Naruto: The Last Airbender

by ChocolateCannibal

Summary

In which the banished prince "captures" the last airbender, and things don't go according to plan.

Notes

It's the same fic by the same gal. AO3 glitched out on me when I tried to attach it to a different pseud. FML.
“Oy, bastard!” Naruto hollered from his perch on the ship’s railing only a few feet away.

“What?” Sasuke snapped.

“Are we there yet?”

“No, usuratonkachi,” the prince sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in a dramatic show of exasperation, “For the thousandth time, no.”

“But, but we’ve been travelling for hours and it’s like we barely even moved, ya know. If I had Kurama-“

“It’s enough to have one unstable idiot as prisoner-”

Prisoner. Right. As if! Naruto stifled a snort.

Ignorantly, Sasuke continued “-and I’d have to be an unstable idiot to allow that thing-“

“Kurama’s not a thing, you jerk!”

“Fine, flying dog-“

“Fox!”

“-whatever. Leave me alone. I’m trying to concentrate.”

For the thirty-seventh time that day, Sasuke drew slow circles in the air with his hands. Blue sparks crackled at his fingertips. The air shimmered, snapped, and-

Erupted in a pathetic puff of black smoke.

Argh, so close!

Naruto chewed the inside of his cheek and tried not to feel disappointed. It really looked like the jerk had it –the Midori? Something like that- this time. In any case, he was getting better.

“Actually, I think it’s time for you to give it a rest,” drawled an old man with white hair. Well, Naruto assumed he was old. It was hard to tell with the mask and eye-patch. What's his name again? Takashi, maybe? Hell if Naruto gave a shit. He was here for only one reason.

Said reason was glaring, flushed pink from exertion, and glistening under a fine sheen of sweat. Naruto watched a single bead of liquid roll down Prince Sasuke’s neck over the sharp line of his collarbone, and lower still to his smooth, well-defined-

“What?”

Naruto almost fell off the railing. “Huh?”


Wasn’t it obvious?

“You,” he grinned.
This seemed to puzzle and irritate the banished prince greatly.

“Why?”

“What else am I going to look at, asshole?” Naruto gestured to the wide, flat, endless, boring expanse of open ocean that surrounded them on all sides.

Prince Sasuke narrowed his eyes, ground his teeth, and opened his mouth to retort.

“Now boys,” Takashi-or-something interrupted, "let’s eat dinner first. You have months to keep flirting but only minutes until this eel gets cold.”

“Flirting? Who’s flirting, you old pervert?” Sasuke hissed at the same time Naruto exclaimed

“Months?! We’re going to be out here for months?”

“Itadakimasu,” Takashi-or-something said, ignoring the indignant boys as he turned away to eat.

Naruto picked up the old man’s scroll off the table. Takashi had been reading it non-stop since Naruto was “captured” to be brought before Fire Lord Madara three days ago.

Must be about advanced bending forms or something, Naruto had thought.

He unraveled the first few inches, took all of five seconds to process the, ahem, forms on the parchment, then quickly rolled it up and dropped it with a startled squeak.

Heat rushed to his face in waves. Naruto felt himself flush from the roots of his bright yellow hair to the tips of his curled, clenching toes. He felt- he felt- he felt so damn…

Prince Sasuke glanced at him from the corner of his eye and smirked.

Naruto reached a his boiling point.

“P-“ He began softly.

“What was that, Naruto-sama?” Takashi-or-something asked, turning around with an empty bowl and mask back in place.

“P-p-“

“I beg your pardon?”

“Pervert! You’re a filthy, disgusting, sinful, unclean p-p-pervert!”

Sasuke made a small, sharp noise. Like a cough or chuckle or- no. The bastard didn’t chuckle. He never even smiled, and no, that sexy smirking thing doesn’t count. Prince Sasuke's food probably just went down the wrong pipe.

“Yes well, I guess this must be difficult for you to understand,” Takashi-or-something reached for his scroll, unconcerned by Naruto’s violent flinch, “seeing as you were raised by monks in a time long past. But the modern world-“

“Stop,” Sasuke cut in abruptly, “You’ll give him the wrong idea.”

“Well, then he wouldn’t be the only one on this ship with the wrong idea,” Takashi-or-something replied lazily and gave Naruto a pointed one-eyed look.
Sasuke blinked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll retire to my quarters now.”

“Kakashi-“

“Goodnight, boys. Whatever you do tonight, do it quietly. You don’t want to wake the rest of the crew.”

Naruto choked.

_He knows! The old pervert- Kakashi-not-Takashi- he totally knows!_

(Well, not like he was being subtle about it, but still.)

Sasuke glared at his sensei’s receding back for a few moments before turning abruptly to Naruto.

“‘You, Avatar-“

“‘My name is Naruto, bastard!”

“Like I care, idiot,” Sasuke sighed, pushed his empty bowl away and rose to his feet, “Spar with me.”

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_Two weeks later...

Sasuke Uchiha was no fool.

He knew, he _knew_ the Avatar didn’t just ‘agree’ to be taken prisoner to save that pathetic little Water Tribe settlement at the South Pole.

The boy –yes, he was over a century old but everything, from his appearance to how he talked to the silly pranks and idiotic acts positively _reeked_ of adolescent immaturity- was up to something.

For starters, the Avatar always watched him.

Which meant he constantly followed Sasuke.

Sasuke didn’t complain. This way, the prince could keep an eye on his prisoner. Prevent escape. Understand his enemy’s (rival’s) character. In theory, it should be a convenient arrangement and a simple problem to solve.

Really, Sasuke Uchiha was anything but a fool. One might even call him a genius.

But Nar- _The Avatar_ remained an enigma.

He watched Sasuke train for hours on end with this… this absolutely _dobey_ expression. The idiot would sit on the ship’s railing or lean against it, resting his head on his knees, blue eyes glazed and distant, as if he was day-dreaming. His mouth sometimes hung open. Sasuke swears there was a spot of drool on the monk’s orange tunic at times.

Which was- really? This idiot? _He_ was The Avatar? Preposterous.
And when they sparred, the idiot held back.

Worse, he made illogical moves that were not in his own best interest. How could The Avatar, prophesied savior of all mankind (according to certain groups) have such little regard for self-preservation?

Like right now, Nar- The Avatar has an advantage at long distances. Sasuke was excellent at close-combat.

And yet, the dobe refused to get further than an arms-length away.

When the idiot managed to land a blow, Sasuke felt his touch linger a little longer than necessary. It happened too frequently to be an accident. But why?

When Sasuke pinned him down, giving plenty of opportunity to escape, Nar- the moron just lay there. Grinning that ridiculous grin, not bothering to fight back.

Sasuke straddled his waist, leaned forward, and pressed his forearm into the loser’s windpipe. Their faces were inches away. Still, he kept the pressure light and rested most of his weight on his knees. Naru- The Avatar could easily push him off. Roll away. Something.

“What are you playing at, Nar- dobe?” Sasuke hissed, glaring sharply.

Naruto swallowed, but continued to grin.

“Playing?” he asked in a rough, breathless voice “This isn’t a game to me, Sasuke.”

What was that supposed to mean?

Sasuke pressed down harder and leaned closer. Maybe he could stare the idiot down.

He was tired of Kakashi’s pointed looks and cryptic remarks, tired of being followed, tired of being in the dark. This was his ship, damnit, his mission. He had to know the truth.

Narut- The Avatar’s pupils were dilated. Only a thin sliver of blue remained.

Tell me, Sasuke willed silently, what is it? What do you want from me?

“Um, S-sasuke? You… You’re k-kind of- um- I’m like-” Narut- The Avatar squirmed beneath him, suddenly even more flushed and acutely uncomfortable.

“Well, do something about it,” Sasuke growled, “We’ve been sparring for weeks and all you ever do is let me win as you just lay there. It’s infuriating.”

He pressed even closer. It’s a standard intimidation tactic: close the distance, get your subject to talk.

Sasuke was now close enough to see little flecks of green around the outer edge of Naruto’s –damn it, fine, that was the idiot’s name and he could at least think it in the privacy of his own head- blue irises. He felt Naruto’s stuttering breath on his face. The Avatar’s pulse beat rapidly, and his skin was hot- strangely, unnaturally hot, even by Firebender standards.

Interesting.

Just then, Naruto started wiggling even more and making strange noises. What… Sasuke frowned, sat back and felt something- something poking- oh. Oh, no.
He sprung to his feet and stumbled backwards.

“What. The. Hell.“

“I’m sorry!” Naruto held up his hands “It just, it just happened, ya know! Like, you were so close-doing that thing you always- and I was-”

“Stop,” he pinched the bridge of his nose. This moron- This was The Avatar? Maybe the Air Nomads were better off without him “Naru- Idiot, stop talking.”

Surprisingly enough (and probably for the first time in his life) Naruto listened.

“We will never speak of this,” Sasuke decided. He briskly turned on his heels and headed to his cabin.

A bath. He would take a nice, long dip in a freezing tub of water, then sleep, and forget.
(The next morning...)

“Long night?” Kakashi asked when Sasuke stifled yet another yawn over breakfast.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he mumbled, then shut his mouth with a click when he realized he’d spoken out loud.

Okay, so Sasuke took a bath, as promised. And fell asleep, kind of. And had a dream. A… Really weird type of… Dream.

That’s all he has to say on this matter. Press him on it, and risk death by Agni Kai.

“Morning, Kakashi. Bastard.”

Naruto dragged his feet and rubbed his eyes before plopping down at the breakfast table, yawning.

Sasuke glimpsed the dark bruises and dull look marring the idiots normally (annoyingly) sunny demeanor.

“Trouble sleeping, Naruto-sama?”

“Un, yeah. And I told you to stop calling me that, ya know,” The Avatar grumbled around a mouthful of porridge.

“Strange,” was Kakashi’s sly reply.

Naruto fixed his gaze on his bowl. Sasuke raised an inquisitive brow.

“No, it’s just, Sasuke also had trouble sleeping last night. Could it be that you two were… Up to something?”

The idiot chose that moment to have a long, violent coughing fit. Sasuke wrinkled his nose in disgust, gave Kakashi one more withering look, then shrugged. Whatever. The old pervert was clearly trying to bait him, and he refused to bite.

“Anyway, it’s a shame,” Kakashi continued, “You’ll want your energy today. We’re stopping for supplies.“

“But we should have rations for at least another week,” Sasuke objected.

“Apparently, The Avatar has quite the appetite.“

“There is absolutely no way one idiot could possibly eat that much.“

Naruto chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. Sasuke glared daggers- no, Chidori bolts- at his prisoner. No. Fucking. Way.

“Also, I spilled jasmine tea on some of my favorite Icha Icha scrolls-“

“Unclean!” Naruto hissed, covering his ears.
Sasuke rolled his eyes. That was rich, coming from a boy who couldn’t even _spar_ without getting a raging hard on. Ahem. Anyway, he turned back to Kakashi.

“This ship is not stopping to feed your perversion.”

“We’ve arrived, Captain Hatake.”

Of course. Perfect timing. Sasuke turned his acerbic glare to the offending crew-member, who stammered and wilted.

Kakashi rose to his feet, deliberately blocking Sasuke’s eye line.

“Excellent. Finish eating and join us when you’re ready-“ at Sasuke’s look, he amended “-if you’d like.”

Deep breath. Count to ten.

“Three hours. Be late, and we’re setting sail without you,” Sasuke said with forced calm.

“A ship setting sail without its captain?” Kakashi’s visible eye sparkled “My, this I’ll have to see.”

Sasuke glared harder, and continued until his sensei was out of sight.

“Keep making that expression, and your face will get stuck like that, ya know,” Naruto chirped, then chuckled at his own terrible joke.

A permanent glare? That didn’t sound too bad.

“So what if it does, usuratonkachi.”

“Be a waste, is all,” Naruto shrugged, downed the rest of his porridge in a single gulp, and filled yet another bowl.

Sasuke watched with horrified fascination. Two minutes later, Naruto reached for a refill. And another. And another.

“That’s enough.”

“But I’m hungry, ya know!”

“How? Why? All you do is follow me, watch me, barely put any effort into sparring-“ Sasuke noticed and pointedly ignored Naruto’s awkwardness at that last remark “-there is absolutely no reason for you to-“

“I’m The Avatar.”

“So?”

“Don’t ask me how, but it affects my met-meta- the thing, ya know.” Naruto gestured to his stomach. Strangely, Sasuke knew exactly what he meant.

“Metabolism.”

“Yeah, that thing. But fine, if you don’t want me to eat, I’ll go to port. I’m tired of being cooped up here.”
“You are a prisoner, Avatar-“

“-my name is Naruto!“

“-which means you're not at liberty to come and go as you please.”

“As if you could stop me, bastard.”

Sasuke clenched his teeth. The idiot was right, but he wouldn’t admit it even on pain of being banished… Again.

“But, if you want to keep an eye on me or whatever, you should come too. Un, un,” he nodded, suddenly excited for some unfathomable reason, “It’ll be fun, like a dat- uh dayout. Let’s go.”

They were having fun. Well, he couldn’t speak for Sasuke, but Naruto was having the time of his life.

It’s amazing how much, and how little, the world changed over the past hundred years. Fashion, for one: present-day clothing was simple and practical, with little difference between what men and women wore. Dull, muted colors were the new norm. There’s a word for it. Starts with an “a” sound.” Hm- aus, aus- austere.

That’s it. Naruto nodded to himself. It made sense.

Due to a century of war, the common person (or peasant, as Sasuke might say) probably can’t waste time or money on elaborate outfits. Naruto missed the bright silk and floral patterns common in his own time. Not that he wore stuff like that, being a monk and all, but still. It was nice to look at.

In contrast to the dull apparel of the customers, the stalls and shops of the Rice Country port overflowed with bright, strange, shiny things. All sorts of things. Like, that sharp, crooked knick-knack with the red string on one end and a-

“Oy bastard, wait up!”

For the umpteenth time that day, Naruto pried himself from a stall, smiled apologetically at a hopeful merchant, and chased after his impatient dat- er, captor.

Sasuke looked bored and more than a little irritated. He practically snarled at a group of girls who tittered as they walked by.

Naruto rolled his eyes and bit back a smile.

“You should be nicer to your admirers, Prince Sasuke.”

Sasuke ducked his head, shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, and walked faster, muttering under his breath. Naruto strained to hear him.

“Admirers? Preposterous… They’re laughing at me because I’ve been banished… I’ll have my honor restored soon enough, and then we’ll see who…” he grumbled under his breath.

The Avatar laughed outright at that.
Sasuke glared.

Yeah, what else is new.

“Come on, bastard, you can’t be that dense. They’re staring at you because you’re- ya know.”

Naruto gestured vaguely at Prince Sasuke’s pretty, pretty face.

“If you say one word about my scar-“

“What scar?”

Sasuke turned away and continued to mumble, “Idiot thinks he’s so funny. When Madara gets his hands on him… Flogging, maybe dental extraction… No, disembowelment might teach him…“

“Teme, I asked you a question!”

“This scar, dobe,” Sasuke snapped, pushing his bangs back.

A small, jagged red mark marred the skin above the prince’s left eyebrow. It was about the size and length of Naruto’s pinky, and cut diagonally, following the curve of Sasuke's hairline.

Naruto squinted. Was that seriously there before? And he’d thought Sasuke was flawless. Ha!

Sasuke removed his hand. His hair fell over his face, covering the little red burn. Maybe it was just hot outside, but Naruto thought the faintest tinge of a flush colored the prince’s cheeks.

“It is a mark of disgrace,” Sasuke whispered so softly, Naruto had to lean closer to hear him.

(Not that he needed an excuse to invade his dat- captor’s personal space.)

“… Okay. Ya know, there’s no way those girls could see that. Hell, even I didn’t see it until just now, and I’ve been-“

“Staring at me for weeks. Right. I’ve noticed.”

And you still don’t get it? Naruto wanted to scream, but bit his tongue and turned away.

A bright yellow rice paddy hat bobbed through the crowded market. It quickly disappeared into a shop on the other side of the street. Naruto thought he saw a flash of pink.

No, he definitely imagined it.
Naruto pointedly ignored the green-eyed girl in the horrible disguise.

“Psst.” She hissed, hiding behind a barrel of fish.

Naruto walked faster, dragging his thoroughly put-outdat-er, captor by the elbow.

“Psst, Naruto!” the girl persisted, now crouched beside a cabbage cart.

The vegetable merchant scowled and shook his fist, shouting “Buy something or get lost, you filthy street rat!”

Naruto pretended not to notice. He managed to lose her in a few minutes. Finally! Now, back to his new favorite game: bugging Sasuke with questions about everything in sight.

“Ne Sasuke, what’s that? I’ve never seen one of those before.”

This earned him A Look.

“You’ve never seen a banana.”

“No, next to it.”

“...Dragonfruit.”

Naruto turned to Sasuke with stars in his eyes.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s doesn’t work that way,” he frowned and added, “Dragons are extinct.”

“Wait, seriously? I don’t believe it. Weren’t there hundreds –no, thousands of mmphmm!”

A small, cold, unnaturally strong hand covered his mouth as another arm circled his waist, pulling him into a dark alley away from the crowded market.

“Naruto, it’s me. Sakura, the waterbender from the south pole.”

The Avatar thrashed and grunted.

“Damn it, let go of me!”

“Oh, sorry. Guess I still don’t know my own strength.” She released him and giggled sweetly. Naruto didn't buy it for a second.

Sakura was the one who punched through layers of solid arctic ice, forcing the glacier that trapped Naruto to the surface. He owed her big time, but...

“It’s fine,” he waved off her apology, mumbling “Though I told you to stay put-” Sakura opened her mouth to object “-say, is your cousin with you? What’s his name again? Something with an ‘s’ like Siri or...”

“Ah, The Avatar has a puny brain to match his pitifully small penis.”
When did that creep get here?

“Right. Nice to see you too, pervert.”

“Sai,” he smiled vacuously, “And we brought your flying dog. He is waiting in a barn not far from here.”

“Kurama is not a- whatever. That’s great and all, but what are you doing here? I told you to wait for my signal.”

“We’re rescuing you, cha!” Sakura winked and gave a thumbs-up.

Naruto scratched his head and squinted.

“From what?”

“The evil prince. The one that almost destroyed our village in cold blood,” Sai nodded sagely.

Okay, it was kind of a stretch to call three igloos and a wall of snow a ‘village.’

More importantly, “Sasuke’s not evil, you guys. He’s cool, brooding, mysterious, misunderstood, beautiful, strong, intense-“ wait, where was he going with this? Oh, right, “But not evil. Actually, I have a feeling that underneath the whole bastard act, he’s a good person. If anything, I’m trying to rescue him.”

“No.” They asked in unison.

Huh. Good question. Naruto rubbed his chin and hummed thoughtfully.

“… Himself. And possibly his crazy uncle. That Madara’s a real piece of work, ya know. But mostly himself. I have a few months to work the old Uzumaki charm. He’ll join us in no time, ya know! Just watch Kurama and try to stay out of it until then.”

“There you are, usuratonkachi-” Naruto let out a startled squeak at the sound of his voice “-I should have known you’d try something. Hn, so it was you two,” the prince tilted his head and cocked a brow, “This must be my lucky day.”

“We’ll see about that.” Sakura uncapped her water pouch.

Sasuke smirked and cracked his knuckles before assuming a stance.

And Sai… Where the hell was Sai?

Not good! Not good! The Avatar was one good scare away from actually pissing himself.

Still, he moved between them. “Sasuke, wait. They were just- hot, hot, ow!” he yelped, jumping away from a smoldering blast of fire.

Shit, she was dead. His only friend in the crazy new world was totally-

-fine behind a wall of solid ice. Huh.

“I see you learned some new tricks, little girl.”

“Little- we’re the same age!” Sakura screeched, aiming a few icicles at the ‘evil’ prince. Sasuke dodged neatly before countering with another blast of scorching heat.
“Wait guys,” Naruto jumped in the middle again, “there’s no need to-“

“Filthy peasant,” Sasuke shoved him aside without a thought, “how dare you try to take what’s mine?”

And suddenly, Sai was behind Sasuke, smiling in his trademark creepy manner-

“Goodnight, Prince Micro-Dick.”

-before whacking said prince on his pretty head with a club. *Thunk.*

Naruto winced at a pang of sympathy pain. Fucking *ow!* He quickly stepped forward to catch the unconscious Sasuke.

“Sai, Sakura-chan, we need to talk.”

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Kurama was a kitsune of many talents. He could fly, shoot destructive energy beams from his mouth, and, if the occasion called for it, shrink to the size of a normal fox. For those reasons and many, many others, Sasuke objected to the Kyuubi’s presence on the ship once he regained consciousness.

By then, they were miles from land with two additional ‘prisoners’ in tow.

Currently, all three ‘prisoners’ were in the captain’s quarters, along with a particularly irate banished prince.

To be honest, the young prince was quite… *Adorable* when he got flustered. Kakashi valued his remaining eye, so he’d never say this out loud, but yes. There were few things cuter than an angry Sasuke throwing a fit of impotent rage as he stomped around, blushing, scowling, and muttering under his breath.

He reminded Kakashi of little Sasu-chan’s funny little tantrums. Of course, that was before The Incident.

Kakashi sighed.

His nephew was forced to grow up too fast. What a shame.

“Kakashi,” Sasuke massaged his temples as he spoke, “I don’t understand why these two *imbeciles.*“

“Hey!” Sakura and Sai objected in unison.

“-Were allowed on my ship. And that idiot-“

Naruto crossed his arms with an exasperated huff. “Come on, man.”

“-Is a prisoner. He doesn’t get to make demands.”
“Maa, maa Sasuke-kun, that’s no way to talk about our *special guests*. Especially while they’re right in front of you. Also, you seem to be forgetting one very important detail.”

Sasuke turned his heated glare on poor little Kurama.

“Right. The *dangerous* animal—Kakashi had to chuckle at that—*with destructive supernatural powers sitting right there on your desk.* Pause. Scowl. Glare. “Wait, is that thing toilet-trained? Don’t tell me it’s going to poop on my ship.”

“That detail. It’s *my* ship.”

“I’m your *prince*.”

“And I’m the captain. Out here, on the water, captain trumps prince. Ah, ah,” The old pervert preempted his student’s objections with a raised finger, “No buts. I have the final say, and what I say stays.”

Sasuke was deceptively quiet for the count of one, two, three-

“You do realize this *idiot*—”

“Learn my name, bastard. Naruto. It’s easy, Na-ru-to. See?”

“This idiot,” Sasuke continued without sparing said ‘idiot’ so much as a glance, “can escape with *those* imbeciles,” cue finger jab at the unhappy Water Tribe natives, “on *that*thing,” insert rude, violent gesture towards the small, cute fox, “any time he wants to.”

Kakashi sighed and turned to his *special guests* with a placating smile.

“Forgive me for my prince’s lack of hospitality. He’s just a little… Tired. And I’m sure his head still hurts. After all, you hit him pretty hard Sai-kun.”

“My sincerest apologies to Prince Micro-Di—“

Naruto hissed “Sai!” at the same time Sasuke growled, “liar.”

A tense, awkward silence settled over the room. Sasuke stared coldly at Kakashi. Naruto glanced at Sasuke in a manner he probably intended to be subtle. *Maa,* Kakashi thought wistfully, *to be young and in love.* Meanwhile, Sai stared vacantly at Naruto. Kurama yawned and curled up, covering his pretty yellow eyes with his fluffy tails.

Kakashi pressed his fingertips together and waited.

Finally, someone spoke. To his surprise, it was the sweet, pink-haired Water Tribe girl.

“I’m a healer. I could- if you’d let me, I can- uh-“ Sakura fidgeted, then took a deep breath “-help you feel better, Sasuke-san.”

“How kind of you,” Kakashi beamed.

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “No.”

“Sasuke-kun,” Kakashi sighed again, “If you’re going to be rude, I’ll have no choice but to entertain our *special guests* myself. Oh, I know,” he clapped his hands, “Want to hear the story about how, when he was a little boy, Sasuke-kun liked to—“
“Okay! Okay, the peasant-“

“Sakura, bastard. Would it kill you to use people’s names?” Naruto interrupted, once again to be ignored.

“Can use her primitive water-based witchcraft-“

“-bending, not witch-“ The Avatar continued to defend his friends.

“-to assassinate me. Sorry, I mean 'heal' the head wound inflicted by her ally,” he turned to Sakura, “Let’s get this over with.”

Sasuke stormed out of the captain’s quarters in a huff, dragging the poor girl behind him.

Yes, Kakashi decided, he sorely missed his innocent, charming, wide-eyed Sasu-chan. Pity that time only flows one way.

Now, back to the matter at hand.

“Naruto-sama, may I have a moment alone with your friend?”
Sasuke stood, lifted a leg onto the ship railing and leaned forward to touch his forehead to his knee. Someone—okay, Naruto, but what else is new?- made a strangled noise. The prince glared over his shoulder, rolled his eyes, and resumed stretching.

Whatever. That idiot and his idiotic obsession with watching Sasuke train were the least of his worries.

Kakashi was up to something.

In the days after they left Rice Country, the old pervert hounded Naruto to look over a certain something he picked up at port. The first few times, Naruto blushed, squealed, and sprinted from the room, spouting the usual string of “filthy, impure, sinful, he-he-hentai!”

Still, his sensei persisted.

“Now, now, Naruto-sama. I bought this just for you. It’s rude to refuse a gift, especially one so thoughtful and dare I say expensive.” Kakashi waved the scroll in front of the cowering Avatar, who remained unconvinced.

“Get that filth away from me!”

“Well, if you insist on being difficult, maybe it’s time I sit down with Sasuke and have a little… Talk… About your,” loud, deliberate throat-clear, “true intentions regarding-“

“No! I mean, there’s no need for that, ya know. I’ll take it. Uh…” he dropped his voice and looked down, “Thanks… I guess.”

Awkward silence. The Avatar shifted uncomfortably as Kakashi crossed his arms and waited.

Sasuke turned away to hide his smirk. Loser. Who gets that embarrassed over a little porn? It’s almost as if- well, he was raised by monks so. It makes sense.

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?”

Sasuke watched from the corner of his eye. No, he wasn’t interested in the two perverts and their perverted exchange, but Naruto’s reactions to certain things were… Amusing. (Okay, hilarious.) He didn’t want to miss it.

“What, right now?” Hissed The Avatar, shooting a look at the seemingly oblivious prince.

Punch, punch, kick, rinse, repeat. Sasuke maintained a steady rhythm and clear expression, even as he strained to listen.

“No time like the present.”

Naruto closed his eyes, turned his head away, and slowly unraveled the parchment.

“…Naruto-sama?”

“Hai.”
“You have to open your eyes to see what’s on it.”

With great reluctance, the idiot squinted at the contents of the scroll.

Fear morphed to disbelief. A few more unraveled inches later, Naruto was grinning ear to ear.

“… Whoa.”

“I expect you will exercise caution.”

“Yeah of course, but why did you-“

“And hope to count on your discretion as well,” Kakashi interrupted with a pointed glance to the only other person within earshot.

“Oh,” the dobe scrunched his fox-like features in apparent confusion, “Okay.”

Sasuke continued to feign ignorance. He finished his routine of kicks and punches, then dropped to the ground and began a series of rapid one-handed push-ups.

What… What the hell was that?

Of course Naruto was a closet pervert, Sasuke decided as he switched hands. The dobe probably had some weird fetish, and Kakashi, being a flamboyant pervert who took perverse pleasure in turning other people into flamboyant perverts, figured it out and bought him a scroll.

That’s the only conclusion Sasuke could draw from this limited information.

Still… It felt wrong. He had bits and pieces, but the big picture evaded him.

Besides, it was fine. This level of abnormal, irrational behavior –from Naruto, Kakashi, even the two Water Tribe savages- was the new norm. He could deal with it. And honestly, he didn’t care.

Naruto’s porn preferences were none of his business.

Sasuke saw them at dinner: the pink-haired girl and The Avatar sat side by side in the cafeteria, hunching over that scroll.

“What are they doing,” Sasuke hissed, feeling heat in his cheeks, “with one of –of those things out in the open?”

“Ah, young love,” Kakashi dismissed with a smile, “Let’s leave them to it for now. Come join me at this table. I’m no Naruto, and I know you’ve become-“ (insert infuriating, meaningful pause that Sasuke still didn’t know what to make of) “-Accustomed to his presence at mealtime, but I’ll have you know…”

Sasuke tuned out his sensei’s rambling as he watched them.

Love, Kakashi said- as if The Avatar and the Haruno girl were an item. Sasuke found that he was unsettled by the idea.

Two perverts with the same strange fetish, reading an Icha Icha scroll together in plain sight…
“Disgusting,” Sasuke grumbled.

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. Sasuke ignored him and spooned more tomato curry into the small mountain of rice on his plate.

“They’re up to something,” he scowled, “and so are you. Don’t think I can’t tell.”

“My, my, what ever are you talking about, Sasu-chan?”

Cue war flashbacks to his clingy, affectionate, goofy childhood-self. Sasuke winced.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Sasu-chan is so cute when he’s angry.”

That’s it. Sasuke pushed his chair back with a harsh screech and violently snatched his tray off the table.

“I’m eating in my room.”

Kakashi used a time-tested tactic: when Sasuke caught on to something important, something that threatened the old pervert’s secret plans, he agitated the prince with terms like “Sasu-chan” and strange observations about The Avatar, like “Doesn’t Naruto-sama have such striking eyes?” and “Naruto-sama’s hair shines so brightly in the sunlight. Have you noticed?”

Sasuke stepped outside. The cool ocean breeze did nothing to calm his ire.

Because it worked. Like a charm, every single time. Sasuke knew what his sensei was doing and why, but damn it, it still worked.

Worse, now he was thinking about the dobe. Noticing insignificant details, like the “striking” color of his eyes and his stupid obnoxiously bright yellow hair that, yes, practically glowed when the sun-

“Oy bastard, where you off to?”

Damn Kakashi for putting these thoughts in his head. Damn Naruto for following him everywhere. And for keeping secrets, and possibly conspiring with those Water Tribe peasants and his thrice-cursed porn-obsessed scheme-hatching sensei.

Sasuke answered without looking back. He was angry. He wanted to be alone. The idiot would probably keep following him if he didn’t answer his inane question.

“I’m going to bed,” Sasuke sighed, “Good night, Naruto.”

That was out of character. Since when was the great Prince Sasuke polite to his prisoners? Scratch that, when did he decide to start calling him- well, by his Kami-given name?

Naruto shivered as he remembered how good three syllables could sound, uttered in that voice by those lips.

He was only neck-deep before. That little incident after dinner (A gentle good night followed by a soft, hesitant, almost longing utterance of his name) pulled him all the way under. Naruto was officially in over his head… over heels in lo-infatuated with that bastard.
And he thought he had it bad before. Now, this thing – this pull, fascination, unearned devotion - was bigger. Badder. That’s totally a word, right?

Oh, well. He could burst a blood vessel thinking about it later. (The Sasuke thing. Not whether ‘badder’ was a real word.)

First he had to talk to Sakura, and then ask Kakashi for a favor. The old pervert was turning out to be quite the ally. Naruto didn’t want to look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth. He was grateful. Really, once you got past the mask and the eye patch and the porn, Kakashi was a pretty cool dude.

A cool dude with a sharp mind, an eye that saw too much, and cartloads of shady ulterior motive.

He’d think about all that later.

It’s time to turn on that famous Uzumaki charm.

The ship stopped. Again. Why was the ship always stopping? Yes, the idiot ate a lot, and so did his idiot friends, but this was getting out of hand.

He found Kakashi leaning over the ship railing, lazily watching the crew work.

“What are we doing here?”

The ship ‘stopped for supplies’ for the third time in as many weeks. For the mathematically challenged, that is once a week. They had to stick to the schedule. It wasn’t a good idea to keep Madara waiting.

“The crew was getting antsy,” Kakashi drawled, refusing to make eye contact, “All that time stuck in this tiny metal box- it’s just not good for a person’s sanity.”

“They’re in the navy. It is their job.”

“Yes, well…” the old pervert trailed off, fishing a scroll from his back pocket.

Sasuke waited for an explanation- a real explanation. He waited…

…and waited, tapped his foot, crossed his arms…

…sighed, waited some more.

Finally, “It’s quiet around here. Have you noticed?”

Sasuke said nothing.

“Something’s missing. Oho, say, where’s Naruto-sama? I haven’t seen him around since this morning.”

By the time Kakashi finished speaking, Sasuke was already gone.

That idiot. Always wandering off- didn’t he know people were out to get him? (Worse people than Sasuke and possibly even his dear uncle Madara, if you could believe it.) Like The Order of the Red Moon or Itach- Shit! Is that what Kakashi was doing? Taking this twisted route to shake their tail?
Sasuke clenched his fists, ground his teeth, and ran.
Like Water To Moonlight

Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

They found a secluded spot upstream not far from the docks: a clearing beside the river, some feet away from the dense forest. Morning turned to noon. Naruto was tired, sweaty, and “-still not getting it.”

“Let me check.”

She compared his position to the illustration on the scroll.

“Well, it looks right. Maybe if you…”

Sakura closed the scroll and tucked it into her belt. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. Naruto held his stance and waited.

“Remember what I told you, Naruto? You have to feel water. It’s the element of emotion.”

“I’m trying, ya know.”

Her expression softened. “Yes, I do know. Look at me.” She stepped forward and took his face in her hands. Bewildered blue met determined green.

“We are creatures of water. It’s in your tears, sweat-“

“-piss-“ That earned him a light tap on the cheek. Well, Sakura probably meant it to be light. It still stung.

“-and most importantly, blood. Think of something that makes your blood warm. What would you bleed for?”

She leaned closer. Naruto could almost count her lashes. He swallowed thickly.

Look, Sakura-chan was cute. Actually, she had the total package of brains, beauty, brawn, and an unflawing moral compass. Naruto is nothing if not flexible, so of course the thought crossed his mind once or twice or two dozen times. He wished it could be like that. Life would be a hell of a lot more simple. The problem was that his blood, sweat, and other bodily fluids didn’t do that thing around her.

Except right now. She stood awfully close and stroked the tattoos on his cheek with her thumbs. What was that scent? Flowers. Jasmine. And a spice… Cinnamon, maybe?

“Sa-Sakura-chan…”

“Do you feel it Naruto?” She asked, no, breathed on his suddenly too-warm skin.

“Um.”

“Good. Remember that feeling. Use it,” Sakura winked and took a step back, “Let’s try this again.”

“Wait, you were-” Suddenly, the world made sense again “-Oh.”

Sneaky, but smart and strangely effective. That's Sakura for ya. Naruto flashed her a cheeky grin.
Prince Sasuke stood coolly in front a tree, arms folded across his chest and feet crossed at the ankles.
His face was carefully blank.

“Shit, Sasuke! Uh...” why did that idiot look guilty? "It’s not what it looks like!”

“...What is this supposed to look like?”

“Eto... Ya know. Never mind.”

“We’re just practicing, Sasuke-san.”

“I can see that,” he replied blandly.

“She means, we’re practicing waterbending. Or wait- Kakashi said not to, but I just- just had to clear
that up.”

“If you say so,” Sasuke shrugged.

Was waterbending code for a deviant sex act? It could be, from the way that dobe flushed, sputtered,
and fidgeted. Whatever that Haruno girl was doing... 

...Was none of his concern. Sasuke sat cross-legged, leaned back on the tree, and took a deep breath.
He had more pressing issues to consider.

Why did Kakashi insist on staying near this backwoods River Country village for the next three
days? The old pervert was suddenly obsessed in brothels and book peddlers. If they were trying to
 evade any pirates on their tail, shouldn’t they be moving faster?

And then, there was Sai.

Like Naruto, he followed Sasuke everywhere. Unlike the blond idiot, Sai took ill-
conceived measures to hide his presence.

Sasuke glared at a nearby ajsai bush. It shivered and rustled in a way that had nothing to do with the
wind. A curved, black lump poked out from behind it.

“I can see you.”

“And I see you, Prince Micr- Sasuke. Carry on,” the plant replied.

“... Right.”

Sasuke spent the day watching Naruto train. He grudgingly grew to respect Haruno’s patience (and,
kunai to his neck, the idiot’s persistence in the face of constant failure.)

It occurred to him that The Avatar told the truth: they really were practicing waterbending forms,
which meant Kakashi gave Naruto a waterbending scroll. Why? To gain his trust? To help defend
the ship against Akatsuki if their paths crossed at sea? It would help their chances to have two
waterbenders on board, in case of an emergency.
Both were good reasons. Neither really fit. Kakashi wasn’t going to tell the truth any time soon.

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose and ground his teeth against an impending migraine. He really hated being in the dark.

Maybe it was time to try something new.

Midnight found Naruto sneaking off the ship to the same spot upriver. He would master these forms or die trying.

“Let me see it.”

Sasuke was, apparently, less than a minute behind him.

“Ah! Shit bastard, don’t sneak up on people like that.”

“The scroll. Hand it over.”

“What, so you can burn it?”

“No.” Sasuke looked at him like he was stupid.

Naruto waited for an explanation. Sasuke tilted his head, but said nothing. And then- don’t ask him how or why, maybe he was just getting better at reading the prince’s silences and weird moods- Naruto got it.

“…You think you can help. This is waterbending, asshole. You’re a firebender. Fire and water- they don’t mix, ya know.”

Sasuke crossed his arms. “Bending is bending. Forms are forms.”

“Water is wet. It’s dark at night. I’m the Avatar,” Naruto counted off on his fingers.

“What are you on about, usuratonkachi?”

“Oh, my bad. I thought we were all standing around stating the obvious.”

“Just,” he held out his hand, “Give me the scroll.”

Maybe it was the moonlight, or the fireflies, or the gentle song of the river flowing behind them. Maybe, he was mesmerized by the way Sasuke’s skin glowed like a blue-white fire illuminated him from the inside.

But the next thing Naruto knew, Sasuke had the scroll. He unraveled it, glanced at its contents for all of three seconds, rolled it up, and gently set it atop a flat rock nearby.

“You were doing it wrong.”

