand. She can feel the pulse of her wrist, the blood drooling from her body down the tree trunk. He's never been one for knives, has never specialized in them. Madara's a man of the sword and his chakra's even more dangerous. She knows why she is to die this way, bleeding and immobile and biting down a scream.

She doesn't deserve anything better. She doesn't deserve his respect. She isn't worth more than a slit throat.

The blade traces her neck, and blood starts to bead, wiggling down her skin. Her working hand automatically start to slide into a single familiar seal, her lips forming equally familiar words even as the blade starts a journey upwards, opening skin over her jaw. Madara draws an uneven line over Ino's cheek, digging the blade in, stripping back her skin, and it hurts. The blade catches on the edge of her mouth, cutting into her, and it hurts. She can see her own breath heating the knife's metal blade when he cuts into her lip.
Madara's eyes are black and empty and inches from her own, but Ino almost thinks she sees something in them—she can't have, though, because this is Uchiha Madara, and it's a surety he's never felt panic or fear or happiness or really anything at all. The war against him has been going on long enough for Ino to know.

"Shintenshin no Jutsu," she breaths, and then the blade sinks into the flesh of her neck. For a moment, she's choking, her own blood filling her throat, her trapped arm shaking in a series of spasms and her wrist shrieking because it is so far from numb.

Her eyes go glazed and there is no pain.

_Run, Ino._

Yamanaka Ino is dead.

…

Ino jerks alive with tears spilling over her face and a scream caught in her throat.

Her body's heavy and weak and blankets bury her hands. She's choking on something, and bile builds in her throat until she vomits. It's mostly stomach acid, and she can feel it on her chin, dripping down her neck. For a long second stretching to forever, Ino just breathes, her fingers clenching and unclenching in the sheets and her hand, her left wrist—

Her hand flies to it. Her wrist is fine.

Wait.

Ino blinks, eyes adjusting to the sunlight. The room's practically bathed in it, and it drips across the floor and licks at Ino's feet. There are two things shaking in her mind, two different people within her head. One is a child. This room is hers, and it is familiar. It is safe and warm and good. One is a child, and she's pushing at the invasion with the force of a small bird, shoving at the entire ocean that has fallen over her and managing to displace barely a couple drops.

The other has blood on her throat and her bones feel sticky inside her and she's somewhere between crying and killing.

Somewhere in the middle, Ino slides across the bed, feet reaching to the floor. Only the tips of her toes manage to brush against the carpet. She slips from the bed, hands feeling along the room. She drifts to a small window, and behind thick gray curtains, a village beckons. Ino's faced with a sea of buildings, and even further are lively green trees. Ino stares, and four stone faces stare back.

She doesn't remember what happens after the throat is slit—she took anatomy, too, trained in medical ninjutsu, too—but she doesn't remember now if the vocal cords survive. Speech isn't possible—of course it isn't, not for a corpse—but she brings hand to her throat now and feels at it. It is whole. She is whole. Her hands travel down her body, over unscarred skin and smooth shoulders and bones that remain free of bruises. Her fingers feel their way up and down the length of her, pulling at her too-short hair and there are no scars on her face, no cuts on her lips. She feels for the impressions of her skin, for the places where her body goes concave like a crater on the moon, and there is nothing.

She is whole and a stranger and she swallows hard on the thick saliva building in her mouth.

(It's bright and calm and sunny with light dripping down the room like honey and the quiet sounds of living beginning to echo through the house when Ino starts to scream.)
It's a couple months of this, of going to school and eating breakfast and feeling her own useless limbs when she tries to throw kunai before she realizes her name is still Yamanaka Ino and she's ten years old. Ino ties a cord into her hair, braiding it within the strands and giving herself a lacy ribbon of steel. It glitters when the sun hits it and it feels smooth against the pad of her thumb. It feels loud, clear, in a way implying truth instead of the falsehood curling in Ino's stomach like a toxic snake.

It's a ribbon. It's a piece of cast off metal, useless and cold. But. It feels like something real. Ino could use something real. Her hair is too short and her body too weak, but her name is still Yamanaka Ino.

Ino watches her own face in the mirror, head tilting to the side and the string shining in the light. Her hand inches forward, pressing against the glass. Ino examines the girl's expression, her eyes narrowed. It looks like the girl in the mirror is fiercely attempting seriousness, but her rounded face, still chubby with baby fat, doesn't allow it.

Ino reaches a hand towards the girl, and the mirror girl does the same. The hand Ino sees—the hand attached to her wrist attached to her shoulder attached to Ino—is very small, and very young.

"That's my hand," Ino says, reminding herself. Sometimes it hits her, sometimes it hits hard, and then something inside her writhes. The girl in the mirror has short hair and baggy clothes and Ino can remember. Yamanaka Ino was a boyish girl, the kind to play in the mud and roll around in the grass. She was a messy girl, and Ino can tell from the bruises on her knees that it's true. Yamanaka Ino is ten years old.

Unmarked graves dance along the edges of Ino's vision and she blinks rapidly to clear them. Her thoughts flee—she can't catch up to them—and Ino has the strangest sensation of waking up from a dream she can't remember. An itch starts in the back of her mind, and it's just on the tip of tongue.

(A little girl in her head is babbling, shouting, crying, and—)

"Shut up," Ino murmurs lowly, one hand pressed to her temple. Her nails start to dig into her skin, first lightly, like an afterthought, and then with more intention, more power, more force. Ino reaches for the counter, steadying, and her hand slowly detaches from her skull, leaving behind five tiny rips in the skin of her scalp, the hand pulling out of her hair before she can give herself a lobotomy. Yamanaka Ino's ten years old and she's loud and she's wild and it makes Ino want to scream.

Ino's nose curls. There's a girl inside Ino who's a child and Ino hasn't quite managed to shake her out. She doesn't have time for it. Ino looks into the blue eyes in the mirror and feels her breath leave her. "Everyone's dead," she says, softly, quietly. She can still feel the blood in her throat, and when she meets her own eyes in the mirror, a little girl stares back.

"No one's dead," the little girl says, clean cheeks shining and blue eyes bright. She's lost, swept under from the sheer force of the wave Ino brings. Her memories sit below the surface, half buried in sand, and no matter how she claws at the surface, this ocean will never belong to her again. Ino's an invader here, the enemy, but she knows from experience that the enemy can easily win. The little girl leans forward, a clean heart with good intent, and it's disgusting. "No one's dead," she repeats, and it's a ripple bouncing across the water.

There are two people inside Ino's head. One is a girl. The other is much more. The two cannot coexist for long.

"Not yet," Ino tells her, and Ino is a wave. The little girl recoils, and Ino pulls her hand from the glass. The little girl's small fingers linger at the edge, clawing at it like she wants to break free.
Ino turns away from the mirror. She's got better places to be.

She pulls chain metal on under her shirt and cuts one of her tiny baby fingers on it when she's trying to fit her vaguely uncoordinated arm through the sleeve. It's uncomfortable—her body isn't used to wearing it, isn't strong enough for it. Everything about her body is wrong. It's too small, too weak; it's inflexible and graceless. She can remember the way her own body was, sewn into her soul and matching her movements perfectly. Bodies are easy to control, but only her own ever truly fit. There's a reason Yamanaka don't often hide inside the heads of others; their own bodies fit better.

This body is worthless to her, but it's all she's got.

(it's all wrong it's so wrong and Ino wants to scream)

Ino's wrapped in armor of her own making and she steps lightly into the academy like she's casing the place, like she's preparing an escape. Naruto's there, and he's loud and elaborate and makes Ino want to scream. Sakura's there too, so shiny and young that it makes something deep inside Ino's stomach ache, makes something inside her chest just fold down under itself, just collapse under the weight, and for a second Ino can't breathe.

So frequently does she find herself unable to breathe.

It's like a pipe dream. Sakura smiles and Ino smiles back, reflexive and bittersweet. Sakura might be a dead girl, but she's alive and whole and clean. No one's dead yet, someone inside Ino murmurs, and she takes a step forward because Sakura's alive and whole and—Ino is whole and a stranger—the little girl under the ocean breaks her face above the surface of the water, eyes bright and that's when she sees him.

His name is Uchiha Sasuke. She's been in the academy with him for two years. Before that, they were in primary school together, in the same class two times of the four. Ino knows him and likes him, maybe even likes him, and when she looks at him she feels so much hate it stills her.

He's sitting at a desk by the window and he looks up when the door slides shut. Ino locks eyes with him, and his eyes are very dark and very black and Ino thinks, for just a second, that it seems very possible that if she stares too long she'll go tumbling into that void forever, lost.

In this second, there is no Naruto. There is no Sakura.

The ocean sends a wave ripping over the little girl's head and the ocean says it's always been about the three of them, always been the circle surrounding them, until Sasuke killed the world and Naruto killed him and Sakura killed herself and there's no way out of that so. There's no one. There's Ino and a killer and a world to save and no one's dead yet and that's all there is room for and the little girl, swamped by these memories and swamped by the weight, begins to drown.

Ino explodes back to the surface, her throat full of something stickier than water, choking and coughing and fighting with a heavy sea even though she can't win. Ino isn't entirely sure what it is about Uchiha Sasuke, what it is he's doing or has done to make her feel an anger better fitting a wild animal. She abruptly finds she isn't entirely sure of anything. There are too many things to choose from, too many options rolling around in her head, and none of the paths are clear and she finds it suddenly difficult to remember where she is, what she's doing. When she sees him, she can't breathe. Dead girls don't lie but Ino's never been fond of telling the truth.

It's strange. Yamanaka Ino is a child and yet she is not.

There isn't any physical defect. She's got ten fingers, two feet, ten toes. Her skin's soft, her eyes clear,
and her cheeks fat. She's got bright eyes and blond hair drooling over her shoulders and all of her teeth. The body is all child, all small hands linked to small wrists. This body is pudgy fingers and fat tears, creamy skin and tripping feet. A weak grip and all her joints safely in place, unbroken.

This body belongs to the little girl. Ino's taken it instead.

Ino's the one who isn't a child, despite how her body attempts to coax her back to the smooth comfort of brightly colored cotton sheets and frilly dresses and purple painted walls and ice cream and coloring books and markers and other useless childlike things. Ino isn't a child even though there is one above water, watching the world and controlling this body; there's still Ino, screeching like the grind of metal on metal, hissing into this child's ears and leaving her eyes hollow from a war inside her head. Her body might be all wrong, but one day, hair grown long and fingernails encased in metal, she's going to save the world.

Save the world from Sasuke, a little girl thinks, and she stares at him and she thinks her heart stops. Ino feels herself take a couple steps toward him, deliberately and beyond her will. Sakura seems to notice, because her face falls and she starts to look confused and very lost but this isn't about Sakura, not anymore. It's always been about Sakura to Ino, always been about avenging the one grave she couldn't bring herself to dig, but it can't be, not now.

Ino looks away from Sakura. She stares at Sasuke and takes another step because this is the boy who's going to destroy her world.

She's ten and he's ten and it's hard to believe Uchiha Sasuke was ever a child.

It's funny to think his eyes will end up so deadly. Sasuke's eyes are huge, long lashes lining them with black, and he doesn't look dangerous at all. It's best to catch a tumor like him early, and the little girl starts to cry, pushing at the water and desperate and she doesn't want to die any more than the older girl wants to kill her. They're soft tears, almost silent, because just a little while ago the little girl was happy and now nothing is alright and the nightmares she has aren't normal at all and no little girl should know the feeling of slitting a throat and she's not just lost, she's trapped. Ino's the one who trapped her.

"Hi," Ino says, and Sasuke looks up at her, apprehensive and small. "You're Sasuke, right?"

Ino sits down next to him in the same motion as his nod. She pulls a pen out of her bag, settling it along the desk with one hand tight around it. Naruto's a bit behind Sasuke and to the left, in the row above them. She can feel his eyes digging into the back of her head and her resolve strengthens.

(She's doing this for him, after all. For Naruto and Sakura and Shikamaru and Hinata and Kiba and Asuma and all the people she hasn't met yet but already knows. They don't deserve to die.)

"And you're Ino." Sasuke's looking at her like she's competition, and she shifts her grip on the pen. Not a pencil, of course, not a pencil. The point would break. Ino's accidentally stabbed herself with a pencil before—the graphite stayed in her hand for years, since Ino couldn't figure out a way to remove it without giving herself a horrible scar. She thinks about the way words written in pencil can be brushed aside, pushed away, smudged beyond repair. Pencils are unreliable.

Ino has to do it. She knows that now. She woke up this morning ten years old despite the monster in her head and even though it haunts her, rages against her—it tied a ribbon that wasn't a ribbon in her hair and told her everyone was dead—but she's back, now, a little girl, and she has to kill him. She's not a soldier, not at heart or in body, and she isn't mature enough for her first loyalty to be her country, but she's ten and her parents are dead-alive and she has to kill him. Uchiha Sasuke destroys Konoha.
So she's ten years old and Ino stands up, out of her chair. She smiles, wide and big and pretty, for the classroom. Sasuke's mouth is still curled up, just a little, and it looks like the face she used to see her killer wear and Ino isn't sure she can fully handle the sight of it. She can only see two versions of him; a little boy and the same one blood on his face and the worst kind of smile to him. She can't piece through the memories she's got and even above the ocean, surviving through increasingly violent waves, it still rules her and she's going insane.

She's ten years old and barely over the surface of madness and Uchiha Sasuke needs to die.

She leans down close to him, so close to him she can see that there is actually a very small freckle hiding in the shadow of his brow bone, just a small dot of skin discoloration in the corner of the outside of his left eye. She likes the flaw of it.

(In her head, Ino adjusts the pen in her hand and she stabs him in the neck with it. She severely overestimates the strength of the little girl hand, even if it's calloused and throws knives, and although the pen pierces the skin easily, it doesn't exactly do the job. Sasuke starts to choke on what would be a scream. In her head, Ino leaps forward on top of him like a wild cat and he goes tumbling out of his chair, to the floor, while Ino tries fiercely to force the pen in deeper.

The dream plays out, someone grabbing her arm, yanking her back, and then it's over.

Khori-san—the teacher, the little girl's teacher—rips at Ino's arm and Ino's going backwards. Her grip on the pen is firm enough to pull it with her, right out of Sasuke's previously unblemished white gold skin. Ino imagines kicking him in the face before she's out of range, catching the sound of breaking cartilage. Sasuke's not screaming anymore. She can't put together the sight of him, evil and tall and beautiful and capable of a grand terror she will never achieve, with playing on the swings and copying his homework and in her head, he's clutching his throat, blood going from his nose up over his forehead to drip into his hair. It's almost beautiful. In her head, Sasuke's a monster. They just don't know it yet. If Ino has it her way, they never will. She's somewhere between twenty three and ten, somewhere between alive and dead. This body can only have one of them and Yamanaka Ino is ten years old and being consumed. All she can hear is screaming all she can see is blood how is she supposed to handle this she has to kill him she has to and—

In her head, the little girl slips under the water, mouth filling with it, choking, screaming, and Ino's eyes go sharp.)

She sits back down and opens her notebook. "I'm only sitting here to copy off you," she says, choked, abrupt, the words familiar with her ten year old mouth but painful where they echo across her mind and she almost tried to kill him. She can see it all reflected in the anger of her ocean, can see it in the drowning girl and the screams she can still hear. The little girl sinks down, down, down, tiny feet kicking uselessly, sand pulling at her toes and seaweed curling along her ankles and her eyes flutter, her struggles starting to cease.

Sasuke snorts, then, disgusted but nowhere near what he could be, and Ino blinks rapidly at her own notebook, at her own shaking hands, at the little girl who saw her parents dead to this boy's hands and was going to kill him for it. Be smart, she thinks, harshly, the words stuttered and lost. Be smart, be smart. The little girl goes still. She is dead.

Ino's painfully aware of Sasuke beside her for the remainder of the day.

…

Yamanaka Ino is dead. Only
she

isn't.

It probably isn't nearly as strange as it sounds.
Chapter Summary

The day passes and passes and passes and Ino is twelve.

Chapter Notes

this is super au and not canon compliant at all! i'm also too lazy to look things up so idk if the yamanaka family has a compound or not but i'm gonna say they do only Ino doesn't live in it because in a filler episode, Ino walks out of her house and it looks kinda apartmenty to me so I'm gonna say she lives in the building the flower shop is in, like her family owns all three floors or whatever and that's where she lives. i do this a lot because writing is more stressful when everything has to be "right." the world ino comes from isn't canon compliant, and more about it will come into focus over the course of the story. thank you all for reading i am very very happy about it! i really hope this doesn’t disappoint you but if it does that’s okay because this is the first time i’ve written in a while and i’m...kind of proud of myself. thank you so much for reading! no beta

Ino fic rec: Five Friends Ino Should Have Made During her Academy Years by gladdecease, hosted on ao3. short and sweet love it

song rec: Something to Believe In by Young the Giant

A-S p-H-o d e L

[cedar]
  think
  of
  me

Ino shifts delicately in her seat, the movement practiced and minuscule. Still, Mother's face goes sharp, a glint in narrowed eyes. It's a warning and it makes Ino's skin crawl. This used to be a bonding exercise, training, even, but now she's uncomfortable and at a breakfast table with strangers, her every movement cataloged and her every absent gesture watched. It's unsettling. The sun isn't even up yet and already Ino feels she's doing everything wrong.

She's ten, a child. Children are told to be polite, to talk softly, or maybe not to talk at all. This might be to instill good manners. Maybe it's a social form of conditioning or maybe it's because children get damn annoying so it's for the best if they know to shut up and maybe later they'll be eating dinner with a killer and they're going to need to know not to hold their breath but instead to hold their tongue. It doesn't matter to her. Ino's never been told to be polite. She's never been scolded for rudeness.

Maybe that's what her mother would do if free to. Maybe if she'd been a civilian child with civilian parts made from civilian parents—maybe then they would tell her to be seen and not heard. As it
stands, Ino’s from a shinobi world. She isn’t taught to be polite; she’s taught to trick people. Your thoughts are a secret, her father used to say. The thoughts of others were, too, but those were secrets never safe from a Yamanaka. Guard them. She’s taught to put up a good front, taught to be pretty and petty in the same breath. Ino’s complimented not for her achievements, not for her grades, not for her sharp kunai or her even sharper mouth. Ino’s pretty. Her talent is her face. Ino's worth is not and never will be in her power. Beauty. It’s what Ino was built for. Her parents love her, sure, and they always have—they just don’t respect her.

She’s ten. Why would they?

"Sit up straight, Ino," her mother says and Ino does, spine pulling itself up like a climb. Her father goes to work earlier than Ino goes to school and everyone at the table is exhausted. Their breakfast ritual is one that continues out of pride, although none of the neighbors would know if they decided to eat half a bagel in the morning and regain at least an hour of sleep. It’s as though they believe themselves to be royalty; in reality, the Yamanaka are a minor clan and Ino thinks it's ridiculous.

But appearances, appearances—these are Ino's trade. This is what they give her.

She used to take pride in it, too. She'd walk into the academy, eyes bright, feeling as though she'd left breakfast a princess. It seems idiotic, now. It seems tiresome. She needs to be training and fighting and reading, ripping open library books so harshly there's a half-minded fear they'll tear. She doesn't need to be holding a small rice bowl in front of her, delicately bringing bite after bite up in wooden chopsticks.

Yes, yes, she knows—you must sit up straight and you must dress nicely and you must eat with the proper utensils and arrange the flowers as asked and pull your hair from your face and you must, must, must be good (on the outside, anyway—the inside doesn't really matter much). But she doesn’t feel like she has the time and maybe she doesn’t.

Father is good at it—very good. He eats like a civilian, even though he comes from shinobi blood both ways. Mother isn’t a ninja, so her refined, tiny bites aren’t as impressive. Father, though, eats like a nobleman. He eats like a thin-faced narrow-eyed nobleman.

Ino sets her empty bowl back to the wooden tabletop, chopsticks going horizontally on top. "May I be excused?" she asks, and the sun is starting to peek into the open kitchen window. Father glances up from his gyoza.

Her mother raises one delicate eyebrow. The image sends bile up her mouth, and she swallows painfully. Ino's mother is dead. This woman terrifies her. "You shouldn't eat so quickly, Ino," she chides. Her light brown hair is down around her shoulders; her eyes are brown, too, but so dark they almost appear red. Ino wasn’t there when Sasuke killed her. She’d been somewhere in Rice Country, seventeen and an idiot, when Sasuke came back to Konoha and set it to burn. Ino wasn’t there when he killed her, so when she remembers her mother all she sees is the corpse, the aftermath, the blood on her dress and her glazed eyes and the way her skin was a bit grey.

"I've got a lot of things to do, you know," Ino says.

"Oh?" says Mother, skin healthy and lips pulled into a thin line. "Such as?"

"Study," she says, feeling patronized and dumb and she isn't doing anything right. She's here, somehow, sent her soul into Madara's world-warping-time-mapping eyes and popped out the other side, and she's going to save her parents, but what good is saving their lives if they lose their only daughter? Ino's not the same, not right, not the way she was, and the little girl dead in the sand within Ino's mind proves it. She isn't acting right, isn't playing this right. "I'm going to pick out a sword from
Father's interest visibly rises, his eyes going from his plate to Ino's face. They've got the same eyes, the same hair. Ino's a Yamanaka. But there's a bit that's off to the reflection. Ino's younger, and her jaw is softer, her eyes free of wrinkles and just a bit more feminine, almost cat-like. Her hair is paler, shorter. "I don't remember hearing about this," he says. They don't live in the clan compound. There isn't a Yamanaka who does, now. It's a museum. They live above the flower shop her mother owned before marrying Inoichi, and upstairs is where Father keeps his share of Yamanaka relics. Her clan is scattered across Konoha, each with their own portion of old arrows and dusty books.

"I graduate in two years," Ino says, shrugging. "I want one."

"A sword?" Her mother looks appalled, and as though she was processing before managing to come up with a response. "Ino, you're ten; that's insanity!"

(Seven years from now and six years ago the war's only been going strong for two months before it became clear that insanity wasn't the monogamous type. It's a homewrecker, and a lot of people got smashed, so some Iwa nin were starting psychological help. They'd asked Ino to help, to dig around inside the brains of her allies and pull them back together. The mental health support system of shinobi is notoriously bad but no one's ever minded before. Being crazy is part of the kick. It's part of the rush. No sane person would find this life bearable much less enjoyable and Ino enjoyed it quite a bit. She's never thought of herself as the type of girl to need therapy. Yoga wasn't gonna make her better. A gratitude journal wasn't gonna cure her.

She stood just close enough to keep an eye on them, watching the shinobi go in and out, slumping against the wooden pole of a tent, eyes scanning the rocky hills, Sakura absent-mindedly healing the small cuts lining Ino's cheeks. The short bumps in the horizon felt like mountains. Ino missed her trees, missed the green of it.

"Bet the Iwa nin feel right at home," Ino muttered, one foot kicking at the ground. Her eyes were narrowed, staring down the ninja gravitating towards the therapy tent. "Down in the fucking dirt, I mean."

"Ino," Sakura warned, not really meaning it, and Ino made a noise that could be taken as an apology. Something about the optimism made Ino feel like screaming. How like Iwa nin—not everyone can be fixed. Ino knew that. They should, too.

Ino's a ninja, and she's had her fair share of trysts with insanity.

She'd always been the dominant one, always been the one to take someone's hand and pull them to the wild, but when her mind fled her, the wild was the one to take Ino to bed instead of the other way around. It curled around her when there was just a hint of alcohol to her breath and tempted her into tugging another cigarette out of her pocket. Her hands shook and her lips stung and her hair's messy and it got her. Even if it caught her by surprise, she was still the one trapped, still the prey to its predator.

Ino wanted to say she wore her mania like a dress. She wanted to say she danced with it, free and feral and laughing loud enough to blind her. She wanted to say she owned this side to her, wanted to say she could smile even when her head's heedy with dementia.

She couldn't. It'd be a lie.

Insanity took her, undomesticated and disorderly—and when it's done, it left her boiling and furious and spitting blood. It slipped under her skin and clawed at her mouth until she couldn't breathe.
"Ino," Sakura said, her eyes soft and her hands softer. One finger brushed against Ino's jaw, dangerously close to the edge of her lip, and Ino glanced over at Sakura's face, eyes gleaming. Sakura's eyes were darker, it seemed like. War must've stained them. Sakura looked to the tent pointedly. "You should go."

Ino closed her eyes. Leaned her cheek into Sakura's hand. "You're a good friend," she said.

"Ino—"

"But I'm not going."

"Ino."

"I'm not!" Ino shrugged Sakura away, face twisting because she wasn't weak and she didn't need help and Sakura should know that. "I'm fine," she growled. The last time someone tried to fix her they went into her head and by the end she had to be gagged to stop the screaming. No one can be fixed.

"They might help you." A pause, and then, "It's okay to need help."

Ino bristled.

They can't fix me I'm not broken who do you think I am)

Ino blinks and she's ten again.

Inoichi looks at her fondly, like he's humoring her, like this is one of her childish whims that won't last a day. It's true that from the beginning, from the moment following her conception, Ino was going to be a shinobi. The shinobi system is all about supply and demand, but, like most things, the supply depends on the audience. Sometimes someone needs an army. But Ino has never been meant to be that kind. Ino isn't a knife. She is a mirror. That is her strength. She's meant as a facade.

"I won't be dumb with it," Ino presses, trying to reach into herself, dig up the girl who screamed for months before falling apart under Ino's weight. "I promise. You won't even have to really spend time teaching me how to use it. I have teachers and the library."

Ino's vain. She's selfish. Her parents raised her like that. She knows they aren't attractive traits.

Quite frankly, she doesn't care. She might not be special or kind, might not be good. That's okay. There's a kind of dignity to it, a kind of honor in sitting pretty. Even to the end, even to the blade in her throat and the blood drying sticky on her skin, Ino was gorgeous. There's a kind of pride in it. She's never tried to be how she is. She's been gently corralled here and now she can't help herself. Ino's been molded to want.

But what?

That's where things shift.

What does Yamanaka Ino want?

And how, Ino asks herself, can she get it?

Inoichi laughs. It's too natural. The sound isn't harsh or grated. Ino hasn't heard a laugh like that in years. It is more frightening and eerie than she can describe.

"I've never been able to stop you, Ino." He's smiling at her. Ino forces a similar expression to emerge.
"Make sure you don't stab anyone, alright?"

Ino nods and tries to take the tension from her bones. Her mother is tight-lipped now. Acknowledging the world of shinobi, that Ino is a shinobi, swords and jutsu and training—these things make her uncomfortable. She doesn't think it's lady-like. Ino and her once bonded often over their shared love of flowers. It was the only time Ino was allowed to speak freely, hands dirty in the back of the flower shop, grinning over at her mother and potting something beautiful, something alive. Ino loves her flowers. She loves them more than she can explain. They are beautiful and alive and the only thing in this world Ino knows. "Breakfast was wonderful," Ino tells her, as an apology.

Mother doesn't look up.

…

She actually ends up taking something closer to a knife.

It's a tanto, as long as her forearm and shiny enough to gleam a bit. Embarrassingly, Ino couldn't much lift her original pick. It was just a ninjato, but she'd been barely able to get it off the ground. She'd started using short swords after she'd pulled Sai's tanto off his dead body but no one's dead yet and she thought she could use something different. But she couldn't lift it so she's alive and has a tanto. It made her feel shriveled and weak and small, but the shorter blade had always seemed more her style anyway.

("You're pathetic," Ino can imagine her old body saying to her, beautiful and regal and cruel. She can imagine her own face, disappointed and noble and it makes her feel so, so small.)

She's sitting on a school bench, Sakura to her right and a window to her left, and Khori-san is talking about elemental theory and Ino's thinking about failure. Uchiha Itachi, ANBU captain by twelve. Orochimaru of the Sannin, first shinobi in the Konoha bingo book to have a flee-on-sight order. Namikaze Minato, genius and the Hokage and the one who won the third war. Hatake Kakashi—

Sakura slides a piece of paper across the desk. Are you okay? the paper says. Ino looks at Sakura and tries her best smile.

It goes like this: they've been teaching her how to attack her friends for years, been putting her against them with knives and fists. This village has placed her in a classroom of children and reminded her that it's a competition, that she has to work for it, that she's gotta beg like a stray dog and be twice as feral.

It goes like this: Ino's smart and she's fast and she's strong and her scores—both practical and written—have never been better and Ino feels nothing. She is dead and she feels nothing.

It goes like this: Sakura smiles back and something inside Ino can breathe again.

(kill your enemies kill your allies kill yourself)

Yamanaka Ino is a ghost and she knows this.

She can remember someone—a girl a woman a weapon—and it's familiar the way an old song would be. She can remember it, can practically feel it on her skin but. She doesn't know who that person is. Ino doesn't know who she is. She's ten years old and she hates this, she hates giving up, hates getting lost to the wake of a life she's never lived. She has to be awake now. She wants to live. Yamanaka Ino gets what she wants.

There are traits she can recall, little things she knows. Ino is loud. Ino is brave. Ino's wild and vain,
selfish and childish. Ino is unapologetic and uncaring and bright enough to blind you. She's a fire, and when the things, when people, around her go up in flames, it's their own fault for being near enough to burn.

She starts to tap her heel against the floor. Sakura shifts her notebook a bit, and Ino realizes she's offering it for copy; Ino's own notebook is open to a blank page. There are notes in someone else's handwriting lazily spilling through the first half of it. Her hand picks up a pencil without her direct order and starts to write down Sakura's words, her handwriting unpracticed and just two mistakes from ugly. When she bends closer to the tabletop, the short sword pressed to her lower back shifts at the movement.

(There's a girl older than her with a knife she stole from a dead man fighting a war.

Ino's in a classroom, aching from discomfort.)

She's a ghost and she knows this.

Her foot keeps tapping, like a routine, against the wooden tiled floor, her toes curling inside her shoes and the winter air escaping through the walls to inch along her spine. Ino eyes leave Sakura's neat rows of words to see the floor; she refocuses, hand moving again. Her ponytail used to spill all the way down to it—but she doesn't have a ponytail. Her hair has never been long enough.

She wants, suddenly, desperately, for the weight of it. Her hair's short, choppy, longer than Sakura's by less than an inch. Khori pauses in her lecture, saying, "Are there any questions?" and Ino has none. Her foot startles into silence when Khori-san looks at her and says, "What about you, Ino? Do you have any questions?"

The board is smeared in chalk, nature cycles drawn prettily over it and diagrams of the chakra centers, too, and lists of different chakra types and the things associated with it, with forms and stars and Konoha's most famous dead people. "Oh," Ino says. "Yes. Are… Are physical and spiritual chakra always in equal measure?"

Khori's eyes glitter. "A good question," she allows, and the words spill from her mouth too fast for Ino to put effort into catching. It aches to swallow her pride like this, to pretend she's made a mistake when she's the only one doing anything right. The day spills over into an ending, and Ino stays after school to sit in on the kenjutsu club, watching their forms and wondering who she would have been if her swordmaster had been someone other than the fear of death. The instructor, Gekkou Hayate, is a dead man, but watching him lead children through kenjutsu is like watching the moon rise in a starlit sky.

Her own memories of muscle and movement were always rushing, panicking, blades meeting with the same grace all of her movements hold but with none of the knowledge she sees here.

"Are you new?"

Ino jumps, her senses exploding at the fear, and every chakra in the room stands in stark color to her (she's scanning through them ally-ally-ally) and there's no threat. Ino's just paranoid and out of practice and ten. The girl who'd spoken laughs.

"Sorry to scare you," she says. It makes shame coil around Ino as though in preparation to strike. "I'm Tenten. Do you want to join in?"

Tenten. She's a dead girl. Ino looks up and finds Hayate watching the two of them, his face something similar to friendly. "Yeah," Ino says. She stands, letting Tenten put a weapon into her
hands and feeling no shame over the way her arms shake from the weight. Hayate smiles. "Yes, yeah," Ino says again. Her arms ache before Hayate shows her the katas.

(Later, bruised and matched with a wooden practice ninjato she can lift, Ino comes home several hours after she was expected. "You're dirty," her dad laughs, scuffing the back of her head with his palm. Her hair falls in her face from the movement.

I don't want you to die, Ino thinks. "I don't think I'm going to use this," she says, holding the tanto out to him. He smiles because he had expected as much and takes it from her, lifting it as though to test what about it had failed to maintain her attention. "I'm sorry," she says.

He frowns at her. "Don't be. Wash up for dinner, okay? You'd give your mother a heart attack.")

…

"You're like a Ungaikyo," she murmurs, the words slipping free before she can catch them. She leans over the countertop, looking harder into the glass. The house is silent, the village at rest, the moon above them and not colored red from Madara's anger. A possessed mirror. It's not perfect—Ino's mirror is fine. It is her reflection that's warped. But, then, the girl in the mirror isn't a demon at all. She's just a girl, and Ino's the one who possessed her. A coolness settles over her limbs. She is here, alive. There's a world to save, alive. Naruto is alive. Sakura is alive. Her parents are alive. They are all here, alive. What's wrong?

They are all here, alive. Ino is the one who doesn't fit.

Ino is the one who leaves the breakfast table early, has a closer bond with her houseplants than with her peers. She'd been a popular girl before—before. Now she speaks to Sakura and to her teachers when prompted and some sparse, painful lines to her parents.

She misses them. She'd thought somehow they would be the way she remembered them, but her friends are ten and Asuma has never even met her.

She misses Sakura the same way some people miss their lost limbs; deeply and intensely and sometimes so strongly they forget anything is missing at all and then, when the thick absence hits her, the realization attacks all over again. Fear has lived with Ino like an animate thing and that doesn't go away. Everyone is alive but not the way they were and it doesn't go away.

She's tired. She doesn't want to argue anymore, doesn't want to fight. Something hot stings behind Ino's eyes, something that might be able to become tears if she were to let it, and she wants to. She wants to be able to cry, wants to hide behind her smaller body and let herself cry, alone in the bathroom with the demon she became.

But Ino isn't a little girl anymore. It's all different now. Everything's different. She doesn't have time for tears. She can't pretend she deserves the luxury. This body is a child. She is not. Yamanaka Ino's been through war.

Everyone's alive. It's a statement, a fact, and it no longer feels like an accusation. Ino's disgust with herself goes beyond the emotions she used to let rule her. "I need to be better," she says and she hates that. She hates hearing that. She's always gonna hate hearing that. She opens her eyes again, looking into the mirror; the girl living inside Ino's reflection stares hard, looking back at her like she wants to rip her apart. "You need to be better," she says again, her voice old with something Ino doesn't want to see. The words cut like glass when they wiggle from her mouth.

Her reflection scowls.
Her own image becomes too much and Ino shifts, eyes landing on the smooth curve of the sink. She needs to be better. It isn't about wanting or trying. She wants it, she'll do it; she's Yamanaka Ino. Madara destroys Konoha, leads an army into her village and lets Uchiha Sasuke kill her parents as an afterthought, cracks into the earth and parts the sea, rips open gods and monsters and pulls the sky apart. She was a girl, then, and she couldn't stop him. He had over half the continent under control before she grew up and by then it was too late.

(She thinks of Naruto's blood on her hands, of clinging to him even as his heart stopped because that was all she had left of Konoha. She thinks of run, Ino and her own list of victims and the way sometimes when Madara made his army march she could recognize the people in it. She thinks of Sakura's cold hands and Chouji's limp form, dead and pinning her to the grass, and of Asuma blessedly dying before he had to watch Kurenai follow him.

She thinks of a world torn wide open, of the way she'd fallen into the abyss.)

I want it, I'll do it.

"I need to be better," she breathes, and she means it.

…

Meaning things and doing them turn out to be entirely different animals to tame so the year passes and Ino is a flower and a blade.

(It's only a spar but Sasuke's ten and he isn't pulling his punches; Ino kicks his feet out from under him and leans over his body as though it's already dead, a kunai held to his neck and an emptiness to her eyes.)

It goes with reading, with a flashlight aimed on textbooks only jounin have access to and with torn pages and a hand copying words she shouldn't understand at a speed she's barely capable of, with hiding and going to the attic, digging through weapons and family histories and special techniques she never heard of because her father died and Konoha was destroyed in the same day and she's never wanted something so badly as she wants this. It goes with Hayate, with kenjutsu club, with tea ceremonies and imagining staring at a victim over a cup of poison that tastes sweet as honey.

(Their parents had grouped them all together, her and Chouji and Shikamaru and she loved them. She'd loved them. They were her family after her family died and her friends before she'd known what friendship was and their parents had quite literally planned their pregnancies; she was born September 23, Shikamaru a day before that, and even though Chouji was born in May, it was all always a plan and she was always meant to work with them. But she can't work with them. She has to keep an eye on Sasuke and that means team seven.

"Father," she says, blandly, bluntly. Shikaku turns to look at her and she cannot meet his eyes or even acknowledge him at all. "I refuse to spend time with these two."

"Ino, you've been playing with them since you were born," Inoichi tells her, laughing. He leans down close, winks. "You might even be on the same genin team with them."

"I would rather die," she says and she doesn't mean it but it sounds like she does enough for him to pause and by the end of the evening she's gotten into a physical fight with Shikamaru and a one sided verbal one with Chouji and her father takes her home looking at her like he doesn't know her and maybe he doesn't. In the doorway of the flower shop, she says, "If they're on my genin team, I'll retire."
She hates herself.

Her father's horrified by her. Her mother is delighted by the prospect.)

It goes by with jutsu she doesn't have the capacity for, with water walking and knife throwing and low planks and desperation, her hands going through signs to techniques she can't do yet, going faster and faster and faster her fingers hurt more than she can describe earth release fire release water release her hand lights up with green and her entire body shakes with exhaustion she goes faster her hands are so tired her wrist aching from the writing and the copying her arms burning from the sets of positions she goes through with the ninjato she'd taken from the attic left swing right block again and she doesn't have to copy off Sasuke or Sakura in class. She knows everything it feels like. There are still tendrils on people from the way she used to let entire forces communicate in her head on the battlefield and if she pulls hard enough—

(Sakura's right next to her and Ino tugs open the girl's mind like it's a dog door and she can see everything that Sakura is everything that Sakura has everything Sakura has done and it isn't her Sakura. Ino quietly writes down on her test sheet that no, Uzumaki Mito was not considered a sealing prodigy, as she'd been trained since birth. However, she was surely the master of her time.

This isn't her Sakura. This isn't her life.)

It goes by with taijutsu class and blocking a punch Naruto barely manages to throw, her forearm definitely bruised but then she always is it goes by with sweeping his feet from under him it goes with practicing her hand seals feeling the chakra inside her as though it is a separate entity lodged under her skin like a sliver, hidden down in the muscle in the bone. She feels her own energy wondering if it belongs to her or if the little girl still has a sharp hold even now and in genjutsu classes that only teach her how to dispel them, being told over and over and over again that being trapped in a genjutsu isn't like being a dream, Ino, it's darker than that, this is the sign to release it, okay?

(In kunoichi classes Ino stares at the flowers she is meant to arrange. She looks at their cut ends, floating without roots, dying. She holds tea ceremonies with her face curved into a smile she does not feel. It seems very meaningless, now, but then, everything does.)

The year goes by like this: Ino trains and she screams and she tests well and does her homework and every day after school she spends hours with her ninjato and late into the night she's silent along the walls of the village library and she punches Chouji in the face and Sakura declares she's in love with Uchiha Sasuke and Ino tells her she's disgusted by it but will graciously allow Sakura to remain her best friend and Naruto keeps looking at her and all of Ino inside and out is constantly aching and simultaneously feeling nothing at all.

It goes like this: She forgets how to smile with kindness and learns only to bare her teeth.

The months slip by the weeks pass and Sakura complains that Ino is boring, that she spends all her time practicing and trying and fighting and where was the girl who used to love climbing trees and watching Princess Gale films? The days escape her and she's telling Sakura to spar with her she's telling Sakura to join her after school she's telling Sakura to eat more and she's avoiding her parents she's avoiding Naruto she's avoiding Shikamaru and Chouji and Sakura smiles and shakes her head no. The days end and end and end and end and end and end and end and end and Ino is top of her class, top of these children, top of these children, and she's laughing, crying, mind heavy and heart heavier and still beautiful.

The mornings pass the sun rises and rises and rises and her hair is long, long, long.

The year passes and she is eleven. The year passes and she is twelve. The year passes and the year
passes and she is twelve and Iruka says, "Alright! The graduation exam is in a week! This is crunch time, guys!" and she smiles.

(Yamanaka Ino is a ghost and she knows this.)

…

The teams aren’t random; they are calculated. Ino was destined for the Ino-Shika-Cho take two when she was birthed the day after Shikamaru. Civilian teams are often handled by teachers, placed together to compliment both personality and skill, but most civilians either get pushed into the genin corps or retire and return to their civilian lives with a funny story to tell at the bar about how they were "almost ninja," so close to heroism.

She tosses a kunai, her form perfect, her hand practiced. She misses.

Ino, though? Her team isn’t going to be put together by Iruka. She’s in a class of clan heirs. Clan heirs don’t retire. They sometimes end up in the genin corps, but they don’t retire. The Hokage deals with her team with input from her father, from the clan heads, maybe even the council. When Ino got put with Asuma and Shikamaru and Chouji it wasn’t about her grades or being the top female student. It was about her father, and Shikaku, and Chouza.

She throws another kunai. It lodges in the wood, a smudge off center from the target she’d painted. Her lip curls into what could become a snarl.

She can imagine the Hokage, sitting at a big desk in a big room and unaware that he is going to die. No, Ino corrects. Aware of his own mortality—merely unaware of the proximity. She can see him "hmm"ing, pushing back the pages that describe her attacks on Shikamaru and Chouji’s disappointment in her cruelty. He frowns, not surprised she’s a brat but a bit weary all the same. He’s flipping through their school files, notes from council members and clans splayed across his desk, possible jounin tucked into a pile. Sakura must be in the civilian candidate pile, already dismissed. Maybe Naruto’s attachment would pull her into a team meant for survival; maybe not.

Ino throws again. This time, it hits dead center. The kunai she throws after clangs against it, aimed for the center as well, and then falls silent to the grass. She starts a slow journey to claim them, pushing her hair from her face.

In her head, the Hokage frowns down at his desk. He’s sorting them into teams, the complaints of a painful number of people echoing in his thoughts. She imagines her father still pushing for Ino-Shika-Cho and the Hokage shaking his head. She’s made that combo look impossible. He’s looking at Naruto’s file, fondly, looking over the list of his vandalism and disappointing grades. He’s a good boy, he says, maybe to no one or maybe to a chuunin working in the office and in her head it’s Iruka. I know, Iruka will agree, resigned.

The Hokage will keep sorting the files around, his frown thoughtful, and of course it’ll eventually come down to Sakura and Sasuke and Naruto, the way it always has, and he’ll be thinking to himself, well, now there’s an idea, and he’ll pull at Kakashi from the jounin pile, examining and remembering and of course of course what an idea he’ll think, former ANBU turned genin sensei what an idea, and he’ll be watching those pieces fall into place and Sakura and Sasuke and Naruto don’t have clan heads to interfere and the Hokage will think—

"Ino!"

She’s so startled she drops a kunai. It lands point down into the dirt, missing her toes by probably less
than an inch.

"Come inside! It's time for dinner!"

Ino gravitates quickly to the backdoor, kunai stored safely in the pouch on her hip. Inoichi smiles at her from the doorway, one hand coming up to ruffle her hair when she walks in. It's longer, now, down around her shoulders, snaking halfway down her spine. It isn't long enough. "Graduation tomorrow," Father says, his smile sparking with pride.

Ino copies his smile. "I know," she says.

Mother glances up, the table nearly set. She looks disappointed. She always looks disappointed and it's because of Ino. Ino isn't the daughter she should be, isn't the girl she was at twelve. She isn't the daughter she used to be. She used to be preening and beautiful; her mother's pretty bird, running the flower shop with genuine affection and holding tea ceremonies in her free time. Now she runs laps before breakfast, leaves breakfast early to add insult to injury, carries a curved blade on her back, wears her hair long and often up, and she is not what Mother wants. Ino's not who she used to be. She hasn't allowed her mother to take any of her time in years. "Change your clothes before dinner," Mother says.

"Of course," Ino says. In her head, the Hokage leans down over the three files—Sakura Sasuke Naruto—and in his focus, his elbow slips just a little, and Ino's file goes down, underneath the civilian ones, forgotten.
acacia

Chapter Summary

She graduates and it's one step closer but she's so, so far.

Chapter Notes

it’s so hard to find Ino fics for the ino fic rec so uh you’re welcome please read them these are hard to dig up if you have some good ino fics pm me! I gave her mom a name btw and i don’t know when graduation is so uhh it happens in the spring i’m so clearly winging it and have no idea what i’m doing! anyway mmm ino can kind of but not quite read minds sorry and i’m breaking all the rules everything you know from canon is wrong (not really as a fanfiction this is based in canon but don’t question me it isn’t canon i’m doing it anyway this is a fanfic and by nature not canon i’m not even sure if the nagato fight happened yet i’m making bad decisions as we go and i’m not gonna stop overcomplicating things no matter who asks thanks for reading xoxo)

Ino fic rec: Skiprope by Taivasalla, hosted on ffnet. from sakura’s point of view but we all know sakura and ino love each other so

AsPhoDEL

[acacia]
chase
away
ghosts

The academy has big classrooms with high ceilings, walls stretching as far as they can without intruding in on the Hokage's office spaces. This building has stood since the Second Hokage's reign. These walls were built by warriors and sanded by soldiers. Ino used to wonder in amazement at them, used to take a small breath in her classroom and buzz with excitement when she realized she was in the same building as the Hokage himself. She used to love these walls, the vast openness, the shining glass windows and smooth polished wood. Used to imagine cute loft-type apartments with similar designs as these rooms, used to imagine walking up those curving steps to the mission office, being assigned some world ending adventure by a chuunin while the Hokage read through paperwork just a couple feet away.

She used to dream in this building. She used to look up at the high ceilings and breathe deep and dream.

Now Ino only feels suffocated. Sakura's nervous next to her, but smiling, pleasantly anxious, like the buzz when you've jumped but haven't yet hit the water. "I have confidence in all of you," Iruka's saying, tests in his hand, one going first in front of Sakura and then to Ino. He looks out over them, over these students he's had for a year, and his smile isn't false. The sincerity hurts her.
This building once made her feel holy, feel incredibly. She'd go over the academy acceptance standards in her head over and over again, repeating them to herself over and over again. Love the village and hope to help preserve peace and prosperity. Have a mind that will not yield, able to endure hard training and work. Be healthy in mind and body.

All arbitrary conditions met? Great. Academy admission granted.

(this building still stands and so does she. this is real and so is she.)

The test, these simple words she's read before, warbles dangerously on the paper, shifting in front of her eyes. She rubs hard at them. She knows the answers—she sometimes feels she knows everything—and most people in the room do. Graduation isn't difficult, or at least, isn't difficult enough. It isn't enough to prepare them.

Us, she thinks. She's taking her final exam today. Graduating. She is twelve years old. She can't gather an army, can't assassinate anyone, can't wage war, and today she will be a ninja. Ino's always been all about appearances—all about the image of control. She wonders if she should think beyond revenge and anger and retribution but she won't and maybe that's okay. She's only angry. Terrified.

There's still time.

It's tempting to think about, to imagine a world where there wasn't a war and no one is dead and Ino's safe and clean. Ino's a selfish person and when she finds something she wants, if she wants it badly enough, she'll get it, but what she wants now isn't the world she knew but the people in it and there's no way for her to have them. They're gone; these people are echoes, memories, puzzle pieces not yet ground down to fit against her own rough edges. She can remember. There was a time when nothing made her feel more alive than the chase, the fight, the war.

Unfortunately, see, there is no war. That puts her at an impasse.

(Two weeks ago Ino was leaning against a low fence, eyes lazing half shut. The spar yard used to be one of her most exciting places—it was then she decided it's really just kids scrambling in the dirt. Ino watched with her arms leaning against the wooden posts and one cheek propped on a closed fist. There's no war and Ino was tight with tension, the air of it building in the back of her throat and leaving her tongue tasting of trepidation and her throat dry. There's no war and Ino never lived long enough to have survived one.

Kiba's grappling at Sasuke in what's practically mud, hissing and shouting and missing. It'd rained the day before, and the grass still smelled fresh and dewy. Soft. There was something gentle in the air, something drooly about the dappled sunlight and soft winds. Konoha's spring is full of newfangled charm, leading into summers that are cloudy and pleasant.

The autumn is quiet and slow; the winter mild, full of snowflake flutters and clinging frost. Konoha's kind. Gentle. Calm.

Ino wasn't particularly impressed by Kiba's failures or Sasuke's quiet, refined smugness, and her eyes went instead over the class, over these small faces, all watching raptly and some, like Naruto, shouting support. It was less support and more an unearthly wish to see Sasuke beaten. She kept looking at him, trying to memorize his features as though she was going to draw him out, stretch him apart and see what he was made from, but she lingered on Naruto too long and he glanced up and their eyes met and there was a smile on his face and it hurt.)

She looks up and Sakura's looking at her and as Ino watches she smiles. It hurts.
Ino smiles back. "Good luck," she whispers. Sakura flicks a bit of her pink hair behind her shoulder with a hand. It's long, now, down to the small of her back. It shines when she tilts her head. *Sasuke likes girls with long hair*, Sakura had said. It doesn't matter at all what Sasuke likes, Ino'd thought a bit rudely, a part of her still stinging, a part of her still recoiling from the pang of Sasuke's betrayal, of Sasuke going from a little boy she thought was perfect to a man who ruined her life. He ruined your life, too, Ino wanted to say. *Sasuke likes girls with long hair*. Ino hadn't argued.

"Luck," Sakura echoes, dismissive. She leans a bit closer to Ino conspiratorially, twelve years old and indignant. "Who needs that?"

*Luck. Who needs that?*


The type of people to change the world—Ino knows she isn't one of them. She's not as powerful as Naruto or as smart as Shikamaru. She's not the best with weaponry, isn't the strongest or the fastest or the sharpest. She's smart, sure, and slippery, and strong, but she knows she isn't well-suited to the job. Naruto could have changed the world. He was fire and anger and grinning and wild and watching him was like watching sunlight melt frost. He could have changed the world. Instead he died. Now there's only Ino. She's bitter and beautiful and all the world's got.

Ino lets her hand find a pencil. Her eyes go over the classroom, to the ceiling and down again and back to the exam. Her hand moves then, writing her name, then going down, down, down. *Question one*, Ino reads. *List the Kages of Konoha."

All she can hear is the grind of pencils on paper.

Easy, Ino thinks. Luck—who needs it?

…

She's tied her forehead protector around her neck where it'll stay until she can get it fitted onto something larger, something that would fit over her hip or around her thigh. It weighs fondly against her skin. It isn't a particularly attractive accessory, and the blue doesn't match the purple she still clings to, but Ino forgives it. Mother looks at it as though it is a parasite.

"I passed, Mama," Ino says. She takes a couple careful steps into the flower shop and she hates this. She can feel her mother's tension more than see it and it aches, curls around her wrists and pulls. Mother is still staring at the hitai-ate. She lets her hand go over a couple flowers—the orchid petals, in full bloom, are painfully soft—and her fingers drift to the soil, prodding lightly. Ino frowns. It's dry.

"I can see that," Mother says. "So you're a ninja now, are you?"

She wonders if it's meant as an accusation.

Yes, Ino almost says. I am. I'm an adult, now. I won't apologize for leaving behind trinkets and the children of your friends and sleepovers my father never felt comfortable with. I won't apologize for trading domesticity for strength. I won't apologize for displeasing you. It just might save your life.

"I'm sorry," is what she says. Her mother's eyes go just a hairbreadth wider than normal, the watering can in her hands hitting the counter with enough force to send a couple drops into the air. Maybe it's a warning. Maybe it's an attack. Ino takes another step forward. "This is who I'm growing up to be. I know it wasn't what you wanted from me."
Mother wanted a girl. Instead, Ino's a shinobi.

"I know you've never liked it," Ino says. She stands up straighter, just a bit. She loves her mother and her mother is dead. "But this is who I am. This is who I have become."

She flicks her ponytail over her shoulder, the long hair a mark of femininity and a mockery of what her mother wants. Yamanaka Aimi is the perfect image of domesticity, the ideal version of a civilian wife. She'd wanted to marry a nobleman. Unfortunately, she married a ninja, and now her only daughter is lost to her. When Ino was a child, she was a creature of blood and bone. Messy and confident and selfish, without control or strategy. Artless. It was around ten that she began to take on the traits of her mother, that she began to brag about the dance lessons once forced on her and charm those around her with smiles and practiced words. She'd been a perfect little lady.

Now, Ino spares her perfectly balanced smiles only for people she needs to fool. Here, little lady Ino never happened. She went from wild child to determined student. There was never any popularity, never any bragging, and never any reprieve from the world Aimi shuns. She quit dance and took up more dangerous hobbies. Ino still wears mascara and she still paints her nails, still discusses with Sakura the science behind the perfect cat eye, but she never had to be taught that. Her interests as a child were running, fighting, laughing, climbing; as she grew older, it seemed to Mother that these interests only solidified, crystallizing from artless power to quiet brutality.

The two years Ino's taken were the creation of who Ino became. As it stands, Ino stole her own childhood from her mother and she does not regret it.

"I've always loved you, Ino," her mother says quietly. She releases the watering pail handle. Ino can hear each weighted breath, can feel the way Aimi looks away. "Your father will be very proud."

Ino's surprised to find this stings.

The hurt goes down deeper than the dismissed half-built friendships she'd broken off with her civilian classmates, hurts more than Shikamaru's disdain and Chouji's unease, more than Naruto's lack of attention and Sakura's lack of knowledge. She only spends time with her parents, with Sakura, with classmates, and with strangers. For the first group, she is restrained and polite. With Sakura, she is somewhere between wistful and pained. The last two experience only her cruelty or her indifference. Her behavior towards Shikamaru, towards Chouji, and to a lesser extent towards her parents must be explained. Her chosen explanation is personality. Ino has cultivated for herself a reputation: she is simply a mean person. Yamanaka Ino does not work well with others. She imagines it written in her academy file.

She's giving up everything for this village and no one will ever know it. Her friends are gone to her and no one will ever care.

"I know," Ino says. She spares the flowers another glance, longing to spend more time with them. She turns, hair lashing her back. "I'll be back for dinner," she says, and leaves the way she came. Mother doesn't stop her.

Ino reaches a hand over her head, brushing her ponytail aside to comfort herself with the sword's metal grip. Her relationship with her mother for the world. A fair trade, if not one favoring Ino.

(still, it stings.)

The next day, her father's pride and her mother's refined disapproval lost to the feel of a metal hitai-
ate in her hand, and she's surveying the classroom for what might be the last time when Sakura's hand tugs at her own. "Ino," Sakura murmurs, hand still holding Ino's, pointing with her free hand. Her hand is warm. The contact burns. "Ino, look!"

Ino follows her pointed finger to a scoreboard of ranks that used to rule her life. She's twelve and twenty five and it's meaningless to her but her eyes look at it regardless, glazed and tired and with sweat from her morning set of katas collecting along her hairline. Yamanaka Ino, she sees, is listed at the top, and then below it, below her name is Uchiha Sasuke. She's rookie of the year. It's somehow an insult. She wasn't better than Sasuke. He ruined her world. The ranking board, putting Sasuke at second best, Sakura right behind him, is a mockery.