The Avatar bristled. “Listen here, you judgmental prick-“ Sasuke raised a brow. Naruto scowled “-I studied those pictures to the very last brushstroke. I’m not the problem. It’s that,” he waved both arms at the water, “that stuff refuses to work with me.”
Sasuke rolled his eyes.
“Sure.”
By Kami-sama, that one syllable nearly sent him into the Avatar State.
“Of all the bastards in all the bastard villages in this entire bastardly-“
“Not a real word.”
“-world, you stand alone. I can’t believe I actually like- I mean I, uh…”
Sasuke narrowed his eyes.
“You what?”
“I- I’m going to listen to what you have to say about this.”
Nice save.
For a moment, Sasuke didn’t look like he bought it... And then he did. Or judging by the shrug, he didn’t give a damn either way.
“Whatever. It’s simple. You have to shift your weight through the stances. Watch carefully.”
Sasuke moved through the forms with the fluid, effortless grace of a dancer. Naruto’s mouth was completely dry. He swallowed anyway.
“Get it?”
“Huh? Uh…”
Sasuke sighed.
“I’ll do it again. Pay attention to my feet, dobe.”
Naruto obeyed mindlessly.
Okay, let’s get something straight: he wasn’t a foot guy. Everyone has their thing. It was his job as The Avatar to accept people, not judge them. So he had nothing against it, but he didn’t exactly get it either.
Except now he might get it. He’s still not into it or anything. Just- just looking at Sasuke’s narrow, perfectly arched feet and small toes curling delicately in the grass…
“Now you try.”
“Hnh? Yes.” Sasuke’s face told him that was the wrong answer. “No. Wait, um.”
“This is impossible. Maybe…”
Sasuke started to mumble to himself. Naruto picked up a few phrases: “moron,” “decent bender,” “not a visual learner,” and “tactile approach.” He forced his gaze away from Sasuke’s feet and to the river. Stupid river. Stupid scroll. Stupid budding foot feti- Uh. Anyway. What was that jerk doing now? Getting closer, slowly circling behind-
“guide you from behind.” Sasuke’s warm breath washed over Naruto’s ear.
“What?” he squeaked.

“Try to copy what you saw me do just now,” one warm hand rested lightly on his left shoulder. The other curled loosely at his waist, "I'll help you through it."

Naruto knew he missed some crucial information while he was ogling Sasuke’s feet. Or maybe he was dreaming. It was nighttime, right? Yeah he’s probably still asleep. It’s fine if he never woke up from this. The world can save itself, so long as dream-Sasuke kept touching him and murmuring in his ear.

The Avatar practiced for endless hours. His body knew these forms. His mind was useless mush.

"Now." Sasuke said. Naruto didn't have to be told twice. He moved.

And for the first time by that river, he felt.

He felt Sasuke gently push down on his shoulder while turning him at the waist. He felt air on his neck and warmth at his back. He felt his blood churn under his skin, rush to his cheeks, and flood his ears with a steady, pulsing whoosh.

Sasuke’s toe nudged the inside of his calf and pushed his leg out just so. The hand on his shoulder slowly crept to his neck. Sasuke’s other hand slipped down his waist and rested on his hip.

(Naruto’s blood now rushed to other places as well.)

And then, without warning, he stepped away. “See?”

“See what?”

Sasuke glanced at the river and Naruto followed his gaze. A long column of liquid flowed from the main body of water to his outstretched fingertips. What was- when did he-

“I’m doing that?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes.

Right. Dumb question.

Naruto wiggled his fingertips and watched, dazed, as the clear line of water rippled with his movement. He turned his palm to flatten the column into a thin sheet and pushed with his other hand to lift it above his head. He watched the night sky shimmer and ripple behind the water- his water. It was as an extension of himself.

Air wasn’t like this. Air did as it was told without fuss. It was fickle and fleeting, like a thought, but easy.

Water…

He drew more from the river to make the sheet thicker. The stars twinkled in seven fractal colors. The moon stretched and almost split into two.

Water was pure feeling. It touched him in a way air never could. Naruto decided he liked it.

Sasuke indulged him for a full minute before saying, “Let’s go.”

“Go…”
“To bed.”

*Splash.* The water turned traitor. Okay fine, Naruto dropped it because his head was still firmly lodged in the gutter. “What?!”

“It’s late,” Sasuke spoke slowly, enunciating each word, “You can’t walk around unsupervised. Come back to the ship.”

“Right,” he forced a laugh and dried himself with a swift puff of air, “Hey, wait up!”
Sasuke tried a different approach.

He talked to the prisoners and spent time with them. The prince wasn’t exactly nice; he didn’t smile, but he scowled a little less and tempered the usual biting insults into something more palatable. His words were still bitter, but easier to stomach.

Sakura quickly overcame her nervousness around him. Sasuke learned that she was an excellent bender with razor-sharp wit and a good head for strategy. He lent her his favorite war tactics scroll (to gain trust) and taught her the rules of shoji. He won the first time. The second match was a draw. The third, fourth, and fifth games went to her.

It was hard to think of someone as an uncultured savage and respect them at the same time. Sasuke tried anyway.

Sai used a boomerang. Sasuke thought it was a stupid, useless (savage) weapon of choice. Still, as part of his different approach, he asked Sai to show him how it worked and was nearly decapitated. Sai stood five hundred away, pelting Sasuke with blunted shuriken. He barely, barely dodged each one. The prince didn’t know when Sai threw the boomerang or how it snuck up on him. He felt something whoosh over his head and snip a few strands of hair.

No doubt: Sai missed on purpose. Sasuke was, once again, reluctantly impressed.

And then, there was Naruto.

They didn’t spar much anymore. Not because of that incident, but because it was too easy. Naruto always let him win. Sasuke was tired of trying to understand way.

Instead, they talked. It usually happened at night when everyone else was asleep.

That night, Sasuke and Naruto lay side by side some distance from a small waterfall. The prince was on his back with his hands laced behind his head. He looked at the stars and wondered how they ended up like this. He honestly couldn’t remember; it was like trying to recall the details of a dream.

Naruto rested on his stomach with his chin in his palm, fingers absently running over the lines on his own cheek. He stared at Sasuke. His face was too close. Sasuke hardly noticed anymore- this was their norm. The idiot had no concept of boundaries or personal space.

“I’m not stupid, ya know.”

Sasuke snorted.

“Is that so?”

“You’re up to something.”

“Hn.”

“I don’t care. I’m just glad to be with- er, glad you’re not being such a jerk all the time.”

Sasuke took a deep breath and held his tongue.
“Not that I mind it when you’re a jerk, or a bastard, or dense, snotty, stuck up—“ Sasuke glared and Naruto grinned—“Anyway, I’m fine with all that. To be completely honest, I like those things about you. It’s hard to explain…” His eyes glazed over.

The prince waited.

“I might not understand the reasons, but it’s you, right? The good and the not so good, they’re all different sides of you and I can’t help it, when it’s you—or anyone because it’s like my job, but especially you— I can’t pick and choose the parts that are ‘good’ from the rest.” Naruto chuckled at this. Sasuke still did not have any inkling why.

“I don’t want to, ya know. I want all of it. I mean, I want— I just want you— uh, you to be yourself.”

As he rambled, he stuttered, flushed, and leaned closer. So close that Sasuke could only focus on one indigo iris at a time.

The proximity was unsettling.

“Naruto.”

Naruto started at the sound of his name. He rolled onto his back with a huff. Sasuke could see the sky again.

“Hai.”

The Avatar plucked a few blades of grass and set them adrift with a flick of his fingers. They sat in silence (if Sasuke didn’t know better, he would describe it as companionable) and watched the wisps spiral with the breeze.

“Try to make sense when you talk, usuratonkachi.”

“You still don’t get it.”

So, they were back to this.


“Fuck, Sasuke… Just, just be honest with me, okay?”

The changes in subject were giving him whiplash. No, a headache. He would definitely not sleep well tonight.

“About what?”

“Everything. Always… Please.”

Sasuke nodded. Well, he inclined his chin slightly and the moron took it as a ‘yes.’

He didn’t feel good about it. Any of it. That’s an understatement. It was terrible. Exhausting. Nauseating. He felt cruel, dirty, and just…Bad.

Still, it was necessary. Mother had her opinions on how to catch flies. Sasuke just had to swallow his pride (along with what little honor he had left) to find the truth.
Kakashi noticed the subtle shift in his normally unsociable nephew. For a moment, he allowed himself to hope.

Maybe Sasuke had an epiphany. Maybe he realized that his honor was with him all along and didn’t need to be restored by anyone, especially a deranged megalo wanna-be Fire Lord like Madara. Maybe the good, sweet, kind part of his nephew –the real Sasuke- finally triumphed over the darkness forced upon him by cruel fate and unfortunate circumstance.

Maybe Kakashi needed to get a grip and stop avoiding The Talk.

Well, not that Talk. Sasuke made it abundantly clear he wasn’t interested in anything (or anyone) like that. That’s fine. Kakashi wanted to let his Sasu-chan keep whatever innocence he still had. Let him hold onto this last vestige of childhood. It’s not like Naruto was- maa, nevermind that and enough stalling.

Kakashi cut to the chase. “Why the change of heart?”

They were below deck in the weapons room. Sasuke was meticulous about caring for his katana. The dull scrape of metal on whetstone stuttered at Kakashi’s question. Sasuke glanced up, narrowed his eyes, then went back to work.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He was telling the truth. Kakashi had always admired Sasuke’s honesty. He would make a great leader someday.

“Hm…Could it be that you’re aware?”

“Stop speaking in riddles, old man.”

“Is it possible that you even… reciprocate?” Kakashi continued to think out loud, “No, no. It’s too soon. Oh.”

Suddenly, the answer was obvious. He didn’t like it. Deception –dishonesty- did not suit his nephew. His honesty, with others if not always himself, was his greatest asset. Kakashi really shouldn’t have delayed this Talk.

“He doesn’t know,” Kakashi said.

“Who doesn’t know what?”

“What you think I’m keeping from you-“ Sasuke’s head shot up “-Not that I’d ever keep anything from my dearest Sasu-chan.”

Sasuke gave him a tired look. Kakashi smiled.

“But if I was doing something slimy or underhanded –not that I am, or have, or ever will-“ and this was completely true, depending on one’s perspective “-Naruto is the last person I’d confide in or conspire with.”

“Right,” was that relief under the steel in his voice? Sasuke seemed to let out the smallest sigh. The hard of his shoulders softened infinitesimally, “Who then?”
Interesting.

“Hm?”

“Hypothetically, who would you tell? The quartermaster, the chef, the dog… Wouldn’t put anyone past you.”

“Sai.”

“What.”

“The Water Tribe boy.”

“Why.” This was less a question than an accusation.

He shrugged. “Why not?”

“Kakashi.”

“Rest assured, your friend remains blissfully unaware. He suspects little and knows even less.”

“Because he’s an idiot,” Pause “And we are not friends.”

“He’s a good, kind, trusting person who sees others the same way. You could learn from him.”

“No.”

“Just… Sasuke, please do things for the right reasons.”

“I always do,” his nephew replied with total conviction.

“Debatable,” Kakashi sang the word before continuing in his usual lazy drawl, “And keep an open mind.”

Sasuke looked at him blandly. The corners of his mouth twitched downward briefly before he resumed sharpening his katana.

“Whatever.”

Kakashi withheld the truth and was intentionally vague, but he never outright lied. Not to Sasuke. Not about things that actually mattered. The prince believed his uncle, especially the part about that idiot knowing nothing.

Sasuke had to hand it to him: the old pervert had excellent taste in co-conspirators. Sai didn’t crack. No, he talked about penises until Sasuke cracked and was forced to leave so he didn’t accidentally barbeque his uncle’s special guest.

He continued to play shoji with Sakura. Just before she won for the umpteenth time, the girl revealed she knew that Sai was up to something. She gave Sasuke a hard, level stare and said, “I trust them. Whatever they’re doing, it’s for the best.”
Sasuke hadn’t asked her—hadn’t said or done anything to reveal the motive behind his different approach. She figured it out anyway. He wasn’t surprised.

Instead, he demanded, “Again.”

“Sasuke-kun…”

And yeah, somewhere along the line, -san became –kun. Sasuke didn’t know when it started, but he found he didn’t mind. It didn’t matter what anyone called him. His name stayed the same regardless of the honorific tacked on to the end. Anything but ‘Sasu-chan’ was acceptable.

“I almost won last time.”

“You think so?” She teased.

“I know so,” he shot back.

This time, Sakura beat him in less than twenty moves. She promised they’d play again tomorrow.

The ship sailed upriver for a week. River Country flowed into the Land of Rocks. They were deep in Earth Kingdom territory now, and moved further from the Fire Nation capital each day.

Sasuke was near his wit’s end. He had no answers and no choice but to follow blindly. He was the prince, not the captain. He had no where else to go.

Then, it came time to (literally) face the music.

Kakashi picked up a song from one of the long, frequent, unnecessary stops at some port. He performed with his little ‘band’ at dinner. Since that cursed night, every crew member and prisoner (with the exception of Sai) hummed, whistled, or outright shouted the tune.

It echoed in Sasuke’s dreams and grated on his already fragile sanity. One night, while taking a bath, he decided to give into his baser urges and let it out. (Just once… To get it out of his system. Sasuke was only human.)

He hummed the introduction, then sang softly to the water.

*Two lovers, forbidden from one another*

*A war divides their people*

*And a mountain divides them apart*

*Built a path to be together*

As many times as Sasuke heard it, he couldn’t remember the next bridge before the chorus. Oh yes, the chorus. It was loud, repetitive, and total nonsense.

*Secret tunnel…*

*Secret tunnel…*

*Through the mountain…*

*Secret, secret, secret, secret tunnel…*
He slouched in the bath with a sigh. The last ‘tunnel’ petered out when his mouth sank below the waterline. Sasuke continued to exhale, blowing bubbles in the water like a child. Then, he leaned his head on the edge of the tub and closed his eyes.

The song was familiar. Maybe he heard it somewhere a long, long time ago. It made his stomach knot with a strange tangle of emotion. Joy, sorrow, longing… It made him want something.

Something besides honor, revenge, and an end to this century of war. Something warm, safe, and maddeningly just out of reach.

That night, he dreamed of a dark place. Little points of light shimmered above him like stars. Cerulean irises morphed into hazel and back. The skin, hair, and face were different, but the person was the same: iridescent and smiling to the very end. Even through the tears. Even when Sasuke (though he had a different name and body then, his essence remained the same) lay bleeding in her arms and slowly passed on.

‘Next time. Next time, for sure. I promise.’

Sasuke woke with a cold trail of liquid on his cheek. He wiped it away and went back to sleep.
Get Ready To Rumble
Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

The sequence of events that brought him to this very bad place happened very quickly. Maybe it just seemed that way because Sasuke hadn’t slept in almost three days. Sleep deprivation always warped his sense of time. He was no stranger to nightmares, but this recent bout…

It was different. That’s far as Sasuke allowed his thoughts to go.

Kakashi didn’t help (well, when did he ever?) by dragging him out of bed hours before dawn as he rambled cheerfully about a ‘special surprise.’ Sasuke didn’t pay attention. He bit into what he thought was an apple, found that it was actually a tomato, and decided this was acceptable. He ignored the idiot’s moon-eyed stare and \textit{hn}-ed in response to Sakura’s idle chatter. They walked through the forest, which thickened, thinned, and faded into a wide dirt clearing.

Sasuke took a while to realize they stopped walking. He wiped a drop of tomato juice from his chin and looked up to find a black, yawning abyss.

Of course.

“Whoa, what is this place?”

\textit{Is this place… this place… place…} \textit{place… place… place}…

Naruto’s shout echoed in the darkness. Sasuke shivered.

“One of the foremost tourist attractions in Rock Country,” Kakashi replied.

Sakura walked to the mouth of the cave. She ran her fingers over something on the side of the entrance and tapped her chin thoughtfully.

“Is this the tunnel from the song, Kakashi-san?”

Of course it was. She didn’t need to specify which song. The tomato sank in Sasuke’s stomach like a rock.

“Excellent observation, Sakura. Yes, it is. You kids can play here while I take care of some business in town.”

\textit{No. No. No, no-}

“No! I refuse to go in there. This is a-‘terrible, insane, \textit{frightening} ‘-waste of time.”

“Stop being a scardy-cat, Sasuke-” okay, there’s no way that idiot could see through him so easily “-Come on guys!” Naruto disappeared with a whoosh, rushing headlong into the unknown without hesitation. Kurama trotted after him with a snort and a small yip.

“Oh, look at these markings. They’re so well preserved, and the language must be…” Sakura’s voice disappeared into the dark. Sai adjusted the straps of his large backpack and followed.

Sasuke shoved his hands into his pockets to hide the shaking. “What business do you have in town?”

“Oh, would you like to accompany me to the brothel?”
Maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. Anything had to be better than this place.

“I’ve been thinking, twenty-one is a bit old to still be a virgin. Perhaps it’s time to do something about it.”

By the time Kakashi finished the sentence, he was speaking to thin air.

A few minutes later, a violent rumble shook the cave. Rocks cracked, clattered, and rolled. Sakura screamed. Naruto fell flat on his back- no, something knocked him down. He tried to get up. A hot, rough hand pushed him back, then curled protectively over his head.

“Idiot! Stay down,” Sasuke hissed into his ear.

Hard to argue with that.

When the noise and shaking stopped, everything was pitch black. Sure, the cave was dark before, but a decent amount of light filtered through the entrance. What happened? Last time Naruto checked, there wasn’t a door that could slam shut or anything like that.

“Um. Sasuke?”

“What.”

“I can’t see.”

“The exit is blocked. We’re- we might be trapped.”

“Oh.”

…

“Sasuke?”

“Hn.”

“You’re shaking, like, really shaking,” Naruto chuckled breathlessly. “It’s gonna be okay, ya know.”

The warm, solid (pleasant) weight left him abruptly.

“Don’t say such reckless things. You don’t know. Can’t you-” Sasuke’s voice cracked. He cleared his throat. “Do you not get it? This is a bad place.”

And then there was light. A flickering white flame floated from Sasuke’s hand. Naruto squinted, both because his eyes hadn’t adjusted and because he really didn’t get it. Like… Okay, the was a minor cave-in, but it’s not like anyone got hurt. What’s the point of getting all worked up?

“Sakura,” Sasuke hissed. “Shit! Where is she? There.”

A hint of teal and pink was visible under layers of pebbles and dirt. Sasuke practically ran to it, crouched and gently turned her over with the hand not holding the flame.
“Sasuke-kun?” She sat up and swayed slightly, still dazed.

“You’re fine,” he decided after a cursory glance, “And your cousin?”

“Behind you.”

Sasuke started slightly—who wouldn’t, when a creep like that sneaks up on you?- before muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “too much to hope for.”

See? Everyone’s fine. No need to freak out. Geez.

“Sasuke-san,” Sai held out a long piece of wood, “Would you light this for me?”

The prince’s dark eyes widened, then narrowed fractionally. He looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it.

“Here.”

The cave pulsed gold with the light from the torch. Sasuke extinguished his own fire and let his hand drop.

Naruto stood up, dusted off, and blew his special whistle. Kurama jumped into his arms and gave his face a thorough tongue bath. “Alright,” Naruto laughed, “Cut it out, will ya? There’s a good boy.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Sasuke grumbled.

The prince mumbled whenever something pissed him off. For some reason, the bastard had been extra pissy lately. Naruto shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up. Sasuke, being semi-nice on a regular basis?

Apparently, it was too much to ask for.

“Sadistic meddlesome bastard… Trap me in a magic cave… Surrounded by backwards cretins… Traitorous old fool… When Madara hears about this… Unless I die here… Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad…”

“Oy bastard, everyone can hear you, ya know.”

“Keep your voice down!”

Normally, Naruto wouldn’t mind pissy Sasuke. Hell, most of the time, fighting with the bastard could be really, really fun. But this was different. From the moment he set eyes on the cave- tunnel-whatever, Sasuke had been scared. Naruto didn’t get it. Like yeah, it’s a big hole inside a mountain. Kind of dark, rickety, and dangerous, but since when did a little danger bother Sasuke?

“It’s okay, ya know,” Naruto tried to calm the agitated prince.

Sasuke ignored him and resumed pacing. “Here’s the plan.”

“Geez, who died and made you king?” Naruto crossed his arms with a childish huff.

“Fire Lord Madara is dead?” Sai tilted his head in apparent confusion.

“No, Sai, it’s an expression,” Sakura explained.

“I can’t see his face from this angle.”
“Not a facial expression, Sai. It’s like- just forget it.”

Sai shrugged. “Okay.”

“If everyone would kindly shut up,” Sasuke snapped, “and pay attention for one minute.”

“Now listen, asshole, if anyone’s the leader here, it’s me. I have se-sen-sen- Eto.”

Sasuke pressed two fingers to the space between his eyebrows. “Seniority,” he supplied reluctantly.

Naruto nodded. “Un. That.”

“Look at you finishing each other’s sentences. Kakashi-san would be proud.”

“Sai, I swear to god.” Naruto groaned at the same time Sasuke asked, “What are you implying?”

“See? There’s no way anyone should take orders from someone this dense.”

“Who’s dense,” Sasuke grabbed the front of The Avatar’s robes, “You absolutely idiotic, incorrigible, dead-last loser?”

“You are, you jerk,” Naruto leaned forward, glaring hotly, “You are literally too dense to know when people are calling you dense, to your face. And you say I’m an idiot? Ha!”

“Not listen here-“

“Sasuke!”

“Naruto!”

“Everybody shut up!” Sakura’s roar echoed through the cave.

-dy shut up… Shut up… Up…

“Here’s what we’re going to do. This isn’t a normal cave. Did I give you permission to speak?” Sasuke deflated and Naruto rapidly shook his head “-thought so. Sai, you have ink and parchment?”

“Always, cousin.”

“Good. Draw a map as we go along. I’ll lead, so give me the torch. Sasuke-kun, hold up the rear. How long can you sustain a flame?”

“As long as I have to.”

Naruto rolled his eyes. Cocky bastard.

“Excellent. You’ll guard the back. What about you, Naruto?”

“Un, un, me too!” Kakashi was kind enough to teach him some basics. So what if Naruto still didn’t understand any of it? Necessity is the mother of forcing you to randomly master new bending techniques.

“Dobe, you can’t light a candle without causing an explosion.”

One time. It happened one time, a week ago, and the jerk still wasn’t letting it go.

“Fuck you!”
“Che. You wish.”

“Finally,” Naruto grinned, “You get it.”


“If all goes well, my dick in y-“

“Enough, you two. Now is not the time. Naruto, just keep an eye on Kurama. Alright everyone, let’s move out.”

With a placating “Hai, hai” from Naruto, a saccharine “Yes, dear cousin” from Sai and the usual “Hn,” from Sasuke, they were off.

“And guys? Under no circumstances will we split up. We will all get out of this in no time if we just stick together.”

As if in response, low, moaning rumble shook the cave. There’s nothing to fear, The Avatar reminded himself. To be a master bender, you have to master fear. Deep breath.

Crack.

Fuck it, he was terrified.

Naruto whimpered and latched onto an irate Sasuke. “Get off,” he tried to push. Naruto only clung tighter.

“Sa-Sakura-chan?”

“Calm down Naruto, it’s probably just…”

“Wind,” Sai supplied, “A good sign. That means there is a way out and we just have to find it.”

Right. The wind. The wind is totally capable of making distant cracking noises and causing rock slides and all that other shit. It was totally just wind.
Three hours later…

“Didn’t we pass those rocks before? The pointy ones hanging off the ceiling. What are they called? St- stan- no, staran- uh…”

“They remind me of very sharp-“

“Say penis one more time, Sai,” Naruto glared, “I dare you.“

“Stalactites,” Sasuke cut in, looking up, “You’re right. We’ve been this way at least twice before.”

“I’d hoped I was imagining it,” Sakura sighed, “This is bad.”

The group stopped walking and exchanged looks.

“But, but, but” Naruto stuttered as he flailed his arms, dropping Kurama, “Sakura-chan, don’t you have the idea thing?” he motioned to his own head as if that made the point clear. The Water Tribe girl looked perplexed.

“… Eidetic memory. That’s what he means.” Sasuke sighed.

Unbelievable. How did he know? Clearly, they’ve been spending too much fucking time together.

“Un, un, that,” Naruto nodded sagely, “So you should remember everything we saw already. You can’t be imagining it.”

“Sai?” Sakura turned to her cousin.

Sai rotated his parchment this way and that, holding his brush in his mouth.

“Let me see,” Naruto snatched the paper away, impatient as ever. He squinted, flushed, and sputtered, “Sai, you pervert! This isn’t a map. It’s a giant drawing of a-”

“Penis.” Sasuke peered over his shoulder, using the light of his flame to illuminate the, ahem, map.

“I thought so too, but much like my dear cousin, hoped it was my imagination.”

Sasuke’s stomach twisted. The feeling he had since he set foot into this place got ten times wore. Naruto opened his mouth and drew a breath to shout.

He didn’t get the chance.

The cave moaned, shivered, and rumbled.

Crack... Crack... Crack...

Sakura took a step back. Sai followed, pulling her closer protectively. Sasuke wanted to scream. Instead, he kept an eye on the ceiling.

Crack… Crack…
SNAP!

“Wha-“

Not again, Sasuke found himself thinking as he yanked the dumbstruck idiot back by his robes. A stalactite impaled the ground where Naruto once stood. Several more landed in quick succession.

Never again.

He pushed Naruto down and made sure to protect the other boy’s head, again.

No. No. Not this time.

If it had to happen again, that’s fine. He’d gladly make that sacrifice because… Because…

Sasuke pressed closer, squeezed his eyes shut, and tried to stifle that wretched burning sensation in his chest. Whatever these strange thoughts and emotions were, they could wait until he found a way out. He pressed his nose (unintentionally) into Naruto’s hair and took a deep, grounding breath. It was surprisingly soft, clean, smelled like… Incense.

Huh.

Something about it –him, them, all of this- was familiar.

That was Sauske’s last thought before pain rippled across the back of his head. A warm, wet line of moisture snaked down his scalp. He closed his eyes and fell into a dream.

In another life, he was a woman named Midori.

Midori had thick, curly bronze hair, a deep, earth-brown complexion, and black eyes identical in shape, size, and color to Sasuke’s.

Perhaps some things carry across lifetimes.

She –he, whatever, they were different expressions of the same soul essence- climbed the mountain by her village once a week to pick the ripest red grapes. That’s what Midori called them, though Sasuke knew they were merely small tomatoes.

Uncanny.

There, Midori met Aoi, a vivacious (obnoxious) redhead with bright hazel eyes and an achingly familiar, infectious grin.

Green clashed with blue. The earth touched the sky.

And two women from warring villages, betrothed to other men, duty-bound by the traditions of their families, fell in love.

Midori –Sasuke- Midori –whatever- didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. Aoi fell head over heels, eager, reckless and self-centered as ever. The end result was the same: it was a thickly sweet, scorching, soul-searing romance. That’s where the pain, the suffocating, insatiable
burning in Sasuke’s chest came from.

Some things felt so good, they hurt. Even after millennia.

The two women watched the stars together in a disturbingly familiar scene, laying side by side on the grassy mountaintop.

Aoi turned and stared until Midori whispered, “What,” as she fought a blush.

“You hair,” the other woman tugged a stray curl until it was straight, then let go, causing it to bounce and coil in its original tight spiral, “is so cute.”

Midori touched her head self-consciously. “Really?”

She always thought it was wild, stubborn, and unruly. Countless hours spent waging war with a hairbrush, oils, ribbons, and her mother-in-law’s snide comments didn’t exactly help. Sasuke- Midori was far from fond of her greatest flaw.

Until that moment.

“Really really, babe,” Aoi grinned.

Midori couldn’t help it. She pulled Aoi down for a kiss. It was gentle, chaste, maybe a little wet. They didn’t do anything more that night, or any other, foolishly thinking they had more time. Love tells you that you have all the time in the world. You’re all too happy to happy to believe it.

Until the sky (ceiling) falls down.

Long story short: it ended too soon and far from well. Aoi was lucky. She died.

Midori –Sasuke- Midori was forced to live in an empty world with an ever-aching heart until the years finally, finally killed her body and gave relief to her ancient, suffering, broken soul.

Sasuke woke with a start and stifled a sob.

“So, you’re finally awake.”

“Hn.”

It was pitch black. Thank Kami-sama for small blessings. He wiped his eyes and released a long, shuddering sigh.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What-“ the prince coughed “-do you- am I… Um…”

“Shit, Sasuke. That rock must have hit you pretty hard.”

“Mmm,” he moaned softly. Spirits, his head.
“Good thing Kurama tells me you’ll be fine,” Naruto chuckled. It sounded hollow. “Otherwise I’d be pretty worried right now.”

Liar. The Avatar was clearly beside himself.

“Your dog can’t talk, dobe.” Sasuke wondered if he wasn’t the only one hit in the head.

“Why’d you do it?” Naruto asked, refusing to take the bait.

“Do what?”

“Save me. Twice.”

“Can’t explain it. Mmm…” Sasuke swallowed bile “My body moved on its own.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re- the way you’ve been acting… I guess it fits.” Naruto made a sound halfway between a sigh and a laugh. Sasuke would have wondered what it meant, but he had bigger fish.

“Like, duh,” he continued, “how can you know how someone else feels when you, you don’t even know yourself? Anyway. Don’t do it again. I can’t –if anything happens to you- just d-don’t. Okay?”

Silence. Darkness so thick and black, he couldn’t distinguish the inside of his eyelids from the surrounding space. Damn, he was tired… And dizzy, and really, really sad.

“Sasuke?”

“I’m not responding,” and why was his tongue so heavy, “unless you say something that makes sense.”

“Heh. That’s more like it. Can you stand?”

Sasuke tried. The wall of the cave scraped his hand. He swayed and fell back with a huff. There were soft shuffling noises, followed by a warm, sturdy arm sliding across his waist.

“Easy there. I’ll help.”

“Don’t-“ Sasuke tried to struggle, but he was so, so sleepy.

“Shut up and let me do this,” Naruto grumbled, “It’s not a big deal.”

“Whatever.”

“We need light, though. Can you…” Sasuke had to snap his fingers to spark a flame. It flickered feebly, casting dim, grey light on their surroundings. “Oh,” Naruto’s voice cracked with barely contained hysteria, “good.”

“The others?” Sasuke asked, struggling to keep his eyes open.

“They’re fine. We tried to move the rocks separating us, but even with Kurama’s help, it wasn’t possible. Sakura –can you believe it, Sakura, you know how stubborn she can be- finally decided it was best to split up and double our chances of finding a way out instead of shouting at each other from opposite sides of a cave-in.”

“She’s smart.”

“You’re worrying me, bastard.”
“About damn time you get worried, dobe. This is not exactly an ideal situation.”

“Right. So… So… What do we. Um. How do we… Sasuke, what if we, if we die here?”

“You won’t.”

“But- but-“

“I won’t let you.”

“Asshole, I’m talking about both of us.”

Sasuke shrugged. It made no difference. No matter what, he wouldn’t let another person die in the confines of this horrid pit, in this life or any of the next.

The prince’s flame grew whiter and brighter. It illuminated the carved writing on the walls. The language was ancient, foreign, and faded, but it seemed to glow a faint, pulsing green.

“Naruto, do you see that?”

The other boy squinted, looked up, down, everywhere but at the writing on the walls.

“Eto…”

“The carvings.”

“Oh.”

“Well?” They were suddenly bright and clear. Couldn't Naruto see? "Read them.”

“Uh. Please don’t call me stupid for this but, but, ever since I was little, words- letters- they always, er, move around,” Naruto made a vague motion with his free hand, “and blur together and it’s like… Really hard to figure out what they’re trying to say. So. Kakashi said I might have dys- dys-“

“Dyslexia.”

“Yeah,” Naruto blushed, suddenly very interested in his feet, “That.”

“Hn. ‘S not your fault,” Sasuke mumbled absently, still mesmerized by the incandescence of the etchings, “your mind processes information differently from most people.” Still, a lot of things about the stuttering, seemingly obtuse blond made sense. “Is it just me or are those words glowing?”

“Sasuke…” Naruto’s face was pinched, like he was in pain or really unhappy about something. Probably the fact that Sasuke was brained by a stalactite, and now he was seeing things.

“Oh.”

Just him, then.

“This way,” Sasuke decided, leading them down a tunnel to the left.

They –Midori and Aoi- were the first earthbenders. The two women made a deal with… Not the devil, but some other unwholesome creature with scales and fangs. Sasuke had a hard time remembering. Midori went blind with grief at her lover’s death. Her eyes turned a queer shade of violet, so pale they were almost white. Her children had straight, black hair.
Not that those details are relevant.

Sasuke shook his head. Now was not the time for… Whatever that was.

The unwholesome creature could earthbend too. It was probably the force behind the shifting tunnels: the only logical explanation behind Sai’s penis map.

At least that thing had a sense of humor.

“Sasuke,” Naruto whined an hour later, “are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Kurama yipped derisively.

“No,” Sasuke said.

“Well, ain’t that a huge relief!” Naruto practically yelled his sarcasm.

Sasuke ground his teeth. His ear was ringing from the sheer volume of the moron's voice.


They stepped through another dark hole into a-

“Holy shit!”

-ly shit… shit… it…

“Dobe,” Sasuke sighed, “what did I just tell you?”

Naruto was too busy exploding with amazement to respond.

They went from a cave to a cavern: a large, wide-open space filled with statues and even larger, gold-encrusted markings. The writing didn’t glow any longer, Sasuke realized with mild surprise. Was that a good thing?

A cold, sharp shiver rattled his spine.

So.

It was a cavern within a cave, protected from the creature –a thick, black, slithering animal- by powerful magic. That’s the good news.

The bad news?

They were standing in a tomb.

Midori’s –Sasuke’s- Midori’s tomb. And her lover’s final resting place.

At least her family honored her final wish, Sasuke thought wistfully. He curled his fingers around Naruto’s supportive shoulder, straining to keep anchored against the siren call of his –
her- their withered, bloodless corpse.

“Do you feel that?” Sasuke hissed through clenched teeth.

“Yeah. It kinda hurts, ya know.”

Naruto was, of course, referring to the prince’s clawing grip on his shoulder. Again, it was just Sasuke who felt the… Whatever. Damn it.

“The exit should be…” Sasuke’s vision blurred. His flame dimmed as his eyelids fluttered. Naruto shook him awake.

“Yeah? Yeah? Stay with me, bastard, we’re almost there.” Another hollow, nervous laugh.

Sasuke’s knees buckled. Naruto caught him.

“Hey, Sasuke.”

“Go ‘way.”

He was buried here. Aoi died here. He –she- they loved her so much, and she died. What they had was greater than simple perfection: it was transcendent. People waited entire lifetimes for a love like that, heaven on earth in the eyes of another, and she had found it. And then, just like that- Why… How… It was so unfair.

What was the point of this senseless tragedy? How much longer, how much further, how much more did he… Kami, he was tired.

“Hey, hey, wake up!” Naruto practically screamed in his ear. Sasuke reluctantly opened his eyes. He could only tell by the feeling, that his eyes were open, because everything was dark. Again.

“If you don’t wake up,” the Avatar growled, “I will firebend. I don’t care if I blow this whole place up, so help me. Sasuke!” Another desperate shake.

“Fine,” Sasuke sighed, prying his eyes open some more and snapping his fingers to generate another pathetic flame, “happy now?”

“Asshole. No. I am not happy. If you pull that crap again, I will kill you.”

Sasuke bit back a smile.

Damn, this must be one hell of a concussion.

“Does your pet have any ideas?” he jerked his head at Kurama, who tilted his head cutely, "Because I...” His eyelids drooped against his will. Two warm, rough hands cupped his cheeks and forced him awake.

“Look at me.”

In the faded light of Sasuke’s weak flame, Naruto’s eyes were grey. Dull, unsaturated, and too close to hopeless.

That wouldn’t do.

“Right,” Sasuke ground his jaw and gathered his will, “I said you’d make it out of here.”
“We, you bastard. We are going to find a way. Believe it.”

He had absolutely no reason to, but Sasuke did.

“Maybe we should walk around,” the prince suggested, “to search for clues.”

On the far end of the cavern –tomb- the two boys came face to face with a giant statue and some seriously cryptic writing.

Well, all writing was cryptic to Naruto, but this was some next-level shit.

“Only love can show the way,” Sasuke read.

Naruto didn’t know how the bastard did it. Sure, he had problems making things out, but those carvings were neither Kana nor Kanji. They had too many circles and straight lines. He was almost positive it was some lost, foreign language that no one alive should be able to read, yet Sasuke-

But, after all, he was Sasuke. He could do anything and then some with a condescending ‘hn’ and ‘che.’ The guy didn’t have to break a sweat to fucking demolish his obstacles.

“So…” Naruto prodded.

“It’s a dead end,” Sasuke said.

But that didn’t feel right.

“Here, can you,” Naruto pulled Sasuke closer with the arm already around his waist and reached for the other hand –the one holding the flame- with his free palm, “let me.”

He held his hand under Sasuke’s illuminated palm and fed it the smallest trickle of chakra. The fire swelled and tinted orange with a soft *whoosh*.

“How did you-“

“Ssh. I’m thinking.”

“Try not to hurt yourself.”

Why that pissy, arrogant, sarcastic *ass*! No. This wasn’t the time for another fight. Naruto forced himself to focus.

A giant statue towered above the large print. Naruto squinted because, shit, for a second he could swear the words did glow a faint, silvery blue. One phrase shone brighter than the rest. Instinctively, Naruto knew it was ‘love.’

He lifted their hands and the flame to get a better look.

The statue was actually two statues. Two women with their knees and lips touching… Kissing. Huh. Naruto felt heat rise in his cheeks as he glanced at Sasuke furtively.
Their faces were so high up, they faded into the darkness without the aid of a larger, bright flame.

Beside him, Sasuke drew a sharp, shaky breath. Naruto felt his companion’s chest swell and deflate.

“Sasuke?”

“Naruto…” the prince glanced down, at the writing below the statues, up at their carved stone faces, back at his feet. Why was he flushed all of a sudden? Shit, was this another side effect of the injury? Naruto opened his mouth to ask, but was interrupted.

“Kiss me.”
Naruto blinked. “Wha?”

“Moron,” Sasuke sighed, still refusing to meet his eyes as he kicked the dirt around, “I’m telling you to kiss me.”