She scans it. Naruto is still last.

(Dead-last. It's funny because it isn't true. He didn't die last. She did.)

Scores never really came into her mind when she was younger. Ranking never mattered to her. She was passing and her competition with Sakura kept her in the top five or so but she never cared much for it. She never wanted to be strong. She didn't need to be the best. Being Ino was enough.

It doesn't matter now, either. But she does need to be more than Ino. Being herself isn't enough.

"That's amazing, Ino!" Sakura pulls her down onto a bench near the front if only to better wave their linked hands in the air excitably. Ino eyes the nail polish curiously. It looks like the kind she'd shown her, harder than steel and when liquid hot enough to need sealing precautions to make it safe. Those nails could cut someone's throat open. She's reluctantly proud of her friend. "You even beat Sasuke!"

"It's just academy scores," Ino says pointedly, adjusting her forehead protector. Sakura lets go of her hand. "It doesn't really matter."

"Doesn't really matter?" Sakura's incredulous, pushing her own forehead protector a bit further back on her head. It replaced the red ribbon Ino'd given her. She'd worn it for all her academy years. Maybe it's a way of showing she's grown up.

She hasn't.

"It won't mean anything when we're shinobi," Ino says. Sakura scoffs so loudly it might cause her physical pain.

Sakura's wrong. It won't. Beating Uchiha Sasuke as a twelve year old in scores based on the opinions of chuunin and exams focused mostly on civilian material isn't an achievement. She isn't proud of beating an assortment of children. She wasn't trying to. She was trying to piss off Shikamaru and she was trying to scare off Chouji and she was trying to get Sakura to run laps with her in the morning and she was trying to watch Sasuke and she was trying not to fall apart but she wasn't trying to get rookie of the year. It's a meaningless title.

Judging by the look Sasuke gives her, it wasn't meaningless to him.

Shame. He's bitter enough already.

It's the first time Ino can recall that a girl got rookie. Even though Ino never showed much interest in academy scores after graduation and typically dismissed graduates before her own a twelve year old girl rather than a twelve year old boy making rookie would've floated somewhere in her circles. Girls in the academy are trained the way Ino has been her whole life; they are trained to be kunoichi. They're pretty and polite and trained to hide. There is no brute force. She's pretty and can smile softly and hold a knife but she isn't... She isn't meant to be like Naruto. Even at Sakura's strongest, at Ino's
strongest, they were never like Naruto. Never like Sasuke or Madara, never like Kakashi. Even at their best, they were never like Naruto.

(Sometimes someone wants an army, or perhaps just the strength of one, but that was never what Ino was supposed to be.)

"I'm going to be a shinobi," Ino says now. She can tell Sakura doesn't understand. "I'm going to be like the Hokages. I'm going to be a shinobi."

"Aren't we already?"

I no watches the class spill in, watches Iruka take his place at the podium. "I'm not sure," she says just as Naruto explodes through the door, hitai-ate firmly tied over his forehead and his eyes brighter than the usual. She looks down at him from her elevated bench and he catches her eyes, grinning. She only gets the tiniest portion of his attention before he sees Sakura.

"Sakura-chan!" he calls. Sakura visibly loses favor, lips going to a line. The bell rings; Sakura sighs in relief, falling back against the bench, shoulder touching Ino's. Naruto scrambles to find a seat and after a moment he slides in next to Ino, painfully close in an attempt to gain Sakura's attention. She pushes her shoulder against his, imagining she's grating their bones together.

He's a stranger. She hasn't spoken to him in years. The last time she knew this boy was when she was twelve instead of twelve and twenty five. The Naruto she remembers doesn't smile like that. The Naruto she knew lost everything—except, perhaps, her. He was all she had. They weren't each other's favorite, but they were all there was.


(it's crying wants to be screaming trying to clean the blood from his face but he's shaking with laughter, vibrating from it. "Stop," she's saying, shouting, crying, but the word is lost to her own tears her own hysteria her parents are dead. Sakura is dead Hinata is dead Shikamaru is dead he is all she has and he is nothing. bloodied and dirty he's laughing her world has burned he is all she has, and he is nothing.)

Ino blinks. Shakes her head. There are other options, now. No one's dead and Ino isn't anything to him. Naruto's smiling even wider now, too, but not the way he was then. He looks proud, a bit smug. "I thought he failed?" Sakura murmurs, leaning close to her so they can gossip with further ease. Even in the front of the classroom, the two of them have no trouble giggling and whispering, doodling over their notes and passing slips of paper between them. It's something Ino never imagined, something she saw as lost forever with the academy's burnt walls, but she loves and misses Sakura with the same ferocity. This girl was Ino's closest friend.

(it's funny. funny, isn't it? her parents don't know her Naruto doesn't remember her she's ruined her relationship with Shikamaru and Chouji. maybe Sakura is all she has but Sakura isn't like he was then. she isn't nothing.)

Sakura taps Ino's arm, clearly expecting a response. It takes Ino several seconds to remember the question. I thought he failed? "Guess not," Ino whispers back, feeling Naruto's eyes on her as he either listens in or wishes he was. Her voice is flat. All of her words taste like poison and Ino hates this. She shifts, then, head leaned against an open palm and she tilts her face a bit to the right, looking at Naruto even though she doesn't want to be.

"I wish he hadn't," Sakura says, even though they both know she doesn't mean it. Sakura's not nearly as interested in him as Ino, isn't even bothering to glance his way. Sakura probably knows without looking that he's staring. She sighs. "He's obsessed with me."
"He really is," Ino agrees. It's something they mutually dislike. Before she can stop herself Ino figures if Sasuke had any friends he'd say the same thing about Sakura. The very thought feels like a betrayal.

At the mention of him her eyes inch away from Naruto over to Sasuke. Even the side of his face appears burning, hands clasped. Would they shake with anger if he let them? Ino wants to say she doesn't know what Sakura sees there but she does. Sakura's a little girl and she sees someone scared, someone alone. She imagines a world where brushing arms with someone in the street leads to an elaborate romance. That isn't true, though. But even if she's wrong about that, she's right about Sasuke. There's something—so much—wrong with him. No one can fix him, though. Maybe he isn't broken at all.

Maybe Sasuke was meant to be a monster.

The thought processes and Ino flinches. He's twelve and alone and angry and scared. She's been alone and angry and scared. The Sasuke she knows isn't this boy. The Sasuke she knows is older. This isn't him she has to believe it isn't him or her skin crawls shame in her throat because she's letting him live.

But he can't be fixed. No one can be fixed. Ino wishes Sakura would stop fantasizing about trying.

At twelve, her bloodline is louder than it is soft and she can feel the anticipation in the room, can catch images her classmates have created for themselves and can hear the hum. The room is full of children, young and clean with minds unfractured. Ino risks a look at Sakura, at her side profile, pretty and nice and smiling. She's grateful to Sakura and she knows in a child-like way, Sakura loves her. It's the cleanest feeling she's been gifted with in years.

It helps that her largest talent is her own mind, crawling like a tic on the consciousness of both strangers and friends alike. She doesn't have to hear the words to know it. Ino knows that Sakura loves her, maybe more than she did when Ino was really twelve. She also knows it is nothing compared to the friendship they once shared.

(But Sakura killed herself, then, so maybe their friendship wasn't so grand as Ino remembers.)

"I'm so proud of you," Iruka says. "You are all ninja now—adults, in the eyes of the village. This is a massive responsibility." For a moment, his face is serious, eyes scanning the room. Naruto shifts uncomfortably. Then he smiles. "I knew you could do it."

Naruto cheers without prompting. Sakura starts to clap with their classmates, her eyes bright. Ino taps her fingertips to the other hand's palm politely. They are all so genuinely happy. Ino can feel something exhilarating in her chest.

Love your village. Ino loves her village, sure. But the village these children love isn't the same village as hers. Her village was sent through a crucible; her village burned on a pyre. Her village had secrets and it died for them.

"Now that you're genin, you'll be separated into teams of three and assigned to a jounin." Sakura looks over at her and Ino smiles in what she hopes is reassurance. Iruka looks so proud. Naruto's grinning.

Ino feels ill, intoxicated, electrified.

"Team one," Iruka announces and it begins.
"Tell me about yourselves."

Ino carefully tips her soy sauce, spilling a bit across her four gyoza evenly. Making even consumption an elegant act is an almost pleasant dance, one she has mastered. "I'm Yamanaka Ino," she says without looking up, chopsticks capturing a gyoza and dipping it lightly into the sauce collected along the bottom of her dish. She takes a single delicate bite. It isn't particularly good. Beside her, Naruto is loudly inhaling some sort of rice-soup dish. Ino is entirely unimpressed by him.

Her new sensei frowns. "I know your names."

Naruto squints suspiciously. "How?" he asks, mouth full. It's disgusting. "We've never met."

Ino doesn't give him the courtesy of a disbelieving glance. He's loud and messy and rather dumb. She'd figured he would be on her team, but she isn't thrilled. She lifts her eyes from the oval shaped dish, considering the three other people, two tucked into the booth across from her and Naruto at her left.

Across from her, Sakura says, "She's our genin-sensei, Naruto. Of course she knows who we are."

"Creepy," Naruto mutters, rice flying as he uses his chopsticks with the skill of a small child. Ino flicks a stray grain of rice from her shoulder; looks over at the jounin to test the level of disgust she may have.

Uzuki Yuugao raises an eyebrow. "You seem fun," she says, her voice flat and her face blank, betraying her statement. She pushes some of her straight hair behind her ear. The movement leaves the handle of her touken, strapped to her back, visible. The grip is embroidered and beautiful and Ino can't look away from it. "Let's meet up again. I'll be at training ground seven tomorrow morning."

"Of course!" Sakura nods somewhat frantically. Ino knows she's going to take notes as soon as Yuugao leaves the booth. "What time?"

Yuugao blinks slowly. She looks somewhat uncomfortable. "I haven't thought of that," she says.

(All of this wasn't supposed to be like this. She'd meant to be with Sasuke or at least Asuma and instead she's here with a woman dead and a girl she's no need to supervise and the largest idiot she's ever seen.

(If she could handle Sasuke. She could take seeing his face and knowing his crimes. She could stop him if she had to. There'd been a time where she cried over him, when he'd killed Orochimaru and been gifted with an entry in the Konoha bingo book and then her village burned and she found her hatred was living, screaming, writhing in her stomach and pulsing with her veins. She hates him. She did hate him. She'd hated him.

Naruto is worse. She can't handle that. She could never have handled that.)

"Seven," Yuugao says abruptly. She stands from the booth with similar aloofness. "See you three there." She twists with the grace of a practiced ninja and exits the restaurant.

"She didn't pay," Ino notes. She dips a second gyoza into the soy sauce, examining the udon still hot and untouched on the table positioned in front of the now empty section of booth beside Sakura. "Rude."

No. It isn't right at all.

Naruto sometimes used to talk all about this day, this moment—and Ino had never been sure she believed him, had never known for certain if she could trust his glazed eyes or his fervent, hysteric
voice, had never been comfortable with the way he spoke not as though it was true but as though he
needed someone else to believe it—when he sat with Kakashi and Sakura and Sasuke on the
academy rooftop and his eyes went from one to the other because it was fate, Naruto used to say, it
was meant to be. Him and Sasuke and Sakura, he would say. It was meant to be.

Sasuke killed the world and Naruto killed him and Sakura killed herself and Ino thinks now that
maybe she doesn't give a shit about fate.

"She's so cool," Sakura breathes, digging in her kunai pouch for the cash to cover Yuugao. Sasuke
killed the world and Naruto killed him and Sakura killed herself. It was meant to be, Naruto would
say, and she let him because they were all alone and dying and maybe he needed to hear it but no
one is dying now and if it was fate if it was meant to be? Ino doesn't mind being the ghost in the
machine. Fate doesn't have a place in the reality she's building. Naruto used to scream it, used to
shake her until she thought her bones themselves were chattering, shivering inside her—he used to
cry it, wail it. It was fate, the three of us, he would bite out and he was all she had and he was
nothing. Naruto wipes his face with his sleeve behind her. Sakura manges to find a couple bills,
flattening them on the counter and looking up with wide eyes. "Did you see her?" Sakura asks. Her
eyes are wide. She looks like she had when they'd watched Princess Gale in theaters. Only a couple
of seconds with a vaguely impressive looking ninja and already if Ino listens closely enough she can
almost hear Sakura's heart pounding. "She's so cool."

"She left you to pay for her lunch," Naruto says. It would be more accurate to say she left all three of
them to pay, and Naruto was welcome to pitch in for Yuugao’s meal anytime, but Ino does not say
this. As she watches, he frowns. "I don't like her. How am I gonna become Hokage with a teacher
like that?"

(Naruto dropped Sakura's body in the hole as though she was nothing to him. Ino flinched when the
body hit the dirt. "She's dead, anyway," Naruto said by explanation. "Not like she cares where we
bury her."

"I care," Ino had said, voice a hiss, softly, twenty one and with nothing. The two of them were all
that was left of the Rookie Twelve. They were dead and Ino was alive.

Naruto'd paused. Looked up at her. Grinned slow. She could see anger and fire and murder in him
and she’d wondered then who had loved Sakura more: her or him. "And?")

Now Ino is alive and Sakura is alive and Naruto is young. Asuma is a stranger to her and Kakashi's
team is filled by Sasuke and Shikamaru and Kiba. Her mother assigns her to the night shift in the
flower shop and her father presses blade handles into her palm instead of flowers. She still washes
her hair with adoration and adds shimmer to her cheekbones and keeps a ritualistic face wash routine
but she does that now because she needs it. She does that now because it's what Ino would have
done then. The routine is something to cling to, something to hold, something to grasp so tightly it
might break. She's still vain and she's still selfish but it's more than that. This body isn't hers and she
needs to be kind to it. So many things are wrong and she doesn't know if it's supposed to be like this.

Maybe it isn't, but the world is still recognizable and that's enough.

(isn't it?)

Sakura's face goes cold. "That's so rude," she says. Naruto visibly recoils, only recovering when,
after a moment, Sakura adds, "Yuugao-sensei seems really cool."

"I don't want cool," Naruto grumbles and Ino wonders if he's thinking of Sasuke. "I want—"
"It doesn't matter," Ino says loudly. She can hear her own heart beating even louder than her voice and when Naruto flinches a little from her she wonders if he can hear it too. She drops a few dollars on the table when she stands. "I'll see you tomorrow."

(That night Ino stares into the stars with her window held open and both her hands in the open air. She looks down at the village the way a bird glances idly to treetops and she wonders about what might happen if she were to lean forward just a bit further and go tumbling down, down, down. Ino weighs more heavily on the window frame, stretching even more out into the air, neck craning and her stomach pushing against the window sill. Down, down, down, Ino thinks. Her own body, beautiful and broken—down, down, down.

Instead she steps away and closes the window and goes to sleep. There's work to be done.)
Chapter Summary

Team seven gets a mission.

Chapter Notes

hi angels. i'm really unhappy with this chapter tbh but at least i did something I guess ?
Let me know what you think about it!

Ino fic rec: It's Complicated by Killaurey, hosted on ffnet! already did a fic rec by them but it's a good one shot

Maybe it's just like before, Ino thinks, watching Naruto grumble and Sakura sit, and nothing will have changed at all: the days will pass and they'll pass and she has library clearance now, at least. She imagines nothing will change at all. She will consume training and reading and power the way she consumes everything—greedily and quickly and without mercy. The d-ranks will be time consuming, sure, but at night, the flower shop will be empty but for the life she's always loved, and Ino will read and she'll learn and practice and become.

Become what? Learn what?

Ino has already been a destroyer. She has already been a thief, a killer, a savior, a girl. Who must she be? None of her has ever been able to change the world. What must she be?

(Perhaps he was a monster and she was an idiot and everyone else was right. But he was the only thing Ino had ever thought could change this world.)

Ino slides into kata second, position three, ninjato in front of her, the metal reflecting her eyes back at her, glossy. She looks somewhere close to angry. Her sandal catches a bit on the uneven ground when she moves on it. This does not hinder her.

The field is lit by sun, a warm wind washing over the grass, and Ino feels if she had the time she would be content to lay in the middle of it until her body withered and died. It has been silent for a bit longer than ten minutes, Yuugao looking out across the trees and Sakura with her knees pulled up to her chest, one foot tapping. It's comfortable, if strange, and as Ino sheathes her ninjato and sinks down next to Sakura, Naruto decides abruptly to break it. "Well?" he barks, arms waving; he stomps a foot, face flashing with red. It's childish and Ino hates herself for smiling at it, hates herself for
being endeared. "What are we waiting for?"

Sakura, predictably, is annoyed by this statement, face flushing in her own anger. They're both twelve and Ino can't fully remember anymore the last time she saw them looking this way. Naruto's face flushes. When was he last genuine and child-like? She finds no images come to mind.

This Naruto is not her Naruto, after all. The Naruto she knows is dead.

"Shut up, Naruto!" Sakura rises to her feet as well, then, completely baited. "Yuugao-sensei is obviously waiting for something—"

Yuugao raises a hand. Sakura goes silent, red with shame, now, melting back into a seated position. "I've decided," she says. There's barely any tonal inflection. It's as though she truly has no opinion on her words. Who was she? Was she in ANBU? Ino can't remember. The war that once seemed so visceral, so painful behind her eyelids and aching in flashing colors—it has faded from her as though stolen. Naruto wiggles anxiously beside her, his knee brushing hers. Sakura shares his feelings, her mind shaking from nervousness.

The Sakura she knew—Ino tries to picture her. She knew that girl better than she knew her own reflection. She knew her. She did. What did she look like?

No image comes straight to mind. It is a vague form, short cut pink hair and green eyes in a blurring pale face. The details she tries to add don't feel right. Was there dirt in her hair? Did she have any scars on her face? Ino adds one just below her left eye, a tiny imperfection. It's the tiny things that make someone real, the small flaws and the delicate lines of their hands, often ignored and pieced together to make someone. This is reality—flawed and intricate and easily broken. The Sakura she knew is gone. Ino no longer knows for certain if she is capable of recalling her face.

The realization chills her.

Ino was wrong before when she thought Sakura was all she had in this world. The people she knew won't be replaced by them. She has nothing here. She won't have anything here. She won't allow it. She won't let Sakura be forgotten and Ino is the only one aware she ever existed.

"You three will be my students," Yuugao decrees. Her voice is that of a judge.

"Weren't we already?" Sakura asks, timid. She wrings her hands a bit restlessly. Naruto nods in frantically enthusiastic agreement. It lends Sakura enough strength to continue. "Iruka-sensei said—"

"Incorrect." Her voice is like a knife. Sakura flinches. "Iruka is no longer your teacher. The information he gave you was intentionally misleading. A jounin sensei has the authority to disband a genin team at any time."

"A-any time?" Naruto's back on his feet instantly, forgetting Yuugao's authority despite her tone. "Are you going to disband us?"

"I could," Yuugao corrects. "That doesn't necessarily mean I will." Her face is mildly contemplative. Ino almost can't stand it. She thought she knew everything, thought her future gave her the advantage, but she doesn't know anything about this woman. She knows her hair is purple and she is a ninja and she dies. Anyone who looked at her could know that. "It is typical to perform a test on new genin to determine their worth. I have no doubt I could give you three a crossword as my exam and would still receive failure."

Despite herself, Ino's cheeks go hot with embarrassment. All her life she's been considered lesser and all her life it has been true. She knows what Yuugao sees when she looks at Ino—a pretty face. Ino
stands, too, then, chin up. "This is an insult," she hears herself say. "To hold no exam—"

"There is an exam," Yuugao says. Her expressions, her posture, her words—all are careful and chosen. Not a movement is a waste. The three of them make horrible soldiers. Sakura is too easily irritated to make a perfect subordinate and Naruto is plainly disrespectful. Ino wonders what she would say about herself were she someone else. "Every moment in my company is an exam. There are mistakes I will not forgive. Should you make any—" She looks from Naruto to Sakura and then her eyes meet Ino's and it's as though nothing in the world exists except those eyes. Something crawls along the track of her spine. "—then team seven will be disbanded on my command, and the three of you will be fodder to the genin corps."

Naruto recoils, shoulder brushing hers, the shiver in him rattling against her. "Fodder," he repeats, so quietly she barely hears him. Ino steps delicately away from him. Being close enough to touch feels intimate somehow. It feels like they're friends. She can't stand it.

"Your fate rests with me." Yuugao is not like a blade, Ino realizes; she is steel incarnate. Ino wishes she could remember who killed her. "I'd advise you not to fail."

"Of course we won't fail!" Naruto scoffs loudly, throwing his head back and crossing his arms.

("Of course we won't lose!" Naruto grinned at her, one hand going to her shoulder. His long, pale cloak fluttered at the movement, like sparks at the edges of his feet. "Konoha shinobi don't lose, Ino!" Ino had tears in her eyes and the village was destroyed but Naruto smiled at her and she believed him. His eyes went softer, just a little. "Don't worry, okay? Leave it to me!")

"I don't know, Naruto," Ino says. When Naruto looks at her, he's horrified. "We might." He rounds on her, in her face, eyes scrunched up.

"We will not!"

"You might," Yuugao agrees. Naruto spins to look at her instead, whirling so quickly that he stumbles a bit. Yuugao doesn't seem particularly interested. She digs in her pocket briefly, pulling free a slip of paper. "I've gotten our first mission approved by the Hokage." She reveals the slip, holding the upmost part of it between her thumb and forefinger. Naruto moves to snatch it out of her hand; she raises her arm mildly, the paper out of reach and her expression going a bit darker.

"Naruto!" Sakura barks. "Stop trying to grab things from her!" Naruto's face twists a bit, like this comment only drives him on, and he looks like he's going to try to reach it a second time. He stops; something about Yuugao's face demands respect without having to ask for it, her energy going beyond the way words seem to sting her mouth on their way out.

Yuugao frowns. "There isn't anything to be excited over," she says, and after a moment in which she watches Naruto wiggle in something akin to shame, she drops the paper. It floats like a feather down into Naruto's grubby hands.

"A d-rank mission? Weeding a garden?" When he speaks, he spits a bit. She can't imagine what he was expecting. He's the lowest ranking rookie. It still makes her itch, makes something in her go restless. This world is going to curl in on itself and cannibalize. This world is going to shrivel inwards and burn. Ino doesn't have time.

(she doesn't have the energy)

"You're new genin," Yuugao says. She's smiling a little now. It's on the edge of mocking, her lip curled and her eyes dangerous. Ino knows the expression. She's seen it in the mirror. "You didn't
think you'd get something better, did you?" One hand goes to her hip, the other going towards the three of them like an offering, beckoning. "Come on, then. Satsuki-san's garden isn't going to weed itself."

In the end Naruto rips up more flowers than weeds and Sakura complains hugely about the dirt and Ino watches Yuugao watch them and team seven completes their first mission.

(Team seven. That isn't right. Ino's on team ten.)

"There's no way this is all we get paid!" Naruto shouts, arms waving. "How am I supposed to pay my rent? Go to Ichiraku?"

Yuugao looks down at him the way a king looks down at conquered territory. "Do more work then," she says blandly.

"More gardens?" Naruto sounds equal parts horrified and disgusted.

(No. she isn't.)

…I want something better," Naruto wails out, dirt under his nails and his hair messy. Sakura flushes with embarrassment. "I don't wanna walk dogs! I don't wanna catch fish! I don't wanna—"

Yuugao placed a hand on top of his head, fingers on the edge of digging into his scalp. "I apologize, Hokage-sama," she says, voice deceptively mild. "Any more d-ranks?"

"I don't want a d-rank," Naruto mutters, mutinous. "There's got to be something better than a d-rank."

The Hokage laughs. The noise somehow sounds wrong coming from his mouth. He's the leader of one of the best villages in the Elemental Nations. It never occurred to Ino that he laughed. He was immortalized in her mind as something holy. He died when she was so young and there were so many deaths after. He wasn't just a man to her.

It isn't disappointing. Something inside her, though, feels a bit of a pang.

"Naruto, you're just a genin," the Hokage chides, the point underscored by his fond smile. He looks down at his desk, digging through a couple papers. "There was a nice one here," he murmurs, quieter now. "A c-rank guard mission. Kakashi took it, though."


"Why couldn't I be on that team," Naruto whines, ducking under Yuugao's hand and wiggling into place next to Ino, squeezing between her and Sakura. Sakura looks unhappy with this development, but the Hokage's presence keeps her from grumbling out protests. Ino digs her nails into her palms to keep from wiggling away.

She doesn't like d-ranks but for the first time she must admit this isn't about her. She can't be selfish anymore. She's lived her life wanting things and she still does. She's wanted things impossible, and she got one. She's gone back in time. Ino's not allowed to want more than that.

(But she does. She really does.)
Naruto pushes against his shoulder, a bump. Ino doesn't flinch because she's fine this is fine but—
(Ino isn't allowed to want more but she does.)

"Ino, aren't you sick of this?" Naruto pushes against her shoulder with his own for the second time. Her face goes scrunched up. "Don't you want something better than a d-rank? Right?"

She pushes him back. "Sure," she says, smiling slyly, "but I bet you wouldn't be able to handle much more."

"Oi!"


"Sakura-chan..."

The entire event feels unreal. It's too casual. It's too easy to laugh. She spent so much of her childhood telling off other girls and applauding Sakura's successes. She can barely remember it, can barely come up with the flowers in that field and pushing a flower behind her ear, but this second feels similar to it. That little girl is gone. She grew up, and now she clings to partially memorized faces.

This—this calmness. It's wrong.

"I have one in here, actually," the Hokage announces. He seems too docile. It makes Ino's skin itch. "A guard mission!"

"Like the one team ten got?" Naruto's back to full enthusiasm now, actually throwing his hands on the Hokage's desk and leaning forward. It's so blatantly disrespectful that Ino nearly chokes on her own tongue. "Like the one Sasuke got?"

Sasuke. Ino hasn't thought of him since team assignments, nearly a month ago. It doesn't seem to matter that years have passed. Ino'd like to say she's grown, and she has. She's seen fire and she's seen death.

Still, something inside her burns. Even now Sasuke looks down on her. Sakura's face may have faded from memory, but she will never forget the way Sasuke looked at her. It was the same way Madara looked at her. It was as though she were nothing. Sasuke looked at her like she's below him. He looks at her like she's lesser.

It's selfish, but she wants to crush him under her foot.

"We'll take it!" Ino hears herself say, the ocean in her head sending up choppy waves over the stirring sand. She wishes she was a god or a devil; she wishes she was beyond this. But she isn't, and her vanity no longer has a death count. "Of course we'll take it!"

Sakura clasps her hands together, her face lighting up. "Exciting!" she cries, clapping twice. Yuugao gives a mild sigh.

"It's up to you, Yuugao," the Hokage says. His smile matched with Naruto's wild grin tell another story.

"Can't have Kakashi thinking team seven is any less than his." She adjusts herself, hand going to a hip when she shifts her weight. "We'll take it, then."
The mission is simple: There is a store halfway up the road out of Fire Country, one which will be unattended tonight. Attend it.

Although Naruto'd initially been unimpressed by the mission briefing—"This isn't even interesting," he'd grumbled—even the dirt below his feet is now exciting enough. "I've never seen this rock before!" he chirps, lifting a brown colored pebble and displaying it, hand going way too close to Ino's face. "It's amazing! I discovered a new rock!"

"Stop shoving dirt in my face," Ino snaps. She pushes him away by his wrist. His grin easily becomes a defensive almost-growl.

"It's a cool rock!"

"It's a rock, Naruto," Ino says, and Sakura sighs, a bit disdainful.

He stuck his tongue out at her and speeds up to walk closer to Yuugao and farther from Sakura and Ino. "It's a cool rock," he mutters, turning away from the two of them and continuing a search along the dirt road for anything else comparatively imposing.

"You're way too excited," Sakura says pointedly, taking a half step behind Ino when Naruto shoots back over, eyes shining from the brief interaction Sakura had given him. "I've seen dirt just like that at home."

"I've never left Konoha before," Naruto says, not like he's revealing a secret or like he's explaining himself. Nothing he says ever seems to be for a purpose. It's like he's just...talking. Ino bites her lip on a scowl. "Everything's so cool!"

"Everything's the same, you mean," Ino corrects. She hates the way she hates that Naruto's face falls just a pinch, before he turns back around and pulls at Yuugao's sleeve, asking her if she's ever been out of Fire Country, and how cool that must have been, and if she's ever gone to Kumo or the Land of Tea. Yuugao responds with voice mild, calm. Ino's lips press together into a thin line.

"Ne, Ino," Sakura goes, long pink hair flicking with the tilt of her head. "Did Naruto do something to you?"

Ino blinks. She stops walking for several seconds, before remembering herself and taking a couple large steps to catch up to Sakura. "What?"

Sakura shrugs, looking away from Ino. Ino's never seen their friendship as a competition but she knows Sakura has. Who's prettier, who's faster, who's smarter, who's stronger. I bet one day you'll be even prettier than a cosmos flower. "You've just been looking at him a lot." She gives Ino an amused look. "Being passive-aggressive for once? I would've thought you'd just smack him. That's what I do. It seems to work." Sakura nods somewhere close to sagely.

You've just been looking at him a lot.

("I can't practice with all this shouting," Naruto wailed, throwing his hands up in an elaborate show of despair. Ino was sixteen and halfway through a forced sparring match Chouji was desperately trying to avoid. She paused, crouched close to the ground while Chouji slipped behind Shikamaru.

"You're not even good at sealing," she said loftily, twirling around to give him a half-smile. Kiba coughed out a laugh across the small training field. "So I'm doing you a favor."
"I'll never get good at it if I can't try it..." He dipped his pen into an ink well, face pulled together unhappily.

Ino laughed. "Don't think Naruto's getting you out of this, Chouji," she warned. Chouji whined something to Shikamaru, something about being hungry or tired and Ino grinned. "C'mon! I'll buy lunch after!")

Something like mortification, something like regret, flushes over her. "No," she says, trying not to sound evasive. Finding out she's from the future seems very unlikely no matter how strange she acts but Ino still digs for something to say, something in character. It's been two years but she still feels lost. "He hasn't done anything. Just annoying, you know. Just...you know. Naruto."

Sakura laughs. The sound of it feels like a secret. It's like this laugh is just for Ino. It's like a best friend laugh. It feels like betrayal to hear it. Her Sakura is dead and it's her fault. They're never coming back. It's selfish to take this Sakura, too, to take these people the way she did before. "I know," Sakura agrees, still giving short giggles.

Ino has always been selfish.

"There it is," Yuugao says, her finger raising to point in the distance. It looks like a small cluster of buildings rising out of the trees. Ino squints at it. "That's the rest stop town. The store we're to guard is in there."

"Yuugao-sensei," Sakura asks, fidgeting a bit as though she thinks her next words will be stupid, "if it's in a town, why does it need guarding?"

"Sakura-chan, that's a good question!" Naruto agrees, probably more because it's Sakura speaking than because he found a concurrence in her words. He swoops back around to stand closer to her. The interaction only serves to annoy Sakura.

He's a mockery. Naruto isn't like this. He is, obviously, but he isn't.

Ino pulls at her hitai-ate, adjusting it on her right hip to hide her discomfort.

"I've been here before," Yuugao reveals. Over the couple of weeks together Ino has learned Yuugao does not like to speak about herself. She's caring and loyal and secretive. She'd bandaged Sakura's knees gently after a rougher spar match and berated Naruto with something close to fondness when he complained about how boring training was. But she doesn't like to speak on herself much. She doesn't like explaining her own life. Once, while Yuugao was frostily watching the three of them fail at the water-walking exercise, Hayate had brought her lunch. Afterwards Yuugao refused to say anything else on the subject; she shut down inquiries on her personal life with the same efficiency with which she swung her sword. "The residents aren't particularly friendly."

As it turns out, that's an understatement.

After an adventure through the trees—there was no path to it and so team seven was forced to go blindly behind Yuugao through thick forest—Ino discovers the "rest stop town" has no gates or discernible borders. Her shirt's ripped by the time they make it there; it got caught on a tree branch, which was unpleasant and caused a tear in the collar. Somehow the fishnet around her knees and elbows was spared by the experience. The chain mail under her shirt and buried beneath the bandages wrapped around her thighs would have kept her from true assault via tree branch, but all the same she does feel affronted by it.

("It's just a tiny rip in your shirt," Naruto had muttered. Ino'd felt irrationally upset by this statement.)
The populace are much worse than tree branches. The first couple buildings they come across are quiet, but not the soft kind. The silence is oppressive. When buildings turn from small shacks to stores with people littering them the silence becomes aggressive. Ino's been glared at before, been spat at before, but the way Sakura flinches back from these strangers and the way the children recoil from Ino as though afraid is unsettling.

"Hey, hey, Yuugao-sensei," Naruto whispers, not at all subtle but making an effort which Ino appreciates. "What's up with these people? It's creeping me out, 'ttebayo."

"This place hasn't changed," Yuugao murmurs. It could be Ino reading into things, but Yuugao almost looks protective of them. "This is a cautious, dangerous place. Stay close to me, alright?"

"Don't need to tell me twice," Sakura mumbles, pressing a bit closer to their teacher. Ino shifts so that she's walking on the other side of Sakura, glancing behind her suspiciously. She should've checked their astral correspondences for the day, made sure it wasn't a day to be afraid.

Ino's not afraid. She isn't. She hasn't felt fear since her heart stopped beating. She isn't afraid. People are just such fragile things and so easy to damage but she isn't afraid. The sun had been shining painfully against Ino's hair when they first left the village, but now the moon is heavy on the horizon, inching up into the sky.

But she isn't scared. Ino's too prideful to be afraid.

"This place is creepy, though," she muses, her index finger tapping against her thumb reflexively. Naruto nods fiercely in agreement.

"So creepy," he whispers. He sounds disturbed. She can't imagine why. This is the way the entirety of Konoha looks at him. Nothing has changed on his end except the people who look on in defensive fear.

Yuugao shushes them with a flick of her hand, her hair swishing back and forth with her steps. "We're here," she says. Her words carry a sort of finality. An unkempt but comparatively superior building looms in front of the four of them. There's a stiff, straight faced man standing in front of it. He scowls when he sees them.

"Finally," he says. The annoyance in him has Ino's hand twitching, as though her fingers long to hold a blade. He says something else defamatory about Konoha shinobi under his breath, something uncomplimentary about women, and then waves them forward hastily.

"Shou, I take it?" Yuugao asks. "The owner of this place?"

"Of course I am," the man snaps. He gathers himself into a heavy looking traveling bag off the front porch, tying the straps around his waist. Ino watches as he digs in a pocket, eventually pulling free a tiny key. He flicks it at Sakura with surprising carelessness for someone living in a place built on caution. She scrambles to catch it, dropping it twice before managing to full snatch it from the air. "Don't touch anything. Don't steal anything. Do not let anyone else steal anything. Especially you, brat," he says, gesturing to Naruto. The boy gapes in open shock. "I'll know if you take anything, you little rat!"

"I'm not a thief!" Naruto shouts back, bristling like an animal.

"You sure look like one," Shou notes dryly. His facial expression is hard, but almost unintentionally so. It's as though his natural expression is one of displeased anger. He walks past them as though they aren't of any significance to him. Ino watches him go.
"This place is perfect for a person like that," she says. When she looks back at the shop, Naruto's vanishing inside it, Sakura and Yuugao presumably already inside. "Huh? Wait for me!"

She catches the door handle and when she slips inside her eyes go a bit wide. The shop they've been ordered to guard is full of expensive looking weaponry, shiny armor, and what looks to Ino's trained eye like high quality kimonos. For the weasel-like visage Shou presented, Ino's impressed.

"Pretty," Sakura whispers, reverent.

"Don't touch anything," Yuugao warns and Ino sighs. It's in for a boring night.

... Or not.

She's been lounging lazily across the checkout counter for several hours when something starts to itch. Yuugao's been leaning back on the wall near a display case of silver daggers dotted with rubies and one of her closed eyes twitches a bit, as though unnerved. The chakra of the other people here have been readily avoiding the area, as though disturbed by the shinobi, but now something sickly itches towards them.

"Something's coming," Ino says. Yuugao's eyes go open.

"Someone," she corrects and then the door goes flying across the room and Ino witnesses, for the first time, Yuugao engaged in battle. The wooden door frame smashes into several ornate blades, sending them clattering to the stone floor. Ino flips off the counter, landing against the wall and jumping from it across the shop, just before Yuugao flies into the counter, smashing against it and breaking it in half. A man Ino doesn't recognize lands on the spot a second before Yuugao comes back on her feet; the movements are so quick that Ino doesn't fully know what's happening before Yuugao's touken is unsheathed, clashing against the man's own sword.

The man grins. "Ho, ho, Shou hired someone, did he?" His mouth stretches even further. Yuugao grunts against the force on her blade, feet sliding backwards over the counter wreckage. "And to think, I killed his uncle to get him out of town."

"Yuugao-sensei!" Naruto pulls free a kunai, feet going into his own defensive stance. Ino steps in front of Sakura, her ninjato in front of her. "Get away from her!"

Yuugao's wielding one-handed; her free hand comes up into a seal just as her foot flies upwards, swiping at the man's head. He dodges back. "Kage Bushin no Jutsu," Yuugao hisses out, a copy of her popping into existence. The copy slides in front of the three of them, her back to Ino. The real Yuugao leaps into the air, body twirling, and this time her kick hits—she sends the man flying straight through the wooden wall to the dirt road outside it. "Stay here!" she barks when she lands to the floor, and then her body is a blur, leaping through the hole she created.

For a moment Ino can hear nothing but her own breathing. "Holy shit," she says.

The clone whips around to face the three of them. "This is going to be fine," she is saying when the floor explodes, a hand coming up and swiping through her body. Ino watches as Yuugao's face twists in pain, and then the clone ceases to exist, leaving behind only smoke.

"Yuugao-sensei!" Naruto cries, panicked now, and the other man destroys the floor, pulling himself out of the new hole in the shop. "You bastard!"

This man is just like the other. His smile sends shivers over Ino's skin. "Just kids, huh? There's
something I want in here. You can just let me take it, right?"

"The mission is to protect this shop," Sakura shouts with surprising confidence. "We won't let you take anything!"

He pauses. Grins. "Good," he says and then he's attacking.

Ino dodges the first kick, bending over so far she's practically in half. Her legs follow the movement in a flip backwards, sending her flying away from him, and the punch he sends hits her wrist, her ninjato skidding away from her. She's still so weak—this man is clearly self-taught, clearly a civilian playing at being a fighter, and yet he's beating her and Ino can feel her heart in her chest and the next kick has her leaping into the air but—

Ino wasn't the target, and Sakura goes across the room like a ragdoll, shattering an elaborate display of clothing and falling to the floor in a heap. It makes Ino feel like her heart is stopping. *You're my only real friend, Ino.* Ino is a failure. "Sakura!" Naruto screams and then he's dodging back from a sword swipe, one of his palms caught by it, blood flying, iron in the air, and Ino's hands go into symbols for a technique she probably can't complete.

"Shinranshin no Jutsu!" she shrieks, and for just a bare second the man's in too much pain to even move and that second is enough. Ino's moving before she knows what's happening, grabbing a sword off the ground and clutching it's bejeweled handle and she sweeps his legs out, her kick so hard it sends a sting up her leg, leaping on top of him like a panther, like an animal, blade at his neck, so close she can feel how he stops moving.

She breathes. He takes shallow inhales; each time, with each small movement of his neck, the skin cuts the tiniest, tiniest bit on the sharpened edge in Ino's hands. "Naruto," she hears herself say. The voice is plain, bored, and far away. She feels weightless. "Check on Sakura."

She doesn't look at him, but she can feel the way the room aches from tension.

"Sakura-chan's going to be okay, I think," Naruto's saying and Ino can barely hear him. "She's knocked out over there. Ino, what are you doing?"

The man under her, frozen and eyes wide and shaking he's trembling how pathetic. How was she ever afraid of this. How did this man send Sakura flying, likely breaking at least one of her ribs. It suddenly doesn't make sense to her. He swallows, the movement causing the shiny blade of this expensive metal to bite just barely into the flesh of his neck. She can see the blood beading up in the corner of her vision. She stays focused on his eyes, on the way she can feel his legs twitching in between her two knees. "Don't move," she whispers to him, like it's intimate, like it's something shared, and maybe it is. Maybe there's no closer relationship than murder. "I'll kill you."

"Kill him?" Naruto's shocked, horrified by her and it's sick, isn't it. He's the monster, not her. He doesn't get to talk to her like that. "Of course you won't kill him," Naruto says, insulted, and his voice is a bit stronger now. Closer. Louder. There's a sound like wind shifting, a vague warmth close to her before she feels one of his hands on her shoulder, the arm going around her back. She tenses against it. The only person allowed to act so comfortable around her is her father. Not even Sakura touches her casually; she'd caught Ino off guard once, surprised her, and Ino had been so shocked so afraid that she'd sprained the other girl's wrist.

Sakura forgave her. Ino did not forgive herself.

How does Ino dare to feel fear?
Ino can hear Sakura's quiet, short breathing. She's unconscious across the shop, nearly smothered by knocked over kimonos. The finely woven fabric must surround her, although Ino doesn't look away from the man's eyes. She can see the pinks of them.

Naruto's other hand comes up to her arm, sliding down until he's touching her wrist. "Put the sword down," he repeats.

"Get off me," Ino spits out and her hand is shaking. Why is it shaking? She's done this before. Why is she shaking?

"We're friends, right?" Naruto says. She hates that he means it. "It'd be cool to be your friend."

"Shut up!" she snarls. Her hand is shaking. With each tiny jittery twitch it nips lightly into the man's neck. There's blood collecting in the hollow of his throat, dripping down. It's as though he's wearing a necklace. "I never liked you, you know that? You're an annoyance. What do you know?"

"We're teammates, Ino," Naruto's saying, pressing in on her, getting closer like he knows she wants to run away. He goes from just touching her wrist to latching onto it, the blood on his hand sticky against her skin. "Why can't we be friends, too?"

(He smiled at her, eyes crinkling from the motion, the dried blood under his eye angered from the movement. "Of course I saved you," he said like it was obvious, like she was stupid. Ino was bloody and he was bloodier and right then she wished he hadn't. She didn't want to fight anymore. She just wanted to die. "We're friends, Ino."

He smiled at her and Ino was bloody and he was bloodier and she didn't want to die, anymore.)

She feels her breath catch. Shut up.

"Don't kill him," he says, and so she doesn't.
gave the world a year system. Graduation takes place in year X995 and Ino died in year X1006. The Naruto timeline (while confusing and honestly not very well thought out) is generally explained by using Naruto's birth as a formative point and while this makes sense because most people making timelines are fans, I feel like as a whole the world doesn't revolve around homeboy. My timeline focus point is the estimated birth of the Sage of Six Paths, who I think was born around the time canon had Kaguya recognized as the "rabbit princess" or something like that? So anyway Sage was born in year X0, the year is X995 rn. X just sounded the best I guess even though as a letter it has nothing to do with the discovery of chakra. So when years are mentioned, that's what they mean.

Ino fic rec: Pretty Girls and Pointy Things by Renaerys. This fic is truly a gem.

Song rec: I'll Be Your Girl by Kitten

**A s PH od eL**

[amaryllis]

- pride
- and
- worth

Ino's still standing with her arms crossed, eyes going blank through the open doorway and limbs stiff, when the sun rises and Yuugao returns.

Sakura's been pushed against a wall delicately—her ribs are definitely broken—and Naruto's fallen asleep somewhere between the two of them, one of his hands splayed dangerously close to her ankle and his face towards the wall. He did try to stay up, like a guard dog, but, like most pets, he turned out to be unreliable for protection or concrete action. She has resolutely not looked at his face. Ino had stared at the open doorway as the moon rose and as the moon fell, as the stars went brighter and as they faded away and now she stares at the blank space as the sun pokes over the trees and bites into her eyes.

Naruto stirs a bit and rolls over, making a small noise in the process, but Ino is watching Yuugao walk back into the building, a bag tied over her kunai pouch. "I'm sorry I took so long," she says. Her hair is perfect. There's no blood on her, no tears in her clothing or scrapes on her skin. If she didn't know, Ino would never guess Yuugao had been fighting. The woman drops her bag to the floor. It jingles like coins as it lands. "Was trying to find out who he was." Yuugao tosses a book her way; Ino barely catches it. "Page sixty three," Yuugao says. Then, "Who's that?"

"Some guy," Ino says distantly. Page sixty three has a picture of a dark haired man apparently named Takeda Daigo. She finds his name uninteresting. She's scanning the page, and finds his status as a b-rank missing nin from Iwa significantly more interesting. "What's an Iwa shinobi doing this close to Konoha?"

"Hiding from Iwa, presumably," Yuugao answers, just as absentmindedly as Ino.
"Yeah, but—" She stops herself. *But don't they still have some village loyalty,* she had been going to say. *Doesn't he hate Konoha the way his birthplace does?* It's idiotic, she realizes. Missing-nin don't have loyalty. "I guess so." As Ino watches, Yuugao circles the tied up man.

"Who did you say this is?" she asks again.

"Some guy," Ino says. It feels an inadequate response.

"This isn't *some guy,* Ino. This is Akizuki Asahi," she says, mystified. "He's an Iwa lord's son. Not a ninja. Classically trained in dance and swordsmanship." A pause. Yuugao scratches at her neck. "Might know some earth techniques. It's tradition for nobles to perform them at ceremonies in Iwa." That explained the floor explosion. "Why is he tied up here?"

The newly named Asahi shouts something from behind his gag. It comes out as a muffled groan. "Oh, him? Came at us. He lost." Ino shrugs, flipping around the bingo book curiously. It's labeled for the year X990. "This book is a bit outdated. I wonder if the bounty changed by now."

"It was lower," Yuugao tells her, jerking her head towards the fallen bag. The implication that she'd killed him shouldn't unsettle Ino, but it does. Ino didn't kill Asahi, but Yuugao killed Daigo. Yuugao's walked over to Asahi now, and gives him a curious kick. He makes furious noises of protest. "Where did he come from?"

Ino motions vaguely to the hole in the floor. It would have been funnier if she'd said, *What hole did he crawl out of?* She didn't, though, so Ino doesn't laugh or look up to see if Yuugao got the message. "Sakura's ribs are broken," she says, as though this is a casual topic, just an exchange of information. Her eyes go up a bit over the top of the bingo back to catch Yuugao giving a short nod. "When do you think Shou-san will—"

She surprises herself with a yelp. Yuugao's head jerks towards her, before her mouth twists a bit at the false alarm, and she returns to her scrutiny of Asahi. Without her notice, Naruto'd rolled back over, and this time he's taken it upon himself to curl around her feet, one hand wrapping around her ankle and his knees pulling up to touch her other foot. She can feel herself shaking. "Naruto," she grinds out lowly, lifting one foot free of him and leaning down to pry his hand from her skin. She has a hand around his fingers when she looks up to glare at him and finds him watching her, newly awake with half-closed blue eyes.

He abandons her ankle in favor of holding her hand weakly, sleepily, and Ino wants to *die.* "Ino-chan?" He blinks a couple times, confused. "What time is it?"

"Morning," she hisses. She pulls away from him, burned, and he grunts at the movement, his hand smacking him in the face from the force with which she rips away from him. "It's morning, you idiot." He hums in acceptance of this new information.

"I'm cold," he announces.

"That's great, Naruto," Yuugao says, distant still as she walks slow circles around Asahi. The Naruto she knew had secret spots like this, had secret moments when he forgot that he didn't really like her and only remembered that they were genin together.

It was never a secret. She knows that. The soft parts of him, the flesh under his chakra coated skin, were never a secret.

It's still disturbing that this Naruto is made entirely of secret soft pieces.

"Man," Naruto comments, sitting up, hands on his knees, "this place is *wrecked.*"
For a moment Yuugao and Ino quietly appreciate this insight. Then Yuugao tilts her head, sighing, and says, "Shou-san has returned," and, indeed, he has. His energy keeps sparking, dangerous and furious, like a mad dog.

Ino has never felt pity for mad dogs. She only puts them down.

"What have you done," he breathes out when he sees them. He steps delicately into the doorway. The damage is already done, but he's reluctant to even touch the splintered remains of the door frame.

"Welcome back," Ino says. The comment doesn't amuse him.

"You destroyed it!" Shou hollers, waving a fist. His hand looks too large for his wrist. "My shop! My livelihood! These are extensive damages! I should sue—" His eyes catch abruptly on the man tied up in the remains of his store. "Who is that?"

"Two man attacked last night. They were looking for something," Ino says, flat, unheeded by his questions, watching his face heat at her rudeness. Yuugao steps forward in front of Sakura, offensive and imposing rather than protective.

"These men would only be looking for something illegal," she says bluntly. Shou recoils from her, chin sinking into his neck and wrinkled hands shaking.

"That's a lie!"

Yuugao raises an eyebrow. "They had your uncle killed for just the chance to search for it," she says, unimpressed. "You just got back from his funeral, right?" She leans down a bit, elbow going on top of Asahi's head. His noises of discontent don't bother her. "Shou. You can pay us and we can go. If you continue being irrational, we'll have you investigated. Both end in a paycheck for me. Which would you prefer?"

His face is completely red. He's a furious man. He's also a sneak. A cheat. A businessman, and not a very good one. "Fine," he spits out. He digs furiously in his pockets. When he discovers the bills inside, he throws them a bit angrily to the floor. Ino flows forward, leaning down to collect them under Yuugao's scrutiny. "Fine!"

"You understand, of course, that your merchandise must be searched as well," Yuugao explains smoothly. Shou shouts something Ino's unable to puzzle out.


"This could have gone worse," she offers, and Yuugao snorts.

It takes only a couple hours for Yuugao to discern that Shou's a small time drug dealer—"Perfectly legal!" Shou insisted when she stared him down—and Asahi's a rich kid looking to start up his own business via robbery. She sniffs haughtily at Shou when they leave, clearly unsupportive, but Sakura needs medical attention and they're a day's walk from Konoha, and he is, as he had insisted, perfectly legal. Yuugao winces down at her, Sakura blearily looking up.

"This is going to be a painful journey for you, Sakura," she says seriously. "Please do your best."

Sakura nods with equal seriousness, but when she gets loaded up on Yuugao's back, she makes a tiny whimper. "I'm sorry," Ino says. Sakura's wincing, clinging to Yuugao's shoulders hard enough
to hurt, and doesn't deem Ino important enough to give a response. "It's my fault you got hurt."

(Ino was choking on her own blood, gurgling on it as it bubbled from her mouth. Internal bleeding, she thought to herself. Sakura was crying and Ino tried to smile because she was dying. How sad. Pitiful. "I'm not going to let you die," Sakura managed to grit out, hands on Ino's shoulders her chest her stomach. I'm bleeding from everywhere, Ino tried to say. Her mouth would not work. Her fingers were twitching.

"I'm not going to let you die," Sakura said again and she pulled Ino's skin apart, reached down inside her to pump her heart for her in her bare hand and it hurt.

"Stop," Ino said but it was too soft to hear, too breathy and pained, drowned out by screaming. There was a policy in this war and it was simple: someone drops, you leave them. Ino didn't just drop. She was half a day from dropping dead. Stop, stop, stop! Sakura forced chakra into that muscle until it was going erratic without assistance and then her hands were on Ino's chest, breathing for her, doing so much stitch-work without a needle in sight and it was too much. Ino was never the best medic but she knew enough and she knew Sakura didn't have the capacity to save her. Ino was missing parts a person couldn't function without and there wasn't a way to stop the bleeding. Not even the best medical shinobi could save her. It wasn't possible. There was too much damage. Something that extensive would—

"This'll kill you," she tried again and blood came out of her mouth and again she wasn't heard. "Stop, Sakura—please stop, you're killing yourself—"

Ino was supposed to die. She'd had her arm blown off, was lying in mud with bombs going off around her, bleeding from everywhere and dying. She was supposed to die there.

I'm not going to let you die, Sakura said and she wasn't a liar. Ino woke up the next morning alive. There was an arm attached to her shoulder with skin paler than her own and Sakura was dead. Sakura killed herself to save her. Ino lived on with Sakura's body parts inside her.

When he found them in the aftermath, Sakura pulled open and Ino knit closed, Naruto said, "That's not a fair trade," and he was right. It wasn't.)

"That isn't true," Naruto says. His words taste like poison and Ino hates this. It was her fault. She'd been weak and afraid and Sakura got hurt. "Sakura-chan wanted to finish the mission."

"He's right," Yuugao says, already walking, the sun glowing on her hair as it creeps over the trees. Ino knows, rationally, the way her heart is racing is impractical. The life she remembers is horror and failure. This world is one mild altercation in which no one was injured, a genin exam where she had the best score, and a ninjato no one believes she knows how to use. Yuugao pauses, hoists Sakura a bit higher on her back. Sakura whines in protest, but Yuugao's staring at Ino. "Sakura made her own choice," she says. "We all make our decisions, Ino."

Ino looks into this woman's eyes with her heart on fire. It is the first time since she died that she feels twelve.

"It still hurts," Sakura moans pathetically. The moment snaps; Naruto winces for her, Yuugao sighs.

"We'll be back in Konoha soon, Sakura-chan!" Naruto edges closer to her to cheer her on. She slides her eyes sideways and glares at him from her position on Yuugao's back. For an invalid, it's surprisingly effective, and Naruto curls back behind Ino. "She's just mad because she's in pain," he says to her, and Ino hopes her face is enough to tell him she doesn't agree.
On the walk back, Ino and Naruto go side by side behind Yuugao and she watches his face, watches his blue eyes like she's waiting for a tidal wave to hit inside them, watches the way his hair falls a bit over his hitai-ate and thinks about how his blond is nothing like hers and her watching gets bad enough that he glances over at her curiously and she has to look away.

God. She's an idiot.

"I'm not gonna tell Yuugao-sensei about what happened," he whispers to her, misreading the way she's been staring. It's a strain to catch the words, and she ends up getting the message more from reading his lips than anything else. He looks earnest and honest and the way he's saying it—he doesn't mean you owe me. He doesn't mean I'm holding this over you. He doesn't even mean let's forget about that. He just means he doesn't plan on telling Yuugao about it. Nothing else. Sakura grunts at a particularly sharp step and Naruto's eyes go to her instead of Ino and Ino had loved Sakura, too. She did. She'd loved Sakura so much. Sakura's a child and Naruto's a child and Ino doesn't fit and he's looking at Sakura instead of her and that's fine.

The tiny, secret pain wiggling like a maggot in her lungs makes her feel sick.

"It isn't like it's a secret," Ino says. He looks at her again, eyes just a bit pulled by worry, and Ino could never have handled this. "Ninja kill people. Yuugao-sensei wouldn't care."

"Maybe some ninja kill people," Naruto says softly and he's still looking at her and she wishes he would stop. She thinks to tell him about the guy Yuugao surely killed for his bounty, but then he moves a bit closer, matching his walk to her pace, and Ino looks away sharply. His hand flutters, like he thinks she needs comfort somehow, but he's never been taught how to do anything like that, and after a moment of what looks like contemplation but can't be because Naruto's an idiot and impulsive, he lowers his hand. "But you don't, Ino."

I do. I did. I will.