“Oh,” so his mind wasn’t playing tricks on him, “Um,” he gulped, “Wh- why?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“Sasuke, I know that rock hit you pretty hard,” Naruto chuckled even though none that was decidedly not funny, “but this isn’t- I mean, now’s not the time to, to fool around like… Like that.”

Okay, why did it feel like his face was on fire? He sucked on the inside of his cheeks. Right, he was blushing. Blushing because- because-

“I saved your life and you still don’t trust me?”

“Sasuke…”

“Hn.”

“Is this a joke?” Spirits know that stuck-up priss had a twisted sense of humor “Like, are you trying to be funny or something?”

“I’m serious.”

“No, what you are is severely con- con-“ Naruto cursed his ineptitude with words and tried again, concussed.”

“I know, damn it,” a particularly forceful kick at a small pebble sent it skittering into the black, “I know. But it’s the only way.”

“No,” Naruto shook his head, “Not like this. This isn’t how it was supposed to- just no.”

“What, you never kissed anyone before, dead-last?” Cue condescending smirk and sarcastic eye-roll, “I’m shocked.”

“For your information, I’ve done plenty of stuff with lots of people-” guys, girls, both at the same time. In the sky, on the ground, under the sea, twins, triplets, bored housewives, virgin farm boys, soldiers, diplomats, swamp hermits- If you can name it, Naruto probably did it. Hey, being the Avatar came with some perks. “Though, if I told you, you’d get a nosebleed on top of your other injuries and probably die, asshole.”

“Che.”

“And I could totally blow your mind-”

Because all that other stuff was really just practice for the real thing with that one Special Person.

“Well, here’s your chance,” Naruto’s Special Person goaded as he leaned closer.
He took a half-step back. “in any other circumstance.”

“Right,” Sasuke scoffed, then muttered, “says the monk.”

“You- mmphmm!”

The world faded to nothing, not because Naruto closed his eyes, but because Sasuke extinguished their flame to grab him by the front of his robes. The prince’s lips were pleasantly warm and so, so soft. Their noses brushed. The angle was awkward. Hell, everything was a little awkward. Sasuke was surprisingly clumsy and… Almost innocent in the way he hesitantly pressed in.

This was it: the part where he’s supposed to pull away.

Instead, Naruto gently placed a hand on the back of Sasuke’s head. He coaxed the other boy closer, urged him to tilt his mouth so their lips aligned just so, and curled his fingers in warm, silky hair.

Sasuke hummed softly. Naruto smiled into their kiss. With his other hand, he cupped the other boy’s face and stroked his smooth, satiny cheek. As expected, that bastard had perfect skin.

He wanted to taste it.

Naruto slowly, carefully parted his lips.

At that exact moment, Sasuke pulled away.

“I got it.”

The blond gasped and nearly fell over. “Huh?”

“I know the way out. Let’s go.”

---

*Hot,* Sasuke thought as he rekindled the flame in his hand. It felt like he pressed his lips to flesh made of a pulsing flame. Naruto’s body temperature ran high. Sasuke had felt it before, what with their routine sparring and the idiot’s total disregard for personal space, but actually *feeling* it was another matter entirely.

That’s why his lips still burned, he reasoned. The Avatar was (literally) *hot.*

Sasuke lead the dazed, stumbling blond to the other side of the cavern, which was empty of statues and golden carvings. A small emerald square on the wall throbbed with sharp, green light. He pressed his palm to it.

The ground trembled. Naruto startled and grabbed his hand in a crushing grip.

There it was again: that overwhelming flash of pure *heat.* Sasuke shivered, but didn’t pull away.

They were almost at the end. He was tired, but he held on.

A tall half-circle section of the cavern wall started sinking into the ground. Orange sunbeams emerged from the crescent opening about the door, slashing the darkness within. The prince let his flame die as he struggled to stay awake.
...have to make sure...

And finally, Naruto pulled Sasuke into the light.

“We did it! No, sorry, you did it, you brilliant bastard. Ha! I almost thought- hey, hey, hey! Shit, don’t do this again. We have to go back for the others. And you, you can’t just- Sasuke? Sasuke!”

Blue, he thought as his knees gave in. Wet, he felt warm, stinging raindrops fall onto his skin. Bright, he smiled as he fell back into dreams—memories—of a past life once again.

Sakura and Sai had come across a small river flowing through the cave. They followed it to a large underground lake. The water shimmered with refracted colors that could only come from a bright source of light. Like, possibly, the sun.

Just before they took the plunge, Sai saw something slither under the surface. He placed a hand on Sakura’s shoulder and squeezed.

Wait.

So, they waited. And waited. And waited some more.

“Okay, we get the idea. You sat there twiddling your thumbs for a really long time. Bo-ring.”

Sakura rolled her eyes.

“Baka-Naruto, just shut up and listen.”

They were down to the lower third of their final torch when the creature emerged.

“I am Manda,” the animal hissed, “granter of wishes.”

The snake-fish had a long, glittering body adorned with wispy fins and sharp, gem-like scales. She was an enormous, beautiful mass of radiant hues. However, her eyes were a dull, flat, unseeing white.

“The she-snake,” Sai said, “wanted me to trade my soul for our freedom.”

Naruto snickered. Sasuke smirked. What a stupid animal. Sai obviously had no soul.

“And,” the blond prodded, “And, what’d ya do?”

“I agreed, on the condition that it would show the way out first.”

“Then?” Okay, sue him. Sasuke was curious.

Sai distracted Manda with questions about magic and wishes.

“Why grant one wish for both, rather than each of us?”

“Those are the rules. My magic acts on a pair with a bond.”

“So, if there were three people here and…”
Sakura slowly, silently crept along the shore as she drew water from the lake. This was no small feat in a place prone to echoes, while working with a substance that splashed and babbled at the slightest movement. Water really was a chatty element. She shaped and froze the liquid, then waited for Sai’s signal, a simple nod to indicate that he gathered the necessary information and-

“-impaled the creature’s brain with an icicle.”

“Fuck yeah, Sakura-chan!” Naruto cheered, punching the air.

“She –it- didn’t leave me any choice,” Sakura fidgeted, “Sai doesn’t believe he has a soul…”

The Avatar made a strangled noise. Sasuke covered his mouth and coughed.

“You couldn’t take the chance, huh,” Naruto supplied, despite struggling to keep a straight face.

Sakura nodded.

“You did the right thing,” Sasuke said, “It should have died a long time ago.”

“Sasuke-kun, you’re talking like…”

Like he met Manda and held some kind of grudge. He did, and he did, but he didn’t want to talk about it. Ever.

Sakura shook her head. “But that can’t be possible.” As usual, she was a little too astute.

Sasuke ignored Naruto’s pointed stare. “Chalk it up to the concussion.”

The rest was, actually, pretty simple: the lake flowed below the walls of the cave and connected to a river nearby. The light from the setting sun touched the river at an angle, allowing some rays to filter into the cave. She and Sai followed the source of light underwater. They found a wide, bright opening in the wall.

“-And a couple of hours later, we found you,” Sakura giggled, “Hunched over Sasuke-kun, screaming ‘I’ll kill you if you die on me, bastard,’ which-“

“What, it’s a crime to be concerned when a guy’s passed out and bleeding from his head? Sasuke, tell her.”

“…Tell her what?”

Naruto grumbled something unintelligible, suddenly sprung to his feet, and stomped into the woods, claiming he needed some air.

“Wonder what that’s about,” Sakura mused.

Sasuke shrugged. He didn’t know, he didn’t care, and in the grand scheme of things, the Avatar’s strange tantrums were the least of anyone’s worries.

The universe proved him right the very next day. Sai gave Sasuke a scroll.
“From Kakashi.”

He accepted it, found a secluded spot in the dense forest, and unraveled the parchment. His uncle’s writing consisted of small strokes, deep lines, and the occasional ink spot to indicate a broken quill or frayed brush. Kakashi’s penmanship was atrocious.

The content of the letter was infinitely worse.

Sasuke was partially right: they were being followed, but not by pirates.

“… and kill you, eliminating the last threat to his power... plans to obliterate the soul and break the cycle... library in the desert... earth bending master who pretends to be... north for safety and another...” Sasuke had to read some of the words aloud to cut through his own disbelief.

He repeated the most important pieces to himself, then spent the night slowly committing every word to memory before burning the scroll at dawn. Sai watched from the shadows. Sasuke pretended not to notice.

*But why didn’t he just tell me?*

Instead of trapping Sasuke in a cursed mountain (yes, Kakashi admitted to blasting the entrance shut) and driving the prince up the walls, half-mad with paranoia-

Wait, did his uncle know about Sasuke’s connection to the cave? No. It didn’t make sense. How can someone else know about his past life when even *he* didn’t know until a few days ago?

And Sai. Don’t even get him started on that stone-faced dick-fixated fink.

“Why did he trust you with this?”

“I am unallied.”

The prince waited for him to elaborate.

“I pledge allegiance to no nation, kingdom, or creed. I am my own person.” Sai spoke as if repeating a speech.

It sounded familiar, but Sasuke couldn’t place where he heard those words before.

“And?”

“Neither is your sensei.”

“So what do you want?”

“Peace, balance, and justice at any cost. Prince Micr- Sasuke, you will do well to trust him.”

Kakashi preferred not to lie, not when it mattered and certainly not to his own surrogate son. His uncle hated to deceive (who he thought of as) *his Sasu-chan*, unless it was for a damn good reason.

But...

“My honor.”

Sai smiled. “Don’t be a fool.” Pause. “You were born to lead a rev-” Sai halted mid-syllable. His eyes flicked to Sasuke’s bandaged forehead. “-a nation. You can’t afford to be so obtuse.”
The prince struggled to remain impassive. He hid his clenching fists in his pockets. “Fuck you.”

“Not even if you beg for it.”

His lips hitched upward at its own accord before he forced them into a hard, unimpressed line.

“Tomorrow, we will follow the route indicated by Hatake to the rendezvous point. The day of black sun is in three months. You have twelve hours to make your choice.”

So, he had to choose between the psychopath who banished and allegedly planned to assassinate him (not to mention the depraved things he wanted to do to the Avatar) or turn his back on the only family he had left.

“Don’t insult me, peasant.”

Oh, Sasuke was still angry, suspicious, and thoroughly pissed off at his uncle.

But really, what did he expect?

The prince remembered swimming lessons.

Kakashi dragged thirteen-year-old Sasuke out of bed at the crack of dawn, claiming there was an absolutely amazing once-in-a-lifetime chance to witness this spectacular, but indescribable phenomena. “You’ll have to see it to believe it, nephew.”

Sasuke leaned over the ship’s railing, peering into the clear, teal water of the tropical ocean. “I don’t see anything.”

“Look closer. It really is a sight to behold.”

Like a fool, Sasuke obeyed.

“You blind old coot, there is absolutely nothing—”

Then, felt a hard, firm shove, square in his ass. Sasuke fell overboard headfirst. He drank salt water, clawed towards the surface, sunk, saw black spots, and struggled for his life until suddenly, it didn’t feel like a fight anymore. He kept his head above the water. He breathed.

He could swim.

That’s how Kakashi operates. Combine laziness with an unwavering faith in those he deemed trustworthy, and you’re left with a frustrating but frighteningly effective brand of efficiency: Sasuke learned how to swim in less than five minutes. Despite his youth, he was one of the best firebenders in the world, and among the few capable of generating lightning, the purest, most volatile form of chakra.

This was all, at least partially, thanks to that scheming one-eyed son of a bitch.

So... Look, Sasuke didn’t want to walk the path laid out for him by his uncle. Just like he never wanted to follow Madara’s orders (huh, at least he wouldn’t have to do that anymore) or fulfill his traitorous brother’s parting request. The prince would never, in a thousand incarnations, choose any part of this life -his own painful, miserable excuse for an existing- for himself. Honestly, he wouldn’t wish these burdens on his worst enemies.

But, contrary to what Sai thought, there was no alternative.
Sasuke Uchiha was never given *choices*. From infancy, he was told what to think, what to feel, and how to act. His food, clothing, toys, and even his so-called friends back at the palace, were carefully selected to shape him into the man who would serve, rule, and protect the greatest nation in the world.

This latest development was no exception. He simply had a new list of duties which he was honor bound to follow.

So, the prince fumed. He brooded. He muttered, paced, and raged until his insides were burnt clean. Then, Sasuke took a deep breath, accepted that there was nothing else he could do, and decided to move forward.

They set off later that very day, deeper into the Earth Kingdom.

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Sasuke was, like, totally obsessed with the concept of honor.

Yeah, no shit.

For once, Naruto was thankful. The bastard kept his word, which meant Naruto got an explanation for their –ahem- shared experience back in the cave.

And okay, fine, he was disappointed because he had hoped, really, really hoped that-

Oh well. It’ll happen some other day.

The prince was gathering wood for a campfire. Naruto told Kurama to hunt for dinner (which was technically his job) and invited himself along. Sasuke didn’t complain. Wordlessly, he handed sticks to Naruto.

*If you’re going to bother me, at least make yourself useful.*

Sasuke didn’t say it, but Naruto heard the words clear as day.

“So you were this lady named Midori. She was the statue on the left.”

Naruto remembered the image with stark clarity. The one on the right, Aoi, was more familiar and less interesting. But the other woman, even if she was just carved in stone and thousands of years deceased, was ridiculously hot.

“How could you tell?”

Naruto grinned. “Because of course you would be a total babe in a past life.”

“Don’t call her that,” Sasuke snapped, “And show some respect for the dead, usuratonkachi.”

“And you just needed to, like,” he shifted to adjust twigs digging into his chest, “jog your memory.”

They’d already gone over Sasuke’s head-wound induced foray into his past life as a sexy lady caught in a torrid affair. Weirdly, the whole thing made perfect sense.
“Hn,” Sasuke agreed.

Naruto was proud of himself for being able to differentiate between the prince’s various grunts. This one meant ‘yes,’ while that one was for ‘no,’ or ‘that’s funny,’ or ‘fuck off before I’ll castrate you, moron.’ The Uchiha was a truly masterful communicator.

“So… Who’s the other woman?”

“I told you, her name is Aoi. She was—” loud, obnoxious, persistent, touchy-feely, unintentionally dramatic, passionate to the point of being dangerously obsessive “—vivacious,” Sasuke hedged, unwilling to speak ill of the deceased, “She had red hair, yellow-green eyes, a scar across one cheek—”

“Yeah, okay,” Naruto nodded, “that’s all pretty neat and… Interesting, I guess, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

Sasuke picked up a stick, wrinkled his nose, and discarded it. “She was one of the two first earthbenders, although she died before bearing children.”

“Bastard, I’m asking you who she is, not what she was.”

The prince regarded him blandly.

“Like, like, if Midori—you—were born again, doesn’t it make sense for her,” Naruto accepted another branch and tucked it under his arm, “your soulmate, to be here too? She—he, they, whatever—must be out there somewhere, right? There has to be a good reason for all that crap. Maybe you’re getting a second chance.”

The Avatar didn’t like the idea of some perfect person incarnated for that bastard’s sake because of, well, selfish reasons that anyone can guess at a glance. Unless said perfect person was—shit. Naruto’s heart skipped a beat. Wouldn’t that be something?

“I can’t afford to think like that.” Sasuke turned away and quickened his pace.

Naruto trotted to catch up. “Why not?”

This earned him yet another Look.

“But if you’re right, I hope it’s a woman,” Sasuke murmured, “Princes are expected to produce heirs. It would be nice to marry someone I love.”

“Sasuke…” A dull ache pulsed in his chest.

“And you’re the last airbender. You can’t let an entire race die out—” ow, ow, ow, “It’s your duty to find a woman or—”

The pain grew sharper. It was getting harder to breathe.

“Sasuke, stop it.”

“—maybe you’ll just run away from your responsibilities again. You could freeze yourself for another century. Although, I seriously doubt there’ll be a world left to save by the time you thaw again.”

Naruto winced. Bloody ouch, that hurt!

“That’s enough, damn it!”
“This is the way things are,” the bastard was on a roll and just didn’t want to stop, “You’re the Avatar and the last airbender whether you like it or not. I’m destined to inherit the throne because my older brother-“

Aha! An opening. Naruto seized it. “You have a brother?”

“A traitor I must kill,” Sasuke shrugged like he was remarking on the state of Sakura’s hair (a few days in the woods really did a number on that poor girl) instead of fratricide.

“Uh-huh,” he coughed uncomfortably, “why?”

Silence.

“Fucking hell, Sasuke. No wonder you’re so cranky all the time.”

Sasuke scowled.

“See what I mean?”

“I gave you an explanation as promised. Now let it go.”

“No.”

“Whatever, I’m done talking.” He shoved the last of the kindling into Naruto’s overburdened arms and started walking back to camp. Once again, the Avatar had to quicken his pace to keep up.

“And just so you know, I disagree.”

More silence, save for the rustle of the canopy and chirping crickets. A raven-crow cawed in the distance.

“With literally everything you just said.” Naruto continued after a beat, “There’s a better path and I will find it, Sasuke, for both of us. Besides, you’d be surprised how things have a way of working themselves out. Have a little faith.”

“Well done, Avatar,” Sasuke drawled, “You’ve spoken like a true idiot.”

Somehow, that was the last straw.

Naruto dropped the pile of sticks and launched himself forward, shouting “Bas-di-tar-ick-argh!,” because in the heat of the moment, his brain couldn’t decide between calling Sasuke a bastard or dick. To be fair, Sasuke was being a bit of both.

Naruto landed a punch square into the Uchiha’s solar plexus. Sasuke landed on his ass. Surprise flashed across his features before morphing into cold, condescending rage.

“Che, I knew it. You’ve been holding back.”

Wha-

He didn’t even have time to finish a thought.

Naruto spun to avoid an incoming fireball. He jumped away from a second rapid-fire shot. Just as he gathered enough chakra to leap into a nearby tree, a hand closed around his ankle and pulled.

The Avatar kicked violently with his free foot. He felt it collide with something hard- Shit! Like that
asshole’s head hadn’t taken enough of a beating when-

Just like that, the fight went out of him.

“So we’re back to this,” Sasuke sneered as he shoved Naruto to the ground.

“Your head.”

“That was my shoulder, dumbass.”

“Oh,” Naruto’s slouched with relief.

“Oh?” Sasuke mocked.

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper,” he rubbed the back of his neck, looking down, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re,” Sasuke bit out, “what now?”

“I can’t expect you to go against everything you were taught,” Naruto swallowed some saliva and his pride with it, “just because I made a pretty speech. I’ve done nothing to deserve your faith.”

“Hn.”

Damn straight, Naruto translated.

“So,” The Avatar leveled his smoldering blue gaze onto the prince, ”let me earn it.”

Sasuke scoffed. “You’re welcome to try.”

Naruto held out his palm. He didn’t need help standing up; it was supposed to be a gesture of goodwill.

Sasuke rolled his eyes, muttered something rude, and bypassed Naruto’s hand to yank the airbender up by his robes.

“Not gonna make this easy for me, are ya?”

“Che.”

Translation: *Dream on, loser.*

Naruto grinned.

Honestly, he wouldn’t have it any other way.
Sasuke refused to ride Kurama. Naruto refused to leave Sasuke behind.

So, they walked.

Well, Kurama grew to his true size and walked with Sai, Sakura, Naruto, and their sparse belongings secured to his fur by –what else?- magic. Sasuke trudged behind them on the ground, cursing every rock, tree root, and insect in existence.

“Sasuke-kun,” Sakura said one humid afternoon.

He swatted a fly. “No.”

“Will you at least let me-“

“No.”

“It would be a lot easier if-“

“I will not entrust my life to that flatulent flea-bag.”

“Flatulent.” Sakura raised a brow.

Sasuke wrinkled his nose. “We can all smell it.”

“Yes, because it’s swamp gas, Sasuke-kun, due to the fact that we are in a swamp when we could be far, far above it.”

“Don’t waste your breath on that eunuch, dear cousin.”

Sasuke bristled and growled something unintelligible.

“She has a point, ya know,” Naruto piped up, rolling onto his stomach and resting his chin on his hands.

“So leave, usuratonkachi,” the prince avoided his gaze, glaring at Kurama’s bushy tail instead, “I’ll make it to the meeting point on my own.”

“Scardy-cat,” Naruto grumbled.

“Brain-dead imbecile.”

Sasuke knew he was being difficult. Not just for the sake of it, as some people might believe. He had good reasons. Let the others believe he was afraid of heights, flying, and the like. It wasn’t untrue. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

The whole truth was- he glanced furtively at the infuriating yellow-haired loser. Naruto caught him looking and tilted his head ador- stupidly. Sasuke scowled and turned away with an acerbic “tch.” The whole truth was confusing, complicated, and inconvenient.

Life would be simpler if that dumbass could take a hint and leave.
Three humid, disgusting, stinky days later, the Avatar had a vision.

Naruto returned from his bathroom break behind a nearby tree looking flushed. A thread of drool hung from the corner of his mouth. Sasuke couldn’t tear his eyes away from the- that because it was… Disgusting. Gross. Right. All good reasons to… Anyway.

“I saw- there was this really cute girl,” the idiot sighed with stars in his eyes, “with a pet pig. Oh man, you guys should see that thing. It was completely white, which is weird for a pig ya know? And it had an gigantic pair of-“

“Testicles?” Sai was intrigued.

“Wings, you sicko!”

Naruto stomped his foot and pouted. The corner of his mouth still glistened with-

“Wipe your mouth.”

“Huh?” Naruto scrubbed his face with the back of his hand, “Did I get it?”

“Hn. Let's go.”

Sasuke and Sakura set up camp while Naruto, Sai, and Kurama searched for dinner. Sakura took this as an opportunity to make the prince see reason.

“This place is making Naruto act strange.”

She talked as if that usuratonkachi wasn’t a born-and-bred freak.

“Your point?” Sasuke replied absently, focused on driving stakes into the ground.

She sighed.

“Fine, you win,” she huffed, unpacking the cooking pot, “I give up. We’ll suffer through this reeking hell-swamp for Kami knows how long, because of your stubbornness. Happy now?”

Great, the spacing was wrong. Or was it the depth? “…No.”

Sasuke could never be happy. That was his thing.

“Hilarious, Sasuke-kun. Pity that you’re a prince. You’d make a legendary court jester.”
He took a few steps back and wondered why something seemed off. How big was the tent supposed to be? “Watch your tongue, peasant.”

“Watch yourself, your highness,” Sakura teased, “you have an elbow leech.”

“Where? Oh.”

She shook her head with a sweet, good-natured smile. “Let me help.”

No denying it: things were weird. Sakura wasn’t referring to this creepy-ass swamp, though that goes without saying.

Something was up with Sasuke. Well, Naruto and Sasuke.

Yes. Shocking. Who woulda thunk it. Usually, those two got along swimmingly. They were basically best friends, two peas in a pod, a pair of whacky peanuts sharing one tiny shell, permanently fused at the hip by the force of their legendary bromantic love for each other.

Sakura giggled. Cha, if only!

“Cousin?” Sai asked.

“It’s nothing.”

They’d been slogging through mud, sludge, and shifting tree roots for a solid week. When they made camp at nightfall, the group divided the chores: hunting, cooking, pitching the tent, shifts for keeping watch.

By some strange coincidence, Sasuke and Naruto never volunteered for the same task. Well, Naruto would say he was up for something, and Sasuke deliberately chose work that would require no interaction with him. Sakura didn’t think much of it at first- like, c’mon! Those two were always at each other’s throats. A little space was just what the doctor ordered.

Until Sasuke –Sasuke Uchiha, the beautiful, surly man-child, future king of the fire nation- offered to gather food alone with Sai. Which -don’t get it twisted, Sakura loved her cousin, quirks, perversions, warts and all- but. But. Something about that didn’t sit well.

And then there was Naruto, bless his poor besotted soul. The boy tried to not to show it, but you can’t hide a matter of the heart from a girl as clever as Sakura.

Sasuke’s cold (-er than usual) treatment really hurt him. When he thought no one was watching, Naruto’s smile faltered. His laughter was a little forced. His eyes appeared closer to gray than blue, and not just because of the murky lighting in this dingy, reeking shitscape.

Sakura drove a stake into the semi-dry patch of ground with more force than necessary because, honestly, fuck this swamp.

The girl was all too familiar with that feeling; she was no stranger to unrequited love. She remembered her first. He was one of the men sent from the North Pole to help repair the village, shortly after the first fire nation attacks. A tall, pretty, lean, older boy with long, wavy white hair that reminded Sakura of moon beams filtering through water.

She really, really had it bad.

Haru only pretended not to notice Sakura’s advances, though she didn’t realize it at the time. He wasn’t interested, but Sakura thought he was just shy. After a full week of dropping hints (and other things, so that she could deliberately bend over and pick them up) she gathered her courage and confessed.

“Haru-kun… I love you.”

“Sakura-san, you are a strong, beautiful, intelligent young woman. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

Cha, like she didn’t already know that.

“So do you…“

“Unfortunately, that man can not be me.”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid that I am… How to say this… Homosexual.”

“Oh.” She could live with that. “Alright, I hope we can stay friends.”

A few days later, she found him in an igloo with her then-best friend. Her very female best friend, Ino. Said igloo was promptly demolished. She froze Haru and that pig together in a solid block of ice, but left their noses exposed. Hey, she was pissed, but that’s no reason to commit murder.

Sakura had decided not to take it personally. Any friend who did something like that was never really a friend to begin with. Any guy without the balls to be honest wasn’t worth the penguin shit on her moccasins.

So, she took it as a blessing, thanked the spirits for showing her the truth, and moved on.

See? Life is easy as long as you have your priorities straight.

This little dance between the Avatar and the young prince was funny for a while. But honestly, at this point, several months later, it was hard to watch. Sakura knew the two boys were too stubborn to listen to reason. Direct intervention was out of the question. Whatever their problem was, they’d have to work it out together.

Alone.

“Sai and I will gather dinner and firewood,” she declared on the eighth night, “while you two set up camp.”

“Sakura.” Sasuke said.

She held up a finger, “And if I find a single burn mark anywhere, or holes in the canvas, or anything to indicate that you children couldn’t complete this simple task without keeping your hands to yourselves, well,” the swamp water below their camp site churned and gurgled ominously, “Let’s hope it won’t come to that.”

Sai raised an eyebrow as they walked away. Sakura whistled innocently. Kurama glanced from the
Water Tribe cousins to the scowling duo at the campsite and darted away with a condescending snort.

*Behave yourselves.*

Sakura paused to pat his little head, earning a pleased yip and wet lick. She smiled. Things would work themselves out. She could feel it.

---

As it turns out, things did not work themselves out.

If anything, they got worse.

Sakura sighed. So much for that *brilliant* plan. Really, it was more of a gambit anyway. No need to beat herself up about it.

The group sat in tense silence as they ate giant insects for dinner.

Naruto’s gaze flicked from Sasuke, to the fire, to Kurama curled up at his feet, and back to the prince.

“Did something…” Sakura mused.

“No,” they objected simultaneously, exchanged a heated glare, then turned away.

“…Right.”

Sai nibbled the bug’s succulent thorax. “…pair of dickless wonders…” he murmured before swallowing and taking a larger bite.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Naruto hissed.

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Don’t encourage him, idiot.”

“Who’re you calling an idiot, you damn coward?”

“Obviously you’d call someone a coward for refusing to indulge some senseless, irresponsible whim,” Sasuke replied, “Because You. Are. An. I.di.ot.” He spat each syllable, cutting the last word into three distinct parts. The insect blackened and sizzled under his fingertips.

“Seriously,” she was starting to get worried, “what happened?”

“Nothing!” they shouted in unison.

The silence returned. Sakura wondered. Sai reached into the cooking pot for seconds. As he stared into the fire, Naruto remembered.
A few hours earlier...

Sometimes, he wondered if Sasuke was right to call him an idiot. Because after their little chat, fight, whatever, in the woods, like an idiot, he expected the lingering awkwardness between them to just… Go away. So okay, fine, Sasuke did what he thought he had to do. He saved both their lives **multiple** times. Naruto didn’t know how else to thank him, so he respected that jerk’s wishes and didn’t bring it up again.

See, he could be mature.

Anyways, weren’t they on the same side now? Shouldn’t they be making an effort to, like, get to know each other and work together? If the Uchiha was really a genius like everyone said, why couldn’t he get something that simple?

They worked in silence for a while. Well, Sasuke worked while Naruto watched him work. Every time he tried to help, he was met with a glare and a scowl. Then, Sasuke undid and redid whatever Naruto tried to help with, all without saying a single word.

Bastard.

It was so unfair. Even when he was being a pissy asshole, he just had to do it looking so cool and calm and so heart-breakingly pretty. Not that- that- Argh!

Naruto plopped onto the ground with an angry huff. He really couldn’t take it anymore. “Why are you avoiding me?”

“’m not,” Sasuke muttered, handing two long poles to Naruto.

The Avatar stood and followed. “Cut the bullshit, bastard.”

“Hold this steady,” Sasuke instructed before muttering “…calls me a liar… that usutatonkachi… can’t even keep…”

“Sasuke,” Naruto sighed, “you won’t even look at me.”

“My sincerest apologies, Avatar,” he drawled, adjusting the angle of the center post ropes, “I forget that to properly pitch a tent, it is imperative that one must never keep one’s eyes on the task at hand. After all, your bottomless appetite for attention should always be my first priority.”

Well, ouch. That one hit a little close to home, which meant that Naruto was on the right track. He had a long time to study the prince’s defense mechanisms. A sarcastic speech to start a fight and avoid the issue was classic Uchiha bullshit. Naruto was practically immune at this point.

“Are you really gonna make me say it?”

“Say. What.” Sasuke bit out as he hammered the stakes into the ground.

“Un. I’ve tried to be nice about this, ya know,” he reached for the other stake, only to have his hand slapped away, “because you didn’t want- but we can’t go on like this.”

“Interesting. I wonder… Do we speak the same language?”

“Huh?”
“Most of the time, I understand the words you say. The individual words. But, somehow, when you put them all together, nothing makes sense. Isn’t that remarkable?”

“Fine,” Naruto took a deep breath, “I’ll say it.”

Silence. A shuffling noise as Sasuke unrolled the canvas.

“I’d tell you the suspense is killing me but at this rate,” he muttered, “I’m more afraid I’ll die of old age.”

Naruto opened and closed his mouth a few more times. How was a guy supposed to- ah, fuck it.

“Was it really that horrible for you? What we- what happened in that cave?”

“Hm? No! I had a great time, what with being stuck in the dark for hours, thinking you were going to die again-” something sounded off about that part ”-bleeding from my skull and seeing things. Best vacation ever.”

“Asshole.”

“Hn.”

“I was. Ah,” he coughed, “I wasn’t talking about that part.”

Sasuke was adjusting the canvas with a single-minded focus. He said nothing.

“The kiss.”

“Ssh!”

Well, at least this got a reaction.

“See?”

“Keep your voice down,” Sasuke hissed, glancing over his shoulder.

“It’s still bothering you.”

No response.

So, he was right.

“I can’t figure out why. I mean, you’re the one who— kissed me first —and I thought— it was good for both of us because I’m a great kisser, damn it! —but okay. Like, did you hate doing it so much that you can’t even…” the pain in his chest rushed to his throat, cutting off his next words, stand to be around me anymore.

“That’s not the issue.”

“Then what?”

The bastard was too busy fixing the shape of the tent to respond.

“Ya know,” Naruto persisted, “You just admitted there was an issue. Come on, S’uke.”

“My name is Sasuke. Sa-su-ke. Say it right, moron.”
“Don’t change the subject. It’s fine if you hated it. We don’t have to do it again-” spirits, he hoped that wasn’t true “-Unless... Wait, don’t tell me you liked it?” Because honestly, at the time... Naruto’s face lit up wickedly at that ridiculous notion. Wouldn’t that be hilarious? “Oh, widdle Sasu-chan had her first kiss and it was everything she never knew she wanted,” he said in a high-pitched voice, “Her heart is aflutter with so many new feelings, and she just doesn’t know what to do!”

Sasuke’s cheeks flushed a soft, delicate pink as he turned away. “I'm not a girl.”

Oh. No way. No freaking way. Naruto’s jaw unhinged. His mouth went dry. He had to clear his throat a few times before he could even speak again.

“So... You liked it.”
“That’s it, isn’t it? You, you, you *totally* liked it!” Naruto’s arms flailed with excitement.

“Shut up.”

“And- and-“ he continued, grabbing the prince by his shoulders to shake him, “It was your first time, wasn’t it?”

Sasuke took a step back, breaking the idiot’s bruising grip. “You’re being loud.”

Naruto stepped forward, still gesturing wildly. “This is- is- well uh, ya know.”

The bastard still refused to make eye contact.

“Sasuke, c’mon,” *look at me, damn it!* “It’s okay if you liked it. I-“ aw shit, here it goes“-I liked it too. A lot.”

“You,” the flush darkened “you did?”

“See,” Naruto grinned, “what we have here is the exact opposite of a problem.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well…” he shuffled closer, “If you liked doing something, and I liked it too, then we can¬¬”

Another step back. “No.”

“But it’s so simp¬¬“

“No.”

Sliding forward, he tried again, “Sasuke.“

“It doesn’t matter what I think I feel, or what you believe you want. Nothing is going to happen. I’ll get better¬¬”

“This is not the flu, asshole,” Naruto interrupted, closing the distance as the other boy continued to rant.

“-and because you have the attention span of a fly¬¬“

“Hey!”

“-you’ll find another distraction soon enough.”

“No, I won’t,” Naruto said, because it was true. They were only a foot apart.

Sasuke glared stubbornly at the ground. “This isn’t up for debate.”

Naruto scoffed. “Don’t go deciding things about us without me.”

“There is no *us*, usuratonkachi. There is just you,” Sasuke emphasized with a violent jab of his
finger, “and your own weird issues.”

The Avatar decided not to comment on the irony of that statement. “You know I won’t give up so easily. Unless…”

Now there’s an idea.

“…One more time.”

“What?”

“If you let me…” Naruto had to swallow before he could continue, “Just this once to. Uh. Yeah, get it out of our systems. Like, maybe you’re right and it’s nothing, and we’re both confused,” he reached forward. “We should make sure, right?”

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Sasuke narrowed his eyes and finally, finally met the other boy’s heated gaze.

Gotcha.

Sasuke should have pulled back. For some reason, his feet were rooted to the spot. Fingertips grazed the prince’s forehead, touched his hair, and tucked a few locks behind his ear. Blue eyes became half-lidded, iridescent with desire.

“Is it?” Naruto whispered.

The prince’s heart stuttered. There was a flash of pink (tongue) as the younger boy wet his lips, followed by the warm, rough touch of a calloused palm resting on his cheek. A soft mouth, glistening with moisture, parted and moved to form a word.

“Sasuke.”

He found himself swaying forward, mesmerized. There was a hint of green in the irises. He’d seen it before, but never noticed the spots of gold and orange, nor the smallest red and violet flecks towards the very center. Every color, every element, every thing coalesced into a person, one point, a single moment.

“Naruto, you…” His own voice sounded distant and unfocused.

The hand that cupped his face drifted to the back of his head and urged him closer. Mindlessly, he complied. Heat. He remembered the heat, like a solid flame, except fire doesn’t simply touch; it burns, consumes, and destroys.

“Tell me,” the warmth drew him in, “Sasuke, what is it?’

Sasuke blinked. What, when, and most importantly, how did that usura- Ugh! Whatever. Good sense returned with a vengeance, no thanks to that sly, sneaky, manipulative little “dobe,” he jerked back, “I said,” he grasped the Avatar’s wrist and removed the offending hand. “I said no.”

“But- but you want to.”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“So what? Sasuke-“

“Stop saying my name like that.”
“Sasuke, for once in your life, why can’t you just, just do something damn it!” And once again, the Avatar was physically shaking him, “Don’t call me an idiot,” what, could the idiot read minds now? “and don’t you dare pretend not to-” Naruto stuttered and loosened his grip, “to know what I mean. You always know what I’m trying to say, and if you can’t get it, it’s because some-some part of you doesn’t want to.”

“Stop doing that,” Sasuke swatted Naruto away and took two big steps back, “Of course I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Figures,” Naruto clenched and unclenched his hands, “way to prove my point, bastard.”

Sasuke wiped his clammy palms on his pants. Damn this swamp for being so humid. It was hard to breathe.

“If Kakashi was really such a great teacher,” Naruto grumbled, “He would have-“

The prince never heard what the Avatar meant to say. A crack followed by several small thumps, announced the others’ return. Sakura was clearly impressed; the tent was up, cooking utensils were unpacked, and nothing was broken or burnt. With a relieved sigh, Sasuke took the wood from her arms and went to work on the fire.

(End flashback)

Everything seemed fine up until that outburst at dinner. The group finished their meal in tense silence. Afterwards, Sasuke took first watch. He wouldn’t mind taking the second or third. Something about this swamp agitated his insomnia. Too bad Sakura didn’t allow it.

“It’s unhealthy, Sasuke-kun,” she decided on the fourth night. There’s no use arguing with Sakura once she assumed That Pose. The one with her hands on her on her hips and head tilting ever so slightly forward. Besides, the prince was tired. Not tired enough to actually sleep, though he hallucinated plenty.

For a while, it was nice, because he saw his mother. She sang lullabies, stroked his hair, and told him everything would be alright. Some nights, Sasuke allowed himself to believe her.

Then, a white-haired woman with olive-gold skin and familiar eyes started took her place. Tsukiko wore the indigo robes characteristic of water tribe royalty. Apparently, she was fond of “crimson plums” and doling out unsolicited advice.

“Duty is important,” she said, “I died to become the moon.”

They sat side by side on an old, hollow log. Sasuke pressed his palms to the wood and rested his weight on his hands. Tsukiko mirrored his pose. Their fingertips touched. When Sasuke blinked, he saw a bloody, white koi in a crescent-shaped oasis. He shivered.

“And if I knew that I wouldn’t live past twenty-two, I would have….” She sighed wistfully, “No matter, I was engaged.”

Another fleeting image appeared in his mind’s eye, this time of a man with bright, silver eyes, illuminated with- with an emotion Sasuke didn’t want to place. He decided not to dwell on it.

“He was a peasant who dared to love a princess. I would have…” She sighed wistfully, “No matter, I was engaged.”
“You stayed true to your people.” Sasuke nodded. “You made the honorable choice.”