There are a lot of things she suddenly wants to say to him, things she would have said to him if he hadn't died against her and left her with nothing. Things he wouldn't understand and wouldn't have a response to, things she had never been brave enough to say. Insults and acclimations, admiration and something darker and questions she both would kill to know the answer to and would kill herself to forget about.

"Sure," Ino says instead and he looks relieved, so she did the right thing.

Sakura's going to be fine. It's nothing serious, allegedly, but Ino and Naruto still swarm Sakura's hospital bed for several hours apiece. Two broken ribs and some bruises, and as it turned out, leaving yourself untreated wasn't particularly good for anything at all, so she just had to stay a day to get her bones set and achieve a prescription for antibiotics. "This is dumb," Sakura complains. "I'm really fine!"

"You will be in a couple days," Ino corrects. She adjusts the flowers on Sakura's side table, hands lingering on the purple hyacinth petals. They're inky, so dark it's hard to tell the color. Sakura's going to be fine.

"A couple days?" Sakura heaves a huge sigh. "I have to be here that long?"

Ino shrugs. "You should ask your nurse about that," she says. Sakura's mouth twists, displeased.

"Sorry for leaving you with Naruto," she says, and she's sincere. Her face takes on an even more
unhappy expression. Ino waves a hand, dismissive.

"Don't worry about it." Ino adjusts the flowers again. Then again. "Do these look okay to you?"

"You don't have to stay with me," she says instead of answering. Ino adjusts the flowers. "Yuugao-sensei and Naruto can't catch cats or plant seeds all by themselves."

"True," Ino says decisively. "Yuugao-sensei would probably kill him." Sakura laughs, and that's enough for Ino to let her hands fall away from the vase. "You'll be fine soon," she says, which is true. Sakura's parents had pushed extensively for a civilian doctor, but Yuugao was the only one with direct authority over Sakura now. Only Sakura's superiors could order her around, and her parents didn't have any place in the military bureaucracy. It's sad, but she doesn't have to listen, and Sakura's getting a medical-nin. This world was built in just a couple decades atop a foundation of blood and war. Civilians don't have control in it. It's sad, but Sakura will be at top speed within the next twenty four hours, probably, and Ino's happy for that.

Ino looks at her friend for a couple seconds. Sakura shifts uncomfortably. "I'm sorry that happened," she says eventually.

Sakura waves a hand in dismissal. "It was cool," she says. "Yuugao-sensei was so cool, did you see?" All it takes is one mildly capable kunoichi for Sakura to start foaming at the mouth for ninja training, for Sakura to start babbling about how she should've studied in kunoichi class more. Ino shakes her head fondly as she turns away, but she lingers, hand tracing the the doorknob, overtly aware of Sakura behind her.

"I saw," Ino says, and then she opens the door, glancing behind her. "Bye, Sakura," she calls over her shoulder and the door closes when she knocks hard against a warm body. She falls against the closed door, her entire body going tense, back hitting the metal, and she doesn't have any of her weapons but her eyes go up to catch wild blue.

"Sorry!" Naruto babbles, hands going to her shoulders and pulling her a bit closer to him. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to push you but you came out so quickly! Is Sakura-chan doing okay—I mean, I came to visit her, but you would obviously know—"

Her hands go up and flick him off. "I'm fine," Ino says. It takes all of her to keep eye contact, all of her to stay standing upright instead of recoiling against the door. "Don't take too long. Team seven still needs to run missions and Sakura needs to rest."

He takes a step away from her. "Oh. Uh, yeah. Okay. Of course!" He gives her a grin but he's shifting a little uncomfortably. Then he goes past her, opens the door, says, "Hi, Sakura-chan!" in what must be the happiest voice in the world and Ino walks down the tiled hallway to where Yuugao waits in the lobby. It's idiotic and she is aware of this.

She and Naruto were never friends. They were survivors. They didn't choose each other. When nights were quiet enough for him to be in camp she slept curled against him not because he meant something to her but because he was all there was and because she couldn't afford to wake the camp with her screams. That wasn't friendship. She cried over the blood dried against his skin and traced the scars on his arms because it was better than crying over herself, better than crying over the dead. She laughed at his stained clothes and mocked his lazily sharpened kunai. She didn't do that because she cared about it. It wasn't friendship.

It was loneliness.

She stops, hand going to fists for a bare second before her pale fingers go slack.
We're teammates, Ino. Can't we be friends, too?

(He could feel the blood through his shirt, could feel the way his bone jutted into her from his split arm. "Naruto," she choked, pushing at him with weak fingers. She was bruised and broken and she heard the crack of his arm snapping back into place, felt the force of kunai hitting against his back. He fell forward a bit more, his body going over her like a shadow. "Naruto, you—"

Her face went into the crook of his neck, his chin going on top of her head. "You aren't going," he said and she let herself fall fully, limply, against his shoulder. He smelled of blood and dirt and ash. "You aren't."

Her nails dug into his back. She cut into the skin; it healed over her fingertips, pulling at them, like his body was trying to consume her. "You have to let me go," she whispered. She could hear the fighting, could almost taste it. It was sick, but she wanted to be in the battle, wanted to kill and be killed. The muscle under his skin sucked at her fingers. It was disgusting. "Let me go," she said again and she hated that he was stronger than her. She remembers always hating how much stronger than her he was, hating the way he could pin her down when the shinobi world roared ahead of them.

"Konoha's gone," he said. His hands went to her shoulders, pulled her bloodied face from his neck. One of his hands went over her cheek, traveling to her hairline. His fingers went through her hair, sticky on the fine strands. "But you're here."

She was the last relic of Konoha, and he did his best to preserve her.)

"No," she whispers. Looks up, pushes pale blond hair from her face. Takes a couple more steps down the hallway, sandals clicking. Can't we be friends?

(Shes thinks of Naruto, eyes half-closed, curled around her feet. "What time is it?")

"We can't."

..."We're a bit short-handed," Yuugao says, taking the steps two at a time, long legs stretching with a leisure even Ino can't mimic. "But an old colleague of mine agreed to let us tag along. Be polite."

She pauses, hand going up to stop them from walking further just as they curve the top of the stairs. "Especially you, Naruto. We're going to be partnering with team ten. I better not see anything from you."

"Team ten?" Naruto says. It's as though a mild light goes up in his mind. "That's Sasuke's team! He's probably the same annoying bastard as always..."

"That's exactly what I mean," Yuugao says. "Don't do that."

Naruto makes a face, Ino opens the door, and Sasuke looks the way she remembers. He's got his arms crossed, shoulder to Shikamaru's, Kiba pulling at Kakashi's sleeve urgently. All four of them look up when the door goes open, and Kakashi raises one hand in a lazy half-wave. "Yo," he says. "Heard you'll be tagging along?"

Yuugao looks at him, her smile truly genuine for the first time since Ino's met her, and her nod is both respectful and teasing. "If you wouldn't mind," she says, and it sounds like an inside joke.

Shikamaru glances up, catches Ino's eyes. She feels shamed, feels the heat of her guilt all the way down her spine. "How annoying," he says, still staring at her, and if Ino were alone she might've
considered crying. Kiba follows Shikamaru's line of sight, smiles at her best he can. He's thinking she'll be a bit annoying to be around, a bit of a burden, but she's pretty, so he smiles anyway.

Ino reaches inside herself, digging at her own brain, and manages to produce a halfway smile, mouth curving with something closer to cruelty than happiness. When she was twelve, she would've had a line prepared: *So it's these losers, she would have said. Try to keep up, will you?*

Shikamaru looks at her like she's disgustingly to him and she is. She's disgusting to herself, too. She doesn't need to think about it; anything Shikamaru were to think of her, do to her, would be forgiven. It's her fault. She had to do it, she thinks suddenly, feeling the way his thoughts go twisted when she's in his line of sight. They'd been friends since birth, but they couldn't be friends. This world wants so badly to copy the echoes, to recreate what once stormed over it, but Ino-Shika-Cho doesn't work the second time. They die. She had to do it.

Looking at him still makes her feel the worst in the world.

But Sasuke looks at her like she's an insect and she will never forgive Sasuke for anything, so her lips curve up into something she practiced after he destroyed her world and she's looking right at him when Naruto shouts something about fighting, and being the best team, and the moment breaks when Sasuke turns his eyes to something else.

(Those eyes, those eyes—Ino has seen men die for them.)

"I can't believe we're being forced to babysit," Sasuke draws out contemplatively. Naruto goes red. Yuugao looks to be holding in a laugh.

"Sasuke-kun, we did fail our last mission," Kakashi says lightly. Ino remembers only a bit of him; only his warm hand on her shoulder, blood flecked on his face. He'd been Inoichi's friend, he told her, about a year into the war. She thinks he was lying.

Looking at them makes her think of Hinata and Shino and Chouji, team eight, with Kurenai. Kurenai had always been so kind to her; after Asuma was gone, Ino and Kurenai had grown painfully close, and then Kurenai was pregnant and couldn't fight anymore and she died. Asuma now isn't even a sensei. He's still alone, one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja, hidden in the heart of Fire Country. The regret and pain surprises her.

How does she dare to feel regret?

"We had a c-rank mission," Naruto announces proudly. Ino's eyes jerk to him, to the way he jabs a finger in her direction. Sasuke's staring at him like there's a secret to the words. There isn't, Ino wants to say, but she's only trying to convince herself, so it's alright when her mouth stays closed. Naruto's just a bit dumb, Ino thinks to tell him. Her mouth stays closed. "And we did it! Ino took down a guy in the bingo book Yuugao-sensei had!"

"That's not true," Ino interjects as soon as she's able, her words tumbling over his, pushing against him. Sasuke narrows his eyes at her, as though he's saying, *I already knew it wasn't true. You could never do that.* "Yuugao-sensei did that. I just disarmed some nobleman."

"He knew doton jutsu, though!" Naruto argues. "And he was so strong! And the sword! But you—"

He does his best to mime out the fight with his body. No one is impressed by the unwarranted display. Ino's hand moves before she's thought it through, going around his wrist and tugging him back into a more respectable, shinobi-like position beside her, and then she realizes she's touching him and her hand feels like it's been dipped in acid.
Sasuke sneers. "A nobleman," Kiba repeats, laughing. Ino thinks of the way the blood had collected on Asahi's collarbone, of the way her fingers had shaken and how badly she had wanted to see him dead, to see someone dead, to see anyone dead just to prove her own life. Kiba doesn't know any of that. "Bet that's still more than you could do, Naruto!"

Naruto bristles. The Hokage allows too much conflict in his office; Ino can see him, leaning back in his chair, smiling fondly at the altercation. The chuunin at his side whispers something furiously. The Hokage waves the man off, dismissive, comfortable.

Something about it is unsettling.

"And way more than you could do," Naruto snaps. His eyes go to Kiba, to Shikamaru, but they lock on Sasuke. "Any of you! Just because Sakura-chan got hurt doesn't mean you guys are any better than team seven!" He sniffs indignantly, turning towards Ino like he means to ignore the rest of the room. Even despite himself, Sasuke's shaking with what could only be anger. "We could easily kick your asses!"

Yuugao's hand comes down again on Naruto's head, dangerously close to digging in with her metal painted nails. "That's more than enough," she says. Her voice is as mild as usual, dulled, but Ino gets the feeling she's embarrassed. Kakashi laughs, and it's enough to bring a slight but definitively embarrassed flush to Yuugao's face.

"Ne, ne, Yuugao," Kakashi says, ignoring his students completely, even as Kiba tugs uselessly on the hem of his shirt, "this is fun, isn't it?"

"Just like old times," Yuugao mutters, annoyed enough for her voice to reflect sarcasm. Ino's eyes go from one teacher to the other. Then Naruto nearly punches Kiba in the middle of the Hokage's office and even if Kakashi sees fit to give his students free leave to be disrespectful idiots, Yuugao does not, and there isn't much time for socializing until they're quietly occupied with cutting down trees for a (lazy) civilian. Naruto sticks to Ino the whole time, grumbling in team ten's direction and making bitter comments to her on Yuugao's camaraderie with Kakashi. Once, Ino glances up, a laugh cutting up her throat at a particularly mean spirited comment Naruto makes, and she sees Shikamaru watching her.

She can't laugh again.

It must be her imagination, but Ino can feel Shikamaru looking at her even after the mission ends, even after she waves goodbye to Yuugao and Naruto and starts to cut a path away from them. That night, running laps around one of the quieter training grounds, she swears she can still sense his eyes on her, disappointed and sharp and dark.

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Sakura, thank god, is out of the hospital within a day.

Ino hugs her when she sees the other girl waiting peaceably in training ground seven, clutching Sakura to her so harshly that she squeaks out, "Ino, I was just injured," to engage a release. Naruto goes to repeat the same treatment, but Sakura's less patient with him, and smacks him away in the same fashion one would a fly.

"Are you done recovering?" Yuugao asks seriously, all business. It's lost the authority it once held now that Yuugao's shown them some of her softer sides, though, so Sakura laughs. She opens her mouth, a response pushing free, and—
"It was horrible!" Naruto screeches. "We had to work with Sasuke and Kiba and Shikamaru and Sasuke! The worst!"

Sakura gapes. "You got to do a mission with Sasuke-kun? Without me?" She covers her face with her hands, squirming now, jumping from one foot to another.

"It wasn't even a big deal," Naruto grumbles, sniffing in offense. "I don't know why you like him that much, Sakura-chan——"

Sakura pulls her hands away, shifting on her feet. "I do like him," she says, quietly, as though she is about to contradict it. "But I—well, it's—I-I want—" Sakura leans forward towards Ino. It reminds her suddenly of Naruto about team seven, the way Sakura needs someone to believe her. She's flushed red. "I want to be a shinobi," she says. "Like Yuugao-sensei, and like you, Ino, and——"

"No time for him, huh?" Yuugao nods, smiling just barely. "It looks like you're doing even better than you were before," she says. Sakura brings one hand up to her ribs reflexively. She pushes at them, like that's the ultimate proof of her healed bones.

Naruto goes closer to her, his mouth opening and closing through the undecided desire to speak. "Does that—does that mean——"

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Sakura says flatly. Ino hides a laugh behind her hand. "Ever. The answer is still no."

She smiles up at Yuugao, stepping back from Ino. "What's the mission today, Yuugao-sensei?" Sakura chirps. Nothing about her suggests injury; when Ino pulls up the image of Sakura, motionless and broken on stone tiled floor, and places it next to the smiling girl she sees now, the two pictures cannot be reconciled.

"No mission, Sakura," Yuugao appeases, waving them closer to her. Ino goes forward curiously. "I suppose the only mission is to keep up your training, and consider these." Sakura and Naruto edge even closer to her to see the slips of paper Yuugao's holding. "One for each of you," Yuugao explains, and Sakura takes one with the same expression she gets when she does sudoku.

"The chuunin exams?" she asks. "Really?"

"Really," Yuugao agrees. She bends down, her hands on her knees, so that she's eye level with them. "You three could handle a man trained from birth in swordplay and extensive doton techniques. You can handle genin."

"B-but sensei," Sakura starts, pinching the exam paper between her fingers, "all I did was go unconscious."

Yuugao blinks. Then her hand comes forward, and she flicks the top of Sakura's head lightly. "You stuck to the mission," Yuugao corrects. "You did your best."

"We could die in these," Ino says absently, scanning hers for a date. It's set to take place just a week from now. It feels too soon. She hasn't even seen Chouji since graduation. It seems too soon. She won't die in there. There's too much to do.

Still, it's too soon.

"D-die?" Naruto's been staring at the exam like it's something holy, but now he looks up, eyes catching Ino's. "You're allowed to kill people? But it's just a test!"
"Ino's right. It's looked down upon, but allowed, to kill your opponents." Yuugao rises to her full height, sighing. "Normally, I would never let you die," Yuugao says and it's painful and kind but mostly a lie. Yuugao can't protect them. She just can't. It isn't a slight against her. She's skilled and strong and beautiful. But she can't. She just can't. "If you decide to participate in the chuunin exams, know that I won't be able to protect you there. But I would never let you die."

"Yuugao-sensei..." Sakura murmurs, staring down at the piece of paper in her hands like it's alive, like it's cursed. It isn't, Ino wants to say. That paper can't hurt you. There are more important things to be afraid of. "Are we strong enough for this?"

Yuugao smiles at the three of them. Ino never noticed how beautiful the woman was before. "Don't worry," she says softly. "You three are so far from weak. Yes, you too, Sakura," she adds when Sakura tucks down into herself.

She's wrong. Ino's never been strong. She remembers that she was pathetic.

("I love you," she had said and for a moment his eyes went a bit wide, hands freezing on her forearms and he looked human suddenly she remembers when she said that he looked human again and it was like seeing the sun after decades in the dark and one of his hands moved to her cheek, thumb going back and forth over her skin and she remembers leaning into the touch. She remembers feeling warm and light and she was still a little girl, a romantic, at heart, still the same girl who saw broken boys and thought she could hold out a hand, pull them up. Then his head tilted to the side. It was a parody of an emotion.

"Everything I love is dead," he said and from the way her entire body went cold, from the way her eyes went too wide and her blood went still and she couldn't breathe and he kept talking. "Are you dead, Ino?"

*She was bloody and he was bloodier and she didn't want to die anymore.*

"No," she whispered and he smiled, tapped her cheek like it was a form of praise.

"That's what I thought," he agreed and he stood, leaving her pale and motionless on her knees. The cloth pinned over the opening of the tent shifted when he left.)

"I know we can do it," Naruto says, a hand going first to Ino's shoulder and then to Sakura's. "Sakura-chan, Ino, we can do it!"

(Are you dead, Ino?)

Ino stares at the paper in her hand. *Of course we can,* she thinks.

(Yamanaka Ino is a ghost and she knows this.)
interlude i

Chapter Summary

Konoha died. Naruto survived.

Chapter Notes

hi yall! okay i deleted chapter six because i wanted to start posting interludes every five chapters. specifically every five because five is a nice number for intervals. this chapter might feel lighter than normal bc tbh i really started shipping like hardcore and also because, in case you haven’t noticed, this fic is depressing as fuck man. it’s so sad. i worry for myself. so the interlude (this one, anyway) is like, ya know. lighter. love you guys

i: boy, one day you’ll be a man

There’s a girl at school and he really liked her and her name was Haruno Sakura.

They weren’t anything alike. She’s smart and he’s not; she took notes and he didn’t; she got amazing grades and he’s just barely passing. But they had something in common. Neither of them had friends, and Naruto would love to be her friend. And if he could just be brave, he would be.

“Crying again, Forehead?” Sakura-chan flinched when Ami flicked her forehead. A red mark blossomed on Sakura's skin, unfurling. Naruto ducked further into his little hiding place behind one of the stone benches. Another thing they had in common. People didn’t just not want to be friends with them. Other kids were actively mean. He couldn’t think of a reason for anyone to be mean to Sakura-chan. She was always nice to everyone and she was so smart and so cute and her hair was shiny.

(This made him feel a little better. There was no reason to be mean to Sakura-chan. Maybe that meant there was no reason to be mean to him, either.)

He just had to be brave, just had to get up the courage to go stand up to her, to tell Ami she was wrong and Sakura-chan was great and to just go away and then Sakura-chan would say thank you and he would have a friend and he didn’t like reading but she read a lot and he could sit in the library with her and watch her read and she always had such nice lunch boxes and maybe she would even read aloud for him it was gonna be so fun, like seriously, really fun, and all he had to do was be brave this one time—

“Shut up, Ami,” a new voice said and he peeked around the bench. Some blond girl—she was in his class but he never talked to her—was standing in front of Sakura-chan, one hand on her hip, eyes narrowed. She was wearing a pale orange sweater. She wore colorful stuff like that a lot. Naruto looked down at his black tee-shirt. “Just because Sakura’s prettier and smarter than you doesn’t mean you get to be mean.”
Ami and the blond girl were facing each other, in each other’s space. Ami’s long hair that Naruto had always thought looked so shiny, like her mother brushed it each morning and each night, was lackluster compared to the fine hair the other girl had. He could imagine it knotting like strands of silk. “You go away, Ino-pig.” Ami sneered defensively. “Who do you think you are?”

The blond girl—Ino-pig?—considered this question. She punched Ami in the mouth without answering. Ami squealed, landing on her butt on the sidewalk. The girls who’d been standing behind her squeaked. Ino-pig watched the three scamper off. She looked satisfied.

She turned back to Sakura-chan. Sakura was still crying. Naruto felt like he should look away, like the moment wasn’t meant for him, but nothing was meant for him and he kept watching. He was always on the outside, watching. “So they make fun of your forehead,” the blond girl said to herself. She made a contemplative noise. “I’m Ino,” she said. Sakura flinched from her. The blond girl’s voice wasn’t gentle or soft. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Sakura,” Sakura whispered. Then, a bit louder, looking anywhere but Ino’s eyes, “Haruno Sakura!”

Ino laughed and smiled and used her hand to push back Sakura-chan’s bangs. “You look so much cuter without your hair in your face,” she decided and Sakura blushed and Naruto should have been happy for them. Sakura had made a friend, and Ino had stopped Ami from being mean to her. He should have been happy.

(He knew if it was him no one would have stopped the other kids from being mean. It it was him Ami would’ve been able to say cruel things forever. No one would care if he cried. If it was him no one would’ve helped and he knew that because no one ever did.)

Sakura-chan had a friend now, and Ino seemed really nice. She looked like she was. She was smiling. “Let’s get you something to tie your hair back,” Ino suggested and Sakura looked like she’d won the lottery. He should be happy for them.

Naruto ducked back behind the bench. He should be happy for them. All he felt was lonely.

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Sakura-chan and Ino stopped being friends. He wouldn’t have minded, except it seemed like it was ‘cause of Sasuke, and Naruto fricking hated Sasuke. Naruto didn’t talk to Ino a lot, but the few times he had, and the even fewer times it was about Sasuke, Ino didn’t seem like she was a fan. “He’s always bragging,” Naruto had complained to himself during break, scuffing his feet on the grass.

Halfway up a tree and otherwise ignoring him, Ino had said, just a little bitterly, “He thinks he’s just so cool.” She blew her hair out of her face in one large breath. Ino sometimes talked about Sasuke like she was his rival or something, and even though Naruto was clearly Sasuke’s rival, Ino was probably the coolest person Naruto knew, so he didn’t argue it. But hearing her talk to him—and talk bad about Sasuke, too—made him feel real nervous. He didn’t wanna say the wrong thing, didn’t wanna mess it up.

“R-right!” he sputtered. “Exactly!”

While he was trying to think of something to say to get her to keep talking to him, Ino gave him a look probably intended to let him know her response had been a one time thing and wouldn’t lead to
a conversation, and then Sakura had run up and called Ino down. Ino jumped straight from her
branch, high in the air, to the dirt. She did a little flip on the way down and Naruto tried not to make
it too obvious he was gaping at her. Sakura-chan seemed to catch him, though, because she said
something to Ino and then laughed. They’d gone off to do whatever friends did and Naruto was an
outsider, an observer, watching moments not meant for him.

He was at least trying to, like. Not be a creep about it, though.

“Ino gets so weird whenever Sasuke comes up,” one of Ino and Sakura-chan’s friends murmured.
Another one—Yuki? He thought her name was Yuki—nodded in agreement. “Did you hear what
she said?”

“Wait,” Yuki said. Then, “Do you think she likes him?”

A couple weeks after that Sakura-chan and Ino weren’t friends anymore.

“Good morning, Sakura-chan,” Naruto announced, as was routine. In line with routine, Sakura-
chan’s stare was withering when her eyes landed on him. She sniffed pointedly and looked away. He
slid into a seat next to Shikamaru, who was asleep, and therefore usually a good person to sit next to
when you wanted to take a nap. “Your hair’s longer! It looks really nice.” Shikamaru didn’t even
flinch. That made Shikamaru really one of the best people to sit next to; he didn’t make any noises to
disturb Naruto when he was sleeping and he didn’t seem to care if Naruto made any noises or
disruptions when it was the other way around.

Sakura paused. She reached up and touched her hair. The red ribbon she wore flopped over a little
when she pushed her hair back. Sakura-chan turned to look at Ino, triumphant. “My hair’s longer
already,” she said.

Ino didn’t even look up from her notebook. “Don’t listen to her,” Yuki said. “Not like Naruto’s a
credible source on hair.”

Sakura turned to give Naruto the same look again, like it was his fault his opinion wasn’t
trustworthy. She was only nine—and he was older, at ten, so she shouldn’t really be scary—but he
found her incredibly intimidating. Even if his opinion wasn’t, uh, credible, he thought Sakura-chan’s
opinion was probably the most important in the world, and he really wanted her to like him.

(He could still picture Ino in her pale orange sweater, stepping in front of Sakura with her arms
spread, like she was gonna take a hit to the jaw for her. He really, really wanted Sakura-chan to like
him.)

“Naruto’s not dumb, Yuki,” Ino said, like she was speaking to a small child. One smaller than her, at
least. Ino had a unique way of making other people feel small and stupid. It was kinda rude—but
when not aimed at him, a little bit funny. “Sakura’s hair got longer.”

Sakura-chan stared at her and Naruto was pretty sure she could still see Ino in her pale orange
sweater, too. He felt like what Ino said didn’t actually have anything to do with him, that it was some
kind of subtle message to Sakura and he’d accidentally become her mailman. “Ino,” Sakura said
quietly.

“Naruto’s pretty dumb,” Yuki said, unsure.

“Not any dumber than you,” Ino said, still not looking up from her notebook. Yuki made a small,
surprised noise. Ino kept her eyes on her notebook. Naruto wanted to know what she was writing in
it. “And I’m friends with you. If I wasn’t completely totally obviously super in love with Sasuke-kun,
I’d definitely like Naruto.”

Sasuke’s face got all twisted and Sakura-chan’s face did, too. “Shut up, Ino-pig! You lay off Sasuke-kun!”

“You gonna make me?” Ino asked, abandoning her notebook and slamming her hands on the desk, voice louder and a bit more like singing and Naruto wiggled in his seat, face and ears uncomfortably hot. Naruto watched with rapt attention as Reo-sensei walked up to the podium at the front of the room, silencing the argument with a quick glance. When Naruto’s eyes dashed back down at his desk and he started to desperately search for a pencil, for a notebook, for anything to look at other than his classmates, he caught Shikamaru’s eye.

Shikamaru looked at him, unimpressed, and then turned his head to the side and went back to sleep.

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After Sasuke left the village Naruto saw Ino and Sakura together at the hospital. They’d visited everyone—Ino cried over Chouji and Sakura brought flowers for Lee. After Sakura came to see him, Ino stopped in, probably on her way out. He wiped his tears away. She looked away while he did it, which was nice, at least.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Ino said. He tried his best to smile at her.

“Don’t make any mistakes on this, Naruto!” Sakura put her hands on her hips. “Ino-pig and I aren’t friends!”

“Yeah...” Naruto looked down at his hands. His smile hurt. “You...rivals, right?”

Ino rolled her eyes. “Basically friends,” she said, tone implying she’d discussed it with Sakura previously. Still, she gave Sakura a look, one eyebrow raised, and Sakura’s face went red.

“Hmph!” Sakura-chan turned away pointedly. It was endearing. Would’ve been kinda funny. “I’m gonna wait for you outside!”

“I’ll be right out, Forehead,” Ino promised. Naruto listened to Sakura’s footsteps get further and further away as she walked down the hallway. Ino reached forward, as if to hug him, but then she ruffled his hair and laughed. “Sakura was right. You do look like a mummy!”

“I couldn’t bring him back, Naruto thought. I promised on my life to bring him back! A part of him ached at the thought. Sasuke was his friend. He would bring him back—for Sakura, for Sasuke.

“I’ll see you later,” Ino said and she brushed his hair out of his face a bit before stepping away. “Get
well soon, okay?”

He nodded and looked at his hands and Ino walked away. But then she stopped. “It wasn’t your fault, you know,” she said, abruptly, in the doorway just as she’d stepped out to leave.

“What?”

Ino looked back at him. “It wasn’t your fault. Sasuke...”

“You don’t know anything about it,” Naruto said. Sasuke was his first friend. Ino wasn’t team seven. She didn’t know the promises he’d made or the fights he and Sasuke had fought together. She didn’t know the way Naruto had screamed and hurt and failed. She didn’t know the way Sakura was crying when he promised to bring Sasuke home. She didn’t know what it felt like—to finally have friendship and affection and warmth, to finally feel it with his own hands, and then have it slip away. Ino said she loved Sasuke, but she didn’t know anything about it. I won’t be a failure forever, he’d said to Sasuke. I’ll be your equal! “I failed. I promised Sakura I would bring him back.” He clenched his fists. “I promised, and I’ll never go back on my word.”

For a second she took a breath, her shoulders shaking just a little. He thought she was gonna either cry or yell at him—you idiot! let it go! save yourself, loser! you’re recovering! look at all the hurt Sasuke did to you!—but Ino just turned around fully, looked him in the face. “Sakura can take care of herself,” she said. And then she left.

He never really liked Ino. She was really loud and said mean things to Sakura-chan and had a thing for Sasuke, which was unforgivable in anyone other than Sakura. Everyone was allowed to have their flaws, but Sakura’s only flaw was the little Sasuke hitch. Ino had the Sasuke hitch, but, like, a lot of other stuff, too.

(Even now, with Sasuke missing for years and feeling forever out of reach, Naruto could still say that and laugh about it. She had a thing for Sasuke. Ha!

Sasuke was gone and it wasn’t funny anymore.)

Still. He, like. Really needed a plant.

Naruto allowed himself a few seconds of lingering in the doorway, counting the moments after the little bell jingled. “Welcome to—” Ino did a double take when she saw him. She was in a burnt orange short-sleeved shirt. He wished he was wearing his usual orange. It would’ve made him feel better. “Oh,” she said. Her smile shrank away. Her hair was down around her shoulders, long and shiny. He could imagine it tangling like fishing line. “Hey, Naruto. You need anything?”

He scowled a little. Pissed him off that everyone was being so-so-so nice to him now that Jiraiya was dead.

“You don’t gotta baby me,” he said. “I just want a plant.”

Ino raised an eyebrow. She didn’t look impressed. Good. That was good. That felt more normal. That felt less like his teacher was, you know. Dead. “A plant,” she repeated. “Anything more specific?”
He shrugged, leaned his elbows on the counter. Ino crossed her arms. “I don’t know.” Naruto scanned the shelves of plants, the fleshy aloe and soft spikes of fern. “A friendly plant. Stonecrop, or Allium, or something? A nice plant. Something fluffy.”

She was smiling now, like he’d said something funny. He just wanted someone to say goodnight to and morning to and, you know, that kind of thing. The closest he had to family was gone, and Jiraiya hadn’t been much for that sort of domestic stuff anyway. Sometimes he used to try to get Jiraiya to do family stuff with him—“Let’s brush our teeth together, Ero-sennin! Can we buy these matching slippers? We should make curry rice! Please, Ero-sennin, please? Please, please?”—but he hadn’t been much for it. It wasn’t that Jiraiya didn’t want to do...family stuff. You know. The perv had wanted to like, bond, when he wasn’t out being a perv. Naruto was just starved and begging and he wanted to do everything he’d seen in movies, everything he’d overheard people mention. He was so freaked about doing something wrong, about messing up, and so freaked out about not being able to do all that fun bonding stuff right.

Didn’t matter anymore, anyway.

“A nice plant?” Ino asked. The expression she’d put on made him feel stupid. That was good. Normal. His face felt hot. The was normal, too, even if not preferred. “What, do you want a plant that’ll kiss you goodnight?”

Maybe, Naruto thought rebelliously. “No,” he said petulantly. She laughed. It made him feel a little bit less shitty.

“I’ll show you a secret,” Ino said and he’s already suspicious. His eyes followed her from the counter to the door. He watched her brush her hands off and pull her hair up into a ponytail. She hung up her apron and flipped around the sign on the door so that it said closed and not open. The bell jingled when she opened the door. “Are you coming?”

They walked down the street together, her in that burnt orange shirt and him in a green shirt so pale it really looked beige. “Do you really like plants?”

“Yeah!” He’s smiling before he remembered to be cautious. She caught the expression, though, even when it paled.

“You’ll love this, then,” she said, and pulled open the gate to the Yamanaka Compound.

“You house?” Naruto asked, doubtful. A part of him preemptively built himself up for the embarrassment of her parents seeing him. The first time he met Sakura-chan’s family, it had been really awkward for everyone involved. He’d only passed Ino’s mother in passing, but, in passing, she’d looked extremely uncomfortable.

“No, the compound’s too small for that,” Ino said, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. Phew. “No one really lives here anymore. It’s more...symbolic, now. It’s been here since the village founding, though.” She looked at him over her shoulder, grinning. “And so has this!”

She pulled open a massive door and when he ducked his head to enter, went down the set of stairs—wow. As far as greenhouses went, this one was definitely impressive. Holy shit. “Holy shit,” he said out loud. Ino looked smug. “You have Welwitschia? And Ephedra?” Ino shrugged, forcibly casual under her pleased expression. There was even a massive, monstrous looking Rafflesia Arnoldii near the back panel of windows. He spun in place, unable to look at anything for more than a few seconds before something else distracted him.

“What can I say? The Yamanaka love plants.”
He touched everything, obviously, because the greenhouse didn’t seem like a place random people
got to visit very often, but he could still feel Ino watching him. “What?” he eventually demanded,
confronting her.

“Nothing,” Ino said. She looked like he’d surprised her, like he’d done something unexpectedly great
and she was in awe. It wasn’t reluctantly, though, not a bitter sort of impressed. She just seemed
happily surprised. “You really like plants, huh? Never thought you would know all these names.”

It wouldn’t be fair to have a plant to take care of if you didn’t know everything you could about it.
“Of course I know,” he said, indignant. He used to force himself to read botany texts until the words
held meaning, until he could link the sentences together even though his mind never really wanted to
do that. *I’ll take care of you*, he’d vowed to them, to the sprouts of autumn fire and stalks of poppy. *I
promise!*

“That’s impressive,” she said softly.

He looked at her, at the smile she held, full of secrets unknown to him. She was rubbing a delicate
green leaf between two fingers, looking away from him to turn fond eyes on the pale stem as it
poked out of the dirt. There was sunlight dancing over her mouth. He could feel the warmth from the
flowers, the smell of them, of so much life all blending up in one small space.

Look. He was feeling emotionally vulnerable. He can’t really be blamed. When she stepped towards
him and leaned up and looked at him and then said, "I'm gonna kiss you," he kissed back.

(Konoha was still alive and he was kissing Yamanaka Ino? He said he loved Sakura for how many
years, had been chasing Sasuke for almost as long, and he was kissing Yamanaka Ino? What? Why?
Konoha was living and breathing and he picked Ino?

It’s shameful. But he didn’t decide that until later.)

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What he expected: He got to kiss a really pretty girl in a really pretty greenhouse, which didn’t
appear to be an engagement that would have any long-term consequences at all, and ended the day
with Iruka-sensei managing to have some free time for him. That worked out really well, actually,
because by the end of the day the weird churning in his stomach had stopped being butterflies and
started to feel like a writhing mess of snakes, and he was crying on a bench at about two in the
morning feeling absolutely completely alone, before Iruka-sensei showed up.

What he got: Everything listed above, in addition to Yamanaka Ino *completely* in his business.

“Oh, it’s Miss Beautiful,” Sai called. Naruto tensed immediately. Sai either didn’t notice or didn’t
care—probably didn’t care, the bastard—and waved at her with his chopsticks. Ino gifted him with a
tiny smile. She sat down facing the street on the stool right next to Naruto, where he just kind of
looked at her, wide eyed and feeling confused. He’d never even officially kissed anyone before. He
didn’t know the protocol. Was he supposed to bring it up? Ignore it?

At the thought—the word “kiss”—he felt his ears heat up. Naruto chose rapid consumption of the
ramen bowl in front of him as the best way to hide this.

“Hey, Sai,” Ino greeted. He watched her aim a winning grin at Teuchi. “Hi!” she chirped.
“What can I get for you today, Ino-san?” And that seemed to imply she’d been there before, which, for some reason, didn’t sit right with Naruto at all.

“Nothing for me today,” Ino said.

Naruto tried to make his eating as loud as possible.

Still, the inevitable: “Hey, Naruto.”

She’s being so casual. Did she kiss people a lot? For some reason the thought made him feel...weird. When he glanced over at her, Ino was looking at him. Freaked him out until he realized she was waiting for a response to her greeting. Naruto made a noise at her through his noodles. She leaned backwards on her stool, falling against the counter, hair spilling around her. Ino peered up at him. He noticed her hair wasn’t up in a ponytail and felt weirdly uncomfortable with himself for noticing. His body felt too big. Awkward.

“Could I have some?” Ino asked, lolling her head towards him on the counter. Naruto really hoped Sai couldn’t tell how tense his shoulders were. She lifted her head a little bit and opened her mouth in offering. For a second Naruto looked at her. It was a second too long.

Okay. Look. It felt. Charged. For some reason.

By the time he’d finished blinking rapidly, Sai had already popped one of his mochi into her mouth. She muffled out a thanks and then fell back against the counter again. Ino kept looking at Naruto as she chewed and he definitely could not look at her so he made a half-built excuse and hurried off.

She just bounced right off the counter, though, shouting a goodbye at Sai and Teuchi and catching up to him so she was walking in time. “You’re going to spend today with me,” Ino said. Naruto had not given any input on this previously.

Ino and him have always crossed paths often in the village and she usually had something for him when she saw him—a sly, moderately funny, hintingly insulting comment or an equally sly smile that made him think she probably had a moderately funny but very insulting comment she’d chosen not to share. But the past week, ever since the incident in the greenhouse, every time she walked past him, she stopped to talk to him. If he walked by while she was having lunch with her teammates or some of the hospital staff she would abandon the table or call him over to join.

It wasn’t particularly creepy. They passed each other by a lot. Only she wasn’t passing him by anymore. She was talking to him.

“I’m—I’m busy today,” Naruto blurted. His voice cracked. He wasn’t a very good liar or very good at getting out of being uncomfortable. He’d always thought he was fantastic under pressure, but even that talent had fled him. He felt subdued and embarrassed and it wasn’t a good look.

From the way she was looking at him, all smiley, Ino seemed to disagree. “I’m not,” she said, like it was an announcement. He could imagine her on a stage, telling a crowd of people that. I’m not busy today, she would allow indulgently, the crowd fighting over themselves to be the first to reach her on her pedestal. “I’ll come with.”

“What?”

“Whatever you’re doing,” Ino said. “I’ll come with. Can I?”
He searched desperately for an excuse. “It’ll be boring,” he got out, words tumbling over each other. “I’m just gonna be—researching!”

There’s no way she couldn’t tell he was digging for bullshit. But Ino just smiled wider. “Researching what?” she asked.

Um. That’s a good question. What had he been doing? Other than dragging through the day, thinking about Jiraiya and trying not to feel sad and taking care of the couple of wildflowers he’d snatched when he hadn’t managed to actually buy a nice plant and forcibly maintaining every relationship he’d ever had with anyone who had ever made eye contact with him—well, other than that, he’d been—

The guy who killed Jiraiya-sensei, Naruto thought. I’m researching that.

But he couldn’t tell her that. It was depressing. Ino was the only one treating him kind of normal. Even if he knew something was hidden in Jiraiya’s notes, something was hidden in the message he’d written on Fukasaku, he couldn’t tell Ino about that. She stopped him, put a hand on his arm. He’d been walking so quickly trying to scatter that when he looked around he actually wasn’t completely sure where he was. “Hey,” she said. “I’m here, you know. If you need anything.”

She might’ve meant emotional support or something but when she said it Naruto looked down at her mouth unintentionally. It was one of the most embarrassing moments of his life. It became slightly less embarrassing when he actually leaned down and kissed her and much, much less embarrassing when she kissed back and her tongue gave a lick on his bottom lip and he was definitely kissing Yamanaka Ino in the middle of the street with one hand tangled in her hair and all he could think of was the sunshine on her mouth in that greenhouse.

He pulled away from Ino—for a couple moments he couldn’t really look away, though, and she’s biting her lip and her eyes were so bright—but she just kind of smiled and leaned up to kiss him again. When Ino pulled away next, her eyes unfocused from his face to stare over his shoulder. He glanced back to see, and it was Ino’s mother, staring at them, a bag of groceries scattered on the street in front of her as though she’d been so shocked she had dropped them.

Ino’s put a hand to his cheek, gently turned his face back towards her. She was grinning.

She kissed him again.

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When he wasn’t with Ino, he was obsessively reading over Jiraiya’s last notes or begging Iruka-sensei to take a day off and hang out with him or trying to worm the other rookie nine into having a meetup preferably at a ramen place as well as preferably without Sai invited or really begging Tsunade to let him go out and catch Jiraiya’s killer or at least take some of his advice on the guy’s last note to the world. All of those things were generally unsuccessful and, honestly, kind of depressing, so when Ino ditched eating lunch with some chuunin to walk next to him, he let her.

Even though he was pretty sure Ino’s mom absolutely hated him, Ino didn’t seem concerned about their close contact. “She’s just old-fashioned,” Ino said about it when prompted. She rolled her eyes. Naruto felt like there was a story there, but he didn’t really think it was his to hear. He’d been following her after she’d run up beside him and grabbed his hand and he watched her slow to a stop,
start flinging kunai in quick succession. Three targets. Hit, hit, hit. Center, center, center.

“Why do you even wanna kiss me?” he asked and as soon as the words came out he felt deeply awkward. Naruto wasn’t used to feeling self-conscious. He leaned back against a tree, staring up through the leaves at the tiny slivers of sun glowing through the green. Ino paused—she was collecting her kunai, body twisted to try to keep looking at him while ripping the knives back out. She’d asked him to come train with her, help her practice her tajjutsu forms.

Usually, he had learned, when she asked him something like that, it meant she wanted to kiss him. Just the thought made him squirm.

“What do you mean?” Ino asked. She stood up, tucked the last kunai away and starting a walk towards him. In his attempt to look cool, posed against the tree, he’d kind of trapped himself, and when she got in his face, he was caged against the bark.

“If you don’t like me or anything,” Naruto said. “Then how come?”

She leaned toward him and he fell back against the tree trunk in an unintentional retreat. Ino ran a hand through his hair. Her other hand traced down his arm before she linked her fingers with his. This felt entirely too close and he hated feeling so out of place, so nervous. He thought she was going to ignore the question entirely, that she was going to kiss him. His eyes slipped closed and he tried not to do anything embarrassing, like sigh helplessly or tell her she’s beautiful or make any humiliating noises, but she pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth. Then she kissed his cheek, and pressed her forehead against his. His eyes went open and Ino was smiling at him. She rubbed their noses together.

Usually when Ino touched him it made him flush with embarrassment, turned him into a helpless mess, too busy trying not to swallow his own tongue to speak. That kept it fun, though. It kept a light mood. She hadn’t promised him anything or told him she was in love with him or said half the things he’s heard Sakura-chan say about Sasuke or even half the things he’s heard Ino say about Sasuke. So it was good to just be fun. He got to kiss a pretty girl who for some unknowable reason wanted to kiss him and that was pretty amazing. But when she did stuff like that he kind of wanted to cry.

Naruto used to think he had poisonous skin and insects in his veins. Sometimes it struck how badly he just wanted someone to touch him. He wanted warmth from someone else’s skin. Ino was still smiling at him and he’d wanted this for so long, had wanted to be standing this close to someone with his hand in theirs. Not a lot of people really wanted to touch him. Not a lot of people wanted to hold his hand or hug him or kiss his forehead or any shit like that so when Ino did stuff like that he kind of just sort of a little wanted to cry.

“Who said I don’t like you?” Ino asked, like it was a serious question and she had plans to beat up the responsible party. When he only sputtered, she said, “You’re pretty amazing,” and it sounded like she meant it, like it was the first time she’d thought it and she was just as surprised as him.

He kissed her so hard when he pulled away her lips were swollen, her breathing erratic. He touched a finger to her mouth. It looked painful. He’d done that to her. Her cheeks were red and her lips looked bruised because of him.

Before he could apologize for it, she kissed him again.
It lasted some time. And then it ended.

Danzo became Hokage.

A few weeks after that, Danzo stopped being Hokage, because Sasuke killed him. Was real bloody, allegedly. Naruto wasn’t there. A couple days after that Sasuke brought Uchiha Madara and Pain to Konoha.

That was bloody, too. Naruto was there.

Konoha died. Naruto survived.
Chapter Summary

The chuunin exams are going to be easy, obviously.

Chapter Notes

i feel like the chuunin exams are under a lot of pressure to not be tired and boring. idk if i succeeded? I was nervous for this arc. disappointed I didn't finish it in one chapter but there's a lot I wanted to happen and i'm a detail-oriented writer and i just LOVEEEEE going on tangents, so ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

i appreciate every review and every reader. i'm really bad at chatting so it might not come across but each one of you makes me so happy

Ino fic rec: Lespedeza by JinnySkeans, hosted on ffnet
Song rec: Flesh and Bone by The Killers

The forest of death still frightens her. Not even the pleasant, newly-turned July skies, bright with the promise of summer, can alleviate the way her body shakes. The trees above her shake with silent life, with danger, and Ino presses in a bit closer to Sakura, so that she's guarding one side of the girl with Naruto on the other. The other genin along the forest borders push at the edge of Ino's sense, but she can only see Sakura and Naruto. Sakura has her hair braided back into a bun for the occasion, and Naruto's kunai seem mildly sharper than usual. The two of them are so bright it's almost like they're the entire world.

If she didn't know better, Ino might think it was just team seven and an angry forest. But the forest is only one of many enemies. Sakura plays with her hands, wringing them together and taking small steps under mild urging from her teammates. "I can't believe we have to attack another team," she frets. Her fingers shake just a bit as she holds her own hands. She's learned basic first aid, has brought with her the poisons Yuugao helped with and the weapons disguised as jewelry that kunoichi class taught her. Ino never thought poison was Sakura's style, but this isn't the same Sakura.

(Even though Ino would have thought the suspense of the oncoming chuunin exam would've kept them on their toes, training went the same way it always did. It was like nothing'd been announced, like Yuugao hadn't taken them on a group trip to the Hokage's office to turn in their forms and Naruto hadn't been throwing Sasuke sneering glances in the street the past few days. It was still just Naruto throwing kunai with accuracy she wouldn't expect and still just Sakura only pacing along the
river. Ino, in an uncharacteristic show of laziness but a perfectly accurate display of luxury, lounged in the grass, occasionally rising to her feet to pick flowers.

"I'm confident you can pass," Yuugao said, looking at the three of them. Naruto paused, kunai held up by a finger hooked in the ring.

"Really?" he asked. Ino started to smile, and Yuugao tapped her foot against the side of Ino's leg, giving her a sidelong unimpressed look.

"Maybe if your teammate gets up," she suggested wryly. It felt to Ino that Yuugao's voice was a wet towel, and each word only a bit of water being wrung out.

"Maybe I want to poison my weapons," Ino had claimed, twirling the long foxglove stem she'd picked earlier. This was false—she did not want to poison anything. "Like my ninjato."

Sakura, though, paused in her trip back up the tree, and something in Yuugao's face changed by just a swivel. "Maybe I want to poison my weapons," Sakura murmured, and it wasn't something Ino had considered before.

It wasn't that Sakura wouldn't be good at it. She'd be amazing with poison, just like she'd be amazing at genjutsu, and just like she'd been amazing at medical ninjutsu. But these were things Ino hadn't thought about. Genjutsu and poison seemed too...underhanded. The Sakura she knew was so straightforward. Her fighting style, while clever, wasn't sneaky. She and Naruto had never been typical shinobi.

Sakura's honor—her refusal to use tactics she deemed dishonest—was something Ino wanted to keep. But that wasn't her decision.

Yuugao didn't have these reservations. She began to nod in approval, Ino sitting up to watch Sakura scuttle down the tree.

"I know a lot about that," Ino said. She thought of Sakura with larkspur, with lily of the valley in her hair, with morning glory seeds ground up in a paste and mountain laurel left to soak overnight. It was an offering, she felt. Sakura wasn't right and Ino was all wrong and it was an offering. She held up the foxglove towards Sakura. It was beautiful and poisonous. Ino had never thought of Sakura as that type but it was an offering.

"That's a pretty flower," Naruto said. "Can I eat it?")

Sakura isn't the way she was once, and she isn't some sort of prodigy, but she's smart and she's stronger than she wants to think. Ino bites back a scoff as Sakura goes on. "Is there anyone we can beat? Everyone looks so much stronger than us—"

Naruto claps his hands together, resolute. "Of course! We can beat any other team in this forest, dattebayo!"

"Any other team," Ino echoes. She laughs at him. "You think we could beat any of them?"

"Of course," Naruto announces, and Ino goes tense, a new chakra edging along the trees. She pulls Sakura back just as kunai land at their feet; her eyes go wide when she sees the exploding tags.

"Move!" she howls, one hand in Sakura's and one hand on Naruto's wrist, leaping up. The tags explode while they are midair, and Ino releases her teammates to drop into a roll, elegantly spinning to land, skidding, on her feet. Sakura slips, tripping onto her knees, her hair miraculously staying up but for a few strands; Naruto drops like a rock.
"Good dancing," a genin from Kiri says, coming forward out of the trees like a hidden beast. Ino draws her ninjato. She goes flying forward just as he does, a kunai in his hand, and one hard hit to the knife sends it flying from his grip. Sakura yelps just outside of Ino's line of vision, and her head snaps in the other girl's direction to see Naruto in front of her, fighting off another genin. The third chakra she can sense is somewhere above them and Ino twists, neck craning, blade raised as she scans the trees. "You shouldn't have looked away," the genin crows, and when Ino turns back she's just in time to watch the boy finish his jutsu. "Suiton: Juudan!"

A condensed shot of water hits her squarely in the stomach and she falls backwards from the force of it, rolling with the hit to rise shakily on her feet, dashing forward again to knock the grip of her sword against the back of his head. The force of it vibrates through her hand and up her wrist. "Eat dust," Naruto shouts from a couple feet away, so she assumes that's going well. She watches the Kiri genin's eyes roll back with something akin to pleasure coiled in her. She pulls open his haori, digging through his pockets.

"No scroll here," she calls.

"Not here either," Sakura reports back.

The third energy signal—Ino twirls, going through the air like an arrow, rushing up one of the endless trees, blade unsheathed. There's a girl shivering against a tree trunk, and Ino's halfway to cutting her open before she stops, hand shaking. "Give me your scroll," Ino says, and it's then that she sees the girl isn't shaking out of fear—she's laughing.

Her pale hand rises into the hand seal of the snake. The seal of the snake—using it alone? The only things Ino uses a single snake seal for are exploding tags—

"Do me a favor," the girl says, and Ino takes a step back. "Okay? Die."

The force of the explosion knocks her ninjato out of her hand—it flies away from her, bouncing in metallic clangs. Ino hits the ground like a stone, her head knocking back against solidly packed dirt. A noise escapes her involuntarily, ears ringing, back aching.

"Ino!" Sakura's hands are soft on Ino's arm, and she blinks her eyes open, blinded briefly by the white light flickering under her eyelids.

"I'm fine," she manages to croak. "All good. Fine."

She'd been about to kill that girl, that stranger, but her hands shook and she stopped. Some ninja kill people and she'd been a murderer before but—

(Some ninja kill people, but not you, Ino.)

"Naruto's got your sword," Sakura says, voice low and reassuring, a hand brushing through Ino's bangs. "Let's get up, okay? Can you get up?"

Sakura slips an arm under Ino's, Naruto taking control of her other side. "I'm good," Ino says, echoing her previous sentiments. "That girl blew herself up. I don't think the scroll survived."

Sakura gasps and for a second doesn't say anything. "She's dead?"

"Probably," Ino says. She can't tell if she feels hollow or not.

"That sucks," Naruto decides. Ino pulls her arm away, shaking herself a bit. "We totally beat them up, though," he adds after Ino and Sakura both stay quiet. His voice is like a chirping bird. Ino tugs
her other arm away from him, too, taking her ninjato from his hand and sheathing it. Shame stings at Ino, sharper than the bruises forming along her spine. She'd walked into the forest thinking herself better. She'd walked in with her head high and her fists clenched. Ino had walked in feeling as though it would be simple.

Ino likes to think highly of herself. She likes to romanticize herself. She likes to think about herself, likes to pretend she used to be grinning and glowing and happy, with sparks of laughter and spills of sunshine. She likes to look in the mirror at her young, young, too young face and pretend the girl in there is worth protecting.

Sometimes, though—sometimes she can admit it.

The girl she was, the girl that became her, was never much for anything. That girl was petty and cruel. That girl was vain and selfish. That girl was never worth saving.

"That's not a fair trade," Naruto had said and he was right. Ino's fought in warfare, and yet when she'd walked in with her weapons sharpened, with her eyes glazed by indifference, she got caught off guard by some twelve year old girl.

A crazy twelve year old girl, Ino corrects. There's no way she could have survived the blast. Ino stretches her senses out curiously—the Kiri girl's chakra is gone. She's dead.

Ino rubs her thumb against the hilt of her ninjato. It does little to reassure her.

... 

Come day three they still haven't found a heaven scroll. Ino gnaws on her portion of the rabbit they'd caught—Sakura'd shed a couple tears when team seven found the animal in the trap, and Naruto had looked a little ill, but Ino's done worse things than kill cute animals in her lifetime and she only felt mildly empty when she broke its neck—and tries to hide her restlessness. Still, she can't stop herself from saying, "We should be at the tower by now." It's a useless comment.

"We aren't," Naruto says helpfully. He flings a bit more dirt into the fire. It hisses.

"We still need a scroll, too," Sakura adds. She sighs. "We almost had it on the first day..."

Ino chews a bit more, then flicks her makeshift skewer to the side. It lands point down, digging into the dirt like a discarded knife. The trees shake from thrashing within them. The clearing is small, hallowed by tree trunks, and even if she feels painfully exposed, the shaking leaves have her scooting a bit back in the dirt. "Maybe we should—"

Naruto raises one hand suddenly, sitting up straighter, head tilting to the side as if to raise his ear; she's so shocked at his nerve to interrupt her that she does actually go quiet. "Do you hear that?" he whispers. He's staring into the trees.

"Hear what?" Sakura starts, rising to her feet, and—

It's distant, but Ino's been paying attention to the fights in the forest since they sparked the fire. "What about it?" Ino demands. So someone's fighting. "It isn't any of our business." The noise comes louder. Sakura stares into the trees, reaching for a kunai.

"I think it's Sasuke," Naruto says, words coming faster now. He comes up to his feet, eyes wide, tense like a frightened animal. "It sounds like Sasuke!"

"We should leave," Ino decides immediately.
At the same time, Naruto shouts, "We have to go help them!"

For a bare second they stare at each other. Then, "Ino, we have to go help," Sakura says.

"We don't!" Ino spreads her hands in a plee because she knows something goes wrong for Sasuke in this forest. She doesn't know what—she doesn't know when—but she knows it starts him down a path to nowhere and she doesn't want any of them to be involved in it. Sasuke's a black hole. All he manages to do is ruin. "Sasuke can take care of himself, and we still need a scroll—"

Naruto turns away, kicking a bit more dirt into the fire. It breathes out a final growl and dies. Sakura stands with him. Something about the image—Sakura and Naruto standing together as though they've been that way for centuries, Sakura with verdant eyes of steel and Naruto with a jaw harsher than it has a right to be—sends something sharp through Ino's chest. It was always the three of them, Naruto used to tell her, and when the two of them twist, turning away from her, the image glows golden in her eyes.