“I was stupid,” Tsukiko countered, “stubborn, and proud. Don’t repeat my mistakes, young prince.”

“But who was he, really?” He pressed, a little irritated that she managed to distract him.

Tsukiko looked up as she drummed her fingers. “If I waited as he asked me to, we could have been together.”

_I love you_, the peasant boy said, looking at her with stars in his eyes as he laid his heart bare, _I’ll always love you. So please, please, just believe in me._

It hurt. It hurt to be so loved, wanted, and adored for no good reason. It hurt because he- she- they felt the same way, but once again, it was impossible to be together.

Sasuke took a deep breath. “Answer the question properly.”

“There is no greater honor for a princess than to marry the King of All Nations. Pity Youta was a late bloomer.” Tsukiko’s lips quirked coyly. Her black eyes glittered with mirth. “The Avatar is surprisingly astute, as usual. Too bad you only comprehend what you allow yourself to. I’d know.”

_Because we’re the same._ The unspoken words hung in the air between the Uchiha and the ghost of his own soul. Midori and Tsukiko were different names for ‘Sasuke.’ Midori enjoyed red grapes and Tsukiko liked-

“Tomatoes,” he said, “is the correct term. Don’t call them crimson plums. It sounds weird.”

“Habits are hard to break,” she ignored the jab, “especially those formed over lifetimes. Regardless, you should stop lying to yourself. Do something, Sasuke.”

Before he could respond, a vine curled around his ankle and pulled him off the log. He kicked violently and burned it off. A thicker tendril took its place. He opened his mouth to alert the others, only to find himself gagged by a dirty, slimy plant. For every vine he burned, two more appeared, and continued to drag him away.

When they released him, he prince stood alone in front of a wall. A mossy, wooden wall that extended horizontally and vertically, blotting out the sky. Ruddy haze hovered near the swamp’s canopy, indicative of sunrise. Sasuke walked along the length of the giant wall, which he eventually realized was a tree. Along the way, he found Sakura in a similar daze. Together, they walked some more until they came across Sai, and then Kurama, and finally-

“Naruto!” Sasuke called out.

The lines on the Avatar’s cheeks glowed. Light pulsed in the shape of a spiral through the robes covering his stomach. The Avatar faced the wooden wall, legs crossed and arms folded in meditation. He opened his eyes at the sound of his name.

“Hey,” his voice resonated oddly, as if more than one person was speaking, “You’re here.”

“But where’s here?” asked Sakura.

“The center,” a fifth, unfamiliar voice answered.

Everyone but Sai assumed a defensive stance. “Show yourself,” the prince demanded.

A man with dark, empty eyes, wearing a wooden headpiece that covered his sideburns and temples,
emerged from the swamp. Vines curled, crawled, and slithered in sync with his steps.

“Yamato taichou,” Sai greeted with a bow.

Like Sakura, Yamato was a waterbender. He manipulated the plants in the swamp by bending the water inside of them. According to Yamato, this was the center of the entire swamp; every tree was merely an extension of the same organism.

“Time, and death are human constructs.” Apparently, the swamp strips away the illusions of the material world.

Naruto nodded solemnly. Sakura frowned in contemplation. Sasuke rolled his eyes. This again.

“Is that why I saw my father?” Sakura asked.

“Probably,” the stranger shrugged.

Naruto contemplated his own vision. He came to the conclusion that if time is an illusion, the future was not untouchable. “The black-haired girl with strange eyes and a flying pig,” he recounted, “is probably someone I’m going to meet. Awesome!”

The Avatar continued to gush about his adventure. “-gave me a heart attack. Great job keeping watch, teme. Whatdya do, fall asleep?”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Moron, keep your baseless accusations to yourself.”

As they bickered, Yamato and Sai had some sort of silent exchange. Sakura turned towards her cousin, and watched as the swamp-dweller handed Sai a large bag of supplies, promising to “send word to the rest.”

“You’re behind schedule,” the man added after an awkward beat.

“All thanks to that eunuch,” Sai shrugged, inclining his chin at Sasuke. The prince ground his teeth, but was hard-pressed to argue.

“There’s still time,” Yamato said, “be on your way.”

An hour later, due to magic or some other miraculous force, they emerged from the swamp and came face to face with a desert. Sakura took a deep breath of delicious, odorless air, then sneezed.

“Sand!”

“It is a desert, Sakura-chan,” Naruto chirped, stretching his arms cheerfully, “Let’s get a-walkin’.”

Do something, the idiot had said. Stop running, Tsukiko whispered.

“Or,” Sasuke said, “If your dog is up for it, we could…” Spirits, he hoped he wouldn't regret this.

"How many times do I have to say it? Kurama is not a- Wait," Naruto's eyes nearly popped out of his skull. “You want to fly?”

No. He pursed his lips and settled for an ambiguous “Hn.”

“Ha!” the Avatar gave the prince a hearty, violent slap on the back, "I knew you’d come around, bastard. Trust me, you’re gonna love this.”
Sugar Sickness

Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

Sasuke used to love sweets. He can pinpoint the exact moment he decided to hate them.

The chef made higashi candy for Itachi’s thirteenth birthday. To elaborate: the royal chef and his entire staff slaved away kami knows how long, shaping and testing wasabon, to produce a large display of colorful sugary art.

For little Sasuke, it was love at first sight.

Itachi’s surprise desert would be presented after dinner, which was six hours away. To an eight year old, it might as well have been six years.

The impatient little prince snuck into the kitchen when the staff took their break. He circled the tray stacked with pretty sweets. At one point, his jaw unhinged. A spot of drool darkened the red silk of his royal shirt. He wiped his mouth with a thoughtful frown.

Just one, he decided, and then he would wait.

After eating a reddish flower, Sasuke found himself wondering: did they all taste the same?

Well, one more couldn’t hurt. One of each would fully satisfy his curiosity. No, two of each, to make sure he tasted them right the first time. Then again, three is the magic number.

This continued until there was only a small, yellow leaf left of the once-brimming plate.

Well, little Sasuke thought, might as well finish what I started.

The chef almost had a stroke when he returned to the kitchen. Itachi cast a knowing glance at his younger brother before saying, “I saw it earlier today and couldn’t help myself. Apologies Chef Tanaka, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Itachi,” his father sighed, “we need to have a talk.”

Itachi nodded and followed the king. He ruffled his little brother’s hair as he walked by. Sasuke’s stomach felt funny. Maybe it was guilt.

That night, as Sasuke vomited a veritable rainbow of half-digested sugar into the toilet, he came to two important conclusions. One: he wasn’t simply guilty; the ache in his gut foreshadowed violent illness.


Kurama lifted off with a powerful flick of his tails. Sasuke’s stomach dropped, then clenched painfully. The nausea triggered that abhorrent memory. He squeezed his eyes shut, contemplating his hatred for sweets and the slippery slope of “just one.”

Just this once.

The memory of the idiot’s idiotic voice and shabby excuse for- for doing that echoed in his ears.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid.” Sasuke hissed, pressing his face into Kurama’s fur.
“What did ya say, bastard?”

“I hate you.”

“Sure, sure,” Naruto laughed, and Sasuke could easily picture the sunny, good-humored smile that accompanied the sound, “I’ll believe you if you open your eyes.”

“No.”

“C’mon,” and suddenly, there were lips by his ear speaking in a low, rough whisper, “I promise you’ll like the view.”

Sasuke clenched his fist in Kurama’s fur. He gnashed his teeth together, suppressed a shiver, and said nothing.

“Fine,” Naruto chuckled, “be that way.”

The rest of the flight passed peacefully. Well, if you didn’t count Sasuke’s death grip on Kurama’s fur as he mumbled about waterboarding, foot roasting, denailing, and other tortures vastly preferable to the unnatural, utterly nauseating horrors of flight. No one was particularly bothered by it, so yeah. All in all, it went pretty smoothly.

Some time between ten minutes and ten hours later (Sasuke had lost all concept of time) Sai announced their arrival. The prince felt the others shift on Kurama’s back, presumably to look down at their destination. A fresh wave of terror washed over him as he felt his stomach drop. They were descending.

“Ah, Sasuke-kun.”

“What.”

“You’re hurting Kurama,” Sakura said, “ease up.” He felt two hard, cold hands grip his own and force his hands to unclench. Spirits, how could a peasant girl be this strong?

He wanted to tell her to fuck off, but wasn’t a fan of getting his fingers broken, so settled for a disgruntled “hn.”

When he felt Kurama’s feet touch down, Sasuke wanted off. He jumped onto the ground, took a deep breath, and stepped forward. His knees buckled immediately but before he could stumble, something warm held him up.

“Alright, teme?”

The prince glared, stepped back, and crossed his arms. “I don’t need your help.”

“Good one!” Naruto almost shouted with a ‘friendly’ punch that almost knocked Sasuke down. What the hell was that idiot’s problem?

He shrugged (to disguise a wince because fuck, that hurt) and glanced at their surroundings. They were at the outskirts of a large village with round, sandy half-dome structures. The architecture was characteristic of Sunagakure, the village hidden in the sand. As one of the last Earth Kingdom strongholds, it was supposed to be impossible to find.

Sai appeared in front of him, holding out a bundle. “You’ll have to change.” Sasuke looked down at his own clothes. Of course- fire nation colors along with the glaring Uchiha insignia on the back. It
was basically screaming for someone to attack him.

“Thanks,” Sasuke mumbled (because his mother raised him to have *some* manners) and started to undress.

“You’re going to do it here?” Sakura asked with a bemused tilt to her lips.

Sasuke tossed his shirt to the ground and picked up the sleeveless black tunic. “I can’t go into the village looking like this.” He tied the front shut, frowning at the plunging neckline. “They’d stone me to death.”

“Huh,” she tapped her chin thoughtfully, “good point.”

Well, the prince thought as he donned the black capris, *at least they’re comfortable*. He rolled his eyes at the Avatar’s flustered sputtering. Seriously, that idiot chose the weirdest times to be a prude. The old outfit was balled up and burnt to cinders without a second thought.

“Done,” he said, dusting off the ashes.

Kurama shrunk and jumped into Sakura’s arms. Sai—who had stared at Sasuke crotch unabashedly *the entire time* he was changing—procured a scroll from Yamato’s bag and explained their mission.

Suna was home to the oldest Earthbending clan in existence, the Hyuugas. Supposedly, they descended from the very first earth bender. (Sasuke frowned at that.) The dobe needed a teacher because he couldn’t bend a pebble to save his life. There was also a library, deeper in the desert, that contained information crucial to defeating Madara.

“I’m meeting a specialist who can decipher the information in this scroll and provide coordinates. It should take no more than two weeks,” Sai concluded, walking to the village.

“Two weeks?” Naruto pursed his lips, looking confused.

Sakura nodded, squeezed the Avatar’s shoulder companionably, and followed her cousin.

After a few seconds of tense silence, Sasuke got it. The Avatar was really a world-class idiot.

“No one expects *you* to learn earth bending in seven days, dead-last. Find someone who can come with us.”

“Oh,” Naruto deflated with relief, “I knew that.”

"Yeah," Sasuke scoffed, "right."

Sai entered a small house with a red circle carved onto its door, telling the others to wait outside. He returned with directions to the Hyuuga residence.

The clan manor was a lush, green oasis in the center of the city. An enormous silver bell, covered in intricate carvings of winged animals, hung from an arch above the main gate. Rope dangled from the
clapper, presumably for visitors to ring. Naruto reached out to pull it just as the gate swung open.

“Avatar,” remarked a boy with pale eyes and long, dark hair, “we were expecting you sooner.”

“Eh-heh,” Naruto shifted uncomfortably, “How’d you- Nevermind. We got held up,” he cast a glance at Sasuke, rubbing the back of his neck, “What’s your name?”

“Hyuuga Neji,” he said, “follow me.”

Neji lead them down a winding cobblestone path to the main house. Welll, mansion. Sakura and Naruto gushed at the garden, the ponds, the fountains, peacocks, butterflies, basically everything. Sai remained impassive.

Sasuke was underwhelmed.

“Tch,” he mumbled, “peasants.”

“You’re in the middle of the desert. Where do you get this water from?” Sakura asked

“Good question,” Neji said.

Sakura waited, but apparently the Hyuuga had nothing more to say. An older man with a striking resemblance to Neji was waiting in the main room of the mansion. Instead of greeting the man, Naruto stared at a crystal chandelier with stars in his eyes.

Sasuke elbowed him, whispering, “Pay attention, dobe.”

“Huh, wha- oh. Hi ya, mister… Hyuuga-san sir,” he greeted with a bow followed by a salute.

The prince’s eyebrow twitched as he resisted the urge to facepalm.

Sasuke decided the idiot embarrassed himself enough and politely established that Naruto was, indeed, the Avatar. He also introduced Sai, who continued to stare blankly, and Sakura, who had the good grace to bow.

“Hyuuga Hiashi. I’m honored to welcome you into my home,” he said with a deep bow before turning to Sasuke, “and you must be…”

A banished outcast turned traitor. The heir to the throne of the fire nation. Sasuke Uchiha. None of this would be well-received.

Sasuke wondered how to explain his presence without divulging his identity.

“He’s my friend,” Naruto declared, throwing an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders and practically bashing their heads together, “my very special friend. We’re just- uh- we’re good friends. Ne, Sa-Sakae?”

His eye twitched. “Of course.”

Hiashi’s eyes flicked down to Sasuke’s mostly bare, very flat chest, and back up. ‘Sakae’ made a mental note to beat the living daylights out of his ‘very good friend’ for giving him a girl’s name.

“I see,” the Hyuuga said, clearly brimming with questions he was too polite to voice.

Before the silence got too awkward, Sai made an odd gesture with his left hand, almost too quick to catch. Hiashi’s eyes widened subtly, then narrowed. The older man nodded and said he and Sai had
important matters to discuss.

“My nephew will show you to your rooms. Dinner will be delivered to you. Rest, and we’ll speak in
the morning.”

“Unbelievable,” the prince sighed when Neji left.

“Whoa, check out this giant bed. You could fit three –four?– no, three people here, easy!” Naruto
jumped airily onto the bed, bouncing with glee, “And there are so many pillows. Sasuke, Sasuke,
look! They’re so fluffy.” The idiot proceeded to roll around like a dog. Watching him made Sasuke’s
face hot. He ignored the feeling, plucking a grape from a bowl of fruit nearby.

“Call me Sakae while we’re here, idiot.”

“Oh yeah. Good catch, Sakae-chan. Un, not that I’m complaining, but why’d he put us in the same
room?” He lay on his stomach, elbows propped up and feet swinging in the air charmingly,
“There’s only one bed here, even though it’s freaking huge.”

“Hyuuga thinks that we’re together.” And there it was again. That abominable queasiness. Sasuke
didn’t like it.

“What, like lovers?” the idiot looked delighted for some idiotic reason that Sasuke wasn’t stupid
enough to understand.

“You said that I was your special friend.” There was only one way to interpret that.

“Because you are my special friend.”

“Die in a fire.”

“Aw Sakae-chan, you’re blushing.”

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. Before he could make his statement a reality by actually
setting the dead-last ablaze, someone knocked on the door. A parade of pretty, neatly dressed women
brought tray after tray of mouthwatering everything, set the table in the corner of the room, bowed,
and left.

“Man,” Naruto groaned an hour later, “I am stuffed. These Hyuugas sure know how to treat an
Avatar.” He trudged to the bed and fell on the mattress face-down.

Sasuke sat on the other side, arranging the pillows into a makeshift wall down the middle of the bed.

“What’cha doin’ that for?” Naruto murmured sleepily.

“Boundaries are important.”

It wasn’t a lie, but it was certainly not the whole truth. Sasuke prayed that his old habit didn’t
resurface. He would never live it down.

“If you say so, bastard.” Naruto sounded skeptical because of course he had to choose the most
inconvenient times to be preternaturally perceptive.
The prince said nothing as he laid down and turned on his side. They were quiet for a while. The air was heavy with something like... Anticipation? Sasuke decided not to think about it as he stubbornly closed his eyes.

“Sasuke?”

“What,” he sighed.

“G’night.”

That simple phrase dripped with enough sugar to give him a toothache. Sasuke reminded himself that he hated sweets, that it was his decision to hate sweets, as he swallowed around the thickness in his throat.

“Go to sleep, usuratonkachi.”

The next day, Naruto woke up to one hell of a surprise.
It was the exact opposite of a problem.

Naruto remembered the last time he was naïve enough to think that. He sighed.

So, correction: it should’ve been the exact opposite problem, but really, it made everything a hundred times worse, because it involved Sasuke. That stubborn bastard with his weird sense of obligation and warm skin and soft hair and spirits, he smelled so nice- wait, what he thinking about again?

Oh. Right.

The problem that, under any other circumstance, with any other person, would not be a problem at all.

Sasuke was a cuddler.

Last night, he rolled across the bed, plowed through the wall of pillows that he built himself, to end up half on top of Naruto, with his face pressed into the younger boy’s neck.

Clearly, Sasuke was a determined, habitual cuddler, who could only sleep peacefully with a warm body at his side.

Naruto understood that feeling too well. At night, in the dark, when everyone else was in their own peaceful dream world, leaving him alone with this yawning, aching emptiness- shit. Just thinking about it made his chest hurt. Thinking about that cool, aloof bastard going through the exact same thing, somehow hurt even more… But in kind of a good way.

Which was weird. Like, that’s weird, right? (And selfish. Definitely selfish.)

Anyways, here were two guys with an obvious mutual attraction that was by no means superficial, intimately pressed together, on the same bed.

And nothing -not one damn thing- would come of it.

Naruto was torn between shoving that jerk off (maybe to beat some sense into him) or pulling him closer and refusing to ever let go, just to show that he could be stubborn too.

Which was just stupid.

Not as stupid as Sasuke, but. Ugh. It was a bad idea.

Still, he had to do something, because when that asshole finally woke up, Naruto knew what he’d say. Six words: we will never speak of this. And then, the stubborn, prideful ass would sleep on the floor for the rest of their stay, and what good would any of that do?

Naruto took one more deep breath, resting his cheek gently on top of Sasuke’s head. His fingers itched to do something, but he kept them still, allowed himself to feel content, comfortable, and at peace for a few short seconds, then slowly, carefully slipped away.

Time to go find a sturdy wall. Ya know, to bang his head on until something about this situation made sense. Yeah, good plan.
His forehead was sore. Probably bruised. No big deal- he healed pretty quickly. It was another perk of being the Avatar.

The head-banging (what, you thought he was kidding? Fuck no!) relieved tension, but ultimately, it didn’t help. Yeah, what a shocker.

Maybe food would do the trick.

Naruto asked one of the women bustling around the palace, mansion, whatever, for directions to the dining room. The nice girl –she called herself a servant, but the monks raised Naruto to think of all people as his equal, so that felt awkward and just wrong- walked him there personally. She even pulled the chair out for him, which was really, really weird, bowed and asked if he needed anything else.

“Just your name, sweet cheeks,” he said with a playful grin. Sakura, who was already seated next to her cousin and across from Naruto, kicked him under the table.

The ‘servant’ blushed, stuttered something unintelligible, and hurried away.

“Ow Sakura-chan, what’d you do that for?”

“Baka, you’re the Avatar, the guest of honor, and you already have a special friend. Mind your manners.”

“But ya know he’s not rea-“ another violent jab to his poor shin “-uh, okay. I’ll just shut up now, I guess.” Naruto crossed his arms and slouched, glaring at the extravagant display of fruit, dumplings, and colorful drinks at the center of the table. Man, these Hyuugas were seriously loaded.

He reached for an orange. Sharp pain stabbed his (previously) uninjured leg. What now?

“Wait until the host arrives,” Sakura hissed.

More stupid, snotty, pointless rich-people etiquette. Naruto pouted.

Neji and Hiashi arrived, along with a small dark-haired, white-eyed girl. She clutched at Neji’s sleeve, following meekly with her head bowed, as he helped her into a chair right next to Naruto. The Avatar wondered if all rich people bad at using chairs. Like, it’s not a complicated concept- just pull it back, sit your ass down, and scooch forward.

He decided to ask Sasuke later.

Oh yeah, where was that prissy bastard anyway?

Hiashi was talking to him. From the looks of it, Naruto had been part of this conversation for a while and nodding along absently. Shit, he really should pay attention.

“-so you agree?” Neji asked.

“Uh. Yeah, totally.”

“Good. We’ll start this afternoon.”
Start what? Lunch, catching butterflies, yodeling lessons- wait, there’s something about the last one. Lessons. Right, he was here to learn earth bending so Neji probably… Well, he could always ask Sakura later but seriously, where’s-

“Sa-” Sakura kicked him again, but this time, it helped, “Sakae-chan, there you are!”

Sasuke looked at him, blinked, nodded, and waited for one of the girls to pull back his chair as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He greeted everyone at the table politely, apologized for being late, and started to eat.

Naruto stared. He couldn’t help it. Usually, Sasuke was really, really pretty. Even with the bruises under his eyes and the surly scowl and general aura that screamed, ‘fuck off, I’m better than you,’ the Uchiha was, just, nice to look at.

And now- something was different. Better. Naruto couldn’t put his finger on it. He stared. From the corner of his eye, he saw Sakura doing the same thing. And Sai. And shit, even that cold, stoic Neji guy looked a bit intrigued.

So, it wasn’t just him.

“Naruto,” Sasuke said after the Hyuugas (plus Sai) excused themselves, “Is there something on my face?”

“Wha- um, no. Your face is,” gulp, “just fine.”

“Then why,” he sighed, “are you staring at me. Why is everyone looking at me like that.” The second statement was obliquely addressed to Sakura.

Who blushed.

Oh, oh no. Naruto didn’t like that one bit. He has dibs, damnit.

“Sa- Sakae-kun,” she said, “you seem… Different. Are you in a good mood?”

Sasuke furrowed his brow -not frowning or scowling or glaring, but just thinking- pushed his bangs behind his ear (a casual, thoughtless gesture that made Naruto’s pulse race) and nodded. This small motion made his hair slide back over his face. Naruto’s fingers itched again. He drummed them on the table instead of doing- whatever. Something. Geez, was it hot in here?

“I see. That’s,” Sakura cleared her throat, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but-“

“It’s unusual. I’m aware. Is that it?” the prince quirked a bow –not sarcastically or sardonically or mockingly but- as a sincere indication of curiosity.

“H-hai,” she stuttered.

“Naruto?” Sasuke turned to him.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said, prodding the pineapple on his plate with a chopstick, “everyone’s weirded out because you’re not acting like a bastard.”

And being extra cute and weirdly kind of nice and glowing like the fucking moon.

Naruto kept those comments to himself.

“I can still insult your intelligence,” Sasuke’s lip hitched upward, as if he was almost smiling, “if it
helps. Idiot,” he added as an afterthought, nudging Naruto with his elbow. Like, *playfully.*

(Seriously, who was this guy and what happened to that other jerk?)

Okay, the temperature in this room was officially through the roof. Ridiculously hot. Shit, he was starting to get sweaty.

“Ha ha,” he forced a laugh, “so you make jokes now.”

“I always make jokes. They just go over your head. Loser.”

“Ass.” Naruto grinned. Then, he caught Sakura’s coy glance and became very interested in his pineapple once more.

“*Dumbass.* Anyway, I’m going down to the village,” Sasuke said, getting up and leaving even though there was some food still in his plate.* What a waste. “Ja, ne.”

How does that saying go? ‘I hate to see you go, but love to watch you leave.’ Something along those lines. Naruto had a new appreciation for that sort of thing. He was enjoying himself until, for the millionth time that morning, Sakura kicked him under the table.

“Sakura-chan, ow! Damn it, that hurts.” Pause. “And don’t go getting any weird ideas. I have dibs,” he declared, jabbing a thumb at his own chest. There, that should get the message across.

Though she just looked confused, then amused.

“Naruto,” and there was that smile again. Made his skin crawl, yikes, “did something *happen* last night?”

Yes. No. Kind of. It’s a secret though, until he figured out what to do.

“Shit, I- I gotta go check on the, uh, guy who- someone to teach me the- rock battle.” Sure, this castle was big but it couldn’t be too hard to find that Neji guy. He had a few hours. “Where you throw rocks at… Other rocks.” God damn it, why couldn’t he remember the word? “Sometimes people. Still not sure how that works, to be honest.”

“Earth bending, Naruto,” Sakura pursed her lips like she was trying not to laugh, “It’s called earth bending.”

“Un, un, that! And remember I got dibs,” he shouted over his shoulder as he sprinted away.

When Sasuke woke up that morning, something was missing. He stepped onto the cool marble floor, too lost in thought to notice he was on the wrong side of the bed, and tried to figure out *what.*

Something else was present in that missing thing’s place. He washed up and went to breakfast, ignoring the odd look from the many servants in the hall. They didn’t bother him.

Wait.

They... Didn’t… Bother him. Shouldn’t he be more irritated?
The prince paused in front of a tapestry of a white boar. A crow with milky, sightless eyes perched on its tusk. Sasuke admired it. He felt the corners of his mouth lift in a smile? At a stupid picture?

Why?

All at once, it hit him: he slept.

Last night, he slept. He didn’t wake up ever hour covered in cold sweat, shaking from nightmares or suffocating loneliness. He didn’t lie awake and stare at the ceiling until the first rays of dawn painted the ceiling gold.

For the first time since —since that happened, he had slept.

Through the whole night, no less, and dreamt warm, pleasant, senseless dreams. Turns out, a little thing like real sleep can make a significant difference.

Sasuke didn’t realize how significant that difference was until breakfast. He would have been annoyed. He was usually annoyed by everyone and everything all the time.

Yet, he didn’t snap at Naruto once or glare at Sakura or wish for a wild animal to gut and feast upon Sai. Not once. Instead, he was calm. The Avatar’s antics and Hyuugas’ dry, subtle wit amused him. The food was excellent.

On top of everything, he’d be the first fire bender in a century to visit Sunagakure. Sasuke decided to explore the village. (Training was out of the question. His forms and exercises basically screamed ‘fire bender.’) He found that he was… Excited by the prospect. Just a little.

“It’s the bed,” he mumbled as a servant unlatched the front gate, then said “thank you,” a bit louder. The boy blushed. Sasuke rolled his eyes and smirked. This again.

For the first time in years, he slept in a real bed with a soft mattress and satin sheets. Not a rickety wooden thing in an old inn, the hard metal frame on Kakashi’s ship, or the dirty insect-infested ground. It made sense. His body was accustomed to luxury.

“Well,” he mused, climbing down the sandstone steps, “what else could it be?”

Certainly not that.

Suna had an open market place much like a port town, despite its location in the middle of the desert, with no major body of water anywhere. Stalls filled the spaces between shop buildings.


Sasuke scoffed at the merchant, whose face was marked with purple paint. The merchant added, eyes glinting, “Revenge?”

This made him pause, glare, and walk faster.

He wandered into a shop dedicated exclusively to selling fans of every size and shape. The girl behind the counter had a large fan strapped to her back. She leered at him. Sasuke was used to it by then. He really, really didn’t get why people were like this, but was starting to remember why he hated everyone.

Strange. She looks like him.

Though Naruto’s hair was much brighter and his eyes were a more pleasant shade of blue and, come
to think of it, the dobe would be ecstatic about a store full of fans. He could practically hear the 
excited squeal of “Sasuke, Sasuke, look at this one. It’s made of pure gold!” To which he’d reply, 
“Usuratonkachi, that’s just paint.” He chuckled to himself, turning the painted fan in his hands.

“Maybe I should bring him here,” Sasuke murmured, then shut his mouth with an audible click.

Where the hell did that come from?

He shook his head. It should take more than simple sleep to make Uchiha Sasuke go soft and 
fantasize about that- that idiot. There was something else. There had to be something else. He ground 
his teeth, feeling the familiar scowl etch itself on his face.

“Hey, you,” the blonde girl called from the front of the store.

“What,” he glared. By his ancestors, if one more person hit on him today-

“You like earth bending tournaments?”

“Excuse me?”

“Ya know-“ he knew for a fact that all of Naruto’s relatives were dead, but this girl “-big, muscely 
guys and gals chuckin’ rocks at each other. That sort of thing. You interested?”

“Ah,” why not? He had nothing better to do, “Sure.”

“Ha! I totally pegged you for the type. Here, check it out.” She held out a colorful flyer, which 
Sasuke reluctantly took.

“Ultimate Rock Battle?” Really, it wasn’t his thing but Naruto- never mind, damn his thoughts for 
always going there.

“Name’s Temari, by the way.”

Sasuke carefully folded the flyer and tucked it into his pocket. “I’m Sa-“

“Sakae or something, yeah? Heard you’re travelling with the Avatar.”

“How-“

“Word travels fast ‘round these parts. You’re his girlfriend or something, right?”

“Boyfriend,” Sasuke corrected automatically, then blushed furiously. Thank the spirits, no one else 
was in the store.

“Huh. My bad. Sakae’s a girl’s name, ya know.”

“I am aware.”

Seriously, he owed that idiot a severe beating for this humiliation.

“And no offense, but you seem pretty girly too.”

Sasuke’s eye twitched and in that moment, he knew: if that idiot had been born a woman, this is 
what he’d be.

“None,” he ground his teeth, “taken.”
Temari smirked and leaned forward, showing off plenty of cleavage. Sasuke was mildly disgusted.

“So,” she began conspirationally, “what’s the Avatar like?”

“He’s— stupid, cute, annoying, sweet, shit what was wrong with him—interesting.”

“No, no. I mean in bed. I’ve always wondered what it’s like to be fuc—“

“Temari.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll take my leave now. Thank you for the,” Deep breath. No starting fires. He can do this. “Ultimate Rock Battle poster. Good,” his nails dug into his palm hard, but Sasuke kept his cool, “day to you.”

On the way out, the prince caught a flash of red. He turned to meet a cool, blue-green gaze and realized that no, he wasn’t the only other person in the store.

So, there was a witness to this utterly mortifying conversation.

Great.

Hyuuga Neji was a monster. A slave driver. A so- soci-

“Sociopath,” Sasuke supplied, “Hold the ladder steady, usuratonkachi.”

Yesterday, the desert sun roasted the prince’s skin like a lobster-crab. He was burnt to a crisp and peeling, so decided to spend the day indoors. After an hour of meditation and two more wandering aimlessly, bored out of his mind, it hit him: all noble bloodlines kept detailed records of their ancestry. Hiashi gave ‘Sakae’ directions to the Hyuuga records room, along with a copy of the key. Naruto invited himself, complaining about his earthbending lessons incessantly.

This room, full of tall shelves that extended floor to ceiling, wall to wall, would be impressive by anyone’s standards. Unless you grew up in the Uchiha palace, which had a three-story library shelved with the biographies of every family member in existence, including the very first firebender.

Sasuke remembered that lame story, and for some reason, felt the need to share it.

“Do you know the story of the first firebender?”

“Eto… the monks gave me a book to read but…”

The prince sighed. No wonder the Avatar’s education was lacking- his teachers were clearly either inconsiderate or outright cruel.

“I could tell you.”

“Really, really?” The ladder trembled. Probably because it didn’t take much to get Naruto excited.
Sasuke gripped the shelf to keep his balance. “Yes, dobe. *Please* mind the ladder.”

“Heh, sorry. Go ‘head. I’m listening.”

As Sasuke skimmed the titles and climbed the rungs, he spoke.

“The first firebender…”

Izuna Uchiha was visited by the goddess of the sun. Supposedly, she was enraptured by his pure, innocent human beauty and equally pure, kind heart. The goddess couldn’t touch his fragile skin without killing him. She granted him the gift of fire and was cast out of the spirit world, cursed with mortality.

This worked out perfectly for everyone involved: she married Izuna, They spawned fire bender after fire bender. The Uchiha became royalty, the most powerful clan in their corner of the world, where they remain to this day.

Yes, how quaint.

Little Sasuke loved that story because it featured real lovers who didn’t suffer a tragic fate. He read it over and over again, and spent an inordinate amount of time gazing at the portrait of Izuna and the vibrant blonde-haired, blue-eyed, bronze-skinned sun goddess. Mother often gushed, ‘My little Sasu-chan looks just like Izuna. No, he’ll be even more beautiful when he grows up. The whole world will fall in love with him, just you see.’ Sasuke would pout, blush, and tell her to stop being embarrassing. Secretly, he was pleased-

The ladder shook again, jarring him from the memory. Sasuke realized much, much too late that he had said *all of that* out loud and now the dumbass was laughing at him.

“Sh-shut up! You’re shaking it again, dobe. You had one job, and you can’t even-“

More shaking. This was getting impossible.

Sasuke fought down a blush, shelved the book in his hands –they were in the wrong section, though he was getting closer- and climbed down. Naruto fell to the floor, clutching his stomach and laughing. Sasuke kicked him in the ribs, hoisted the ladder over his shoulder, and stomped away.

“Wait –ahaha- no Sasuke, you don’t –haha- get it. I was, was,” and then the idiot collapsed into another fit.

“See if I ever waste my breath speaking to the likes of you,” the prince punctuated with a jab of his forefinger, “ever again.” Then, he leaned closer and hissed, “It’s Sakae, idiot. Someone could hear you.”

“In that case,” the idiot had the gal to smirk, “should you be talking about your childhood in some place that just happened to have a picture of that Izuna guy? Wouldn’t take a genius to connect those dots.”

Well. Sasuke scowled.

Turns out even the natural good mood from actually sleeping at night, didn’t stand a chance against the Avatars infuriating logic.

“Point taken,” Sasuke conceded. His left eye would develop a permanent tick at this rate.
“And I wasn’t laughing at you, asshole. Just, uh, your mom—oh, like that was so much better”—wait, let me finish. Your mom really hit the nail on the head. Like, she was fucking *astute.* Both of Sasuke’s eyebrows went up at that. “Don’t give me that look. You’re not the only one who can use big words.”

(It was really, really hard not to smile at that.)

Sasuke set the ladder down in front of a particularly tall, creaky book shelf towards the back of the room. He gestured for Naruto to hold it in place—these Hyuugas used an archaic, unfamiliar system that placed the most important records closest to the ceiling—and started to climb.

Then, it hit him: the implications of that statement, and his already stinging face grew uncomfortably warm.

“Man,” Naruto peered up with a wistful smile, “I can’t wait to meet her. Your mom, I mean. I have so many questions, about, like *everything*.”

“I’m sure she’d love to meet the Avatar,” Sasuke murmured, then flinched.

For a second. That single moment in time, he’d forgotten.

“Ha! Ne Sasuke, what’s she like?”

And there it was. The book had a thick spine and was bound in boar-raven leather. Faded silver letters decorated the cover. Sasuke recognized, but couldn’t read the language. A metal tab was tacked on to the spine, and engraved with a single character [翠].

“… Dead,” the prince replied absently, eyes focused forward.

Three more scrolls, labeled in that language, were marked with the same name. Sasuke tucked them carefully under his arm. Cold fingers brushed the back of his neck and down his spine. When he turned, there was nothing.


The ladder rattled. Sasuke lost his footing, but kept his grip on the book and scrolls.

“Shit. Crap. I got you, I got you,” Naruto's voice was tinged with hysteria.

The prince came to the ground rather slowly. He braced for a fall that never came.

“You,” Sasuke said, inches from the Avatar’s face, “idiot.” The book pressed between their chests was the only barrier keeping them apart. The prince propped himself up on his elbows and tried to push off. “Let go.”

Naruto’s arms were around his waist, pinning him like a vice. Blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

“How’d she die?”

Sasuke tried to pull away again. He dug his knees into the ground and used all his strength. Naruto didn’t even seem to notice. He was the Avatar, of course he was strong. Sasuke felt it in those ‘playful’ punches, in their half-assed sparring sessions, and in the way the other boy moved. But this—he tried again– this was something else entirely.

“She was murdered.” *Am I really this weak?*
Pupils narrowed to slits, and the iris bled to red. Sasuke blinked, and saw nothing but blue. Apparently, he was hallucinating again. Wonderful.

“Who,” his grip tightened almost painfully, “who killed her.”

“Let me up, Naruto.”

“No. Tell me.”

Guess there was no avoiding it. “My brother,” Sasuke took a deep breath, “killed her, and my father. In front of me, when I was nine years old,” he closed his eyes, swallowed, then opened them again, “I was too weak to stop him-”

“You were a child-”

“-so Madara marked me for my failure-“

“He scarred an innocent child.”

“And banished me until I could prove myself worthy of the throne, by capturing the Avatar. Who turned out to be a dead-last moron with no regard for boundaries and- and…”

It started slowly. A sniffle, two, three. Blue eyes sparkled, brimmed, then unleashed a flood of tears. Sasuke was stunned into silence. The arms holding him let go. Naruto buried his face in his hands, sobbing a muffled apology.

“Wh-what are you sorry for, idiot?” Sasuke stammered. His pulse pounded in his ears. “You didn’t kill them. Oy, Naruto. St-stop that. What if someone sees you? This is irrational.”

“I ca-” hiccup “-can’t help it, ya know!” he wailed like a baby.

“You’re the one you asked!”

“Yeah b-but-” sob “-S’uke that’s terrible. I’m sorry I called you a ba-bastard. I’m sorry I- you- don’t deserve-” a series of hiccups that made his shoulders shake “-I’m just sorry, okay?”

“Oh,” Sasuke finally pulled away to sit back on his haunches, “okay.”

A minute passed. Then another. The prince set the scrolls aside and crossed his arms, watching the Avatar bawl like a baby. It should have been funny, or repulsive, or anything but heartbreaking. He didn’t get it- why his own chest hurt as he watched that idiot act like a fool, why that pain grew more and more unbearable with every second, or why he did what he did next.

“Hey,” he murmured.

Naruto moved his hands, revealing a blotchy face and puffy red eyes. “Oh-“ hic “-you’re still here.”

As if he could leave him like that.

“Yeah,” Sasuke sighed, opening his arms, “come here.”
Shock, realization, and elation, followed by a renewed wave of tears, snot, and sobbing. Sasuke was transfixed by Naruto’s expressions.

Shortly after, he found himself flat on the floor with an armful of hysterical Avatar.

“There, there,” he mumbled, rubbing circles in Naruto’s too-warm back, feeling the too-warm face, breath, and outright scorching tears soak through the fabric on his shoulder.