Maybe it never mattered at all how strong she became and maybe it was never going to be a happy ending for her but Sakura dies and Naruto dies and, "Sasuke isn't worth dying for," she says, she begs. Leave him, she doesn't say. Stay with me.

"I don't plan on dying, Ino," Naruto tells her, looking back at her, mouth downturned a bit like he thinks she's said something stupid. Sakura extends a hand, waving Ino on, and it was always the three of them. Ino knows she never had a chance. Sakura pulls her hand back; she and Naruto run into the trees. The branches are shaking from the force of the fight now, and Ino catches a shout, a cry of pain. It was always going to be the three of them it was always going to be just them, but—

The best she can do is go with.

"Fine," Ino mutters and she frees her ninjato.

She leaps into the branches and drops from from the tree tops, foliage stabbing at her bare skin. Ino's just landed, head flicking up and her ponytail following as she finds her footing just behind Naruto and Sakura, in front of Sasuke like a shield, legs bent in a crouch. "Leave Sasuke alone!" Naruto shouts and Sakura's holding one kunai, small tendrils of shiny pink hair falling into her face, green eyes sharp and fingers white around the knife handle. Sasuke's on the branch behind them, splayed over its massive width. Ino risks a look back at him; his eyes are closed. She pushes two cold fingers against his neck, against the steady pulse. She lets her hand go to his shoulder, shaking him. At the touch, his eyes flutter, halfway to conscious, alive. She would never expect anything less. He could survive the end of the world.

(But she was still there when Naruto killed him.)

He isn't worth it and he isn't worth this and he isn't worth her, but Naruto flicks a kunai up into his hand, and she resigns herself. The grass-nin frowns. Ino can sense Shikamaru and Kiba down below them, on the forest floor. If she can sense their chakra, then they aren't dead. Not yet, something inside her mocks, voice the same way she had talked to the ten year old girl first living in this body. No one's dead yet, Ino.

The grass ninja—a woman, Ino thinks, but it's difficult to tell—sighs. "You three should get out of my way," she says. "That's what his teammates did. That's why they aren't dead."

Naruto sucks in a shocked, sharp breath. Ino's never known Shikamaru or Kiba to abandon anyone. They'd been there almost as long as Sakura, Kiba with his teeth bared and Shikamaru with the chess board hidden inside his mind and—
Oh. Oh. Ino blinks, hard, her hands shaking. Those people don't exist. Madara may have killed them, but Ino did worse; she erased them entirely. Those people never existed. They have the chance to be anyone now. Shikamaru and Kiba could grow up to be anyone now.

"We aren't leaving him," Sakura hisses, feral, predatory. It's like she's declaring war. "You aren't touching him!"

The woman sighs again. Ino tenses, and then the stranger moves.

There is no other way to describe it. Once, the grass-nin was across from them, pressed to the tree trunk instead of in the open air on the branch, and then she's just there, parrying Sakura's kunai with a bare hand, a cut going down her wrist without notice. She moves to smack her hand across Sakura's face, to send her flying, when Naruto pulls the girl back by her wrist, Sakura safely behind him.

Naruto takes the hit and he soars.

Ino's breath catches when he hits hard against the tree trunk, head snapping back from the force of the blow. The woman is beside him faster than Ino can physically follow and she realizes, the acknowledgment burning in her stomach, that she is afraid.

They can't die here. There's so much to do—she can't die here there's so much she still has to do so much she has to fix so much she has to say—if she dies here who will save the world who will save Naruto who will save her parents if she dies here what will they become? She can't die here—

(Shes erased the people she loved for this. She destroyed herself for this. She desecrated Sakura's memory for this. She lost Shikamaru and Chouji for this. They are not dying here.)

Ino catches his eyes over the woman's shoulder, hers rounded with fear. His are red. She's ashamed that they terrify her. "The demon brat," the grass-nin murmurs thoughtfully, hand around Naruto's throat now, holding him against the bark, nails long and digging into his skin. His neck begins to bleed in tiny lines that run over the woman's hand and drip lazily along his skin. The grass-nin's hand drifts over Naruto's stomach—

"Don't touch him!" Ino shouts, rising higher on her toes as if it will afford her power. The panic of being powerless, the pain of helplessness that she thought was behind her: it rises in her chest. "Don't touch him!"

The grass-nin looks over at Ino, a smile coming over her face. "Don't worry, little girl," she says. Ino can't decide to look at Naruto's scrunched up face or at the cruel tilt of the grass-nin's chin. "This should be enough to subdue your little monster."

"Little monster"—Ino's face goes twisted.

The woman's free hand goes over his face and Naruto screams. The sound goes into Ino like knives and Sakura echoes it and Ino knows they will not die here and she isn't willing to fight for Sasuke. He doesn't deserve her.

It is a surprise, though, to know she is willing to die for Naruto. When the grass-nin releases him, he drops; Ino leaps over the grass-nin's head, spinning in the air, landing between the two of them, her ponytail flicking and her eyes raging.

"I said not to touch him," Ino snarls, a hand pushing Naruto behind her and the other drawing her sword in one smooth movement. She's forced to parry the grass ninja's gleaming blade but she doesn't manage to avoid it, only succeeding in forcing the blow upwards, so a clean scratch cuts into
her cheek instead of her chest. The blood oozes, drips down her face. Naruto slumps into her shoulder, the movement so reminiscent of when he died that for a moment she forgets how to breathe.

Naruto slides down her body, landing in a heap behind her. The moment does not last and Ino exhales out, inhales in, eyes a sharp, hard glare. She is outclassed; Ino blocks and attacks, ninjato moving so quickly it is almost more liquid than solid, her body shifting around attacks, pale limbs graceful, dodging expertly and receiving small red cuts for her efforts.

"Ino!" Sakura cries and Ino thinks what she can't say: Run, Sakura.

"You will lose," the grass-nin says. Ino looks almost instinctively at the cut on their wrist—the cut from Sakura's kunai.

All of Sakura's kunai are poisoned.

Ino's ninjato flies up to block their next hit, the force of the blow sending her feet backwards a few steps, sweat dripping down her face, and there is no time to rest; she nearly trips over Naruto, her body going faster than ever to block the blows, taking hit after hit, the metal singing in high pitched screeches with each match of the blades and—

The grass-nin's weapon clashes against Ino's. Her eyes are wide, sweat beaded along her hairline, and the blade of her ninjato breaks, shatters, bits of metal flying, cutting into her arms and her hand, small shards of hardened metal biting into her neck. She ducks under the next swipe, whirling around in the same movement, hands sliding into a seal she's known for. "Shintenshin no Jutsu," she breathes. Ino's body drops; Naruto's eyes come open.

The power of it, of him, surprises her. It's nothing compared to what he used to be, compared to the beast she used to slip inside of and destroy battlefields with—she thinks of the grass-nin, of little monster, and decides maybe this is a good thing—but it still surprises and bites at her just how much more chakra his body has compared to her own. The first time she took control of Naruto's body, the first time she owned his flesh as though it were her own, Kurama was long dead, and the power belonged entirely to Naruto. If Naruto was compromised, the power of the Kyuubi was put under threat. It was Ino's job to be sure their largest asset never stopped moving. If he died, Kyuubi's power would reincarnate somewhere after escaping his body. Now it's different. Kurama lives. She still rises with grace Naruto has never had, eyes blue and hard.

It's a deal she never perfected, but to gain power one must give; with Naruto, she always threw a bit of herself down the chute, down the void, and the crawling animals living inside him ate the scraps of her sacrificed soul—then spat up power for her to use in return. Now, she figures the same rule applies.

Ino's always been skilled with the mind. She pulls off a piece of herself and lets it drift down-down-down, into the spiraling blackness hidden inside Naruto, feels the sharp sting as another part of her is consumed. She's always done this for Naruto. He never had to give up any of himself. It was only ever other people he lost. She was the one to cut free a finger a limb a heart and offer it to him as if tribute for a god.

("Does it hurt?" Naruto asked her once, his back to a cliff face and Ino next to him. The stone ached against her spine. "When you make the trade. Does it hurt?"

"Yes," Ino'd said. "It does."

He didn't say anything. Ino felt a strange coldness at the silence.)
Her eyes—Naruto's eyes—go red. She parries the grass-nin's sword with a kunai, her limbs bleeding out chakra. It burns at Naruto's skin, eating it the same way it eats at her mind. She doesn't allow herself to feel guilty for it. She's clawing at the grass-nin like an animal, swipe after swipe, leading the fight with aggression and anger.

"You," she spits, the fire burning at her body burning at her soul and she aches with it, "will lose."

Ino dodges backwards from a nasty looking sweep of the grass-nin's sword and she doesn't time it right—this body doesn't know her well enough or perhaps she doesn't know it—and oh god she isn't just going to kill herself but she's going to kill Naruto—

The hit doesn't come. Ino shakes from the anticipation of it, and Shikamaru's familiar voice calls out across the trees, "Capture successful."

Ino falls to her knees in relief, the jutsu canceling and sending her flying back to the body she stole nearly three years ago, bloody and arms quivering, muscles biting. Her blood hisses when she forces herself onto her hands and knees. Sakura's kunai was poisoned, and as Ino watches the skin around the grass-nin's cut begins to curl, to shrivel inwards, the woman's entire body unraveling as it dies. Do me a favor, Ino thinks, crouched on the thick tree branch, nails digging into the bark. Okay? Die. The grass-nin's eyes go wide, and then her body begins to fall away, like it was only a shell she'd been hiding inside and the skin flakes off, vanishing, turning to pale petals, floating away—

Oh god. Oh god. It is Orochimaru of the Sannin behind the woman's skin.

(Sh, can't die here.)

"I can't hold it," Shikamaru grunts and that's the only warning before his shadow withers, sliding off Orochimaru and leaving Ino defenseless. She flings herself backwards, stretching, arms first followed by her entire body as she flips, going far enough to avoid the reach of Orochimaru's blade is that kusanagi it can't be oh god and Ino loops one of Naruto's arms around her shoulder, flipping even further back, going up the tree, clinging to Naruto's body, her feet leaving grooves in the bark.

Her fear is for nothing. Shikamaru's hold has broken, but Orochimaru doesn't make any other movements. He laughs, the noise broken and terrifying, and she watches him swallow his sword, watches each inch of metal disappear. "You're a difficult little group," he says. Die, Ino thinks. "Sasuke," he calls and Ino takes a step back, further up the tree. "Remember my offer."

He twists, then, moves fast enough to send shrill bombs of fear over Ino, but he only flees the scene, a flash of pale against dark trees. Ino drops down the tree trunk, going flat against the branch, Naruto suddenly weighing so much more than before. She drags him back to Sakura and Sasuke, back to Sakura's still tense defense position and Sasuke's barely conscious body. Kiba's next to them now, shaking Sasuke sharply and glancing wildly around the forests. She doesn't see Akamaru. He must be in Kiba's jacket. She looks at Naruto's face. His eyes are closed, but his arm thrown around her shoulders is tense as though he's trying to hang on. She goes back to watching Kiba shake Sasuke, watching Sasuke's eyes come open fully and start to focus.

"You weren't worth it," Ino hisses. Sasuke recoils from her, scrambling back. She wants him to be afraid, and he is, but he isn't scared of her. His fear isn't meant for her and she bares her teeth. Ino falls to her knees in front of him, Naruto supported by her arm. Her body stings, the cuts so sharp she barely realized they were there until now, until this tired moment with blood escaping her from everywhere.

Shikamaru leaps to their tree branch, landing beside Sasuke. Before she remembers herself, she reaches out for him with her free hand, fingers fluttering. He looks at her, looks back at Sasuke. Her
hand stutters and falls. "I'm glad you're okay," she says and she means it.

He surveys her. A moment passes; she looks into his eyes and thinks of the way she can always feel his stare on her, sharp and dark. "You, too," he says, quietly, mouth barely moving.

Ino closes her eyes on tears.

"We have to go," Kiba hisses urgently, loading Sasuke onto his back messily, all splayed limbs and visible bruises. "Sasuke's really badly hurt."

"We won't take your scroll," Shikamaru says. Ino chokes on a laugh. Shikamaru was always an asshole like that. Too bad Ino's never been as polite. Sakura bristles.

"Sasuke-kun's hurt, some monster just nearly killed Ino and Naruto, and that's what you say?" she growls, pushing hard on his shoulder, the movement disturbing the wisps of pink hair loose around her face. Shikamaru falls back from the shove, and Ino finds she's leaning into Naruto as badly as he's leaning against her. Everything hurts. "I should beat you up for that!"

"Sakura," Ino says. One of her hands goes to the branch to help support her weight. "Take Naruto."

The other girl instantly takes Naruto's other side, kunai now tucked away, his arm thrown over her slight shoulders. "You'd better take care of Sasuke-kun," she says, voice bitter and displeased.

Ino laughs. She wants to hurt him. She wants to watch Sasuke scream. She wants to beat him so badly he stops breathing. Instead she helps Sakura carry Naruto away, her feet steady where Ino limps, and although Ino hears Shikamaru leaving with Kiba and Sasuke, she does not look back. (She'd really, really wanted to look back.)

..."Will Naruto be okay?" Sakura asks, and shrugging seems a rude answer, but Ino's too tired for more. She is ravaged, exhausted, broken, empty, and she shrugs. Naruto's always okay, she almost says, but he was always okay until he wasn't, so Ino says nothing. Naruto's unconscious beside them. Ino dips one hand into the flowing river at their side, the water rushing over her skin. "Will you be okay?" Sakura asks, quieter, urgently.

I'm always okay, Ino almost says. It's the kind of confidence she envies of herself. When she was a genin, she'd thought she could take over the world. Now, she knows this world can be taken by any number of people, and she isn't one of them.

"We'll be fine," Ino says eventually, looking at her hand under the water, feeling Sakura's eyes on her.

"Maybe Yuugao-sensei was wrong," Sakura blurs and Ino looks up. "Maybe we weren't ready for this."

Sakura's wringing her hands together again, looking at her lap. Bits of hair have escaped her bun, although it's now closer to a ponytail. She looks very young. It surprises Ino a bit, although it shouldn't. Looking at her face hurts. A part of Ino wants to scream when she looks at her, wants to howl—this world is tainted, this world is cruel, this world will eat you whole. It would be better for Sakura to learn it from Ino than from experience, wouldn't it? It would be kinder, wouldn't it?

"Maybe we weren't ready," Ino says carefully. "I don't think it matters now. We're already here, Sakura."
Sakura looks afraid. This hurts, too. "We still need a scroll," she says, disheartened.

The words inspire something in Ino she'd thought long dead. A light goes up in her chest. Ino grins. "Do we?"

Sakura frowns. "Yes," she says slowly, and Ino digs through her kunai pouch. She's still smiling widely, secretly, when she produces a heaven scroll from the depths of it and her mouth only stretches further at Sakura's gasp. "Where did you get that?" she demands, leaning forward into Ino's space to stare at her, wide-eyed, pulling the scroll from Ino's hands. "When did you get that?"

Ino laughs. The noise is like a barking dog, like a hungry ghost. It burns at her lips on the way out. "I took it!" she cries, fingers flying from the river and flicking water across Naruto when she spreads her hands.

"Took it?" Sakura repeats. She leans closer, eyes wide. "Ino, from—"

Ino bites her lip on another laugh. "I took it from Sasuke, Sakura," she says, clasping her hands together primly. "While he was unconscious."

Sakura's so shocked she covers her mouth with her hands, scroll dropping from her fingers to hit the dirt.

"Be more careful with it," Ino chides playfully, rescuing the scroll and tucking it back inside her kunai pouch.

"You took this," Sakura repeats. "From Sasuke-kun?" Her voice has gone flat. Then she says it again, and this time her words shake a bit. "You took it from Sasuke-kun?" Ino nods, pleased. "He was—he was—" Sakura sputters, stuttering, reaching forward to take Ino's hands. "He was unconscious! That's so-so dishonorable!" Sakura's anger is genuine, but it only makes Ino laugh harder. It feels like a rebellion—Uchiha Sasuke just might fail the chuunin exams, and it'll be because of Yamanaka Ino. Her laugh goes high-pitched, shrill. Uchiha Sasuke! Fail the chuunin exams!

"Don't you have faith in Sasuke?" Ino teases, her voice a squeak. Sakura's fingers tickle along Ino's side when she recaptures the scroll from Ino to marvel at it. She rubs her fingertips over the edge of it. "Come on," Ino needles. "If Sasuke's so great, he'll be able to pass."

(He killed her family he killed her village he made her want to kill herself—Ino laughs harder.)

"You know he's injured," Sakura says sharply. Still, her eyes are wide as she turns the scroll over in her hands. "I can't believe you!"

"You would have been thanking me," Ino insists, but she doesn't finish the sentence because she isn't sure it's true. Sakura never talked about Sasuke, not after. She never brought it up, never answered any questions about it. Before she died, the only true connection to Sasuke was Naruto. Naruto killed him, and his ghost hung between the two of them, marked on them like a stain.

("I don't know," Sakura said once. "I don't know—I don't know, Ino, okay?"

"If you loved him, you would know," Ino said because she loved pushing things, loved prodding things, loved waiting for people to snap and loved prompting people to hurt her. It was easier than hurting herself.

"I don't know!" Sakura shouted, and Ino grinned at the shock of it, at the harsh grate of a loud voice in silence. Then, quieter, so quiet it was difficult for Ino to catch, "I don't know if I ever knew him at all."
Ino'd cried when his bingo book entry got a kill on sight order. She had sobbed into her hands at the thought of him dead. It was less than a year later that there was nothing she wanted more.

"It's fine, it's fine," Ino says, waving her hand. Her teeth in her lip are beginning to draw blood but she refuses to let more laughter escape—it's starting to sound hysterical to her, starting to sound frightening, starting to remind her of what Naruto sounded like five or six years into the end. Ino takes the scroll from Sakura's twitching fingers, shoves it in a pocket on the inside of Naruto's jacket. She zips his jumpsuit up all the way to her neck.

Sakura glares at her. "I can't believe you," she says again.

"Okay, okay, fine!" The process of loading Naruto onto her back is messy, with her blood staining his clothes and the bruises on his face pressing against her shoulder. She's bleeding from everywhere, but it doesn't hurt. "If we see team ten again, we'll give the scroll back. Okay?" She peeks at Sakura's face, and her lips pull apart again into something broken splitting her face. It is almost a smile. "Let's get to the tower, okay?"

Sakura mutters something derogatory, but stands up, brushing off her skirt. Naruto makes a strange noise from his position on Ino's shoulder. The forest feels complimentary, its winds light and the darkness of the trees like the gleam of a night sky.

"We're going to be completely fine," Ino says and there is nothing to contradict her.
Chapter Summary

Ino isn't fucking crazy.

Chapter Notes

hey I reread this fic and read a lot of fun ino fic and like. wow I sure do love that bitch your hair looks great and you’re about to kill a man A+ i don't have a beta wanna be my beta if not just tell me where i fucked up thanks

this fic might feel like a filler but honestly i needed to come back to the characters and get to know them again. i don't think a chapter is a filler if it develops the characters or helps (even if only a little) to further the story so imo this isn’t one but also ino doesn’t like kill god in it or anything. this fic is so depressing lmao. ino really needs to like. find herself. this poor idiot loser

Song rec: Full Moon by The Black Ghosts

Ino slinks forward lowly, hips nearly touching the dirt, her stomach pulled taut. “In position,” she whispers into her headpiece. She's so near the target she barely dares to breathe. When she’s like this, she feels like a snake, staring out over the tall grass with her body tuned finely and turned sleek, smooth.

“I’ve hit a complication,” Shikamaru’s voice mutters. When he talks like that she can imagine him clicking a game piece down on the shogi board, giving Asuma-sensei an annoyed look. When he talks like that he sounds like a frustrated boy playing at being bored to hide his own miscalculations. It’s cute. He’s still Shikamaru, the boy she’s known since birth, even now. Cute.

“I as well, beautiful,” Sai mourns. She spares him an eye roll he can’t see; it’s more for her own benefit, anyway. She likes to tell Shikamaru Sai just got too used to being on missions with Sakura and Naruto, and they always use funny codenames. She likes to tell Shikamaru that, but she also really likes to hear Sai call her beautiful, even if it’s just him being too used to the idiots and their silly codenames. She is beautiful. That’s never been in question. She can hear the clashing of metal on metal through the headphone when he spoke, and she sighs; he isn’t getting here anytime soon.

(She fought with him, once, yelled at him because beautiful was just a joke to him, just something
cruel to say in between talking about Naruto’s dick or Sakura’s chest and what did he know, anyway, the boy who didn’t have feelings at all, who faked his laughs at jokes and didn’t know how to smile or how to speak and repressed himself so deeply she can’t imagine there’s anything left in his husk and when she told him that he’d recoiled like she’d slapped him and Ino knew she was beautiful then. She’s always been beautiful. “I’m gorgeous,” she’d said. “Fuck you.”

“Your call, Beautiful,” he retorted and it was the closest thing to a joke Ino had ever heard Sai make.)

“Can you take the shot?” Shikamaru asks her and she knows if she says no, he won’t argue with her. He won’t push her or guil her for it. He might make some jokingly snide comments later, about kunoichi and shinobi and Ino’s shameful act of being both, but he won’t mean it and he won’t bring it up if she tells him not to. He trusts her judgment, and if she says no, there will be no shaming or chiding. If she says no, it doesn’t mean she doesn’t want to take the shot. It means she can’t. Ino keeps her eyes pinned to the campfire, to the two men sitting around it. Only one of them’s a ninja. The other’s just a noble. She’s close enough, and they’re still enough—she won’t miss.

Still, when Shikamaru talks like that, it makes her feel like a genin again, a few feet from Tora the cat and only a few years away from warfare.

“I’ll be there soon,” Sai interjects. Sai trusts her, same as Shikamaru—but not in the same way. Even if she can take the shot, he probably doesn’t want her to. Sai’s lost a lot, and when you team up with Naruto and Sakura for longer than a week, you usually come out of it petrified that everyone’s gonna leave you. But she’s close enough, the poison already dripped over her senbon. She could destroy the ninja’s brain and still have more than enough time to kill the target, to recoil back into her body.

“I can take the shot,” Ino tells them. Sai makes a sputtering sound and Shikamaru an affirmative one. “If you get here and my body’s in the grass—take care of her for me, okay?”

She almost does feel dismal about it. Falling face first in the dirt—her hair really had looked good that morning. Shame.

But the mission comes first, and Ino’s nothing if not a winner. She brings her hands up in the familiar seal, the first real technique she learned, after years and years of practicing the clan taijutsu and begging her father and showing him she was responsible enough to wash her own face and sharpen her own kunai, after years and years of teaching herself to be strong and beautiful and pretending with Father that Mother wasn’t so formal it hurt and—

The target looks up and it isn’t a nobleman. For a second she’s marred only by confusion. What’s he doing here? She watches Sasuke scan the trees, his eyes lingering for a bit too long on her spot behind the grass. “The target—“ she starts but then his eyes twist, warp, and he’s staring at her, two swirling red pools. She knows Konoha put a kill on sight order on his bingo book entry—she’d cried over it, too—but she hasn’t seen him in years. When she looks at him it’s with regret, nostalgia.

But he stares at her and a shiver goes up her spine and even though it’s impossible, even though Uchiha Madara must be dead by now, she suddenly thinks that’s the face she’s seeing. “What is it?” Sai asks and she wants so desperately to answer but she can’t move. Fear has paralyzed her, but it is also as though she’s no longer in her body at all. “Ino, what is it?” Sai says again, louder now, more alarmed, and he isn’t calling her beautiful now.

(Is that because he’s dead or because she’s dead or because before he killed her Madara ran a knife over her face over her mouth over the plush lips she’d pursed at herself in the mirror a hundred times turned them into plush, fleshy scars the kind that never heal right and turn into raised ridges of skin, into mountain ranges echoing up and down her body—is it because she’s ugly now? Or is it because
She wants so badly to answer him, at least to let him now they’ve been chasing the wrong marks, but when she tries to move she can’t. She wants to tell him—he’s been calling her beautiful and stopping in on her when she gets hurt after missions and she really wants to say something to him but she can’t remember what. Ino tries again to speak but can’t. She wonders if the vocal cords remain, if they’re functional, after a throat is slit. It feels as though she’s been ejected, that she’s drifting away, and she watches Madara take those precious few steps toward her, tugging a kunai from a pouch on his hip and she knows what’s going to happen.

(“Little girl,” he’d said, shaking his head, mouth twisted and he would enjoy killing her. His body on hers—she wished he would just kill her. One hand to grip her chin, to force her to look at him. “Don’t you have any teeth to bare? Nothing sharp to show?”)

He’s going to kill her and Ino jerks awake in the Forest of Death just in time to stifle her own scream.

She sits up sharply. She was supposed to be on watch duty but she’d fallen asleep. Shame ignites in her—but it isn’t strong enough. Fear still lingers. She can feel it in her own chakra signature, sickly and slow and grey like sewer water. Ino listens to the sound of Sakura breathing. She feels exposed, wind rustling the leaves and the rush of the river too loud. But Sakura inhales, exhales, asleep and peaceful. “I’ll take first watch,” Ino had said. It’s been hours.

Ino stares at the shadow of her own hands in the darkness. It’ll be impossible for Ino to fall back asleep.

There’s no point in waking Sakura then. Sakura had been asleep before camp had even been set up. She probably needed the rest. Still, Ino had been left alone to wash Naruto’s face and tuck him into his sleeping bag—he was still unconscious then, and he’s unconscious now. She looks over at him in the dark and indulges herself. She brushes some of his hair back from his face. His forehead protector, in the sleeping bag, next to his head, gleams under moonlight.

She can’t sleep, but she lays back in the dirt, closing her eyes, shutting out the shaded trees and the glitter in the sky. Her sense stretch, but the closest chakra she can find is over a mile away, just a dim spark. There’s only Sakura’s quiet warmth and the Naruto’s soft rumbling. At first glance, he seems like he’s asleep—but when Ino closes her eyes and searches out his chakra, it’s like a pot about to boil over.

She lost Shikamaru. She realizes it now. When she looked into his eyes, bloodied and with Sasuke’s body between them, she saw only something cursory. He’d been relieved. But the emotion was perfunctory, carried out with only the minimum thought. Ino’s alive, he must have thought. Well, that’s not bad. And that was all.

Is that not what Ino had thought, every time she watched Naruto crawl back into camp like an insect, like sludge slipping through a drain, alive again? Isn’t that what she had thought, when she saw him again and knew it meant she’d have to live another day?

It isn’t the same, Ino thinks and it isn’t. What she’d felt had been worse. What Shikamaru felt was indifference. She was a familiar face from family gatherings, the one he spent festivals with and the one who used to mock him when he couldn’t manage to catch a goldfish in a paper net. Before they started the academy, she and Shika and Chouji were each other’s only friends. She begged her father to let her go to the academy early—“I can’t only talk to them for the rest of my life!”—but he wouldn’t break the rules for her, not even when she got Shikamaru and Chouji in it, too.

(Well, just Chouji, really. “If we go to the academy we can make so many friends,” she’d said,
talking a mile a minute, and she could already picture it. Yamanaka Ino in a room of girls with
cleanly brushed brushed hair and boys with freshly washed faces and of course she would make so
many friends. And they would have birthday parties and sleepovers and it would be so fun and she
just had to go to the academy she had to go to school—she’d been practicing her forms for so long
because she was going to make an amazing first impression and everyone would want to be her
friend—

“Really?” Chouji asked, cautiously optimistic. Then, confused, “But I already have you guys.”

Ino stomped her foot.)

She hasn’t spent a festival with him in years.