The idiot sobbed out a muffled ‘S’uke’ followed by more incoherent babbling. Sasuke shushed him. He wondered if this is how Mother felt all those times after he came back crying from skinned knees or a split lip or because Itachi didn’t have time for him. Comforting another person (that’s what this is, right?) was… Weird, because it was actually very, very nice.

_When’s the last time I was this close to another person?_ Sasuke wondered. Kakashi was a dutiful guardian, but far from affectionate. Regardless, Sasuke had too much pride to accept such a thing, had it been offered.

_More than a decade. Huh._

He forgot how it felt. You can’t miss what you don’t remember, so it was for the best.

_And when was the last time I felt… Needed?_

Never. This was a first. It’s a simple, logical fact: when someone clings to you for comfort, you feel a strong sense of fulfilment. Sasuke liked it a little too much, which is why it needed to stop.

The prince cleared his throat. “Naruto?”

“Mmm.” He hummed in a raspy voice, hiccupping slightly.

“Are you…”

“Y-yeah, I’m done.”

“Can you…”


The warmth left him abruptly. As he sat up, Sasuke realized he was suddenly cold (bereft) and-

“Sorry ‘bout your shirt.”

-moist. Shit, he should he disgusted. Instead-

“Don’t. Um. Worry about it.”

A shuffling noise, as the prince sat upright with his hands on his knees and feet tucked beneath him, followed by a long, awkward silence.

“Why did you-“ Sasuke started, looking down.
“I was just-” Naruto blurted out at the same time.

They looked at each other. Naruto’s eyelashes were dark with moisture, curly and clumped together. A single tear drop clung to his cheek. It didn’t trail down as it should have, and the blond made no move to wipe it off.

Sasuke decided to do him a favor. More accurately, Sasuke’s hand, which moved on its own, decided to do that particular favor.

The prince’s fingers brushed away the moisture. His hand decided to linger, rest its palm on the smooth, warm cheek and touch the thin lines that adorned it. Blue eyes locked on black and once again, Sasuke found himself rooted to the spot, unable to look away.

Slowly, deliberately, without breaking eye contact, Naruto turned his head. His mouth brushed Sasuke’s hand. Soft, chapped, burning hot. Lips parted, eyelids fell to half-mast as-

Click. Thud. Bang!

“Naruto!” Sakura bellowed from the doorway, out of sight.

Sasuke wrenched his hand away and scrambled backwards. His face flushed beet-red. His heartbeat jumped, then hammered at a rapid staccato.

What- what-

“You!” He accused.

“Eh? What did I do? You were the one who-“

“I didn’t- my hand-“

“Bastard, if you say your hand moved on its own, I swear-“

“B-but-“ Fuck! Since when did he stutter? “It did. You were the one-“

“Nuh-uh, no, enough. No way you’re getting out of this one. I know-“

Thank Kami-sama, Sakura finally found them. “There you are, baka!”

The prince snatched up the book and scrolls, clambered to his feet, and brushed past her with barely a nod of acknowledgement.

“Sakura-chan, what are you- ow, ow, ow what’d do that for?” He heard Naruto’s cry from some distance.

Distance. Right. He needed to put some space between them. He needed to-

“Neji, your earthbending sensei, has been looking everywhere for you. I know you don’t enjoy his teaching methods-“ A spectacular understatement. Sasuke snorted. “-but it is your duty as the Avatar…”

Her voice became distant as he walked out the records room, further down the hall. The word duty echoed after him.

There was a good reason for this, right? He couldn’t- he wasn’t supposed to- but why not? It was hard to remember. Something changed since that night in the swamp. He couldn’t put his finger
on what, exactly, but suddenly the nonsense that idiot spouted (just this once) was starting to make sense.

The prince found himself in the rear courtyard. A weeping willow provided shade, as well as a place to sit back on.

Thoughts coiled into a knot that would take days to pick apart. Doing the logical thing was now illogical, because it made him feel odd, empty, and unfocused.

Winning a war was hard enough with a clear head. The way things were going-

No way you’re getting out of this one.

-he’s bound to slip up.

Sasuke Uchiha was only human.

Humans are creatures of emotion, and as much as he tried to kill that part of himself, it lingered. Festered. Grew demanding, loudly declaring its hunger. That part of him had to be appeased. Sasuke set the scrolls aside and stroked the spine of the book. The silver letters were cold, surprisingly rough, while the leather was supple and smooth.

Appeasement is a form of compromise. I’ve been compromising my whole life.

He had no choice. Trees that don’t bend in the face of a storm, break.

How is this any different?

Great, so now he was rationalizing. Stupid emotions. Stupid Naruto for making him- he shook his head to stop that thought in its tracks.

I need time, Sasuke decided, then realized he had more than enough. He’d pick apart this knot later. Just then, he wanted to focus on the task at hand: Midori’s story. The bubble-riddled letters inside the book shimmered and flickered, rearranging themselves into something that –just for an instant- Sasuke could comprehend. His vision blurred. His head began to throb.

Then, he understood.

Hyuuga Midori was born in…

“Again,” Neji said without looking up from his book.

“But-“

“Again.” He repeated.

“Prick.” Naruto muttered, wiping from his brow with a scowl. The ground shifted under his feet, throwing his legs into a painful splits. “Fuck!” he screamed, “what the hell, asshole!”
Neji shut his book with a dull thump. “I am your sensei. You will treat me with respect, Avatar.”

“Ha!” Naruto barked, rising unsteadily to his feet. “Some sensei you are. I haven’t learned shit,” he spat, “from you.” The earth rumbled beneath him. This time, he had the good sense to leap out of the way.

“You are an ungrateful,” Neji set the book down and cracked his knuckles, “untalented, unintelligent student. It is your fate to struggle with the noble art of earthbending, just as it is my fate to suffer through your idiocy.”

Wow. Why did all that sound weirdly familiar?

“Ya know, Neji-“

“Hyuuga-sensei.”

“Neji, you’d get along great with Sakae.” Nice, he didn’t even stutter.

The Hyuuga’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying I remind you of your lover?”

“Oh, no. You said that. Well, now that you mention it-“

His mouth was suddenly full of dirt. “Blergh! Learn to take a compliment, jerkass.”

Jerkass. The fates must truly despise me, Neji thought somberly.

“Do a two-hundred repetitions of each form.”

“But that’s, like, a billion!”

“You’ve learned,” Neji closed his eyes to calm himself, “only ten. I have some business in town, but I will know if you don’t complete your task. Don’t test me.”

With that, the Hyuuga sauntered away, only pausing briefly when he heard the fool mumble something along the likes, “I’ll test your mom.”

If this is the Avatar, the war was as good as over. His very existence was an asset to the fire nation.

Naruto was halfway through his first set when he noticed her: the small, quiet girl who couldn’t seem to—for whatever reason—walk without someone’s help. He stopped, panting slightly, and waved.

“Yo!” He chirped a friendly greeting.

She had been watching him. Looking right at him, actually, though something was odd about her eyes. Like, she knew where he was, but couldn’t...”

“H-hello.” Her voice was quiet. He had to strain to hear.

“Ah,” he scratched his head, squinting against the sun, “I’m Naruto.”

“We’ve been introduced-“ Shit, really? “-Hyuuga Hinata.”

“Oh.”

There was a silence as they seemed to consider each other. Something about this girl was familiar, like he’d seen her before, but couldn’t remember where. Anyone else would write her off as your
typical wilting flower, all delicate, weak, and in need of protection. So why did he get the feeling that he was missing something?

“Neji-nii-san is wrong.”

Suddenly, none of that mattered. Hinata was clearly one cool chick.

*But how long was she standing there? How did neither of us notice?*

“Heh, you can say that again.”

She nodded and walked closer, taking small, measured steps. That dress could not be comfortable; all that long, heavy silk in this heat? Sheesh.

“You know each element has a nature.”

“Hm?”

“How to explain,” she whispered, looking off to the side and fiddling with her sleeve, “it’s like a personality. To bend an element to your will, you must first… Befriend it, in a way. Or at least, gain its respect.”

“Oh! Yeah, yeah. Like, air is-“ he flailed around to demonstrate, “while water is more-“ what’s that dance move called? Right, the snake. Naruto did the snake, “I gotcha.”

Hinata’s gaze was fixed in the direction of his feet. Not like she was looking at them, but more like that’s where her eyes happened to land.

“Earth…”

She explained how, unlike water, earth didn’t move on its own or change with the environment. It didn’t swirl like the wind. It didn’t breathe, spread, and crackle like fire. The other elements have intrinsic movement. Water goes down, fire creeps up and outwards, and air goes in any direction, sometimes all at once. Meanwhile, earth…

“…just is. It’s a stubborn element-”

Stubborn, huh. Sounds a lot like. Ya know. That guy.

“-and to gain its respect, you must be honest, direct, and clear about your intentions.”

Naruto bristled, feeling defensive. *Do you really think that would work?*

“What if can’t? What if I don’t want to come on too strong and- and scare away the prickly bast- Ah. Dirt. Rocks. And stuff.”

Nice save.

“If-“ her lips quirked as she stared at a spot past his shoulder “-you’re avoiding something, earth can sense it. You will not have its respect, and it won’t bend for you.”

“But- but-“

“Allow me to finish, Naruto-kun.”

“Right,” he pouted, wrinkling his nose.
She blushed and fidgeted some more. “The earth will see you as a coward, unfit to be a bender, the Avatar, or even a man.”

“Hey!” He’s taking it back. Hinata was clearly another prissy, judgmental Hyuuga. Seriously, what is it with all these rich people?

“So,” she continued, softly but with conviction, “Neji-nii-san is wrong. You’re not untalented. You’re just a p-pussyfooting twinkle toes.”

“I’m a what now? Yo, don’t just say shit like that and walk away. Oy Hinata!”

“That’s my advice,” she said, glancing over her shoulder, “do what you will.”

She regarded him with such contempt, Neji looked like a proud mother hen in comparison.

“Uncool,” Naruto grumbled, resuming his training, “she is the least cool person ever. Worse than me. Worse than Neji. Hell, even Sai…” more cursing “Calls me twinkle toes. What the hell is up with that? Pussy-footing, is that even in the dictionary? Do they have a dictionary around here?” Wait, that was off topic. “Anyways, I’ll show her. Me, a coward? When did I ever run away?”

Besides that one time. After which he was trapped in an iceberg for a century. Nope, not counting that.

By the time he finished, the sun set. Naruto collapsed, chest heaving, and peeled the sweat-drenched cloth from his chest. He flicked his wrist, whipping up a light breeze.

The moon was out. Full, round, and blurred behind a translucent cloud. The cloud passed. The moon shone brightly, clear and unobscured.*

“Shit,” the truth landed on him in a rock slide, “she’s right.”

He’d been avoiding the issue for months. Sure, he dropped hints, but no matter how obvious he made everything, he never really said it.

*I’ve had plenty of time. Naruto sprung to his feet and dusted himself off. Alright, let’s do this.*
Itachi played this game with Shisui. Sasuke wasn’t allowed to participate because he was ‘still a baby’ and would ‘mess everything up,’ but they let him watch. Not that he minded; it was boring. At least he got to spend time with Nii-san. Sometimes, he wished—

Nevermind.

_The heat must be getting to me._

Sasuke kneeled in front of the cactus. His vision swam. Sweat dripped down his forehead in streams, plastering his hair to his skin.

The prince’s brother and cousin would painstakingly place Mahjong tiles in a winding line. They worked for hours, sometimes over the span of several days, making sure everything aligned perfectly. Then, Shisui would get down until his chin touched the floor. Exhale softly. The first tile would wobble and—for a second, Sasuke hoped it stayed standing— with a soft _click_, fall.

The second tile fell faster than the first. The third, even quicker than that, and so on until each _click-click-click_ faded into a single rattling song. The sound reminded Sasuke of rain.

The prince reached for the hilt of his katana. He tuned out Sakura’s protests and shrugged off the too-hot hand that lingered on his sweltering shoulder.

“I’m going to doing this. Stand back.”

Naruto sighed. “I really don’t think this is a good idea,” he said, but complied. _The idiot’s tired too._

Sasuke didn’t understand until they were stranded in the middle of nowhere: that everything up to yesterday morning was analogous to lining up the Mahjong tiles in that insipid game. Fate, the universe, the gods, the forces writing the story of this world, all had a hand in what happened.

It was always inevitable. Only a fool would try to delay it. Sasuke wasted enough lifetimes being foolish.

So, he toppled the first piece. (_Just get on with it._) The second fell with Sai’s announcement. The third, later that same evening. A few more in rapid succession, and now—

_Now, we’re running out of time._

He couldn’t explain how everything was connected. Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe the dehydration fucked with his thoughts. Conversely, perhaps desperation finally revealed the truth.

Sunlight glinted off the surface of the blade. A flash of blinding white. Sasuke closed his eyes, blinked the black spots away, and raised his sword.
Previously...

The first part of Midori’s biography was a collection of accounts from close friends and family members. They described her as proud, surly, cold, distant, honorable, intelligent, blah blah blah. Sasuke was dizzy with déjà vu.

The second part was a transcription of her private journal.

Word by word, day by day, Sasuke watched Midori-himself-Midori fall in love. After Aoi’s death, the writing became jumbled and incoherent. The biographer noted that grief, along with something that Sasuke’s mind couldn’t translate (the word , followed by ‘erosion’) made Midori blind. Her pupils lost color. This trait was passed to her children, along with the ability to earthbend. Oddly, most Hyuugas had excellent vision, although one in ten was born blind.

Then came the list of names. The biographer noted that Midori dictated the list from her deathbed, but provided no further explanation.

Sasuke spend the night just… Staring. His fingers were numb from cold. An hour before dawn, he stumbled into bed, book and scrolls still in hand, and passed out.

“Morning, bastard.”

Already?

“Five more minutes,” he murmured, pressing closer to Naruto’s warmth. A heavy arm wrapped around his waist. Fingers combed through his hair. Sasuke smiled. It felt nice.

Wait. What.

“Naruto.”

“Hai.”

The idiot was grinning.

“How did this happen?”

A shift of Naruto’s shoulders as he shrugged. Sasuke felt a sharp exhale of air on his scalp.

“Well, your body seems to do this thing where it, like, moves on its own. So you don’t have to take responsibility for your actions. Super convenient, if you ask me.”

Sasuke knew he should get up. Move. Be angry. But damn it, he was comfortable.

“You-” muffled cursing “-since when?”

“Um. Probably when we were in the cave. Unless you count that time at the South Pole, in which case-”

And now the dumbass was trying to be a smartass, listing every other time Sasuke was stupid enough to risk his life for-

“Naruto.”

“Oh alright,” he chuckled. Sasuke intimately felt every vibration in Naruto’s chest. It was weird. (And good.) “Every night since we got here, you’d build your stupid wall of stupid pillows, then roll
right through them and end up on top of me. Do you notice that, Sasuke?” the rough fingers moved from his hair to the back of his neck, absently tracing circles on his skin, “That you’re the one always breaking the walls you put up? Huh.”

“Why-” he should be embarrassed. He couldn’t feel anything but contentment and a small prickle of curiosity “-Why didn’t you say something.”

“Because I wanted this,” Naruto pulled him closer, “and you needed it.”

“Hm.”

Sasuke once read in a scroll detailing torture via isolation. There was a segment on touch starvation and the psychological necessity of physical contact. He thought it was ridiculous at the time. Now...

Damn it.

The prince sighed. He began to drift off when Naruto spoke.

“I l-“ pause, clear throat, deep breath, “like you, Sasuke. Way more than a friend likes a friend or a guy likes his dog or a bird likes... other birds?... or anyone liked anyone else in the history of everything. Shit, that sounds crazy but sometimes it really, really feels that way. And I know, I just know you feel something too, whether you’ll admit it or not-”

Well, he denied it long enough. “I admit it.”

“-and you are such a stubborn bastard. You go out of your way to make everything a million times harder than it has to be. Well, I’m tired of- wait, what?”

“I said,” the corners of his mouth pulled up, “I admit it.”

“Sasuke, back up. What was that?”

“My-“ muffled again because this time, he was embarrassed and okay, Naruto’s skin felt really, really nice against his lips “-confession.”

“You call that a confession?”

“...Yes.”

“Bullshit.”

“I refuse to humiliate myself.”

“Coward.”

“I am not. A coward.”


Sasuke pushed upwards, propping himself up on his forearms. “Fine.”

He wasn’t the type to talk about feelings. (Yes, what a shocker). Despite how everyone called him girly, the Uchiha didn’t have a vulnerable bone in his body. Crying? Loud emotional declarations? Gushing over cute animals? That was all Naruto.

Why doesn’t he ever get shit about acting like a girl? Why is it always me?
The princes hovered inches above the Avatar’s face. Blue eyes widened fractionally. The beginning of a word—probably ‘wait’—was silenced. Sasuke met the other boy’s lips with bruising force. He pulled back, smirking.

“Ow, ow, ow. Fuck, asshole, you bit me. You’re not supposed to—“

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Oh, like you’d know.” Silly monk.

“Yes, I would. Here, do it like this.”

Naruto reversed their positions in one fluid motion.

“Dobe,” Sasuke grunted.

“Shut up.”

And then, the prince was being kissed. Softly, thoroughly, sweetly in a way that made his stomach churn. His chest burned from the inside. A flicker of pure heat seared his lips. He inhaled sharply, clenching one hand in Naruto’s robes and the other in the sheets. He felt it again, sharp, a little wet, more insistent.

Naruto pulled back just enough to whisper, “Sasuke, please.” Another lick. “Trust me.” The hand in his hair tightened, tilting his head back.

Sasuke parted his lips. Nauto pushed in. He was slow, delicate and inquisitive. There it was again—that feeling in his chest like he was suffocating, but not for air. The prince moaned. His heart thudded in his throat. He wanted more.

Somehow, like he always did, Naruto understood. ‘I’ll give you what you want,’ the Avatar seemed to say as he rolled his tongue over the roof of Sasuke’s mouth. And again, ‘trust me,’ as he sucked on his lower lip, before plunging back in.

Naruto was heavy, but Sasuke didn’t mind the weight. He was hot, but the firebender adored heat. And then, he was—“Already, loser?” the prince gasped.

An unmistakable something was pressing firmly into his stomach. Sasuke arched into it without thinking.

“Least I’m not the only one.” Naruto panted. His voice broke with lust. “This time.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” That was a blatant lie.

“It’s okay, ya know.”

Sasuke felt even more blood rush to his face (and… downwards) as he glared. “Do you ever stop saying stupid things?”

“Good question.” Naruto’s grin was feral. “Hey, stop squirming. If you do that- ah- wait a minute, hold on Sasuke, slow down-“

“What,” he shifted deliberately, “isn’t this what you want?”

“Yes, no, yes but- ah- I was- I was- fuck it, fine, have it your way.”

Naruto kissed his neck and ground down hard, holding Sasuke’s hips in a rigid grip.
“Naruto,” Sasuke hissed through clenched teeth, “just get on with it.” The grip on his hips tightened. He wanted to move, go faster, be in control but- another embarrassing noise escaped his throat- but the idiot was determined to draw this out.

“Bastard,” Naruto whispered before sinking his teeth into his pulse point.

“Naruto,” the prince hissed, pulling the other boy’s hair, “faster.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Usuratonkachi.” His vision blurred. Thoughts scattered. A cold drop of moisture trailed down his cheek, but everything else was too hot. Too much. Not enough.

“Try again.” This was punctuated by another sting of teeth.

“Naruto, please.”

“Your wish is my command, princess.”

Sasuke should have shoved the idiot off. He should- he should- but a hand snaked under his clothes, enclosing him, moving quickly, fuck, not enough to too much, this was too much, he couldn’t-

“Naruto!” Sasuke shouted as the world faded to black. Wait, that’s not right. His eyes were just closed.

The blond shuddered and collapsed seconds later.

For a while, Sasuke felt at peace. Then, he noticed several things at once: the crushing weight of the idiot panting into his ear, the too-bright rays of the morning sun, and the absolutely disgusting, sticky feeling in-

“Get off,” the Uchiha grumbled.

“Heh. Just did.”

Sasuke smiled. He really couldn’t help it. Then, he remembered that his pants were soiled and scowled.

“Idiot, I’m going take a bath.”

“Good idea.”

What. A. Pervert.

“Alone,” he emphasized, sliding off the mattress and wincing at the chill of the air and icy marble floor. Well, anything would feel cold after-

He glanced back. Naruto lay on his back, one arm behind his head, and the other inching towards the his hand. The other boy grinned sheepishly and hooked his pinky finger around the prince’s thumb. Black eyes followed the motion, lingered on their hands, then flitted away.

“Naruto.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s an earthbending tournament tonight. You should come.”
At lunchtime, Sai informed the group that his contact deciphered the coordinates to the library.

“We depart tomorrow,” he said, then returned to eating. Neji and Hiashi exchanged a glance. Neji nodded. He gave Naruto the day off.

“I need time to prepare,” the Hyuuga informed, glancing briefly at his cousin, “to join you on your journey as your earthbending sensei.”

The Avatar rolled his eyes. Sakura elbowed him.

“Right. I, um, appreciate your… Sacrifice?”

“Close enough,” the girl sighed. “Oh yeah,” she perked up, “that means you can come to the Ultimate Rock Battle with us tonight!”

Naruto crossed his arms and slouched. “So it’s not a date,” he muttered.

Sai took this opportunity to inform the Avatar that, in fact, every day has its own unique date, so there’s no reason to be disheartened. Sasuke rolled his eyes and excused himself. If this was their last day, he wanted to spend it in town.

Besides, he needed space to think.

His pride protested, but the prince asked one of the servants for a parasol. Sunburn was a bitch to deal with.

In the end, Sasuke regretted it. It’s nothing new. He always regretted everything, so why would this be an exception?

“Hey,” Naruto said, “I could…”

Sasuke quickened his pace. Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.

“…hold that for you.”

“No, thank you,” Sasuke replied with forced calm.

Naruto invited himself along and the prince didn’t know how to say ‘no’ in light of… Recent events. He intended to visit a book store for information on how to- how to- proceed? Sasuke read a myriad of scrolls ranging in everything from sex to torture to the slim, terrifying intersection between the two. So, there had to be something about… What was this again? A relationship?

Putting all that aside (he almost didn’t notice the hand on the small of his back as he brooded. When he did, Sasuke was irked because he didn’t mind. On the contrary, he- fuck it.) how long did the idiot have these so-called feelings? All those times Naruto seemed like he wanted to say something, but didn’t. All those times he did say something, but it was utterly incomprehensible-

“Sasuke, stop it.”
“Stop what?”

“You’re thinking too much. Don’t.”

“You want me to stop thinking? Still an idiot, I see.”

Naruto pursed his lips and frowned. His hand stayed where it was. “I know it doesn’t make sense. It’s not supposed to.”

Sasuke blinked. His hand tightened around the parasol. “You don’t understand.”

Something was missing again, missing from inside of him. Something crucial.

“The feeling’s mutual,” the blond had the audacity to laugh. It sounded forced. They passed the afternoon arguing. Sasuke didn’t notice the odd looks from the villagers. Even if he did, he wouldn’t have cared.

If he knew why…

Well, that would come later.

Sai insisted that they pack their belongings and bring them to the Ultimate Rock Battle for security reasons or something that sounded equally dubious. Sasuke misplaced Midori’s documents… into his satchel. Sakura brought Kurama because she was excessively fond of the little red fox. Naruto took his staff and nothing else. Also, Neji was there, seated stiffly beside Sai, who openly stared at his crotch.

The prince was subjected to many, many looks from strangers once again.

He ignored them and focused on the barbaric, artless display of bending in the ring.

“Tch, you call this bending?”

Sakura giggled. Naruto called him a snob. They started arguing again -‘better that than a classless idiot’ and ‘I’d rather be classless than an imperialist’ and ‘oh, a five-syllable word. I’m so impressed.’- until Sakura shushed them harshly.

Then came the grand finale: the blind Hyuuga girl was, apparently, an earthbending prodigy with a secret identity. Naruto flailed wildly when the Blind Bandit entered the ring. Neji stiffened.

Hinata destroyed ‘The Boulder’ in a single move. The crowd erupted into cheers and boos. People trickled out of the stadium as the Avatar stumbled after her.

“It’s you,” he shook her narrow, not-so-delicate shoulders, “you were the one in the swamp.”

“P-pardon me?” she stuttered, pushing her fingertips together. The ringmaster attempted to present her with a plaque. Naruto waved him off as he rambled excitedly. The old man heaved a sigh, shoved the silver, reflective metal into Sasuke’s hands, and groused about his aching joints.

The prince examined its clear, carved surface. His stoic reflection blinked, unimpressed, until he saw-

“Sakura,” he said quietly, “is this why people were staring?”

The waterbender glanced from the plaque, down to the marks on his neck and up to his livid features.
“Sasuke-kun-“

“That,” and there it was again. The burning lack of something. The most crucial thing a firebender has, the one thing he’d spent a lifetime honing to perfection. "Idiot."

Sasuke exploded.

Rather, his hands caught on fire.

Same difference: every earthbender in the stadium noticed.

“Oy!” a tall, stoic woman hissed.

“You,” a burly bearded man declared.

Shouts of ‘firebender’ and ‘get him!’ echoed at the precise moment the prince pinpointed his loss.

Self-control. Every firebender must keep a firm grip at all times, but that morning, Sasuke lost- shit, here it goes.

They were attacked from all sides.

“Kurama, yip- yip!” Naruto shouted. The kitsune expanded and whipped his tails, generating a powerful burst of wind.

“Hinata-sama,” Neji shouted, shoving a bag into her hands, “Go! I’ll hold them back.” Sasuke and Naruto were flung onto the fox’s back by a determined Sakura. Sai pulled Hinata aboard. Sakura exchanged a look with Neji, who nodded solemnly. She hesitated. Neji stomped on the ground, forcing her into the air and onto the fox’s back.

Together, they took off into the night, unaware of the kohl-lined eyes that watched from the shadows.

Sasuke was too busy fuming to indulge his fear of flight. Naruto was too busy comforting a very blind Hinata to notice. Sakura helped Sai navigate to a small cave deep in the desert where they decided to sleep for a few hours.

Back to the present...

I should have taken watch, the prince told himself as he drank the thick, acid-sweet sap from the cactus. Someone should have… But it’s my fault.

Because when they woke only a few hours later, Kurama was gone, leaving them with two choices: move deeper into the desert towards the library or perish.

Sasuke’s thirst receded. He felt invigorated, like everything would be just fine. The prince was giddy with joy, brimming with hope, and understood the reason behind everything since the beginning of things. Whoa.
“I was right,” he smiled brightly, “it’s all connected. Naruto, drink this.”

All he got in return was a tired, glazed look.

“No? ‘Bout you, Sakuwa- ra,” he corrected. Hoo boy, words were tricky little things. “Cactus juice. It’ll quench ya.”

Another blank look. Fine, fuck you. And your crazy purple hair, too. Wait, since when did Sakura have purple hair? Weird.

“Blind girl,” he turned to the earthbender, “come on. It’s the quenchiest!”

“…O-okay,” Blind girl stuttered, reaching for the makeshift cactus-cup in Saskue’s hand.

“Hinata,” Sakura said, swatting her hand down, “don’t drink that.”

Sasuke pouted. What a buzzkill.

“What about you, penis freak?”

“I appreciate the offer, prince dickless, but no.”

“Okay,” and Sasuke would have been offended but he was too distracted by the rainbows around the sun and the swirling sand babies dancing on the ground, “More for me. Filthy peasants. Not you, blind girl,” he added, before chugging the rest and going back for more.
The Desert

Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

The sun was near the horizon, so they must have been walking for… Naruto squinted up at the sky and sighed. Seriously, who cares? Sai was at the front of the line, navigating. Sakura and Hinata walked side by side behind him, talking quietly. Naruto was… Not lagging, but holding up the rear as he carried Sasuke piggy-back style.

It would’ve been tons of fun under other circumstances. Naruto always wanted to tell the bastard to hop on and hold tight. Then he’d run with the wind at his back, go fast, faster as the air whistled in their ears and far, far away, sharing that wonderful experience of true freedom…

The Avatar stumbled. A cool, firm hand steadied him at the last second.

“Naruto, you’re tired,” Sakura squeezed his arm, “If you want, I could…”

_Not a chance in hell._

“It’s alright Sakura-chan. He’s not that heavy.”

“Naruto…”

“Leave it, already!” He snapped and immediately regretted it. “Uh. Sorry, please.”

“Okay. I understand.”

_No, you don’t._

Sakura’s concerned frown faded into a small, thoughtful smile. She quickened her pace, cast one last glance over her shoulder and resumed her conversation with Hinata. Naruto huffed, adjusted his grip, and focused on moving forward.

“Crazy, stubborn bastard… always thinks everything’s his fault,” Naruto grumbled, “should have stopped him… should have known he has that mur- mur- murder complex?” That didn’t sound right. He wished Sasuke would wake up already and make fun of his pitiful vocabulary.

“Martyr complex,” the prince hummed into the Avatar’s neck, “and I don’t have one.”

“Sasuke, you’re awake!”

“Idiot. Just because I closed my eyes and fell over doesn’t mean I passed out. The sand babies wanted to play. Oh,” he perked up, peering forward, “who lit Sai on fire? Not that I’m complaining.”

Naruto looked. Sai was not on fire. Sasuke was hallucinating (again). Naruto didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry. He was too tired to choose, so he did nothing.

“Ne, Naruto.”

_And why does this sort of thing always happen? Does that asshole actually have a death wish?_

Ice cracks at the South Pole: Sasuke pushes Naruto out of the way, falls into freezing water, and almost dies of hypothermia. The Avatar shuddered at the memory.
“Naruto,” the prince said again. Naruto continued to ignore him as he brooded. Like, remember that other time? Yeah. Rock slide in a scary, magic cave: Sasuke pushes Naruto out of the way, gets bonked in the head, and nearly dies of a concussion.

“Na-ru-to.”

And now, in the middle of the desert: Sasuke drinks cactus juice, knowing that it could be poisonous, just because-

“Oy, usuratonkachi!”

“Ow, ow bastard! Don’t yell in my ear. What?”

“Did we have sex?”

Naruto nearly pitched forward face-first once again. A lot of blood rushed to his already burning face. Again, he said nothing.

“Naruto.” Sasuke pulled his earlobe teasingly.

“Sasuke, you’re high.”

And since when do I have to be the rational one? Argh, this is all wrong!

“I’m talking about that morning. Remember, you held me down and-”

“Yes, okay! Keep it down, will ya?”

“Anyway, did we. Is that how it works, ah, with two guys?”

“Um.”

Fuck.

“Because… It’s pretty clear-cut between a guy and a girl. Like, oh. This goes there. But how does-how do you- and she never got that far, so I don’t know how two women would do it either. It doesn’t make sense.”

This time, Naruto didn’t say anything because he honestly didn’t know where to begin.

“Is that what you meant?” Sasuke asked, “When you said that it’s not supposed to make sense. That’s what you were talking about, right?”

“Uh.”

The Avatar took a moment to remember. When they were walking through the Suna markets, Sasuke was clearly overthinking everything. Naruto nearly got a migraine just watching him, this so-called genius acting like a total idiot by trying to analyze-

“What do you want from me?” the prince murmured almost childishly.

Nothing. Everything. Whatever you’ll give me. Whatever you’ll let me give to you.

(He didn’t say any of this. Sasuke would have a heart attack or at the very least vomit his guts out. Uh-uh, no thanks.)
“We should, like, really talk about this later.”

“Hn. If you’re after the royal dango receptie, I’m afraid it was lost in a fire.”

“What?”

“Along with my stuffed fish-cat. His name was Sir Whiskers. I… I miss him.” Sasuke yawned.

“You had a stuffed… fish-cat.”

“Okay, fine. I started the fire. It was Nii-san’s fault, though. He was too-“ another yawn “-he said he couldn’t play again. ‘Next time, Sasuke,’ and then the jerk pokes me. Why doesn’t he ever have time?”

Naruto’s chest clenched painfully. “Sasuke…”

“No, he’s good big brother. I hope he’s doing okay. It’s been a while since-“ yawn “-Huh. What was I saying?”

“That-“ Naruto swallowed though his throat felt like sandpaper “-that you’re going to sleep.” He lied, but it was for the best.

“Oh. Right.”

The Avatar continued to walk in silence.

Sai’s compass malfunctioned. After a day and a half of walking non-stop in sweltering heat, they ended up in front of a…

“Rock,” Sasuke and Naruto observed in unison. Sasuke swayed. The bastard was still suffering side effects from cactus juice. Naruto steadied him. Sasuke rolled his eyes and stepped out of reach, hissing, “I’m fine.”

“Hm,” Sakura cracked her neck and smiled sardonically, “thanks for pointing that out. You’re a pair of bona fide geniuses. Shucks, what would the world do without our omnipotent Avatar and his equally all-knowing lover?”

“Uh. Sakura-chan-“

“Yes, good to see that you can stop making eyes at each other-“

“-making eyes? We are most certainly not-“ Sasuke cut in.

Sakura simply continued, talking louder. Well, at this point, it should be called yelling. “-to see what’s right in front of you. Yes, it’s a rock!”

Sai placed a hand on his cousin’s shoulder. He fixed her with a level look. Sakura blinked as if startled out of a daze. “Oh my goodness, I’m sorry guys. I didn’t mean-“
“It’s okay, Sakura-chan.”

“Don’t interrupt me baka! Shit, crap, did it again. Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

As Naruto reassured Sakura, Sasuke glared at the ground muttering unintelligibly, and Sai threw his compass onto the ground, crushing it under his heel, Hinata walked towards the giant rock. She placed her palm flat on its surface and closed her eyes.

“It’s a hive,” said the earthbender, startling the others into silence. She continued after a beat, “It’s a giant hive full of… Winged creatures and wet stuff. There’s something at the top. I can feel the vibrations, though the buzzing…”

“Yeah? Yeah? What is it?”

“Hush, Naruto,” Sakura clamped a hand over his mouth, “let her concentrate.”

As they waited, Sasuke picked at the sunburn on his arm. Sai drew a penis in the sand with his foot. And another. And another. Five penises later, Hinata spoke.

“I think there might be… People at the top.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Naruto whooped, “Let’s go!”

“Idiot, be careful!” Sasuke shouted, stumbling after him. Sai followed silently. Sakura heaved a sigh.

“A-are they always like this?” Hinata asked. She stretched her arms, then reached down to touch her toes.

Sakura mirrored her actions. “No, they used to be worse.”

“I don’t know how you stand it.”

“Me neither, to be honest,” she chuckled, “You ready for this?”

Like Hinata, Sakura knew: whatever was inside that rock, they were in for a hell of a fight.

“Heh,” the Hyuuga’s lips quirked upward, “bring it on.”

Giant wasps –giant fucking wasps- converged on them in a deadly swarm.

It ended quickly. A lot of bugs died. Most of them fled out of fear. Naruto, as the bridge between humanity and the natural world, felt kinda bad. Those wasps didn’t deserve to be run out of their own home, but- but- he heaved a sigh.

And then watched in horror as Sasuke ate some yellow goo off the wall.

“Hey, bastard! What are you doing? Spit it out, spit it out right now!”

Sasuke, being a stubborn little shit, swallowed.
“Why did you do that?!?”

“Liquid sunshine, thought it’d taste nice.”

“Fucking hell, are you still high?”

“Huh,” Sasuke licked his lips, “Maybe so.”

“Sakura-chan,” the Avatar whined, “What do we do?”

The waterbender looked like she wanted to go off again, but thought better of it. She dipped a finger in the goo and held it to her lips. “It’s not poisonous. He’ll be fine.” With that, she pushed forward, followed by Sai and Hinata, as they made their way to the top of the hive.

“I feel funny,” Sasuke complained as Hinata rearranged their surroundings into a staircase of sorts.

Sakura giggled. Naruto kept a firm grip on the prince’s upper arm. Sai actually rolled his eyes at the prince’s idiocy.

“Well,” the Avatar said, “maybe you should stop putting stuff in your mouth.” Okay, that sounded weird. “Like, uh. Random stuff from the- the- if it’s sticky or pointy- wait, I mean- shut up, you perverts!”

“We’re the perverts,” Sai deadpanned, “okay.”

Naruto damn near had an an-anything- that brain thing, where it explodes and then people die. Just ask Sasuke once he’s sober. He’ll tell you what it’s called.

Hinata finished bending the hive wall into a staircase that led to the top of the rock. She climbed as the rest followed.

Sasuke couldn’t decide if this was another hallucination, or if that perverted girl with the giant fan was really there, in the middle of the desert, on top of a giant bee-hive, with Naruto’s dog.

He squinted, blinked, and squinted some more.

Yup. Still there, along with a short red-haired boy and a guy with a painted face who definitely tried to sell him a ‘revenge potion’ or... Something... Like that. The red-head had ‘love’ painted on his forehead. Sasuke watched in abject fascination as the paint melted, leaking onto the boy’s nose, which also melted and dripped down his face.

“Wax people...” Sasuke mused.

Naruto sobbed tears of joy as he squeezed the life out of Kurama. Sakura was intrigued, but weary of the strangers. The waterbender’s green hair flowed like grape vines. Grape vines... Grapes... It must be edible.

“Kindly refrain from trying to eat my cousin’s hair,” Sai said, prying the delicious vines from Sasuke’s mouth.

The prince shrugged, turning his attention back to the wax people.
Sakura gasped softly beside him. Naruto was screaming something about airbenders, which sounded odd, because there was only one airbender in the world: this irresponsible, mathematically-challenged idiot. Then, the blonde girl suddenly whipped the fan off her back. A sharp gust of wind knocked Sasuke back down Hinata’s artificial staircase and into unconsciousness.

“This,” Naruto glared, “has got to stop happening.”

The room spun. His head was too heavy to lift. Sasuke squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

“Hn?” he grunted, scraping his hand across his face.

A rough, sardonic chuckle, followed by, “You hit your head pretty hard back there. Not the- uh- first time you. Passed out, I mean.”

The prince buried his face in the crook of his elbow and sighed. This again.

“We’re at the fifth Air Temple,” Naruto continued. Sasuke felt a warm weight rest on the center of his stomach. He felt the vibration of the Avatar’s voice along with the movement of his jaw as the other boy spoke. “The monks said that wind moves in five directions: north, south, east, west, and ‘between.’ They also said that we have a temple at each car-card-“

“Cardinal,” Sasuke murmured, threading his fingers through Naruto’s hair. The prince felt warm lips curved into a wistful smile against the skin of his abdomen.

“Yeah. *Cardinal*. There’s an Air Temple to represent each cardinal direction, so four temples total, I thought- and the fifth was probably a meta- metaphor. But it’s real, Sasuke, and it’s been here all this time.”

Black eyes opened fractionally, then fluttered shut when the strain became too much. Naruto continued to speak.

The fifth cardinal direction wasn’t a metaphor. It referred to the space between worlds. The fifth Air Temple was a secret; it existed where the rift between spirits and material reality grew paper-thin.

Magic flowed freely between realms. At its root, all magic is knowledge- knowledge about the very fabric of reality that allowed the wielder to manipulate it freely.

So, the fifth Air Temple became a repository of esoteric knowledge.

In other words, *a library*.

Its location remained a secret kept for millennia because knowledge is power, and power in the wrong hands spelled disaster of catastrophic proportions.

“That’s- that’s why they survived. Everyone thought the fifth Air Temple was a myth, so the Fire Nation didn’t bother looking for it when they-” committed genocide, Naruto should have said. Instead, he cleared his throat, “But all this time... “
Temari- the girl with the fan- and her brothers, Gaara and Kankuro, had been watching the Avatar and his friends since they set foot in Suna. The trio followed the Avatar’s group into the desert, and found Kurama when the little fox wandered off. They knew that the hive-rock contained magnetic qualities, which would affect any compasses within a certain radius. So, they-

“They saved us, ya know.”

The prince remembered how he thought she looked like Naruto.

“Are you happy?” Sasuke whispered.

“Hm? Oh. To be honest… Deep down, I knew. I knew I wasn’t the last one. It’s one of those things- I couldn’t explain why, but I just- just knew. Get it?”

“No.”

“Figures.”

...

“But. Ah, yeah. I’m, like, really happy Sasuke.”

Naruto lifted his head off of the prince’s stomach. The Uchiha forced his eyes open again. It hurt a little less this time. Blue irises flooded his vision, blotting out the intricately carved ceiling.

“Feel better soon, ‘kay? I’m dying to show you around. It’s… You’ll love it, believe me.”

“Hn.”

Believe me.

Naruto was honest because he was too stupid to lie properly.

Why does he say he’s happy when his eyes are so sad?

Later, Sasuke decided as he closed his eyes. Later, when his mouth didn't taste like sand and his eyes stopped burning, he'd figure it out.
Ten days passed in a whirlwind of wonder.

Naruto was right: Sasuke loved the air temple. He’d never admit it but the whole place was pure… *Magic*.

Somehow, the building was completely underground.

The Avatar found new places to hide from Hinata every day. He brought (dragged) the prince along on these so-called dates. Sasuke should have been irritated by the constant stream of chatter, the clumsy, excessive gestures, the constant physical contact, and a lot of other things.

He wasn’t. What he should’ve felt and what he did feel were leagues apart.

And that’s okay because he was probably going to die soon.

*If Madara doesn’t kill me, Itachi will. This thing (relationship?) was always inevitable so. So-*

Whatever. Look, it is what it is. The temple contained too many diversions to allow for proper brooding.

Sai used the planetarium - an *enormous* model made of metal rings and glittering geodes that mirrored celestial motion with perfect precision- to pinpoint this ‘Day of Black Sun.’ Kakashi’s estimate was wildly inaccurate; the solar eclipse would happen months later than predicted. Sai sent a parrot-hawk with an encrypted message to their allies.

(Sasuke sagged with relief. They had time.)

Later, Naruto showed him The Atlas Room.

“This…” Sasuke breathed, “goes beyond the edges of the Fire Nation map.”

“And then some,” Nara Shikamaru remarked as Naruto gushed in the background about ‘all the pretty colors.’

A few hours later, the Uchiha found it: a map. Okay, duh. But it was *the* Map- the one he didn’t know he was looking for until he stumbled across it.


“Whatcha say?”

“Nothing. Go back to sleep, dobe.”

“Kay.” The blond resumed drooling on a pile of ‘blankets’ (read: atlases printed on cloth.)

Sasuke traced the thickest vein: a river flowing from the Ambrut sea** across the entire continent. It touched the Cave Of Two Lovers, wound under Grass Country, surfaced briefly in a forest -swamp- before dipping deep below the desert.

*Suna… The Hyuuga Manor.*
Sakura’s unanswered question echoed in his ears.

“You’re in the middle of the desert. Where do you get this water from?”

His vision shifted, shimmered, and briefly tinted red.

And next is…

*The temple. It flows beneath the temple. Everything is connected.*

His head throbbed. A faint metallic scent lingered in his nostrils.

Sasuke thought he heard it again: the sound of tiles falling– the soft pitter-patter of past raining into the future.

Something warm and wet touched his upper lip. Fingertips grazed the liquid and pulled away. Blood.

“Naruto, wake up.”

“A nosebleed, Sasuke?” Naruto’s voice echoed in the empty halls.

The prince continued to pinch his nose. He glared.

“What,” the blond chuckled, “were you having perverted thoughts again?”

Nasally, “Usuwatokachi, what do you mean ‘again?’ I’m not the one who- stop laughing.”


“Don’t call me that.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

They really shouldn’t have done what they did next but it was late and no one seemed to be around.

Naruto liked to talk afterwards-

*He’s still not telling me something. What isn’t he telling me?*

-and (again, not that he’d ever admit it) Sasuke liked to listen.

“Most of the monks, they weren’t…”

The silence spoke volumes.

“That’s not important. Iruka-sensei was there from the start. He stuck with me until I- when I-“

“It’s okay,” Sasuke cut in, “I would’ve done the same thing.”
After everything they put you through, I’m surprised you didn’t run sooner.

“Yeah?”

The prince rolled his eyes.

“Of course.”

Naruto was stunned into silence when they met Uzumaki Karin.

Eventually, he wheezed, “Kaa-chan?”

“What? Ew, I’m not your mother, loser. Shit, are you for real the Avatar?”

“She has the same hair…” the blond pointed a trembling finger, “The same face… Sakura-chan, tell me you see her too.”

Sakura quirked a brow and bit back a laugh. “Yes Naruto, I see her.”

Karin took them to the Spirit Garden: a cavern of white grass, glowing trees, and iridescent waters at the base of the temple. Plants swayed mysteriously in the absence of wind. Small, pulsing orbs of color rained from the ceiling. Naruto thought they looked like fireflies. He touched one and felt a tingle as it sank into his skin.

“This is the Intersection,” Karin said. She didn’t bother elaborating.

Luckily, Sakura was always quick to catch on. “You mean where the Spirit World flows into ours.”

Karin nodded. The girls watched the Avatar run amok, yelling about how ‘Sasuke has to see this.’

(Yeah, shocker.)

“So,” Karin examined her nails, “this good for waterbending practice or whatever?”

“Or whatever,” Sakura winked, “thanks. I’ll take it from here.”

The Sun Room, true to its name, was the brightest enclosure in the air temple. The geniuses of the Nara clan concocted an intricate array of mirrors that brought natural light to almost every floor. Sunlight was scarce in the lower levels; none reached the Garden at the base of the temple.

Temari liked meditating in the Sun Room. She loved the glittering jeweled walls and translucent crystal ceiling. Yeah, okay: she has a weakness for pretty things.

That particular morning, the Sun Room was occupied. Temari ‘tsked’ in irritation before she decided to settle in and watch.

Whipped, Temari thought as she watched them, that loser is so whipped. But no, it was worse –
better?- than that. *Maybe he’s strung up like one of Kankuro’s puppets.* She nodded to herself. That seemed about right.

Temari unclipped the fan from her back and carefully set it aside. She cracked her neck in relief. The airbender leaned back on a pillar, watching the prince of Fire Nation attempted to teach the Avatar how to firebend.

“You have to control yourself,” Sasuke-not-Sakae said, “Firebending is the art of restraint.”

The Avatar made a stupid-looking face, said “okay” though he clearly didn’t get it, punched the air and landed on his ass, knocked down by the blowback of another ridiculous explosion.

Temari waved the smoke aside with a puff of air and coughed.

Yeah, the Avatar: some century-old loser with a raging crush on the prince of the fire nation. Just peachy.

Temari’ s cheeks flushed as she remembered walking in on- Well, let’s just say Sasuke was a quiet guy except when he wasn’t and if those noises were anything to go bym Naruto clearly knew what he was doing. They didn’t notice her even when she deliberately cleared her throat. Which, again, was weirdly romantic but also really, really concerning considering that they were in the middle of a war. If the Avatar’s supposed to save the world, shouldn’t he, like, be aware of his surroundings?

“Naruto,” Sasuke said, forcing Temari to repress a nosebleed at the memory of last night, “do it like this.” The firebender punched the air, releasing a sweltering blast of heat that made her sweat.

“Whoa,” Naruto murmured, eyes alight with nauseating admiration.

“No, not ‘whoa.’ It was supposed to be-“ he punched the air again, creating a smaller but still too-hot blast of heat “-damn it! The point is, you have to hold back as much as possible.”

“Why?”

“Fire is pure chakra. You have massive chakra stores. If you release too much at once, you might explode.”

Naruto squinted, scratched the back of his head, then burst out laughing. “Ha- aha- right, I’ll blow up like boom!” He flung his hands out. “Whoosh! Good one Sasuke.”

“I’m serious.”

...

“What?”

“It’s too soon for you to learn firebending. There’s a reason the Avatar’s supposed to follow a certain sequence of elements. Just… Spend the rest of the day training with Hinata. Your earthbending needs improvement.”

“But- but Hinata’s. Um.” Naruto shuddered. “She’s scary ya know.”

Sasuke snorted. “You’re the one who wanted her as a teacher.”

“Not me, the magic swamp.”

“Tomato, to-mahto,” Sasuke rolled his shoulders and dusted his tunic. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Naruto,” he squeezed the other boy’s shoulder, “you can do this.”

In a blink, the pout was replaced by pure blinding hope. “Ya think so?”

“No, I’m the type of person who says things just to be nice.”

…

“That was a joke.”

“Oh. Heh. Good one! Hey, so I was thinking tonight we could-“

Sasuke shushed him, jerking his head at Temari. Naruto followed the prince’s gesture. “Wha- when did you get here, Tamako?”

“It’s Temari, dick-for-brains.”

“Fuck you too fan-girl.”

Clever. She chuckled.

“Just here to remind you, that if you screw this up, we’re all done for. Avatar.” Temari tacked on for good measure.

Naruto sputtered. “I- you, look here lady-“ he deflated all at once “-yeah. Yeah, I know.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I suppose it’s a good thing.” “white sparks buzzed at the prince’s fingertips. He clenched his hands. His tone remained calm. “-that Naruto only took a few months to nearly master waterbending, that he is making exponential progress in earthbending -the element polar opposite to his nature- and has the potential to be the one of the greatest firebenders the world has ever known.”

Naruto’s eyes widened until they just about popped out of his pretty yellow head. “W-what? Sasuke, what’re you saying?”

“That so?” Temari challenged, crossing her arms under her ample bosom.

“Yes, it is so. And another thing…”

So… Turns out that when you piss him off, Sasuke talks. Like, a lot.

First, he ranted about the incompetence of the monks in Naruto’s time. They were terrible teachers, used outdated methods without accounting for the needs of their students or whatever. Temari was distracted by how Naruto’s jaw unhinged, so she didn’t catch all of it.

“… he was practically on his own, but he mastered airbending and the Avatar state.” At this point, Sasuke marched up to Temari. He leaned in until they were nose-to-nose and jabbed a finger at her chest. “Do you know what the Avatar state is, peasant? Do you know…”

Whole lotta mystical mumbo-jumbo that Temari had no interest in. She spotted that guy in the library a few times. Apparently, he liked to read.

“… but he’s not alone. Not anymore. The universe is on his side. Every person on this half of the world will fight tooth and nail to help him win. So. Your concern is noted, but entirely unfounded.
Good day, Temari.” He sneered, then stormed away without a glance at either of them.

The corner of her mouth quirked upward.

*Guess it goes both ways.*

“Kid,” she said, jolting the boy from his stupor.

“Um. Huh?”

“Nothing personal. I had to see for myself.”

*A test of loyalty.* That’s what Shikamaru would call it.

“See what?”

She kicked her fan upright and returned it to its holster. “Stuff. Oh, speaking of me seeing stuff… You might want to get a room next time.”

The small lights snowing from the ceiling prickled when they touched his skin. His eyes fell shut. Sasuke had a moment of clarity: they shouldn’t be doing this in a temple. It was- what’s the word? Sacr-Sacre- shit, fuck, *Naruto*– the moment passed.

All he could feel was soft sharp-sweet heat and a deep, echoing ache that should have- but. It was just good. Embarrassing, for obvious reasons. He didn’t realize what he agreed to until it was too late, and by then he was… He was… Naruto hummed. Sasuke clenched one hand in the supple, white grass and another on feathery yellow hair. The (seriously embarrassing) wet sounds coming from below were muffled by the sound of the river–lake? Some body of water nearby- wait, that’s just the *whooshing* of blood in his ears.

He didn’t take long to finish. Probably. Time lost meaning for a while.

“Do you,” Sasuke panted, “do you enjoy doing that?”

Naruto crawled upward and hovered above the prince’s face. His lips were swollen and shiny with something other than just saliva.

“It’s an-“ pause, insert shit-eating grin “-acquired taste.”

Sasuke wrinkled his nose. “Don’t be gross, dumbass,” he murmured, wondering why he wasn’t even remotely disgusted by any of it.

*I should be, right? Why am I not-*

That thought ended as he was kissed. Sasuke returned the kiss, tasted something slightly off, realized what that taste was and. Well. It was weird, but not that bad, all things considered.

“Warn me next time,” he grumbled.

“Oh like you warned me, bastard?”
Another burning rush of embarrassment. Sasuke covered his face with his hand.

Muffled, “Was I supposed to?”

“Un. Yeah. Thought that was obvious but ‘s okay. I know how, heh, hard-“

“Don’t.”

“-it can be. Oy, move your hand. I wanna see you get all flustered.”

“No.”

“Why’re you, um, being like this all of a sudden? Like- you’re usually pretty shameless, Sasuke.” The prince did move his hand then to level a withering glare. “Wait, not- not that that’s a bad thing. Actually I was-”

“Naruto.”

“Touchy, teme.” The Avatar poked his forehead. It was an innocent gesture. That didn’t stop the memories from coming. Sasuke pushed the other boy off and sat up, resting his chin on his knees.

“Don’t do that.”

“Mm?”

*Change the subject, change the subject, change the-

“This is a temple,” the prince blurted before his head could explode. His earlier moment of clarity returned with a vengeance.

“Yeah, so?”

“It’s… I mean. Should we be doing- doing whatever here? It’s sacrilege. That’s what the Fire Sages said.”

Naruto laughed.

“I’m serious.”

“You’re always serious.”

...

“Geez, lighten up Sasuke. To answer the question: fuck no. Actually, the monks taught me that there’s nothing more sacred than making - making a connection with another person that you-”

The prince raised a brow.

“Look, it’s like this. Bending is pretty awesome, right?”

“Get to the point, usuratonkachi.”

“Give me a chance, asshole. Um. Now, now think about how each type of bending like… Began. Came to be. Y’know what I mean.”

The prince was all too familiar with the tale of the first earthbenders. He knew the story of the old
sun goddess and Izuna Uchiha. Vaguely, he recalled the origin of waterbending: the moon and ocean spirits fell in love. They each split their own souls and reached across the ether of time to unite. The fragments of their torn spirits incarnated into human form. Their children became the first waterbenders.

Sasuke stretched his legs out and leaned back on his hands. “I don’t know the one about airbending.”

“Oh, it’s just the usual stuff- foxfire and a tree spirit and a monk crossing the bounds of death to reach his beloved-” Naruto jumped to his feet and began to pace “-yeah, sounds cheesy, what can ya do- so we call it the first…” he ruffled his hair, making a stupid ‘thinking’ face. “Turn of the wheel. Yeah. Apparently, it started cycle of re-reincarnation, not that that’s important, but d’you get it now?”

The Uchiha shrugged and kept his expression neutral.

“Love is, like,” the blond spun in a circle with his arms spread wide, “like, the portal for everything good that comes into this world. Bending, babies, good stories, that one building some king built for his dead wife-* every time, every way love is, uh, expressed, it’s all good. This, between us, whatever we do, it’s good. There’s nothing more sacred than…”

*Does he know what he’s saying?*

“Don’t be naïve. Madara used to be a baby. Look what he’s done.”

“Um Sasuke, all babies are good until bad things happen to them. Besides, without your dickboat of a crazy uncle, we wouldn’t have met. I’d still be stuck in a block of ice.”

The prince chewed his lip, frowning.

“Fine. But that king executed thousands of builders and the architects after the monument was built.”

“Yeah, that kind of sucked.”

“So…”

“Look, I’m not going to defend that guy’s messed up decision, but it doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“You’re naïve.”

“Maybe,” the Avatar shrugged. His eyes were alight with mirth. “Or maybe my wisdom is beyond mortal com-uh- comprehension.”

*I still don’t know if you’re a genius or an idiot.*

He settled for an ambiguous “Hn.”

Naruto smiled a little smugly. They fell into a companiable silence. The blond sat cross-legged beside him and grew thoughtful. “Ne Sasuke, did you know?”

Sasuke tilted his head.

“A long time ago, I fell in love with the moon.”
A long silence passed as Sasuke waited for Naruto to continue.

He didn’t; the idiot just sat there, smiling dobe-ish at him with a faint flush on his cheeks.

“Are you going to…”

“Huh? Oh, d’ya wanna hear the story? It’s really sad and pretty weird. I’m supposed to be good at remembering past lives –ya know, being the Avatar and all that- but the further back I go, the fuzzier everything is and this one... It’s been a while.”

“Hn.”

Sasuke was dying to know.

“… You’re dying to know, aren’t you?” Naruto wet his lips and had the audacity to look even more smug. The prince was briefly startled, then affronted. He settled for a shrug. The Avatar jumped to his feet and held out his hands.

“C’mon, I’ll tell you while we walk to the river. That’s why we came down here in the first place.”

He allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. “Right, the river.”

They stood facing each other. Sasuke was still… mellow? Dazed? Pliable? Probably a bit of each.

Naruto plucked a blade of white grass from the other boy’s hair.

“She had white hair. The moon, I mean. That’s what reminded me of her: seeing the grass in your hair. White hair, black eyes –kinda like yours- and skin like Sakura-chan’s. Oh, and she was beautiful. Uh. Not that… That’s not the reason I fell in love with her. Let’s start walking.” The sentimental idiot laced their fingers together and tugged Sasuke forward.

“The river’s not far from here. It’s freaking awesome, babe, you’re gonna love it. Anyway, her name was Suki- uh- Tsuki- wait-“

“Tsukiko,” Sasuke supplied reflexively.

“Right, right, Tsukiko! So she was this princess but I didn’t know that when we met. I also, er, didn’t know I was the Avatar at the time…”

They met at the fish market. Youta- Naruto- Youta was trying to barter for the best salmon with a single copper piece. A girl waited in line behind him. Unable to bear the second-hand embarrassment, she pushed forward and paid full price, then tossed the fish at Naru- Youta and walked away without saying a word.

“Hey lady, wait up!”

“What do you want, peasant?”

“Just wanted to thank you for earlier. That guy was a real piece of work.“

“Don’t mention it.”
“Wait a minute… You’re- ohmygod are you-” he dropped into a whisper and peering under her hood “-Tsukiko-hime?”

“Ssh!”

“But what’re you-”

“Please go away.”

Instead of leaving, Youta fell into step with her. He laced his fingers behind his head and glanced sidelong at the disguised princess.

“Guess you get bored, huh?” he spoke after minutes of tense silence. “Cooped up in that huge ice palace all day. Hey, if you’re lookin’ for a good time, I can show you the best spots around town.”

“…Really?” She rolled her eyes. “Like what, the garbage dump?”

With a grin, a wink, and unfaltering confidence, Youta replied: “If that’s what you’re into, sweet cheeks.”

“You didn’t.” Sasuke said though the scene played in his mind like a memory from this life, “tell me you didn’t actually say that.”

“What? I wanted her and she wanted me even if she didn’t realize it yet. ‘S no other reason to pay for a stranger’s salmon.”

…

“Well, I guess you could say that ‘cuz she was a good person, she doesn’t need a reason to help people… Still, I could tell.”

“How?”

“It’s pretty obvious.” Naruto winked. Sasuke decided to not read into it.

“And then what?”

“Well, one thing lead to another and… this part’s really blurry but…”

Nar- Youta showed Tsukiko a hidden oasis of warm air and bright, bleached peonies in the midst of the Arctic tundra. Somewhere along they way, he took her hand. She allowed it with a secret smile.

The next time, he took her to a cave of jagged amytheist. Silver eyes begged for a kiss and in a rare moment of weakness, the princess couldn’t refuse.

The time after that, they went to an underground restaurent that served queer ascerbic liquid imported a desert ‘in between.’

“Uh… Are you sure you wanna drink that? Like, I’ve been here before but I’ve never-“

She downed the glass and gestured for another.

“Oy, sweet cheeks-“

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?“
“Just slow down, will ya.”

She didn’t.

“Come to think of it,” Naruto mused, “that might’ve been the same type of cactus juice you drank. What a crazy coincidence, ne?”

“Uncanny,” Sasuke said though he was starting to believe there was no such thing.*

“It was pretty funny to see her get all loopy, though. Anyway, the next thing I know, she’s- “

“-engaged.”

“Like, like, to be married?!” Youta sputtered, flailing violently.

Tsukiko rolled her eyes. “What other kind is there, dum dum?”

“But- but- you, I mean I- uh. You probably figured it out by now, but I love you so…”

“So what?”

“So we should be together and we can’t do that if you’re married to some other guy!”

Tsukiko hummed, sniffed, and turned to leave.

“I mean,” Youta continued, moving to block her, “you love me too. I can tell. You don’t have to say it since I know you don’t like to… Uh… Talk about that type of stuff.”

“So. What.” She bit out, staring resolutely at the floor; no use denying it.

“Can you wait?” Warm hands settled around her waist and pulled her close. “Put it off just for, like, a couple of weeks.”

“Our nation is in jeopardy. It’s my duty-“

Youta scoffed at that abhorrent word.

“-my duty,” she emphasized with a glare, “to protect my people no matter what.”

“And I get that-“

“Oh?” The princess took a step back.

“-but there’s something coming. Something big, so if you put this off I just know-“

“How?” She snapped. “How can you know the future? What proof do you have?”

“None, sweet cheeks. None what-so-fucking-ever, but I know what I’m talking about. Please,” he begged, “please believe me.”

“And then what?”

Sasuke didn’t know what to say. He was struck by the irrational urge to apologize.

“Please,” Youta whispered, sinking to his knees.

Tsukiko’s eyes brimmed with moisture. “I’m sorry.”

Three weeks later, she married ‘Ser Pompous Jerkass’ (as Youta dubbed him). Two days after that, Youta realized he was the Avatar; the king of all kings, royalty to royalty-

“-and if she waited, we could’ve been together.”

“Don’t you blame her? She should have listened to you.”

“What, no no no! Never. She- she was- it wasn’t our time and nothing she did could- she tried her best. At everything. It just didn’t work out.”

Sasuke stopped walking and tightened his grip on Naruto’s hand.

“So you just forgave her.”

Naruto gave him a strange look and tugged him forward, resuming their walk.

“I would’ve, but there was nothing to forgive. Now, where was I?”

Long story short: Ser Jerkass (as Naruto dubbed Tsukiko’s fiance) murdered the magic koi that contained the moon spirit’s soul. The princess, who was healed by the koi when she was a sickly child, gave her life to restore the natural balance. Her heart illuminated the night sky as the new moon; her soul returned to the wheel of incarnation.

“And I was there. My hands were covered in someone else’s blood, so I –damn it!- I wasted time washing them before I h-held her.” He quickened their pace; Sasuke had to trot to keep up. “Didn’t know she’d die so soon or else. Or else. Ugh, whatever!”

“Naruto…”

“She said, ‘next time. Next time for sure, I promise,’ and then, well, she died and oh, we’re here. Would ya look at that.”

Sasuke could hear the sweet lilting babel of the river. White water glowed in his periphery, illuminating the ghostly grass that surrounded it. Still, he kept his gaze on the dumdum to his left. He swallowed and tried again. “Naruto.”

“Teme, don’t worry about it. We’re close to the spirit world or whatever and it’s, um, digging up a lotta stuff. I just shared this part ‘cuz you’re really, really nice to talk to.”

He led the prince to the water’s edge. They sat side by side with their feet in the water. Small, colorful tadpoles nibbled at their toes. Neon-bright dragonflies danced across the surface, occasionally buzzing past their ears.

Naruto cleared his throat.

“And it’s really weird but you have a lot in common with her, don’t ya think?”

Sasuke’s pulse quickened.
“Actually, now that I think about it…” The blond mused.

“You didn’t actually fall in love with the moon.”

“Um. Huh?”

“What you said earlier-” his toes curled underwater ”-that you fell in love with a giant dead rock orbiting the earth-“

“Don’t talk about her like that! Especially since she really was a lot like you. Or are you like her? Ah. Either way-“

“She rejected you. I didn’t.”

“I meant the part where –uh- she turned her back on someone she loved.” That last part was spoken so softly, Sasuke had to strain to hear it.

“Now what’re you on about?”

“Nothing.”

“No, spit it out,” the prince elbowed him none too gently, “I know you have something to say.”

“Okay well, I think it’s pretty obvious: when you love someone, it’s pretty fucked up to vow to kill them.”

“You didn’t mention anything about that princess killing-“

“Not her, bastard, you. Look, I don’t wanna get into this right now.“

“Get into what?” He snapped, standing abruptly.

The Avatar kicked his feet in the water, stirring up a small whirlpool. “Nothing.”

“Naruto.”

“Sasuke,” he grinned, then stuck out his tongue.

“Tell me.”

“If you really want to know…” not yet. ”Apparently, that Tamako chick walked in on us the other night.”

“What?”

“Remember when you got that nosebleed in the library and then we, heh, well I-“

“She saw that?! And you- you- there are people walking around so why do you always-“

“-teach you how to have fun? Live a little, bastard. It’s no big deal.” Naruto flung some water at the irate prince to illustrate his point.

Sasuke leapt to his feet. “Fun? I have a reputation-“ the rest was cut off by a mouthful of water. “You!” A thread of electricity zinged from his fingertips. It singed some grass black and skittered across the surface of the river.

“Whoa, what was that?”
“None of your business, you absolutely reckless, inconsiderate pervert!” Sasuke barked. He flushed a lovely shade of scarlet before he turned on his heel and stormed away.

Naruto took a moment to smile. The whole ‘change the subject to distract people from the real issue and avoid uncomfortable confrontations’ thing that Sasuke always does?

Turns out, two can play at that game.

---

“Y-you were doing so well, Naruto-kun,” Hinata commented in her deceptively sweet voice, “what happened?” She kneeled in front of him and stared at his forehead.

The Avatar was buried in scorching sand from the neck down. He squinted against the sun and spat out a mouthful of crunchy grains.

“Hinata-”

Lavender eyes narrowed dangerously. Naruto hurried to correct himself. “Hinata-sensei, don’t you, ah, think this is a little harsh?”

“I see,” she said.

Naruto snorted (blind girl saying she could ‘see’? Hilarious!). Sand went up his nose. Okay, he deserved that.

“See what?”

“You’re avoiding confrontation again. How does the earth feel about that?”

“Eto. Probably nothing-“ because dirt doesn’t have feelings, he was about to say, but the sand tightened around him in warning “-wait, wait, I mean it’ll not respect me, right?”

“Correct,” she nodded, stomped on the ground, and dragged Naruto out by his hair.** “Deal with your problem tonight. Come find me tomorrow.”

She didn’t have to say ‘or else’ for Naruto to hear it loud and clear.

---

Midnight found the Avatar wandering through the upper floor of the temple. The mirrors lining the halls carried distorted reflections of the full moon, which hovered directly above the Sun Room (so wouldn’t ‘Sky Room’ be a better name? Gah, who cares.) Round, green orbs*** were interspersed at regular intervals, casting additional light.

He stopped in front of an arched entrance. The stone was cracked around the edges, a little dirtier than the rest of the hall, and carved with bubbles and lines. The markings blurred, jumped around, and even seemed to glow a faint blue. He could almost make out what they meant, until he blinked.

“ Weird,” Naruto rubbed his eyes, “maybe I’m just tired.”
Snippets of conversation drifted from the back of the room.

“…common language before the Daimyō reformed…”

Naruto strained to listen as he navigated the winding maze of bookshelves.

“… those with the third sight can…”

It sounded like that Naka guy, the one Tamako liked to sexually harass.

“… so my clan…”

And that was Sasuke! Naruto quickened his pace.

“… troublesome, though if you can translate…” A crinkle of paper followed by some scratching noises; he was getting close.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Naka Shika-whatever yawned.

Sasuke had his back to Naruto. He was sitting at a table piled with dusty old books. A green-lit lamp was balanced precariously on a tall stack of paper. Naka-or-something glanced up at Naruto’s arrived.

“Your boyfriend’s here.”

Sasuke ‘hn’-ed absently, absorbed in his reading. (Really, that guy and his books. Naruto would never understand it.) Then, “my what?”

Naka-or-something nodded at Naruto. “No one really comes here. You’re free to… Do your thing. I’m turning in for the night.” With that, he left the sputtering prince and a curious, confused Avatar alone.

“What a guy,” Naruto said.

“How’d you find me?” Sasuke didn’t look up.

“Luck, coincidence, fate,” and did the bastard tense at that last bit? Weird. “Take your pick.”

He turned a page. “Whatever.”

Naruto sat on the bench across from him. “You mad at me?”

“No.”

“Oh,” he nudged Sasuke’s foot under the table, “so you avoided me all day for no reason.”

“I was busy.”

“Busy avoiding me.”

“Not everything’s about you, dumdum-“ cough “- dumbass.”

Naruto rest his chin on his cheek. He tapped arhythmically on the wood until Sasuke gave him A Look.
Dumdum? That’s what she called me. I never told him and…

And what, exactly? He squinted at Sasuke. The dim light softened the prince’s features and bleached his skin a mesmerizing, ghostly white. Black lashes cast long shadows that flickered with each blink. His hair was longer-

How come I didn’t notice?

- long enough to stay tucked behind his small, round ear.

Even his ears… Gah! Focus, he called me dum dum and yesterday he knew-

“How’s that you know her name?” Naruto slammed both hands down on the table, “how’d you know her name?”

Sasuke closed his book and quirked a brow. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“The moon-“

Dark eyes widened fractionally, then narrowed. “She wasn’t the moon, idiot.”

“-Tsukiko, I couldn’t remember her name but you-“

“It was a lucky guess. If you want to talk about yesterday, tell me what you were saying before you started splashing me with dirty river water.”

The prince shuffled a few papers and opened another book. The Avatar squinted at the print—it was the same weird (familiar?) language as that on the entrance- and tilted his head.

He reminded himself to focus.

Naruto shook his head. “For your information, that water is clean. What’d ya think we’ve been drinking this whole time? And there’s no way you just guessed that exact name. That’s- that’s-”

What did they say about ‘coincidence’ again?

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Right, I forgot that was your thing.”

“Excuse me?”

“Y’know, changing the subject to avoid- fuck it. You know what you’re doing, bastard.”

“The only thing I know is that something’s bothering you and you won’t tell me what it is.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you if you promise to hear me out.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I.”

“Alright, well… You see, the thing is… Argh! Look, you still love your brother-” Sasuke opened his mouth ”- no, you promised to hear me out-” a scowl and a ‘tch,’ followed by silence “-and, ah, I know he like… Did something really messed up so you think it’s your job to fix it but- but!” Naruto leapt to his feet and strode to the other side of the table, gesturing widely “-Damn it, Sasuke, you’ve
been through enough and if you do this by yourself, it would… It would…” his vision blurred.

“Are you crying?”

“Shut up,” Naruto sniffled, sitting on the bench beside him.

The prince’s finger’s twitched. He pursed his lips and looked away. The room was silent for a while.

Naruto cleared his throat. “What I’m trying to say is, you have a choice. You know that, right? Wait, I’m still not done. You have a choice and I don’t want you to do this alone, so whatever you decide, I’ll help you.” Blue eyes blazed with conviction. “If you wanna find another way -and I know there’s another way, there absolutely has to be- I can- we can- Whatever you want. It’s totally up to you.”

“Naruto, I,” Sasuke sighed, “appreciate the sentiment.”

...

“But?”

“You’re wrong. I don’t love nii-san. It wouldn’t make any sense.”

“You just called him n-”

“Whatever. He killed my parents.”

“So what?” Naruto leaned in, trying to catch his eye.

Sasuke turned away. “Stop being absurd.”

“Look at me,” he whispered, moving even closer, “it’s not supposed to make sense, Sasuke.”

“You said that before.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t spell everything out for you all the time. Just think about it.”

I want to touch his scar.

“You can’t help me kill him. It’s my burden and my duty.”

Will he let me?

“That’s what she said.” He brushed Sasuke’s hair away from his forehead.

“Who?” Black eyes were still downcast.

“Tsukiko. You guys have a lot in common, like a lot. And you still haven’t told be how you knew her name.”

The prince finally met his gaze. His irises were so clear, Naruto could see a reflection inside a reflection inside an infinite number of reflections.

On top of that, Sasuke was too damn honest for his own good; you just had to meet his eyes, and he turns into an open book. Like, that’s why he always tries to look away.

“Sasuke?” Naruto prodded.

“I was her at another time,” he murmured, “I can remember from the swamp…”
“Then Yamada—“
“Yamato—“

“Right, that creepy guy. He said the swamp shows you—oh.” Naruto nearly fell off the bench. Sasuke steadied him. “Oh,” he gripped a pair of pale hands, “Oh.” His brain shut down—

“I don’t want to talk about it.”
-then kicked into overdrive.

“But Sasuke! This means you’re, I’m, we’re—right, right, right?!”

“So what.”

“So, so, so—why aren’t you, I mean, this is huge!”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“For real? Then who do I—“

“Naruto. Please.”

“…why not?”

“It’s too much.”

“What does that even mean?!”

Sasuke shrugged. A bright, delicate pink blush dusted his cheeks.

Naruto wanted to kiss him.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“Not really.”

“So I can, like, kiss you?”

He wrinkled his nose. “If you want.”

It wasn’t like all the other times. Sasuke was more hesitant than impatient. The Avatar squeezed the prince’s slender fingers, smiling as the lips pressed to his frowned. He pressed a little closer, exhaling, trying not to laugh, then pulled back.

“I knew it,” Naruto said. The way Sasuke chased his touch as his leaned away? Absolute gold.

“Whoa, your eyes.”

“What about them?” Bright irises flashed from crimson to black to red, and back.

“Wait, your nose is bleeding again.”

“I told you,” Sasuke pried his hand away to wipe at the thick dark liquid, “it’s too much.”

In a blink, the color faded away.

Naruto was dying to ask. He bit his lip to keep quiet.
Just a little longer...
Sight

Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

Sasuke couldn’t fall asleep. The warm arms around him, the soft heartbeat pressed to his back, the occasional contented words murmured into his neck were all nice.

Too nice. Suffocating, somehow.

He needed to think, but couldn’t. Or he didn’t want to because that would take away from this moment.

*We don’t have much time left.*

Between what he wanted to do and what had to be done, the prince always chose the latter. Three hours before dawn, Sasuke wiggled out of Naruto’s grasp and slid a pillow in his place. Quiet rustling filled the room as he dressed. A sliver of nova-blue appeared in the dark, tracking his movements.

“Where you goin’?”

Sasuke didn’t bother looking back. “Bathroom.”

“Liar.”

That idiot really picked the most inconvenient times to be perceptive.

“You’re right. This is all part of a dream.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Silence followed by soft snores. Sasuke sighed, took a deep breath, and shut the door behind him. A scrap of paper fluttered to the ground. Messy handwriting spelled a single word with no context or explanation: greenhouse.

“Nara,” the prince murmured, “what does he want?”

The greenhouse was an artificial garden close to the Sun Room. Plants with leaves that resembled human hands grew in a lush array of floor-to-ceiling shelves. Naruto once asked if these plants were ‘medical- wait, I mean medicinal.’ (And yes, to everyone’s surprise, the dobe came up with the right word on his own.)

Shikamaru chuckled, took another drag from his funny-smelling pipe, and drawled, ‘you could say that.’ Naruto was confused. Sasuke became suspicious and insisted they leave.

“I’m here,” the prince said to what might be an empty room.

“Troublesome,” came a reply from the far left. Sasuke rolled his eyes and followed the voice.

“You left a note.”

“I had a feeling something was bothering you. Hoped I was wrong, though.”

‘Naras are never wrong,’ Temari once said. He scoffed then –what a preposterous notion- but now…
“You’ve been trying to solve a problem for some time.”

“A problem?”

“All threads in the same tapestry, so yes; a single problem.”

Sasuke glared.

“What do you know about my problems?”

“Problem.”

“Whatever.”

“Now you’re starting to get it. Or not. I can only guess at what’s keeping you up, Uchiha.”

“Guess away, Nara.”

“… Let’s not go there. What I’m saying is, I know a thing or two about troublesome shit that keeps sleep at bay.”

“Why do you care about my shit?”

“Have a seat.”

There were no chairs; only plants and the dusty floor. Sasuke reluctantly perched on his own cold, bare feet across from Nara, who was leaning against one of the plant-laden shelves.

“Take it,” Shikamaru said, offering his pipe. The prince hesitated. “Put your thumb over the hole on the side, hold a small flame over the top, and inhale.”

“But—”

“Just do it. You’ll see.”

The first flame Sasuke conjured was too large. It hisses, crackled, and snapped like lightning. Shikamaru extinguished it with a small gust of air.

“Try again. Good. Breathe in, hold it for a while.”

Sasuke’s lungs burned. His throat itched. Then his lips went numb. For the first time in… a while… he felt at peace.