Ino indulges herself; she leans closer to Naruto, letting her hand rest on his cheek for a selfish
moment. She looks down at his face. Sleeping he looks even younger. Ino bends down without
thinking, presses her lips to his forehead, and when he murmurs, “Ino?” she jumps so badly she kicks
him.

“Ow,” Naruto says.

“Sorry,” Ino says hurriedly, ashamed of herself and the embarrassment flushing her face. She hates
when this happens—when she embarrasses herself. It makes her feel like a child. And it would be so
easy to act like a child. She’d thought that the morning before the Chuunin Exams, painting mascara
over her eyes and carefully deciding on the best lipstick color, the most auspicious one. She had
checked her correspondence chart, the astrology one she had gotten from her mother years ago. Ino
can still remembering begging for that book. Please, Mother, she’d said. Then, again, quieter,
Please?

Most children like Ino—children who were loud and confident and knew what colors went with
what and how to paint clean lines on her and do their hair—are taught to be beautiful by their
mothers. The children Ino would later meet in the academy: they have clean faces and finely brushed
hair and if she squints hard enough she thinks she can see the spot on their forehead where they got a
kiss goodbye. Most beautiful little girls are taught to be beautiful by their beautiful mothers. Ino’s
mother bought her a book on stars, told her to use to it to explain when a day would be good and
when it would be bad, when Ino should wear her red kimono to formal gatherings or the blue one.
Yamanaka Aimi scolded her daughter and chided her. She was too busy making herself beautiful to
teach Ino how to do it.

But that’s okay. Ino’s never needed help.

She can brush her own hair.

“It’s okay,” Naruto says. He sits up slowly, cringing just a bit, although his wounds had sealed shut a
couple hours after they’d been opened. He is still covered in dry blood, though. Ino decides this—his
discomfort and uncharacteristic quiet—seems a reasonable reaction to waking up to some girl you
barely know molesting you, with blood caked all over you.

Plus, it’s nighttime. Even Naruto isn’t enough of an idiot to start shouting at nighttime.

He blinks a few times at her and then, his voice a knife in the dark flashing so brightly she bets the
group of chakra signatures resting a few miles south can hear him, “Wow, you look like shit!” She
flushes in humiliation and anger, and even more anger at the humiliation, and he starts to backtrack,
raising his hands in front of him and waving them. It would be placating except he’s moving so
quickly, just flailing. “Not that you look bad! Are you—“
“Shut up,” Ino says. She’s clamped a hand over his mouth. “Don’t be loud. We almost died yesterday. Stop shouting.”

He raises his hand to hers and slowly pulls her off his face. He keeps her hand, playing absently with her fingers, the back of her hand to his thigh. “What happened?” he asks, whispering exaggeratedly. She can’t tell if he’s doing it on purpose to mock her or if he honestly doesn’t know how to shut up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Ino says. She’s shaking. She’s sure he can feel it—he’s still holding her hand. “We’re alive, so, you know. I’m fine.”

Naruto’s watching her. She kind of hates to see him look like that, eyes so blue they become unreadable, unknowable, just watching her. When he looks serious, it almost fools her. But he’s just Naruto. She has to remind herself of that again and again. He’s just Naruto.

“Are you okay?” he asks again, quietly, not unkindly.

No, Ino wants to say. It should’ve been him that got lucky, that fucked up a family technique so badly he ended up possessing himself, lost to the swirl of Madara’s eyes. She can imagine how happy he would be to see everyone again, can imagine the way he would cry over Sasuke’s badly hidden humanity and Sakura’s bright eyes. Naruto would have been so happy. He wouldn’t have been like her, awkwardly flitting around the people she used to know and uncomfortably trying to soften herself into a hug from her father. He wouldn’t be like her, spending hours into the night staring into the mirror and turning all the products in her cabinet over in her hands—wrinkle creams and eye serums and toners and astringents and lotions—he wouldn’t be like her, washing her hair so it smells like vanilla and running her hands over the flat plains of her stomach, over the coiled, weak muscle under the skin of her back and calves. He wouldn’t stare at the classroom and think of being a child and wanting to make so many friends, of staring at all the children with cleanly brushed hair and freshly washed faces, all the girls with nicely clipped nails and beautiful mothers. He wouldn’t cry over the people who never existed.

He wouldn’t have been like her. He would have been happy to forget her. He wouldn’t have been so ill-fitting. He would have been so, so fucking happy.

“Do you, uh...” Naruto looks away from her, uncomfortable. He scratches at the back of his neck and plays with the ends of his hair. He seems determined not to look at her. She doesn’t mind. It’s so dark she can pretend he just can’t see her. He links their fingers together, and then seems to have realized what he’s done. He reddens and releases her. When Ino doesn’t pull her hand back—just leaves her hand in his lap, limp, still warm with his body heat—he very slowly pushes it away. She feels her hand go plop to the dirt. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Ino says. He looks like he wants to protest this, probably because her shoulders are still shaking, but she continues with, “I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

She turns away, twisting in the dirt to face away from him and stare up at the stars, the way the dim light just barely colors the leaves. He mutters something. Ino turns back to him, one eyebrow raised, unimpressed. “What was that?”

Naruto’s wiggling around in his sleeping bag, looking incredibly uncomfortable. He’s put his hitai-ate back on. He looks—

She can’t describe it. But it hurts less to look at him.

“I can’t,” he hisses, turning over on his stomach. After a few moments, he turns over again, this time
on his side, facing away from him. Then he twists again, this time curling up facing her. He looks at her pointedly.

She sighs, takes the bait. “Wanna talk about it?”

“About what?” Naruto’s nose scrunches up. He wiggles around in his sleeping bag a little more, stretching his legs a bit. “I’m fine.”

He turns over again. Then again. A third time, and he’s facing her. She catches his eye, but as soon as he realizes she’s looking back, he flushes again and rolls over, again. Now it feels like he’s mocking her.

“Are you mad at me or something?” Ino can feel something when she says it. It feels…normal. Like she’s just some girl having a chat with one of her loser idiot genin teammates. Like she’s just twelve-going-on-thirteen with a couple nasty bruises trying to pass a test. “If you’re fine, just go to sleep.”

“I’m not mad,” Naruto says. He looks at her like she’s said something dumb, even rolls to face her and wag a finger at her before rolling pointedly to leave her looking at his back. He’s still speaking in what must be the loudest whisper ever. He looks over his shoulder at her, expression—betrayed? Annoyed? “Why would I be mad? If you’re fine, I’m fine.”

“Naruto.”

“What? You’re allowed to be fine, but not me?” He rolls over again, sleeping bag rumbled around him. It’s pretty annoying. All that rustling could wake Sakura.

“If you’re fine,” Ino grits out—and her annoyance, her irritation, it feels so normal, “then go to sleep.”

“I can’t,” Naruto responds, clearly grinding out his words in the same way. “Why don’t you go to sleep?”

Ino scoffs despite herself. “What are you, twelve?”

The offended noise Naruto makes is loud enough to have her giving him a warning look. “I’m thirteen!” he sputters. “That’s older than you! And I’ll be fourteen soon!”

This is funny for reasons she can’t explain to him. Her laugh clots in her throat.

Naruto gives her a look. It’s clear he’s making the same point he has with all the irritating rustling, with all the loud whispers—Ino’s having an issue and apparently he’s pissed she won’t share. Why would he want to talk to her about it? She remembers her hand going plop in the dirt. Why would he want to know?

*I could almost fall for him,* Ino had said, words slipping out accidentally. She watched Naruto’s grin and it wasn’t until she saw the way Shikamaru was staring at her that she’d immediately bitten her tongue. It doesn’t matter now.

Doesn’t matter who you “fall for” if they don’t fall back. She’d learned that lesson.

“I…” Ino pauses. He sits up to look at her, but with his feet still keep kicking around the end of his sleeping bag. When she closes her eyes she sees Orochimaru’s blade coming to take Naruto’s head.

“C’mon, Ino,” he says, earnestly, sincerely. He scoots closer to her, puts his hands on her shoulders. “Thought we were friends.”
She imagines he doesn’t have many of those. She flinches.

“I’m just… I was really worried about you.” She can’t look at him. “I really thought you were going to die.”

“Hah!” Naruto shakes her lightly, like he thinks she’s mentally compromised. “I’m never gonna die, Ino!”

“I don’t know about that,” she whispers. She looks up at him. “There. Can you sleep now, drama queen?”

The light in his face goes out. The rush of guilt she feels—Ino frowns at him. “I just had a nightmare,” he mutters, turning away from her. He looks embarrassed.

It’s…cute. Endearing.

“What about?” When he doesn’t say anything she bumps his shoulder with hers, her index finger drumming against her knee in impatience. “Oh my god—you can’t build up to it and then not tell the story! What was it about?”

Naruto wiggles. She sighs. If this is gonna be another round of obnoxious squirming—

“It was about you, actually,” he says and shamefully, her interest is completely caught.

“Oh?” Ino leans forward, enthused, but his face has her nose wrinkling. He looks so serious, so unnaturally solemn. The expression doesn’t fit right on his face. It’s killing her mood. Talking to him, hearing him laugh and seeing him smile—it can almost make her believe she’s really the twelve year old girl she’s pretending to be, that she didn’t drown herself to be here. It almost makes her feel like she never saw war, never saw him, never tried to wipe the blood off her face only to realize her hands are covered, too. It makes her feel…normal, maybe. Happy, almost. He doesn’t get to kill that. She leans even closer to him, so close her breath is probably able to touch his skin. Then, softly, as though she’s telling a secret, Ino goes, “It wasn’t anything gross, was it? Not a pervert dream?”

He recoils so badly he falls over. Ino stifles laughter.

“Of course not!” he cries, appalled. She puts her hand over his mouth again to keep him from waking the forest, but without her hand to cover her own mouth, she can’t stop the immature snickering.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she manages to get out. He looks indignant, but she softens her expression. She pulls her hand from his face. It seems like Naruto to lick her hand when she does that, but he hasn’t. “What was your dream about? Seriously, I wanna know.”

“You were a lot older,” he starts out. “You had this really pretty crystal necklace and your hair was even longer. Someone was chasing us—“

“Us?”

“I was there, too. Older.”

“Oh.”

“Someone was chasing us and I knew they were… They were really…scary.” His eyes flash, wet and dark. Her hand goes to his shoulder and he tenses beneath it. “And then…”
“Yeah?”

“I died,” he finally says. Her fingers tighten on him. “Knives to the back, to my throat. Couldn’t breathe. I was bleeding all over you.” He’s staring at the ground and she feels numb. That isn’t a dream. It’s a memory. It’s a part of her she used in a bargain—guilt. So much guilt. She really messed up, didn’t she? The monsters of him were supposed to eat her up in return for her power.

But there’s no monsters of him yet. He’s just Naruto.

“That sounds horrible,” Ino says softly. “I’m—”

“No,” Naruto says and his voice is so sharp it pisses her off. Naruto’s not sharp. He doesn’t snap. When he acts like-like that it reminds her of the person she knew, the person that died for her. She thinks of the way it felt as though she were somewhere far, far away, looking down at her own body while it died. “It doesn’t end there.”

Ino’s silent.

“I die. Blood’s all over you and you run away. But he catches you.”

Ino’s silent.

“He puts a knife through your wrist. You scream. He starts to cut up your face. You’re crying.”

Ino’s silent.

“He breaks your necklace. He says goodbye. And then he—”

“Kills me,” Ino murmurs and she wishes she’d been silent.

“Yeah,” Naruto says and she really hates seeing him look like that. He should be acting stupid, as per usual. She loves to see him stupid, to see him shouting stuff that doesn’t matter or calling her mean for things she says about strangers they pass in the street. “He does.”

Ino’s silent.

“I think I’ll be able to sleep if—if I tell you something. In the dream, you died because—you died because of me. Because I was weak.”

Because you were unlucky, Ino corrects. Because I was a poor replacement for the people you love.

He jerks towards her, the movement sudden, knocking her hand off his shoulder, and his hands are on her shoulders now, shaking her just slightly. “I want you to know that won’t happen in real life,” he says, demanding, so honest and genuine and he’s too earnest. She’s glad for it, though. Because it will happen in real life, if she doesn’t stop it, and if he keeps doing stuff that reminds her of him, she doesn’t know if she can. “In real life, I’ll protect you. I’ll protect you and Sakura-chan and Kiba and Shikamaru and even Sasuke-teme.” He pulls her closer, so she can see his pupils dilating to accommodate the low light. “If I die for you, I won’t be an idiot about it. If I die, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

She focuses on the sound of Sakura breathing, on the warmth drooling out of Naruto, on his rumbling chakra and Sakura’s soft heat. Ino closes her eyes. She can still feel the knife going down her mouth.

(In her head, she slides her hands up to grip his forearms. “I would die for you,” she breathes,
looking at him really *looking* at him. She can feel tears going hot down her cheeks, leaving paths over her pale skin, but the ache outweighs the embarrassment and she shakes him. Her nails are digging into him—she can hear him hiss in pain—but he doesn’t pull away and she isn’t letting go. Ino’s never been one to care much for the comfort of others when it rivals her own wants. “Do you hear me? I would die for you, Naruto, and I mean that, so if you ever have to choose—you or me—you pick you, okay? You can’t—you can’t get yourself hurt trying to—“

Her words start to choke her, start to fight against her as she forces them up her throat like vomit. It feels like they’re beginning to escape through the hole in her neck, through the slit Madara cut in her; all of her words slipping free, drooling out with the blood and turning into sludge when they meet the night air. “You can’t get yourself hurt trying to save me,” Ino forces out and it’s like he still has his weight pressing against her, even now, like she can still hear his voice in her ear—*Run, Ino*—and feel his blood sticky in her hair, like the moment his hot breath stopped hitting her collarbone is on repeat. “You can’t go and die,” Ino whispers and her vision is so blurred she can no longer make out his wide blue eyes or gasping mouth. “You are all I have. I would die for you.”

But she has more than him now, so she doesn’t say that.)

Instead she opens her eyes.

“I thought you said you would never die,” Ino says. “That works best for me. I would rather you didn’t die.”

“Ino,” Naruto says. She can feel something hot on her cheeks. Her face is wet. She hasn’t cried in years. It’s been years, now. Two years in a body she stole and she hadn’t cried once. She couldn’t cry. She had a responsibility. The last time she cried was—

(When she died.)

“No,” she says. “No, you listen to me. You aren’t going to die. Ever. And if it’s between you and me, pick you. The only mistake you made in that dream was dying first.”

“Ino—“

She moves one hand up to her shoulder, fingers finding where he’s gripping her. She makes sure not to let her nails dig into his skin when she takes his hand. “Are you listening?” she growls, keeping her voice low—but still, she’s angry. She’s so angry. Even when he started to scare her, when he started to scream instead of cry, that doesn’t mean he’s allowed to say these things to her. *Are you listening? Are you listening?* Ghosts howl in the valley of her ribs. “I would live for you. Are you—”

“Ino, stop,” Naruto’s saying and he doesn’t get it. He doesn’t know what she’s trying to say, doesn’t know what she needs him to hear. “I’m okay, I promise. It was a bad dream and I’m alive and it’s okay.” Her hand goes limp and he pulls his out of her grip. She feels numb, emptied, and sways back and forth, her shoulders shaking and her knees probably bruising against the forest floor. When she falls forward and he pulls her against him in a hug—in a child’s hug, all innocent and tight and confident, like friendship is a promise and a promise can’t be broken—she feels like a doll, like a tiny nesting doll finally being consumed by its older sisters.

*Are you listening? Are you listening?*

“I would live for you,” Ino whispers and she needs him to be listening.

“I died for you,” Naruto whispers back and she jerks away from him as though burned, as though she were touching wet, hot tar.
It’s too much. Sometimes when she sees him it makes her feel like she never became a monster. But when he acts like this all she feels is unholy. She’d felt normal and natural and young and all she feels now—

“In a dream,” she shoots back, forcing a disbelieving little laugh. She turns it into a scoff, dismissive. “You died for me in a dream. Don’t act like you’re a hero all of a sudden.”

It’s a weak joke. He laughs a little, too, though.

“Go to sleep,” Ino says and this time he does.

…

The first time Ino kissed him she did it for a couple reasons.

She’s said it before, maybe she’ll say it again, but Naruto’s kinda cute and she could almost have seen herself falling for him. That’s what she said to Sakura back then: *I can almost see myself falling for him.* At Sakura’s look, her expression jolting, Ino had said, *You know. A guy like that.*

*Seems more likely you’d fall for me than Naruto,* Sakura’d said, snorting.

Ino’s built up a lot of regrets. She’s a murderer, a mourner, a monster—and a ghost. She can still see the blood on her hands and the knives at her feet and they haunt her. She can see Shikamaru and Tenten and Tsunade and even Sasuke and these faces haunt her. Tsunade taught Ino how to heal, how to put bodies back together, and Ino watched Sakura excel at it while she struggled. Ino’s only ever been good at pulling people apart. It’s what she was born for. It’s what the Yamanaka are made for. Her clan thrives in the T&I department because it’s what they do. Yamanaka do surgery on thoughts, do incisions on memories and equally precise cuts on bodies. All Ino’s been good at is pulling people apart.

Jiraiya was dead and Ino never really knew him. She remembers feeling bad about it—she’d always thought he was a creep, but now he was dead and everyone was so torn up over it and he died for Konoha. Back then Ino didn’t know a lot of people who died for Konoha. She didn’t know a lot of people who died for anything. They all talked about the Will of Fire and loving the village and doing anything for it, and dying, because ninja sometimes died, but Ino’d never had to face that. But Jiraiya was dead and he died for Konoha and Naruto was sad about it. She’d planned to set him up with a discounted plant and send him on his way, maybe bring it up to Sakura later.

He loved Sakura. Ino loved Sakura. Sakura was the main way she kept in contact with Naruto at all. Instead she kissed him.

Ino had always been impulsive and she had always been beautiful. Naruto looked so sad and maybe even angry and it wasn’t the best look for him. That wasn’t the boy she’d talked to Sakura about and Ino wasn’t like Sakura, she wasn’t good at fixing things. She still couldn’t stand it, to see people that looked like they needed protecting. It was an instinct she had never managed to shake. She did it for Sakura when they were kids and she wanted to do it for Naruto, too. But she opened her mouth and no words came out so instead she kissed him. Kissing always makes Ino feel better when the world feels heavy. People telling her she’s beautiful, proving they think she’s beautiful—it’s always made her feel better.

When she puts it like that it doesn’t sound so bad. But it is.

She didn’t expect people to get torn up about it—it was just a kiss. But when she mentioned it to Sakura Ino was met with scandal. When Sakura inevitably told Tenten she’d laughed so hard her
hair had come undone from her buns and spilled around her face in tendrils. Naruto was a good person, a genuinely good person, and it was wrong of her, but it was fun, so Ino kept kissing him. Her mother was horrified and Sai gave her appraising mildly amused once-overs and he wasn’t even a bad kisser and it was so funny. Even if people just saw the two of them walking together, they still always had to look twice to be sure it was real. It was hilarious. Was Naruto really that far out of her social circle?

Jiraiya was dead. Naruto was a good person. But Ino’s only ever been good at pulling things apart.

She doesn’t know when, but at some point Naruto started to actually like her, and she knew that, but she didn’t really know how much she liked him. He was nice, sure, and good, and she liked him and all, but not as much as he liked her.

He liked her and she took advantage of that. She liked being liked. Naruto’s a good person and he thought she was good.

Ino’s beautiful but she’s also quick to anger. She used to shout at Shikamaru and Chouji—do you wanna be losers forever? do you wanna be lame forever? get up! c’mon! we could be champions! let’s go!—and clench her fists tight to keep from punching at the trees when her aim was off. She isn’t easy to anger the way Naruto is. Naruto gets angry when he sees something, when something isn’t right. He gets angry at injustice. Ino gets angry when things don’t go her way. But Naruto thought she was good and beautiful. Ino likes being told she’s good, likes being told she’s beautiful.

Her father is also head of torture and interrogation. No nice civilian boy is gonna want to touch that, no matter how beautiful she is. She told Inoichi that and he said being the son of the head of torture and interrogation never stopped her civilian mother. It was different, obviously. And the only other boys she was really close with were Shikamaru and Chouji. Ew. That’d be like dating her dad or something. There were the guys who graduated in her year but she didn’t really like any of them like that and none of them really liked her like that. Everyone else she was close with was a girl. And—

Everyone knows why you can’t do that.

Ino loved being liked.

(It wasn't like the only reason she interacted with Naruto was because he seemed to like her. But it was so easy to get him to like her. He didn't seem to know there were other options or have even realized Ino was an option. And Ino loved being liked.

Other people liked her. Sakura and Hinata and Tenten and Shikamaru liked her. But she couldn't really date them.)

On Valentine’s Day Ino gave him chocolate she’d mostly failed to make edible and he’d looked so happy that it embarrassed her. On White Day he returned the favor with only mildly more edible results and he’d looked so hopeful she actually ate it. But Naruto was mostly just fun. “I don’t get why we weren’t friends before,” she’d said to him once. Both of them had personalities like tornadoes and when they were together the world went crashing down faster than she’d ever thought possible.

Naruto was a good person and she had taken that for granted.

The timing wasn’t right for it. When Naruto was good and whole and sweet, free of nightmares and free from terror, Ino was selfish and vain and she missed it. He was a good person and Ino knew that, sure, but she didn’t want it. The only boy she let herself want was Sasuke. She wanted the flickering glimpse of a boy she saw once, a boy who fed stray cats more than half his lunch and got
the shit beaten out of him to protect people who mattered to him. Ino wanted a boy she had only seen in passing, a boy who had never appeared for her.

Later, when their lives were ruled by decay, sitting in a hastily put-together encampment as the world collapsed, Ino decided she could want Naruto—weirdly clever Naruto who held her hand and kissed her in a greenhouse—and by then he was gone.

She never promised him anything. It was just fun. Later, she realized he never promised her anything, either. Maybe it was like ships passing in the night. By the time Ino realized the boat was slipping by, that it hadn’t dropped an anchor, it was gone.

“You’re so smart, Sakura-chan,” Naruto says, voice dazed and dreamy.

She glares at him. “I know,” she says, indignant. “But the leaves are too thick. Someone has to climb up and see which way is east.”

“You can see directions?” Naruto stares at her, apparently impressed by this. “I don’t think anyone else can do that, Sakura-chan, so it’ll have to be you.”

“I think she means someone has to climb up and check which direction the sun is rising in,” Ino says lightly, valiantly keeping from sounding annoyed. “Because the sun rises in the east?”

“Oh! Oh, right.”

“I’ll go,” Ino says and when Sakura frowns, Ino frowns back. She ignores the way her collection of scabs have started to crack from too much movement. “It’s just a tree, Sakura,” she says.

Sakura grumbles, but accepts this, rescinding her frown with a, “Be careful.”

The higher up the tree she goes the louder the wind gets, starting as a quiet hiss lost somewhere between her footsteps and the bark and becoming more like howling, more like the screams of a hungry ghost. Ino scratches at one ear and slows to a walk, each footstep more careful than the one before. She can’t see the ground anymore, and the quiet pull of gravity on her body hurts just a little. The tree grows thinner and thinner, shaking in the wind, drifting from one side to the other like an unbalanced jenga castle. She scratches at her neck the same way she had been all morning, but this time her fingers catch on something, like there’s a tick or a scab or a mole—something on her neck, some kind of bump in the skin. She scratches a bit harder, dismissively, walking higher and higher. It doesn’t come off and she digs in her nails in, ripping at her own skin. When Ino sees the sun, a glaring bright mark far off to the left, she almost sighs in relief. The tower’s peeking up over the tree cover, even, eastward with the rising sun. She takes a couple self-indulgent seconds up there, face heating under the light. It doesn’t do anything but her cuts hurt a bit less.

God. Ino scratches at her neck. This itch is killing her, though.

Something like a hiss slips along her ears. It’s probably nothing—the same way the wind had been nothing—but Ino goes tense anyway, the warmth of the sun going from comforting to stifling. Ino scoots a bit down the trunk, maneuvering her feet around carefully, and she brings her hand up to scratch at her neck—

Something hisses. Loudly. Ino pulls her hand away and tilts her head down to see and a snake is hissing, outstretched, facing down Ino’s hand like an enemy. Her other hand flies to her neck immediately and when she feels around, the snake has come from her own skin, has erupted out of her, scales breaking out of her body and leaving her skin in tangles. She’s only ever seen that happen
on curse seals. The snake leans forward and bites her finger, tiny jaw clenching down so hard Ino irrationally fears it’ll take the tip of her index finger off.

The pain wakes her and she pulls at the snake, at where it’s attached to her skin. It doesn’t move. The pain wakes her, and Ino doesn’t tighten her jaw in time to stop a scream. She tries to smack it off her hand, desperate and stupid and moving too quickly for someone so high up. The pain wakes her and Ino stumbles, falls.

The tumble brings her face first into leaves and branches, body twirling midair and panicked feet trying to catch a grip on the trunk again. Get off get off get off! The only one she knows with a curse seal is Anko and Anko got hers years ago from Orochimaru—Orochimaru who was in the forest Orochimaru who didn’t put on one her she knows he didn’t he didn’t even put one on Sasuke she was there she stopped him whatever happens to Sasuke in this forest it isn’t her concern and it wasn’t her fault—

(kill your enemies kill your allies kill yourself.)

A kunai catches the side of her shirt and pins her to the tree the same way a kunai went through her wrist and pinned her to a tree. But it’s Sakura staring at her, wide-eyed, and thank god for her aim. Ino presses a hand to her neck. Nothing’s there.

She stares at her finger and there aren’t any injuries. She hasn’t been bitten. Nothing was there.

Ino picks at the kunai and drops smoothly down to the forest floor. “Sorry,” she says shortly.

“Did something attack you?” Naruto demands. He looks up into the trees, hands shaking. “Why were you—were you—screaming like that?”

“You’re bleeding,” Sakura notes dully, voice like a stone dropping in a river. Ino’s hand goes to her neck so quickly so slaps herself. Her fingers turn sticky and wet.

“It was on my neck. Bit me.” Sakura and Naruto are both looking at her and she hates it.

Sakura gives her an appraising look, eyes going up and down, lingering at Ino’s shoulders, the neck. She undid the bun overnight and her hair hangs long in ruffled halfway curls over her shoulders and down her back. Sasuke likes girls with long hair. Two girls with short hair were best friends became two girls with long hair and painfully little between them became two girls with nothing in common at all—one living one dead. Sakura grew her hair out for him and when she cut it that was for him, too.

“Sasuke thinks he so cool,” she’d said. “Strutting around like some bird. What a loser. Sakura’s my best friend. She wouldn’t like a loser.”

Eventually Sakura snorts. Doesn’t sigh, but does bite her lip. “You’re a ninja, Ino,” she says, just a bit teasingly. “You can’t still be afraid of bugs.”

“Strut the tower’s over there, Ino announces pointedly, waving her hand in its direction. “Let’s go! Okay?” She hates the way they’re looking at her. It was a simple mistake. She thought something was there and it wasn’t. She’s tired. Ino’s just tired.

(They’re looking at her the way she looked at Naruto. They’re looking at her like she’s crazy. And she’s not.)
“Okay,” Naruto says, slowly, carefully. He’s looking at her like—like—he thinks she’s going to do something. Like he thinks she’s gonna snap.

And she isn’t. Because she’s not fucking crazy.

She lingers, though, hand on her neck, feet moving just a hint too slow on the walk to the tower. She lingers and wonders if she’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. She lingers and wonders if fixing things is just a chance to trade Naruto for the world.

“Hurry up!” Naruto yells back to her, skipping forward. Sakura turns just a bit, glances over, beckons with a sweep of her hand. Ino looks up and thinks of a life spent watching someone’s back while they left you.

This time, she chases.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! we're living it up in gama-chan party, on discord! join n have fun
also feel free to chat w me on tumblr!

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