“See?” Shikamaru said, “it helps.”

The prince exhaled slowly. The green lights on the ceiling streaked his vision with long, straight lines. Reality grew more vivid and more distant simultaneously.

He liked it.

“Does everyone in the temple smoke this stuff?”

“Not really. It’s a Nara clan specialty.”

…”

“Why.”
“Most people don’t constantly have such loud, troublesome thoughts.”

“Meditation-“

“-provides temporary relief. This helps shift your perspective. Look at the problem from a different angle. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“We’re allies.”

True, but far from the whole truth. Sasuke was all too familiar with that evasion strategy. “Try again.”

“Fine, fine. You’re actually a pain in the ass: always digging through shit, never putting anything back. Who’d you think has to reshelf everything after you’re done?”

“Okay, so…”

“Look, it’s nothing personal. Most people think the Avatar’s going to save the world-”

“He is,” the prince cut in.

“Easy there, I wasn’t taking a dig at your boyfriend.”

“We’re-“

“If it waddles, swims, and quacks like a turtle-duck, it’s a fucking turtle-duck. Whatever,” Nara waved Sasuke's protests aside, "my point is: he’s an idealist. He’s got talent, principles, and a weird sort of charisma. He loves people. People love him. Without that guy’s blind faith, bluster, and Avatar powers —whatever those are, ‘m not sure on specifics— we wouldn’t win this war.”

Sasuke took another drag. He waited for the real answer to his question.

“We’re gonna win. No question. But that’s only one solution.”

“One solution…”

“To the problem. Look, it’s like this.”

Nara rummaged through his pockets. He dug out a crumpled piece of parchment along with a small stub of graphite, unraveled the page, smoothed the wrinkles, and scribbled out a problem.

Sasuke watched. His eyes stung. When he closed and reopened them, each component of Shikamaru’s writing took on a distinct color.

A ball thrown perpendicularly upwards to reaches a maximum height of XX units, at how many seconds after the initial throw is it YY units above the ground?*

The sting in his eyes intensified. He squeezed them shut. Instead of darkness, the Uchiha saw this hypothetical ball move in slow motion. He knew the exact moment it passed a height of YY units, reached its peak, and descended to YY units once more before returning to its initial position.

“It reaches that height twice; once at one second after the initial throw and again at seven seconds.”

Shikamaru exhaled sharply through his nose. “Not bad.”
“Anyone can solve a math problem.”

“Technically, it’s physics- uh, your eyes are doing that thing again.”

“Never mind that. So,” Sasuke balled the paper in his fist, “this problem has two solutions and without either one, you’d have an incomplete answer.”

“Exactly. If the problem is saving the world, we need to win the war. That’s the first part.”

Shikamaru took the now empty pipe from Sasuke and refilled it with powdery dark green leaves. The prince stared blankly. His thoughts were getting… Slippery? Harder to get a grip on, at any rate. “The second part,” he spoke after a long pause, “is repairing the damage. I still don’t see what this has to do with my question.”

“Repair the damage, you say- if only it was so simple.” Nara handed him the now full pipe. Sasuke was more grateful than he’d like to admit. “No, we need more than that. We need to restore the natural balance.”

“The Fire Nation –my people- started this war. They –we- committed genocide.”

“And when they lose, a second genocide won’t be out of the question.”

Sasuke chuckled. He didn’t know why. None of this was funny. If anything, it was the opposite – shit, what’s the right word? Un-funny? Something like that.

Nara only quirked a brow. “Your people need you. The world needs you.” Then, he spoke of trade relations, the economy in Fire Nation colonies, the murder of innocents, the ‘wheel’ of hatred-

Enormous, red, with floating black spokes that whirled hypnotically. It wasn’t a real thing; just like the math problem, the wheel was hypothetical.

“-which turns and turns but none of these reasons matter. Atrocities like that, like what happened to my people and what could happen to yours- they’re deep, irreparable wounds on The Tree. Roots shrivel and die. Branches fall. There’s no helping it after the point of no return.”

Blue leaves fluttering in starlight, velvety ultra-violet wood, moon-silver shifting shadows, roots that reached deep, past the ocean floor, down to the scorching core of this speck of a planet. In a blink, this picture (another hypothetical) dissolved into oblivion.

“You lost me.”

“Don’t worry about it. My point is, your boyfriend will win this war and you’ll protect your people from the fallout, being on the winning side and all. I’m helping you ‘cause you can’t do your job if you’re constantly on the verge of a panic attack.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“…maybe a little. These plants, the ones in this room, that’s what you’re always smoking?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s nice, but it can’t be, er.”
“Good for me? No, probably not. Truth be told, the stuff makes you stupid.”

“So why…”

Sasuke pushed his bangs back. Shikamaru’s gaze drifted to his hairline and lingered at that particular spot. The prince frowned and moved his hand, covering his scar.

“Your mind, your thoughts: they get stuck in loops.” Nara turned his attention to the ceiling.

The Uchiha nodded.

“This,” he gestured to the pipe, ”interrupts the established pattern. It helps you relax enough to see the answer.”

“I see.”

It somehow made perfect sense.

“And Uchiha?”

Sasuke tilted his head.

“I don’t know what your problem is, but dying is neither an option nor a solution. Stop being so goddamn reckless.”

“What…” He exhaled, watching the wisps of smoke form strange, fox-like figures in the air.

“I’ve been there,” Shikamaru pressed.

“You’re talking out of your ass,” Sasuke shot back.

“Well you suck at playing dumb. Next time you think your friends are going to die of thirst in the middle of the desert-”

“Did Sakura put you up to this?”

“No. Stop interrupting. Self-loathing gets you nowhere. The world needs you, and if you need more help getting perspective, you know where to find me. Stay away from the cactus juice, yeah? That stuff can kill you.”

The Uchiha snorted, amused once more. “Fuck off.”

“You’re welcome.”

And apparently, that was that. The monk stood with a grunt, fixed his ponytail, and turned to leave.

“Nara.”

“What now?”

“If you see Naruto-”

“I won’t tell him a damn thing. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

*They call him a genius.*

He took another long, *long* drag.
I can see why.
Not that he’d ever admit it.

Hinata produced a thick strip of black cotton, tossed it at the Avatar’s face, and told him to tie it over his eyes.

“Kinky,” Naruto chuckled.

“What was that, Naruto-kun?”

“Ah. Thingy. I said thingy because that’s what. Shit, please don’t hurt me.”

Hinata giggled delicately. Delicate- more like deranged. He was so over that ‘little innocent rich girl’ act. Naruto rolled his eyes behind the blindfold, and was promptly knocked on his ass.

“Oh! What was that for?”

“I can sense when you’re being disrespectful.”

“But I didn’t-“

“You don’t have to. The earth tells me everything. Speaking of which: it finally respects you enough to listen to your commands.”

“Huh. You’re right.”

“Now, it’s your turn to listen to the earth.”

“Uh…”

“Do it and you’ll find Sasuke. I know you’ve been searching all day.”

“Oh, okay. But how-“


The Hyuuga heiress was scary, but she was also a one-in-a-million earthbending super genius. A few weeks ago, Naruto couldn’t lift a single grain of sand. Now –he hasn’t tried it yet, but he knew- he could raise and level mountains without breaking a sweat.

So, the Avatar picked a random direction, placed his trust in this sensei, and walked.

He ran into things at first: walls, doorways, potted plants, some nerd walking around with his nose in a scroll… Not the nerd he was looking for- a different asshole with a two-tailed raccoon perched on his shoulder.

How did I know that? And what’s that noise?

Slowly, naturally, Naruto stumbled less and less until it was like nothing covered his eyes. A sound like a hundred high-pitched heartbeats rumbled through the stone floor. He followed it to one of the lower levels of the temple.
At the source of this strange noise, the air smelled like wood and oil. One other person sat cross-legged near the center of the small, secluded room.

“What’s that sound?” Naruto asked.

“Seconds,” Tamako answered.

(Temari, the earth whispered.)

“Uh. Huh?” Pointy metal and thin circles littered the floor. He stepped around them effortlessly. “We’re standing in the clock room. The noise you’re talking about is a ‘tick.’ Each ‘tick’ marks a second.”

“You mean like time?”

“Duh.”

Naruto scratched his head. “I thought time was an illusion.”

“It is.” A wrinkle formed in her brow. She couldn’t decide between smirking and frowning. He couldn’t see her face, but...

“So what is a clock?” Naruto asked.

“A tool. Kinda like you. Damn, you make it too easy.” A click as she fiddled with her giant fan.

He sat down in front of her, crossed his legs, and grinned. “You’re a funny chick, Tamako.”

“I’m Temari, you willfully ignorant jackass.”

“Same difference. You were saying a clock is a tool for…”

“Measuring time.”

“What, like a sundial?”

“If you took that stupid blindfold off, you could see for yourself.”

Not yet.

“Sai says we’re leaving in three days. He won’t tell me where we’re going or why we have to leave so soon, but I know it’s almost time.”

“Time for what?”

“The final showdown or whatever.”

“Still doesn’t explain the blindfold.”

“I have to take down the Firelord- the baddest man on the planet!- and to do that, I have to… Get better. At everything.”

“Look at you, Captain Obvious.”

Rude, but there was no arguing with the truth.
“Hinata says that to get better, to be a master earthbender, I have to trust the earth. Even though the earth is stubborn and weirdly secretive and makes everything way more complicated than- uh. I have to trust the earth and listen to it… Even though it doesn’t have a voice.”

“Tough shit.”

“Yeah.”

“You seem to be doing okay.”

Naruto shrugged.

Temari leaned back, resting her weight on her hands, and spoke. “Now that I think about it, every other element makes noise. Water babbles. Air goes whoosh. Fire crackles. They talk even when no one’s bending them. Earth, on the other hand—"

“-is quiet unless something horrible happens like rockslides-“

“-volcanoes-“

“-and earthquakes. Whoa. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re a lot smarter than you look.”

“Thanks, kid.”

“Y’know, I’m a century older than you.”

“You don’t act like it.”

Naruto blew a raspberry.

“Way to prove my point. Hey, if you want help finding your boyfriend, I know where he is.”

“No. I mean, yes I want help but I gotta do this on my own.”

“Huh.”

“Is it just me, or were you kinda impressed just now?”

“Ugh. By what?”

“That wasn’t a ‘no’,“

Temari picked a stray piece of round metal off the floor and rolled it in her palm. Naruto counted fifteen ticks as she regarded him in silence.

“The Naras found a way to measure something completely intangible.” A soft pink as she let the scrap fall to ground. “That’s what a clock is: a tool that lets you see and hear shit that doesn’t actually exist. Shikamaru told me that one person’s minute can feel like another person’s hour but on a clock, it’s all the same. Crazy shit. I don’t understand anything that guy talks about.”

Three ticks. Naruto had to agree: it didn’t make much sense. He turned his attention to an easier problem.

“Are you two…”

“Honestly? I don’t know.”
“Do you want to…”

“I’m not talking to you about it.”

_Sheesh, and I thought I was having a hard time._

Maybe everyone has it rough when it comes to love. Naruto sighed. A few more ticks passed. Once again, Temari spoke up.

“Maybe the… earth… lead you here for some other reason than annoying the shit outta me while I’m trying to meditate.”

“Don’t be like that. You’re clearly having fun right now.”

“Ugh,” Naruto translated that to yet another ‘yes.’ He laughed. She punched him. ”You’re insufferable. I’m outta here.”

“Nice chatting with you, Tamako.”

Naruto didn’t have to see to know that Temari flipped him off before she left.

---

Cool fingers untied the blindfold and gently tugged it away. Green light from the flame-less lamps that illuminated the temple at night flooded his vision.

Naruto grinned. “Found you.”

Sasuke quirked a brow. “They weren’t joking.”

“Who?”

“People said you were looking for me.” The blond nodded. “With your eyes closed.”

“Yup. And I _totally_ found you.”

“… did you hit your head, Usuratonkachi?”

“Only a couple of times.”

The prince scoffed, dropping from his kneel to a comfortable sitting position across from the Avatar. He wrapped the blindfold around his knuckles, unwrapped it, and repeated the process. A peaceful silence, punctured at even intervals by synchronized ticks, settled around them.

Naruto stared at Sasuke. Sasuke stared at anything but Naruto. Naruto rolled his eyes at how typical _that_ was.

Then, he looked at the so-called _clocks_: circular objects with three needles on their faces. They were all pretty much the same; some were as big as his head and others could fit in the palm of his hand.

Also, there were a lot, like a _lot_, of them hanging on the walls, dangling from the ceiling, scattered on the floor, stacked on a table towards the center of the room- just _everywhere._

“Clocks, huh?” He squinted. “They really are just sundials with numbers on them.”
“Only on the outside.”

Time to address the elephant in the room.

“Can your weird red eyes see what’s inside of them or something?”

The prince nodded.

“Seriously?!”

Another nod.

“How…” Naruto leaned closer to example Sasuke’s irises. They were red—a bright, startling, gorgeous shade of red—with two black thingies near the center. (He knew the word. It started with a ’t’ but really, it didn’t matter.)

“I don’t know, but it lets you—me—look underneath the… underneath. Oh.”

“What?”

“Kakashi used to say that.”

“What does that old pervert have to do with anything?” Naruto grumbled, tired of being left in the dark.

“I’d prefer to confirm my suspicions in person.”

“Well la-di-dah, bastard. I’d prefer it if you weren’t so fucking cr- cripple-wait…”

“Cryptic.”

“Un, that. Cryptic and cold and—do you have any idea how much it sucks to wake up alone?”

“You were doing that every day before.”

“Yeah, well, things are different now.”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Hmph.”

“Er. Sorry?”

“It’s fine, I know you got a lot on your mind. I know you need space to brood or cry or whatever, but just tell me next time. Ah. Please.”

“Alright.”

“Now… Your eyes… If they ‘see underneath,’ does that include people’s clothes or—“

“Idiot.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

This earned him A Look. A Big Look followed by irritated silence.

Sasuke shook his head; apparently, he decided to let it slide. “I can see the fundamental components
of… Things. Reality.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I can’t dumb it down any further.”

“Asshole, we’re not all geniuses like your new best friend Naka-“

“Nara.”

“He’s a pineapple-headed ding dong.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that on.”

“You!”

“We got high this morning.”

“High… in the air? Like on a glider? Or did you climb a mountain?”

“Hilarious, dobe.”

Naruto bit his lip.

I wasn’t kidding, teme.

“That stuff he’s always smoking-” the blond squeaked. Not that kind of ‘high!’ No fucking way! “-it really does help with perspective.”

“You got high?! Again?”

“Yes. Pay attention, dobe. I’ve given it a lot of thought and, here,” he reached into his satchel and pulled out a familiar-looking black book, “I want you to read this.”

Naruto accepted the leather-bound hardcover. He could swear he’d seen it before. Those weird silver letters on the cover kept blurring, shimmering, and shifting around.

“Uh…”

“Wipe that drool off your chin and listen. I’ll explain.”

He would’ve been mad, but Sasuke reached forward and swiped a drop of moisture with his thumb. The prince eyes widened as if he was startled.

Naruto's cheeks grew warm. “Did you just-“

“Don’t- I’m just out of it.”

“Whatever you say, mom.”

Sasuke wiped Naruto’s drool on the blindfold still wrapped in his fingers-

Is it weird that I’m kinda turned on right now? Huh… Naw.

-flicked Naruto’s ear, hard, then began to speak.

“Ya know,” he said after what felt like an hour (though, according to the clocks it was only ten
minutes), “I didn’t understand any of that. Like, at all.”

“You will. Read the book. It's about Midori.”
"Sometimes," he squeezed his eyes shut and sighed softly, "I feel..."

"Yeah?" Naruto murmured.

"I feel like I can't get close enough to-" a low, sweet moan "-to you."

The tent was sweltering. Sweat beaded at Sasuke's temple. Black hair stuck to white skin, curled and opaque. A transparent drop slid from his brow, down the curve of his cheek, and clung to his chin.

Naruto wanted to lick it, so he did. Mm. Salty. He traced the prince's jawline with his lips. Whispered in his ear, "yeah. I know." Boy, did he know.

"How do you," Sasuke tilted his head back, turning Naruto's robes impatiently, "m-make it go away?"

Naruto pulled him forward. Sasuke settled on his lap, moving his hips in a steady rhythm. They kissed- well, Naruto tried to kiss properly, while Sasuke sucked with bruising force, bit hard enough to draw blood, and pulled back to hiss, "stop dragging this out."

The Avatar tightened his grip, deliberately slowing their pace.

"Don't rush me."

"At least -a-ah- answer my question, idiot."

"Question..."

"This feeling, make it-"

"Oh. Uh."

"You know how to, right?"

...

"Naruto."

"You. Eto. And then it's like, uh, for a while, but- but- ya know," he chuckled nervously, “Maybe we shouldn't talk about this right now."

"No. Tell me."

"I really th- think we should wait until, like, after the war."

"Naruto."

"Ow, don’t pull my hair you- Okay, okay. Geez, you're so damn pushy- ow!" Again the biting. (Fine. He’ll admit it. Some part of him liked the pain a little too much.)

"Are you sure you want to know?"
The prince shrugged, which translated to an unequivocal ‘yes.’

"When you feel like you can’t get close enough to someone, that means you want to—*cough*—have sex."

"What was that?"

"Sex."

"I’m not following. You mean we haven’t—"

It took every ounce of his self-control not to burst out laughing.

"Not... Exactly..."

"Then how do you..."

For the umpteenth time, Naruto made a mental note to kick Kakashi’s ass. Some guardian that old pervert was- looking at porn all day and not telling Sasuke a damn thing.

"Are you sure you want to know, like, right now?"

"Yes."

Stubborn bastard.

"Ugh, fine. I’ll explain it. Just promise not to freak out."

"Why would I—"

"Just promise me, ’kay?"

"Whatever. Quit stalling."

“Okay, so, it goes like this…”

(Ten minutes later)

The tent shook violently, then collapsed.

"No! Absolutely not." Sasuke stormed off, literally fuming. The air around him shimmered and sparked at odd intervals.

“Wait, where are you going?” Naruto wrestled with the canvas and stumbled after him. "Oy teme, you promised you wouldn’t—"

"I said,” Sasuke spun on his heels, shaking his fist “whatever.’ I didn’t make any promises, you pervert."

"What the hell?! What did I do?"

"It’s what you want to do. I knew this was a mistake.” He turned away.

"What I want to—“ Naruto placed a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. He hissed when static stung him, but didn’t pull away. “Listen here, I never want you to do something you’re not comfortable with. Don’t put shit like that on me."


"And if say I’ll never, ever want—"

"Then we won’t do it. No big deal. I mean, it’s a big deal to do it but not a big deal if you don’t. Does that make sense?"

"No. I’m taking a walk. Don’t follow me." He jerked away and disappeared into the forest.

The blond ran an agitated hand through his hair. He took a step forward, gritted his teeth, and forced himself to turn away. “Moody bastard. Who needs you anyway,” he grumbled, taking in the sorry state of their campsite. “Fuck, Sakura-chan is gonna- uh, Sakura-chan! You- uh- you’re back early.”

She sat cross-legged on the ground. A white dragon-moth perched on her knee, moving its wings lazily. They watched in silence until it took off.

“I was gone for three hours, baka, and when I told you to pitch a tent, I meant one for us to sleep in.”

Naruto looked down at- well. It’ll go away on its own. Uh. Probably.

That was the least of his worries.

“Sakura-chan, did you—” he took another three steps towards the forest, shook his head, and plopped onto the ground in a huff, “I mean, how long were you—“

Pink brows went up. Lips turged upward into a small, smug smile.

“Fine,” he grumbled, “whatever. Since you heard—"

“-because of the yelling.”

“-maybe you can help me out.”

Sakura eyed his crotch wearily. “No offense, but I’m not touching that thing.”

“That- that’s not what I meant!”

“Who knows, with a perv like you.”

“Stop making fun of me. This is serious. Aren’t you supposed to be the smart one? Gimme some sage advice, damn it!”

“Are you going after him?”

Every cell in his body screamed now, go now, because leaving Sasuke alone with his stupid thoughts was a recipe for disaster.

“Later,” he gritted out, “I gotta give the prissy bastard his stupid space. Boundaries and all that shit.”

“See,” she stood up, dusting her dress, “you already know what to do.”

“Whoa. You’re right.”

“In any case, I need your help to fix this mess,” she gestured to the pile of rope, sticks, and canvas. “It’s too cold to sleep outside.”

In the end, Naruto couldn’t sit on his ass and wait. Sai returned from his trip to the nearby village full of whakos. Apparently, the villagers dedicated a festival to The Avatar. Naruto thought that was
pretty rad. Like, they even built a giant statue in his honor!

“That’s not a statue,” Sasuke said, “it’s an effigy.”

“An effing-what?”

“Just watch, dobe.”

Naruto didn’t get it until he did, when statue went up in flames. He shrieked. After the shock wore off, he wanted to find out what the hell those people’s problem was. Sasuke, ever the supportive boyfriend, said, "you don’t have time to get yourself killed, unsuratonkachi.”

“But- but-“

“He’s right,” Sai put in.

“No! Screw you guys, I have to-“

“Naruto-kun,” Hinata said in That Tone.

Just in that moment, Naruto really hated his friends. He told them as much.

“You’ll get over it,” Sakura said. Yes, he would, because unlike some people, he knew grudges were a huge waste of time. That wasn't the point.

But back to the bigger issue: Naruto went into the woods after fixing the tent and waiting for what felt like days… And got lost. The stupid earth refused to talk to him, so he found a nice, sturdy rock, kicked it, probably broke a few toes, cursed kami, the spirits, Sasuke, and anything else he could think of.

When he ran out of breath, he sat down and tried to meditate.

Some time later, footsteps rustled in the dry dead grass. A familiar face appeared in front of the full moon. (Yeah, the sun went down a while ago. Naruto kinda wished he had one of Shikamaru’s clock thingies to see how much time actually passed.)

The Uchiha stood in front of him, looking as close to contrite as he’d ever be. Naruto was surprisingly unsurprised.

I guess I knew he’d come for me.

"You're growing up," he said. The old Sasuke would have avoided him… Forever, probably, after something like that. Like, they had some pretty intense fights, but this was by far the most mortifying. Naruto didn’t let a silly thing like embarrassment get to him. Sasuke, on the other hand-

-scrunched his nose. Naruto knew that look. The bastard was trying to decide if he should be offended.

"It was a compliment."

"I'm sure you intended it that way."

"Duh."

“You got lost.”
“Duh,” he punctuated, elbowing the rock behind him. Ouch. Right in the funny bone. "Did ya get worried about me?"

“You’re such an idiot,” Sasuke sighed.

That was a ‘yes.’

“Sometimes,” Naruto conceded after a thoughtful pause, “Are you done with your little fit?” That earned him a fist to the top of his head. “Guess not,” he grinned.

The prince sat beside him, leaving a good two feet of space. Space that the Avatar filled immediately. He put his head on Sasuke’s shoulder. Sasuke didn’t move away, which gave a serious case of the warm and fuzzies.

“The moon is really pretty tonight,” he observed.

“Hn.”

“Don’t worry,” he put his hand on the other boy's knee, "you’re prettier.”

“Stop talking.” Sasuke’s voice was strained.

“Learn to take a compliment, babe. Hey, are you-‘ oh spirits, was this actually happening? Naruto lifted his head and rubbed his eyes. Yup. Definitely real.

Sasuke was laughing; his shoulders were shaking, palm pressed to his mouth, eyes glimmering with mirth. Naruto gaped. He didn’t blink- didn’t dare miss a second of this.

“I’ve never- uh-‘ seen you laugh ‘-when did- did- Sasuke-’ shit, something must be wrong ‘-are you okay?’”

“F- heh-‘ another fit ‘-f-fine. You –aha- you’re always s-saying such ridiculous things.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you’re com-‘ more laughing ‘-completely serious!”

Naruto chuckled because, yeah, he’d be hard pressed to disagree. Eventually –again, he couldn’t say how long; time really was a strange thing- Sasuke calmed down. The prince wiped his eyes and turned towards him. Naruto leaned forward, bumping their foreheads together for a moment, then pulled back.

Sasuke’s lip quirked upward. His eyebrows knitted together. Something about the expression was downright... fond. Maybe even sappy. (Naw, that was pushing things. It was definitely as close to 'sappy' as that stoic bastard could ever get, though.)

This notion sent Naruto’s heart pounding hard enough to rattle his ribs. Blood rushed to his face. He didn’t know exactly what just happened, but it made him, like, really giddy.

They sat there, just looking at each other. It was nice. A perfect moment, if such a thing existed.

Then, his stomach growled.

The obnoxious rumble shook Sasuke out of his daze. Dark eyes widened-

Shit, is he gonna run again?
-then slowly fell shut. The prince took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, something changed. Naruto couldn’t find the right word for it, besides ‘resignation,’ and that didn’t make sense.

“Sakura found ramen in the village,” Sasuke said, “it’ll get soggy soon. We should head back.”

Every new place was stranger than the last. They stopped in a town at the foot of an active volcano. Despite the so-called fortune-teller (who Sakura was instantly obsessed with) and horde of superstitious quacks, it was an okay place. The local innkeeper let them stay for free. At least some people knew how to treat an Avatar.

“You two can finally get a room,” Sakura remarked.

“Shesh. You’re just jealous cuz you’re not getting any.”

“What was that, Naruto?” She asked, flashing a dangerous smile.

“Eh-heh. Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Yes,” Sai nodded, “now you can touch each other’s penises in peace.”

Hinata took that as her cue to leave. She asked for a separate room.

The next day, Naruto convinced Sasuke to visit the fortuneteller, who turned out to be a blonde earth bender with an enormous rack. He didn’t hear much of what she said, on account of… Yeah. They sat on the floor, sipping tea, waiting for Sakura to finish her very long session.

“One more thing, Tsunade-sama,” Sakura said, wringing her fingers in an uncharacteristic show of nervousness.

The fortuneteller pinched the bridge of her nose. “What more could you possibly want to know?”

“Should I eat mangos or papaya for breakfast?”

“Papaya,” the old lady said, “who wants to go next?”

“Oh! Oh!” Naruto waved his hand in the air, “Pick me!”

"Alright brat, follow me."

They entered a small room with a fire blazing in a clay pit. The fortuneteller muttered something, tossed a handful of bones into the flame, and watched them… Cook? Was he supposed to eat them or-

Crack!

A sound like fireworks filled the small room. The largest bone splintered into tens of pieces, jumping out of the fire, onto the floor. Smaller bones shriveled and crumbled to ash. Firelight dyed the
fortuneteller’s irises a bright, translucent gold. She bowed her head in prayer.

Naruto stared with wide eyes. He held his breath, chewed his cuticles, and damn near died from the suspense.

“What is it?”

“Incredible,” Tsunade whispered, “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

She rambled about fate, destiny, an epic battle that would determine the future of every nation for generations to come, blah, blah, blah. Nothing new there.

“Thanks,” Naruto tried not to sound too disappointed, “But what about me and- and him?”

“Him? You mean the prince.”

“Un, un. Sasuke.”

Tsunade sighed. “You already know the answer to that.”

Naruto blinked. “I do?”

The corner of her painted mouth turned down. Tsunade pressed her fingers together, closed her eyes briefly, and nodded. “Send him in. I’d like a word with the boy.”

All in all, it was a thoroughly unsatisfying experience. Naruto stood up, cracked his neck, and cast one last look at the white bone fragments on the floor. He picked one up, pressed the sharp tip with his forefinger, then dropped it.

“I don’t think I know anything, lady,” he told her frankly. Naruto was sure about a lot of things, but Sasuke... maybe he’d always be a mystery. Maybe he could live with that, as long as they were together.

The beaded curtain rattled behind Naruto. He chewed his lip. Sakura, one of the smartest people he knew, swore by this fortuneteller. There has to be something to what she said, right?

“Teme,” he tapped Sasuke’s shoulder, “she wants to see you.”

Sasuke nodded, stood gracefully, and disappeared into the back room.

Naruto paced outside. He chugged cup after cup of that nasty, bitter herbal tea. Ran to the bathroom. Drank a few more cups. Bathroom again. The fortuneteller’s assistant Shi- Shi- something brought him a tray of dumplings, which he inhaled with gusto. The tray was empty in less than a minute.

“She says I know,” Naruto mused around a mouthful of food, spraying crumbs and not giving a damn. ”I keep telling him everything’s okay and, yeah,” he rambled, “of course it’s gonna be okay, but, like, there’s a catch, right?”

“Uh,” Shi-something squinted unhelpfully.

“Of course it’s gonna be okay. Duh. I’m the Avatar. I can do this. We can both, like totally do it. Well, not it because he said- but winning the war. Like, I know everything’s fine. I just have to believe it. Believe it! I haven’t been wrong yet, right?”

Shi-something shook her head.
“I have?!”

“N-no. I’m sure you’re… Not wrong.”

Naruto nodded rapidly. “Say, lady, what’s in that tea? I’m about to crawl out of my skin!”

“Caffeine.”

“Huh,” why wouldn’t his hands stop shaking? “I hate it. But also, I don’t. Weird.” He reached for another cup.

“That’s quite enough for you.” Shi-something confiscated the teapot.

“Nooo,” Naruto whined, “now what am I supposed to do?”

By the time Sasuke came out, Naruto managed to peel all the chapped skin from his lower lip.

“Stop that, dobe,” the prince hissed, “you’re bleeding.”

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Wanna taste?"

"Maybe later."

"Uh..."

Sasuke smirked. Naruto flushed. He had a feeling it was a joke, but with Sasuke's sadistic streak... That train of thought derailed abruptly in a violent burst of curiosity.

“Well? Well?” he jumped up and down, “What’d she say? What happened? What did you ask about? You were gone a while, and you have this- this- face. Holy shit! Did ya see a ghost?!” If anyone could summon spirits from the Uchiha’s dark, tragic past, it was Tsunade.

The prince shrugged. His expression remained carefully blank. Maybe he didn’t want to say anything near the scary fortuneteller. Naruto dragged him outside. Shit, the sun was bright. “Tell me everything,” he insisted.

“Hn.”

That was a hard ‘no.’

“C’mon, Sasuke, don’t be like that.”

“She’s a con-artist.”

An old man shot Sasuke a dirty look. Naruto stuck his tongue out at the nosy geezer. Sheesh, people in this town could be so damn touchy.

“We didn’t pay her or anything. It’s a free service!”

“Whatever.”

They went back to the inn, where the Uchiha found a table and pulled out some scrolls. Black irises bled crimson and stayed fixed on the page. Naruto badgered him some more. Sasuke remained silent. Finally, he gave up, got Midori’s book from their room, and sat across from him.

Sasuke was right: as he stared at the pages, the letters shifted into something that made sense. Every
day, he understood a little more.

Three weeks after they left the temple, he was on his second read-through. The letters—script from a language he never learned—didn’t jump around as much. Actually, they were easier to read than the language he did know. The only problem was that every now and then, his head hurt. Also, he occasionally tasted blood. (Maybe that’s why Sasuke’s nose bled back at the temple. Huh.)

And hoo boy, Midori was messed up. Like, he thought Sasuke had issues but she really took it to the next level.

“Hey, what does that say?” The Avatar pointed to a word his brain couldn’t translate.

"I don't know."

Weird. He pondered the mysterious cluster of text for another minute. Still no dice.

“I think I get it now,” Naruto said, "If every book was this interesting, I’d be reading all the time too.”

“As long as you do it quietly,” Sasuke murmured absently. Because he was reading. As usual.

“That Midori, though,” he leaned across the table, trying to make the bastard look at him, “Man, she used to be a real piece of work.”

“Hn.”

“Kinda like you.”

“Hn.”

“It’s basically an uncen- un, unscented. Uh.”

“Uncensored.” A crinkle as the Uchiha unrolled his scroll a few more inches.

“That. An uncensored look into your brain, if you think about it.”

This got him to look up. Well, glare. Those eyes, man, Naruto could stare at them for days. “What.”

“Because she’s you and you’re her, and this is her diary—“

“Biography.”

“Whatever. Both of you are so damn picky. And you worry about everything. Everything! All the time!”

“We can’t all be as carefree as you.” That sounded almost wistful.

“Carefree? I'm the Avatar! I literally have fate of the world on my shoulders! Give a guy some credit, teme.”

There it was again— the same warm look Sasuke gave him in the forest.

Naruto translated it to, 'you're an idiot, but I lo- no, maybe not that- like that about you.'

"Fair enough,” Sasuke nodded.

“Uh,” Naruto tried to calm the butterflies rampaging in his stomach. "I finished reading it—"
“Took you long enough.”

“-last week,” he said with a sheepish grin.

Sasuke tilted his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Dunno. I needed time. Been thinking about that part at the end. The…” He glanced away. Swallowed the thickness in his throat. “Ya know.”

“And?” The black dots in his iris seemed to spin slowly. Naruto stared, hypnotized. Sasuke kicked him under the table, snapping him out of it.

“It’s pretty awesome, ne?”

“You mean awful.”

“No…”

They stared at each other. The air thickened with tension. Here they go, again. Another fight, right on schedule.

“Why don’t you tall about it first,” Naruto said, “to make sure we’re on the same, heh, page.”

Sasuke frowned.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. You’re allergic to good jokes.”

A bland, unimpressed look, followed by a heavy sigh. Sasuke spoke: “It’s a list of names that started with...” The two of them; Hyuuga Midori on left column, Namikaze Aoi on the right. Sasuke recognized a handful of names: two warlords, one famous non-bending conqueror, and even an ‘Uchiha’ in the right-hand column, interestingly enough. The final pair of names consisted of a common peasant on the left and, in ‘Aoi’ or ‘Naruto's’ column-

“-the first Avatar.”
Clocks are circular just like time. Inside every clock, round gears turn and turn and turn. Seconds, minutes, hours, lifetimes- it's all the same.

Sasuke was trapped in a loop with no open or close. Each iteration came with variations, but in the end, the variables cancelled out and the result was the same.


He became a different version of himself every night. In dreams, he experienced the pain of loss: a blinding, all-consuming grief that made the murder of his parents look like a day at the fair.

Sasuke could only guess at what Naruto remembered. The idiot was probably as oblivious as ever.

So, the prince decided it was better to keep some distance. They can enjoy what little time they had, but they didn't have to- to-

Whatever.

Midori's list contained exactly one-hundred pairs of names. There was one explanation for what those names were: a list of their past lives. The list ended with the first Avatar; the Avatar incarnated at least a thousand times, which meant...

"...Do you get it now?" Sasuke felt very, very tired. His stomach churned. He wanted to laugh, cry, or maybe throw up. He settled for a mild scowl.

"You..." Naruto's eyes blazed. "You're the one who doesn't 'get it.' You don't get a single thing, bastard."

Sasuke scoffed. “Again with the baseless declarations.”

"Stop that. I don't want to fight, not about this. Just- just- shut the fuck up and listen."

The Uchiha calmly packed his reading materials and walked away. Naruto followed him upstairs, visibly fuming.

"You found me, remember?" The Avatar stood at the end of the inn’s second floor hallway. His hands clenched and unclenched sporadically. Dark eyes lingered on the movement, momentarily mesmerized, then flickered forward. Sasuke opened the door to his –their– room.

“You're mistaking me for Sakura,” he mumbled, setting his things aside. Naruto threw his hands up in exasperation, then stepped into his –their– room.

Sasuke ignored him. He walked to the window. Watched a single cloud drift in the clear, blue sky. The room –their room- was suddenly too small. Suffocating. Without another thought, Sasuke stepped over the windowsill, onto the red ceramic tiles of the roof, then jumped into the street below.

"Hey, asshole!" Naruto barked, leaping after him. “Teme, wait up!”

The prince kept his head down. He walked faster. Naruto’s voice faded into the crowd behind him. Sasuke took a deep breath, unclenched his jaw, and let his guard down for one blissful second,
before being yanked into a dark, narrow alleyway.

“What the-“

Naruto shoved him against the cold, rough wall. “As I was saying,” he leaned in until they were nose-to-nose. Sasuke felt every word on his lips.

“You.” Hands closed around his wrists.

“Found.” The grip tightened, trapping him.

“Me.” Blue eyes locked his gaze in place. Sasuke couldn’t look away.

“You spend over- over ten years looking for me, and you found me,” he whispered, “like, literally five minutes after I got out of that spirits-forsaken iceberg.” One scorching hand left his wrist to touch the thrumming pulse at his throat. “We found each other, over and over and over again. We -I don't even care if you freak out anymore, you're gonna have to deal with it someday- we fell in- in love-“

Sasuke flinched away. Naruto pressed closer and repeated, “we fell in love. Every single time. Why, shit,” Blond hair tickled his forehead as the other boy shook his head, “why don't you think about that for-for a change? Just once, use that giant brain of yours to look at things the right way-“

"You mean your way," he hissed.

"-And you know what else? You're not gonna die. Neither am I."

Sasuke sighed. "Everyone dies, loser."

“I-I mean in this stupid war.”

Haven’t they had this conversation before? Surely, after a thousand lifetimes, they already had conversations about every topic in existence.

"What proof do you have?" Sasuke asked for the same reason he made no effort to get away.

"I'll show you someday if- if you let me. Sorry," Naruto chuckled humorously, “but for now, you'll just have to trust me.”

"Naruto, I appreciate your stup- optimism-"

"Asshole."

"-But patterns don't lie. This is the way things are. Nothing you say can change the facts."

"Fuck you."

And there it was on a silver platter: a distraction.

"No, thanks," He smirked.

Naruto’s glare intensified. Blunt nails imprinted half-crescent marks on pale skin.

"Sasuke, please."

"Naruto,” the prince mocked in a lilting drawl, “we've been over this.”
"I'm not talking about that. This isn't funny."

"Is that so?"

Instead of retorting, Naruto chewed his already bloody lip. Sasuke wasn't joking- he did want to taste it, but this was not the time. All sorts of tension saturated the space between them, along with an odd burning smell. Something hard poked Sasuke’s thigh.

“Naruto.”

“Um, yeah?”

“Is there something in your pocket?”

“Oh. Ah. Uh-huh. I got a carrot.”

“A,” black brows lifted incredulously, “carrot.”

There was rustling as the idiot stepped back to reach into his robe, followed by-

“Why.”

-the appearance of a very large, very orange carrot.

“I think I was, um, saving it for later.”

“You. Think.”

“Well, you see, it’s like- I don’t like vegetables, but Hinata says I gotta eat ‘earth foods,’ which means things that grow in-” he scratched his head dobeishly, “in the ground to do the, um. Get better at. Ano. To be honest, I didn’t really understand why. And then she- she said… Stop looking at me like that, bastard!”

Sasuke’s eyebrow twitched. “Out of all the people in the universe, it had to be you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind. Eat your carrot, Usuratonkachi,” Sasuke said. A dark shadow seemed to pass overhead. He looked up, and saw that the once-clear sky was a dull, sooty grey.

Naruto followed Sasuke’s gaze upward. “We’re not done talking about this, ya know.” Absently, he bit the carrot, chewed for a while, and promptly spit on the ground. “Blech! What is this thing? I mean, I know what it is but- but! ugh, screw it.” The carrot was tossed onto the ground. It rolled away into the depths of the alley, out of sight.

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and took a deep, muffled breath.

_The Avatar is an idiot. I’m in an ill-defined relationship with this idiot. Worse-_ 

Was he doomed to repeat the same mistakes with the same person for eternity?

_No. I can stop. We can both stop._

Distant screams, a sound like thunder, and the feeling of the earth shifting under his feet underscored Sasuke’s newest epiphany: He didn’t care. He didn’t want to stop. He chose this, just as he did every time before…
And as he would, every time after.

“Oh,” he whispered as world crumbled around him.

When Sasuke opened his eyes, he saw that the world was actually crumbling around him.

“Teme, get down!” Naruto barked, yanking him away from the collapsing wall.

Darkness engulfed them. The stone path cracked and rattled under their feet; in a split-second, Naruto had created a protective dome of earth. When the tremors stopped, Naruto dug his heels in and lifted the debris in a single fluid motion.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Sasuke coughed.

“You have dirt on your… Eh…” Naruto made a vague gesture at all of him.

“What happened?” Sasuke asked, scrubbing self-consciously at his cheek.

“Huh. I think there was an earthquake.”

“No shit,” Sasuke said, dragging his dumbass out of the- well, it wasn’t an alleyway so much as the space between two piles of demolished rock. He glanced back, wondering if there were people-

“There weren’t any people in there.”

“How-“

“I’ll explain later. Come on! We gotta find the others!”

As it turned out, the earthquake and black sky foreshadowed a much bigger problem. Sasuke cursed the so-called fortuneteller. She was a delusional old bat who was also, conveniently, no where to be found.

Sakura, Sai, Hinata, and Kurama managed to herd the villagers to the town square. The waterbender gave orders left and right as Sai and Hinata held a hushed conversation.

*Good, Sasuke thought, we’re all here. We can leave safely.*

One look at Naruto- at the cool determination coloring his features- proved him wrong.

“I’m going with him.”

“Teme, the volcano is already on fire.”
“Firebenders can’t put out fires, Sasuke-kun.”

“You’d be a liability,” Sai said.

“Me? That dumbass walked around with a carrot in his pocket all day, and you want to send him _alone_ into an _active volcano_?”

“By ‘carrot,’ do you mean—” Sai began. Sakura quickly shushed him. Sasuke’s glare reached sub-zero levels.

“I’m the Avatar,” Naruto interjected, as if that gave him free license to undertake such a monumentally stupid task.

“If you die saving this stupid village—“

“- so it’s my duty,” Sasuke’s heart stuttered at hearing _that_ word from him, “to save these people, and I already told you, I’m not gonna die!”

“And I said you can’t know that! Why can’t we send her?” He jabbed a finger at Hinata.

“I’m blind,” She informed him.

“That- that’s not—“

“Enough!” Sakura snapped. Sasuke considered interrupting her. She cracked her knuckles. He kept his mouth shut.

She nodded grimly, then spoke. “Here’s the plan: Naruto, destroy the edge of the volcano that faces away from the village. It’ll relieve the pressure. Most of the lava should flow into the forest away from the village. Hinata and any other earthbenders will dig a trench over there,” she pointed to the eastern end of the village, “I’m going to use water from the river to push back anything that gets too close. Questions?”

“What am I—“ Sasuke began.

“Oh! Sasuke-kun, you can. Uh. Take this shovel,” she declared, snatching said shovel from a passerby, glaring until the gap-toothed man skittered away, “to help with the, uh, the digging. Right.”

“Tch. Fine.”

“Oh, okay, let’s move out!”

Naruto was about to hop onto Kurama when Sasuke pulled him back. Sakura kept her distance, but watched in case the prince tried something reckless.

She could make out Sasuke’s familiar scowl. Pale lips moved, pursed, and opened to speak again. Naruto threw his head back and laughed. He wrapped his arms around Sasuke, then whispered something into his ear. The way they looked at each other when he pulled back—Sakura knew she wasn’t meant to see it, but she couldn’t turn away.

Kurama whined impatiently. Naruto climbed onto the inflated form of the fox, glanced back one last time, and shouted, “Yip, yip!” Kurama took off.

Sasuke lifted an arm to shield his face from the gust.

Sakura realized that, as ‘smart’ as people thought she was, there were certain things she’d never
understand.

Quake after quake shook the ground with increasing intensity. Hinata created a wide, deep trench in a matter of minutes.

Of course she did.

Sasuke flung his shovel aside with a grunt. He sat on the edge of the trench, dangling his feet above the dark pit. He glanced back at the busy villagers. A little girl clutched a straw doll as she bawled helplessly. A woman –probably her mother- crouched in front of her, murmuring soothingly. The infant strapped to the woman’s back watched the sky with wide eyes.

He turned back when she sat beside him.

“You worry too much,” the Hyuuga remarked.

Just a little push. She was small; couldn’t weigh much. He could reach behind her and shove her into the very pit that she created.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“What do you want,” Sasuke grumbled petulantly.

“I knew this would happen.” Sasuke tilted his head. Though she couldn’t possibly see the motion, Hinata elaborated, ”The volcano errupting. The earth spoke to me days ago, but Tsunade-sama told me not to say anything.”

He nearly pitched forward in shock. Hinata yanked him back by the collar.

“Why?”

She smoothed out the creases on his tunic. Sasuke swatted her off with an irritated ‘tsk.’

“I don’t know,” she said, “but there must be something to gain from it.”

“No, I mean why would you listen to her?”

“It’s important,” Hinata said, rolling a pebble between her fingertips, “to trust people.” She crushed it to dust. “And to believe in things you can’t see,” she added after a thoughtful pause.

“You must know all about that.”

“There’s a reason it’s called ‘blind faith.’”

Sasuke snorted. For a half-second, he almost forgot that Naruto was battling a volcano with nothing but his dog for company. The scowl returned.
A monster roared in the distance. No, not a monster- the mountain. It growled its displeasure, hissed a promise of revenge, then- then it-

Crack!

No. No. No, no, no! Not again, never again. Damn it!

In a flash, Sasuke sprung to his feet. He leapt over the trench, expelling a burst of fire from his feet to cross the distance. Behind him, Hinata closed her eyes and dug her fingernails into the earth.

Sasuke ran past the river, ignoring the familiar voice shouting “Sasuke-kun!” Transparent spheres of water encircled Sakura’s fists. Her lips were set in a grim line. Beside her, Sai stood clutching his boomerang, as if that pathetic weapon could stand against all the rage of the earth.

None of these details mattered. Not to him.

He kept running.

Soon, he stood at the foot of the volcano. The earth purred menacingly. Heat distorted the air around him. His lungs constricted; poison gas polluted the air. The soles of his shoes wore thin, smoking as the leather on the soles shriveled.

Obsidian irises swirled into crimson. The Sharingan cut through the thick plume of smoke. Inside it were two figures- mere specks in the shadow of the monster. There was a flash of white, more growling, another earthquake that brought him to his knees.

Naruto... Naruto didn’t wear shoes. Spirits, why didn’t the idiot ever wear shoes?

Tears blurred his vision. Sasuke blinked them away. He refocused.

The larger silhouette -Kurama- hovered in the air, whipping his tails continuously.

The smaller figure was on the ground, at the very rim of the inferno.

Naruto’s heels dug into the earth. The skin on his feet must have burnt to a crisp.

“Irresponsible idiot,” Sasuke snarled.

Naruto assumed a familiar stance. He punched the earth. A deafening noise pierced the air. The monster announced its surrender.
The earth trembled again, knocking the prince off balance.

Sasuke’s palms landed on the ground. He hissed, crossing his arms across his chest, and staggered to his feet.

_That moron is going to burn. I have to- to-

White light blinded him. High-pitched ringing sounded from the mountain. The light was so bright, so pure, so vivid, it seemed to sing. Another sound, a real sound like nothing he could find the words to describe, vibrated through his skull.

Sasuke didn’t understand why he did what he did next.

He took -well, peeled- off what remained of his shoes.

Maybe this way, Naruto wouldn’t be alone. Both of them could limp around with burned feet. If nothing else, the pain distracted him.

Sasuke stood his ground, unflinching. He watched. He waited.

After an endless interval, half the volcano crumbled into the forest. Lava, like pus from a festering blister, followed suit. The earth was still again; sturdy, stagnant, and stable, as it should be. Relief flooded his overtaxed system. Yet, it was getting harder to breathe. Even as the edges of his vision turned grey, the prince stood his ground and waited for his Avatar.

The large shape carried the smaller one away from the monster’s carcass. An eternity passed in an instant. Specks grew into shadows, which became-

“Kurama, down there!” Naruto yelled.

The Kyuubi dove towards the foot of the demolished mountain.

Naruto said nothing. He jumped down, pulled Sasuke up onto the fox’s back, and issued a rather grim “yip-yip!”

Sasuke’s stomach plunged as the fox took off. He still hated flying, but...

This was better.

Definitely better.

On second thought, it was worse.

The villagers cheered. Children crowded around Kurama, squealing “good doggie,” and other such inanities. The fox panted happily. Naruto paid no mind to any of it. He growled “bastard,” ignored Sasuke’s protests, and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

The prince flushed beet-red.

“Oy, Sakura-chan,” the Avatar bellowed over the enthusiastic townspeople. He brightened when he spotted a familiar face. “Hey, Shi- uh, Shi-”
“Shizune,” came Sasuke’s muffled growl, “put me down, idiot!”

“That’s right! Shizune!”

“Avatar, that was amazing! Are you...”

“Eh-heh, it was nothing. Really. And I’m totally fine, ya know. Ah. Have you seen Sakura-chan?”

“She should be-“

“Naruto!” The waterbender elbowed her way through the crowd. She accidentally knocked an old woman to her knees, paused to help her up, and offered a strained smile before walking to the center of the crowd.

“Are you-“

“I’m fine! He’s the one who needs help.”

Sakura examined the blistered soles of Sasuke’s feet. She poked the reddened skin. His foot twitched.

“What happened?”

“You’ll have to ask him. He’s hurt, though.”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Sasuke protested, “I’m alright.”

Naruto rolled his eyes.

“I’ll set him down,” he stood on his toes, peering ahead, “down by the fountain over there.”

Sasuke didn’t owe them any explanations. They -well, Naruto- seemed incapable of comprehending that simple fact. The idiot prodded, pleaded, and pestered him until he gave in. (Yeah, what else is new.) As Sakura healed him, he told them what happened.

“Basically, I don’t know why, but my-“

“Teme, I swear, if- if you say your body moved on it’s own one more time-“

“Well, it did! What was I supposed to do?”

“Keep your damn shoes on, for starters!”

“Hn.” Sasuke turned away to glare at his sooty reflection in the water.

“Don’t ‘hn’ me, asshole. I’ll throttle you!”

“Both of you, shut up,” Sakura stood briefly to swat both their heads, hard, “I’m trying to work.”

“Oh. Uh. Eh-heh, sorry Sakura-chan. I, ah, forgot you were still here.”

“You what?” Pink hair bristled ominously.

“Don’t mind him, Sakura.”

“Oh, like you’re any better.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sorry, Sasuke-kun, but this group only has one place reserved for a token idiot—”

“Hey!”

“-and if there’s two of you-“

“Excuse me?”

“-then we’re all pretty much doomed. I know this was, is, a difficult situation-“

“Understatement,” Naruto muttered.

Sasuke nodded.

“-but there’s no reason to act irrationally. None of this would’ve happened if you could trust people every now and then.”

“That’s what I said,” Hinata put in.

“It’s true,” Sai agreed.

Naruto shifted closer to Sasuke. “You don’t all gotta team up on him like that...” then, he whispered, “but, but, they totally have a point, ya know.”

Sasuke wanted to set everything on fire. He settled for one of his patented scowls.

“How is a dobe like you completely unscratched after something like that, anyway?”

“Cuz I’m the Avatar!” which explained nothing, but Sasuke didn’t press the issue, “I told you I’d be fine...”

“You passed out.”

The instant Sasuke was safely on the edge of the fountain with his feet in the water, Naruto closed his eyes and fell over, causing all kinds of fuss.

“That doesn’t count. It was only for a few minutes.”

“Tsunade-San said you should be more careful with the Avatar state. She told me you could-“

Sakura glance furtively at Sasuke.

“What?” The prince demanded,

“I know,” Naruto said at the same time.

They exchanged a heated look.

“Most importantly,” Hinata cut in, “the village is safe.”

“And we have another powerful ally,” Sai added, staring blankly into the distance.

Or... no. Sasuke followed his gaze to the so-called ‘fortune-teller,’ who conveniently reappeared after the disaster was averted.

As if reading his mind, Sai nudged the prince’s shoulder. “Don’t antagonize her.”

They left the next day. Sai helped Hinata onto Kurama’s back. Sakura stood in front of the fox, stroking his snout and gushing about what a “good, brave boy” he was. Naruto leaned against his pet, unhappily munching on a radish, as Sasuke took care of his last bit of business.

The prince regarded the fortuneteller in silence. He had questions, boy did he have some questions for that crazy, lying, manipulative-

“I’ll tell you what you want to know, brat. Don’t waste your breath.”

What, was she a mind-reader too? Preposterous.

“Hn.”

“Humans want to be safe. They’ll choose the ‘safe’ option even if just the smallest risk could yield a much greater reward.”

“Get to the point.”

“This town has history. The Avatar played his role in preserving it.” She contemplated her painted nails. Purple. What a disgusting color. Sasuke huffed.

The fortuneteller smirked. “If we chose the ‘safe’ route and evacuated, that history would be lost forever.”

*There must be something to gain,* the blind girl had said.

“But how could you know he wouldn’t-“

“That’s unimportant,” she dismissed with a wave of her fingers, “I know what I know. I’m never wrong. I hoped that, by witnessing this miracle, you’d finally gain some faith.”

“I still don’t believe you.” None of this proved her so-called predictions for his future.

Tsunade frowned.

Sasuke feigned apathy.

A line appeared between Tsunade’s brows. Before he could react, she moved with inhuman speed to flick his forehead, *hard,* knocking him flat on his ass.

“Sorry, Sasuke,” she spoke the abhorrent words with a chillingly familiar inflection, “maybe next time.”

Witch!

He scrambled to his feet. “How-“

“Once again, that’s the wrong question. Never mind any of that, your friends are waiting for you.”

With that, she yanked Sasuke to his feet and shoved him forward.

“Go.”

Even when they were hundreds of feet in the air, Sasuke didn’t spare another glance for that
They stopped at the border between Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe territory- a no-man’s land filled with rolling hills, bustling trade routes, and Fire Nation soldiers. There was no choice but to stay out of town and get reacquainted with nature. Sasuke looked forward to it.

Right.

Sai produced five bundles of clothes from his pack, ‘courtesy of Tsunade-san.’

“Cool!” Naruto gushed, “Fire nation clothes! Look, Sasuke, we’re gonna match!”

Sasuke wrinkled his nose.

“Aw, don’t be like that. And -ah!-and stop stripping out in the open.”

The Uchiha rolled his eyes and continued to undress. Naruto grumbled, walked off into a patch of trees, and returned wearing shades of red and black.

“How’s it look?”

“Good.”

Naruto beamed. “Ya really think so?”

“Can you guys, like, stop being disgusting for one minute?” Sakura snapped, emerging in her new outfit, savagely yanking out the leaves and twigs lodged in her hair.

“Um,” Naruto blushed, “What...”

“You know what I’m talking about,” she sniffed, “come on Hinata. Let’s get firewood while these losers set up camp.”

Apparently, Sai fell into the ‘loser’ category. Worse, he appeared to be in a talkative mood.

“Rumor has it,” Sai spoke as he unrolled his sleeping bag, “these woods are haunted.”

“Is that why it’s s-so f-f-fucking c-c-c-cold?” The prince nearly bit his tongue off forcing out that sentence. He clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering.


“Eto,” Naruto scratched his head, “I don’t get it.”

Sai smiled vacuously. Sakura and Hinata chose that moment to return from the forest, each carrying an armful of sticks.

“F-f-finally!”
Sasuke eagerly arranged the kindling.

“Teme, I wanna try starting the fire.”

“You’re not ready.”

“But!”

“There,” he snapped his fingers, setting the whole thing ablaze, "it’s done.”

“Jerkass.”

“Tch. Loser.”

“Ahem,” Sakura cleated her throat, “Anyways, what were you guys talking about?”

Sasuke shrugged.

“Your cousin thinks this forest is haunted,” Naruto said.

“Oh. Is that why the earth is screaming with the voices of a dozen imprisoned souls?”

“Whoa, Hinata,” Naruto chuckled, “Tone it down with the creepiness, geez. Wait, wait,” he flailed with excitement, “that gives me an idea.”

“No one encourage him,” Sasuke pleaded.

“What is it, Naruto-kun?” Hinata asked just to be contrary.

“Let’s tell ghost stories!”

“And the man’s boomerang,” Sai held up his own boomerang to illustrate, “never came back. He lives in constant fear that one day, at the most inopportune time, it will return.”

“Ah!” Naruto shrieked, tightening his death grip on Sasuke’s arm.

“Usuratonkachi, you can’t possibly-“

Sai waved his boomerang menacingly. Naruto whimpered, simultaneously pulling Sasuke into his lap and trying to climb all over him. Sasuke sighed.

“There, there,” he patted the idiot’s head, “it’s just a story. Haunted boomerangs aren’t real.”

“Like you’d know!”

Hinata giggled.

...She really was creepy.

“Oh, my turn!” Sakura chirped.
Sasuke glanced pointedly at Naruto and back. Sakura scoffed. “Come on, a little fear is healthy. Besides, you’ll want to hear this: it’s a true story. It happened to my mother.”

The bonfire cast long, deep shadows across Sakura’s solemn features. She spoke of a girl freezing to death in her village; of smoke from a chimney, voices in the wind, and...

“... a house that remains empty to. This. Day.”

Even with Naruto crawling all over him, Sasuke felt cold. Hinata smoothed her palms over the grass. The corners of her mouth pulled down. Sai shifted a little closer to the comforting warmth of the fire.

“Someone’s here,” the Hyuuga whispered.

“Th-that’s not funny, ya know!”

“I wasn’t joking.” She stood. “Show yourself.”

Silence. Then soft rustling, followed by strange, slithering footsteps.

A grey-skinned man with long black hair emerged from the shadows.

“Ku-ku-ku,” he chuckled, “greetings, children. What might you be doing in the middle of the woods?” A long tongue darted out, wetting thin, white lips. “Haven’t you heard? This place isn't safe at night.”
Even though staying at that snake-dude’s inn was a questionable decision, Naruto didn’t argue. Sakura-chan glanced from Sasuke’s shivering form to the creepy weirdo, back to Hinata’s trembling shoulders, and again at the scary dude.

Firebenders abhorred cold; Hinata spent her life in Suna. Both had too much pride to speak up about their discomfort.

So, Sakura made the decision for them. She nodded and said thanks.

Next thing Naruto knew, they were following snake dude (oro-ero-whatever-the-fuck his name was) like a row of baby turtle-ducks.

The air was warm inside the inn. Even better, there were beds and blankets upstairs and a hot, filling supper waiting at the long dining table. Okay, okay. All that stuff makes it seem like a good idea, but. But...

Look. Naruto couldn’t put his finger on it. Something just felt wrong.

“Doesn’t he creep you out?” He whispered.

“Concentrate on what you’re doing, dobe.”

“I mean,” Naruto continued, “have you seen the way he looks at you? It’s like...” he shuddered, “ya know.”

“You sound jealous.”

The leaf in his hands exploded in a spectacular burst of gold.

“That- that’s not- I mean, I mean,” his cheeks grew warm, “you can’t be okay with it. Like, it’s wrong! He must be, wassit, three times your age!”

“Speaking of lecherous old men,” Sasuke leveled a pointed look at Naruto, “how old are you again?”

The one-century age-difference was a technicality. If anything, Naruto was younger than Sasuke. They both knew that.

Naruto bristled anyway. He stood up and stomped his feet. “Are you comparing me to him?! Teme, I swear-“

His outrage was met with a cool, unimpressed stare. “Stop being a loser. We’re only here for a week. I can take care of myself. You, on the other hand-“

“Gotta concentrate,” he plopped back down, crossing his legs, “Whatever. Gimme another damn leaf.”

Sasuke plucked a leaf from the yellowing tree overhead, burned a hole in its center, and handed it to Naruto.

“One hour,” he said, “keep the fire from reaching the edges for an hour, and I’ll teach you something
“Something awesome?”

“Hn.”

“Alright! Just you watch, I totally got this in the bag.”

The leaf lasted twenty minutes, which was a little longer than last time. Naruto hunched his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fingers in the grass, waiting for the backlash.

Stupid, slow, can’t do anything right. And you call yourself the Avatar.

That’s what those crazy old geezers told him, even when he tried his best. How many hours a day, for how many weeks did Sasuke try to teach him? And what did Naruto have to show for it?

Nothing.

Warm, soft palms cupped his cheeks.

He tensed and almost flinched away.

“Naruto,” Sasuke murmured.

One blue eye reluctantly pried itself open.

“Hai,” Naruto replied, preparing himself for insults or some sort of lecture. This was the simplest exercise ever. He was even worse at this than earthbending; Hinata told him as much. Yeah, that girl was a paragon of positivity.

“You’re improving. Try one more time.”

“O-okay,” he stuttered, flustered by Sasuke’s patience.

This time, he held it for one minute longer. The third time, only a few seconds. On and on it went until sunset.

Naruto’s stupid stomach growled. Sasuke let out a bemused huff.

“That’s enough for today.”

“But I almost got it! Let me-“

“Naruto,” Sasuke spoken slowly, smoothing his thumbs across the back of the other boy’s hands, “you’ve done well. You deserve to rest. Let’s go.”

Lessons with Sasuke turned out to be a serious mind-fuck. The cranky, surly, asshole -the one Naruto knew and loved- was replaced by someone else entirely; a kind, patient, understanding teacher who didn’t threaten him like Hinata or yell like Sakura-Chan or punish him by locking him up in the dark, all alone, like the monks.

It made him want to cry. Naruto didn’t know what to do with all that kindness.

That night, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. The tears came on their own.

He sniffled quietly into the back of Sauske’s neck.
Usually, the jerk slept like a log, but lately-

“Nar’to?” Sasuke croaked, half-asleep, “whatzzit.”

“Nothing.”

Sasuke turned to face him. Black bled to iridescent crimson. Three tomoe spun lazily about the center of the iris.

“You’re lying.”

“Don’t use those weird eyes on me.”

“Fine,” he yawned.

Red faded to black.

“I’m just glad it’s you- that you’re my firebending teacher. I know I’m, like, slow—”

“You’re not.”

“-and that I suck—”

“-not like that.”

(Wait, wait, holy crap was that a sex joke? No, concentrate.)

“-but you believe in me anyway. Uh. So... Thanks.”

“Usuratonkachi,” Sasuke yawned, “This is what you...” long, black lashes fell shut. He didn’t open his eyes again and Naruto didn’t have the heart to wake him.

“Really,” he pulled Sasuke closer, smoothing down the stubborn little spike at the back of his head, smiling as they sprung back up immediately, “thank you.”

Oro-something’s fixation on Sasuke wasn’t the only reason Naruto disliked him. Evil oozed off the guy like whiskey fumes off an alcoholic. By itself, that didn’t make him dangerous. Most evil people were too dumb to do any real damage; he scared Naruto because he was Evil™ and smart.

“So, what would the Avatar like for dinner?” The creep asked when they first reached the inn.

Naruto spent a good minute coughing when some spit went down the wrong pipe.

Sasuke politely explained that “No, that’s not the Avatar. Please note the Fire Nation clothes and that Normal dog. This idiot can’t possibly be the Avatar. Just look at him. What is he choking on. He hasn’t had anything to eat or drink. I don’t understand, and I doubt he does either. Also, the Avatar is known to travel on a Very Large fox. Foxes, unlike dogs—take, for instance, this Normal dog—” he gestured to Kurama, “are not domesticated. Yet, as you can see, this Normal Dog is very well-behaved.

Oro-old-creep listened patiently to this Completely Airtight explanation. When Sasuke stopped
talking (probably because he ran out of breath) the snake dude made a strange noise. *Ku-ku-ku.*

Naruto realized it was supposed to be a laugh… Chuckle… Something. Ick.

Then, the guy dipped into a bow.

“If the prince of the esteemed Fire Nation insists, it must be the truth.”

Sasuke paled. Naruto finished his coughing fit, threw his condescending bastard of a boyfriend an irritated glare, and said, “how’d ya know?”

“Don’t worry, the Fire Nation is my enemy. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my…”

An awkward silence settled as Oro-something waited for someone to finish the sentence.

“-friend,” Sasuke spoke, “of course. Thank you.”

Not too long after that, they found out that Oro-something was a waterbender from, get this, the Southern Water Tribe. Sakura practically cried and drooled all at once when they heard *that* tragic backstory. Naruto opted to sulk in a corner away from the insanity.

“But Orochimaru-san,” Sakura leaned forward, bright-eyed and bursting with curiosity, “how did you escape the prison?”

He was surprisingly upfront about using this thing called ‘bloodbending.’ First on rats, then people. When Orochimaru offered to teach Sakura, she considered the offer for a bone-chilling moment before shaking her head.

“I think I’ll pass,” she decided, and that was that.

Naruto wanted to rip out his own hair. Like, like, were they all blind or something? Uh. Besides Hinata, who was… The bloodbending, though- this guy could literally take over people’s bodies, override their free will, and why was no one else flipping a shit?

“The Earth tells me we can trust him,” Hinata said when he brought it up.

“Naruto, have some respect!” Sakura punched him in the face to emphasize her point.

Sai made a particularly disturbing comment about Orochimaru’s tongue, which Naruto blocked out immediately.

“*Now* who needs to trust people?” Sasuke smirked.

Maybe he had that one coming.

“You’re seriously okay with this?” he asked just to make sure.

“I don’t see why not.”

Naruto wished he saw the same thing.
Rats squealed.

He knew this, but never heard such an abhorrent noise before then. Unlike Orochimaru, Sasuke didn’t spend much time around rats.

“This is the art of bloodbending,” Orochimaru rasped, “if only you were a water bender, I could…”

“Teach me?” He shook his head, “no, thanks.”

“You’d be great. You have the Avatar along with the rest of them wrapped around your little finger, and you don’t even try. You already control people-” Sasuke scoffed. Maybe Naruto called this guy ‘bat-shit insane’ for a reason… “so controlling people,” Orochimaru chuckled at his own terrible joke, “would be the next natural step.”

“Tch. I don’t think so.”

“With those eyes, my dear Sasuke-kun, anything is possible.”

“How did you know about that?”

This elicited another creepy chuckle. Ku-ku-ku.

Sasuke’s skin crawled.

“That’s unimportant.”

“I disagree.”

“What matters is that I can give you what you most desire.”

Good thing Naruto was sound asleep and no where near hearing distance. The idiot would have a stroke.

Sasuke tilted his head. An unspoken ‘what’ hovered in the air.

“Power,” the snake whispered. With flick of his fingers and a small, wet crack, he snapped the necks of those innocent, unsuspecting creatures.

The prince sucked in a sharp breath. He reminded himself that they were only rats.

And power-

*Half a mountain crumbled in the blink of an eye, yet he emerged unscratched. Even hellfire didn’t singe a single hair on his head. The very fabric of reality was his plaything. He had no need for fear or love or friendship, much less a weak, pathetic mortal with no true-

“Power,” Sasuke found himself repeating absently.

“More than you could ever imagine.” A long, red tongue lolled grotesquely through pale, bloodless lips. “Just say the word.”

Orochimaru seemed to be fond of apples. He lived in the middle of an orchard. Every room in his inn contained a bowl brimming with juicy red fruit. He plucked an apple from a basket on the table and offered it to the prince.

Wordlessly, Sasuke accepted. The crimson skin of the fruit matched his irises.
“Power,” the Uchiha whispered once more, almost against his own will. He bit into the firm, crisp flesh.

It was too sweet for his taste; not at all like his beloved tomatoes.

And yet…

Kurama chased a pigeon-squirrel into a roesberry bush one evening. He got stuck, struggled, and ended up covered in thorns. Sasuke found him by pure chance.

Naruto remained in the woods, burning leaf after leaf, while Sakura and Hinata walked through the small town on the outskirts of the forest. Sai went off to do whatever he did all day, which was why Sasuke found himself responsible for the poor fox. He grumbled, but Kurama took back to the inn and tried his best to remove the thorns.

“I know,” the prince whispered as the fox whimpered, “I know it hurts. Please bear with it.”

Kurama let out a pathetic yelp.

“Sorry,” he said, feeling silly, “but-“

“Perhaps I can help, Sasuke-kun.”

“He’s all yours.”

Orochimaru turned out to be an exceptional medic.

“Bloodbending is the key to healing,” he spoke quietly as he drew the thorns out with his fingertips, “although the full moon helps, a true master has no need of it.”

Sasuke rubbed the fox’s newly healed paw. Kurama made a few pained noises, but managed to stay still. When Orochimary finished, the fox licked his face, then Sasuke’s, before bounding happily away.


Spirits, what an awful sound.

“Sakura,” Sasuke found himself saying, “is more interested in healing than control. She’d want to learn.”

The next day, Orochimaru took Sakura into the forest, where she learned to pull water from the air and trees.
Sasuke left Naruto to practice alone. As boring as the training was, he didn’t mind watching. The idiot, though, was constantly distracted by his presence. Often, he sat in on Sakura’s on Orochimaru’s medicine room: a small shed separate from the main building, covered floor to ceiling with shelves. Books lined one wall; a fireplace and a drying rack covered the other. The other shelves contained small, colorful jars of various body parts. Sasuke hoped they came from animals. He didn’t ask.

After a particularly disturbing lecture about the unique chakra channels and anatomy of firebenders and an indepth tangent into the lost art of doujutsu Sasuke concluded Orochimaru knew too much about things he shouldn’t.

Candlelight cast shifting shadows across a pale, haggard face. Sakura and Sasuke exchanged a look. Sasuke shrugged. Sakura pursed her lips.

“Orochimaru-san, it’s amazing that you know such things. How did you- er- discover all this?”

“I’ll show you.”

He opened a trapdoor in the northeast corner and motioned for them to follow. Sasuke descended into darkness first, ignoring the queasy tightness in his gut. He climbed the ladder one-handed while holding a crackling white flame with the other.

The ladder had one-handed and twenty-three steps. When his feet touched the ground, the light in his hand couldn’t reach the ceiling. Sasuke activated the Sharingan. Two shapes—one a calm, familiar blue, and the other an ambiguous violet—descended the ladder.

“Keep walking, Sasuke-kun,” Orochimaru instructed, “I’ll give you directions.”

The innkeeper launched into a detailed description of his experiments. He paused to give Sasuke directions, like ‘left here,’, or ‘right there,’ or ‘keep straight ahead.’

Sasuke’s flame hissed and crackled dangerously as he listened. He ground his teeth, dug his nails into his palms until blood dripped onto the ground, but said nothing.

This is the truth of my country, the prince thought bitterly, this is why Madara must be stopped.

He ignored Sakura’s quiet gasps and shrugged her off when she tried to comfort him.

The truth was horrific; unforgivable. Perhaps his people deserved to-

“We’ve arrived,” Orochimaru announced, producing a silver key from his dagged sleeve. They stood in front of a narrow metal door crisscrossed with chains that were held together by a palm-sized padlock.

Sakura clutched the hem of Sasuke’s tunic; Sasuke activated the Sharingan. Orochimaru stepped in his line of sight.

“Promise me one thing,” the old man whispered.

“What?” Sasuke replied.

“Don’t judge me for what you’re about to see.”
The criminals –Fire nation soldiers- Orochimaru imprisoned were alive.

 Barely.

Sakura showed no sign of disgust; she was a medic, and men like them killed her mother. She reached inside herself, searching for a shred of compassion. If not that, then vilification.

There was nothing. Normally warm, bright jade eyes hardened to stone as they catalogued relevant details and glossed over extraneous information. She found it all morbidly fascinating.

Sasuke’s knees went weak. He touched the wall and asked the obvious question.

“What are you searching for?”

There were bodies –people, still alive and breathing- chained to the tables. In Sasuke’s second sight, they glowed a feeble, ominous red. Their insides were on display. Clearly, Orochimaru sought something inside them.

“Interesting question,” he mused, “I found many things. Invaluable knowledge, and incalculable power through that knowledge. But what I seek eludes me. There’s a reason my subjects must be alive; only living vessels contain the essence of eternity.”

Sakura glanced up from the man on the table. Sasuke was finding it hard to breathe.

“You see, my dear prince, I am searching for the soul.”

The leaf stayed in tact from noon to twilight. Ha! Wait till Sasuke hears about that! He’ll have to teach Naruto real firebending then.

Naruto crushed the smoldering leaf under his heel and sprinted to the inn. He flung the door open, took a deep breath-

Then, deflated when he realized the place was empty.

Except for Sai, but who’s gonna count that guy?

“Hey Sai,” Naruto greeted flatly, “where’s…”

Sai shrugged.

“Okay.” Naruto closed the door.

No Sasuke, no Sakura. Hell, even Kurama went off somewhere to do his thing. As for Hinata… Naruto closed his eyes. The earth hummed. She was sleeping.

Ugh. What the hell. Naruto joined Sai at the wooden table. He ate an apple (or five because damn, those things were juicy!) as he watched the other boy write letters.

“Yo,” spit and fruit chunks flew everywhere; he took a beat to swallow, “whatcha doin’?”
Sai stared at where Naruto’s saliva made the ink bleed.

“Work.”

“Yeah, Uh-huh. What kinda work?”

He balled up the ruined page.

“Burn this.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

“Fine.” Sai held the paper over a candle and told Naruto to ‘put it out’ instead.

“Bossy,” he complained, but did it anyway,

Sai pulled out fresh parchment. He dipped his brush in an inkpot and started again. Naruto tilted his head until his neck damn near snapped. Not that it did any good- he had trouble reading normal letters right side up, so reading Sai’s crazy code was out of the question.

“You may ask, Avatar.”

Weird. Sai never called him ‘Avatar,’ which was literally the only thing Naruto liked about that guy.

“What are you…“

“These letters pertain to slavery.”

Naruto accidentally inhaled an apple seed. He wheezed, clutching his throat. Sai wrote as he continued to speak.

“The Fire Nation kidnaps and enslaves children. Those children are captured at neutral territory such as where we are. Fourteen children went missing last month just in these woods.”

“I don’t get it,” Naruto croaked after catching his breath, “what would anyone-“ aka Sasuke’s crazy uncle “-want with a bunch of kids?”

Sai didn’t have a definite answer. Instead, he discussed possibilities. The more Naruto listened, the queasier he felt.

Apples didn’t taste as good coming back up. Luckily, he made it to the open window before hurling. After he finished, he cleared his throat and gasped out, “don’t tell Sasuke.”

“Why not?”

“He already thinks everything’s his fault. If he blames himself for this too. Ah. You get it.”

Sai nodded. Naruto trudged upstairs. He was exhausted, and he needed to wash his mouth.

“We’ll keep your secret,” Sasuke said as Orochimaru secured the metal door.
“Sasuke-kun,” Sakura murmured.

The prince silenced her with a look.

“With a few conditions.”

“I expected no less,” Orochimaru turned around, cocking his head, “well?”

He agreed to join their side in the war and share what he knew with Sai. Once the returned through the trapdoor, Orochimaru pulled up a stool. He stood on it and rummaged through the highest shelf, returning with a thin, black book.

"Your uncle was an," he cleared his throat, "acquaintance of mine. This contains his best-kept secret."

Sasuke took the book.

*Power,* Orochimaru had said he could give Sasuke power.

*Knowledge is power.*

The next morning, Sai declared their business done. He exchanged various scrolls with Orochimaru. Their bedroom was silent; Sasuke packed his things. Naruto sat on the windowsill, hugging one knee to his chest. Usually, he’d be bouncing off the walls and chatting up a storm.

“Oy, dobe,” Sasuke said.

“I- hey, huh?”

“Help me make the bed.”

Naruto straightened the sheets and fluffed the pillows without complaint.

“What’s wrong?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Why.”

“You were out pretty late,” he yawned, “what were you doing?”

“Making out with Orochimaru.”

“Oh.” He yawned again.

Sasuke crossed his arms and leaned on the doorframe, waiting.

“What?!”

“He’s a great kisser, what with that long tongue and-“
“THAT’S NOT FUNNY, TEME!” Naruto grabbed his shoulders, shaking him frantically. At a more normal volume, he demanded, “don’t even joke about that! No, wait, don’t make jokes, period. You have the worst sense of humor!”

“You’re one to talk.” Sasuke pried Naruto’s hands off and guided him downstairs. “Did you know firebenders and airbenders have similar lung structure? It makes sense, considering how our bending comes from breath.”

“Eh.” That was random. “That’s cool, I guess.”

“Hn.”

They ate breakfast in silence. Naruto glanced at Sai. Sakura glanced at Sasuke. Sai and Sakura exchanged a look. Hinata didn’t look at anyone. She was blind. Orochimaru entertained Kurama with a ball of yarn.

Before they took off, Orochimaru winked –actually winked- at Sasuke.

“We’ll meet again,” he purred.

Naruto didn’t like the sound of that.

Not one bit.
Sasuke felt like a horned whale. No, a polar-bear-dog… maybe a penguin or… Forget it. To put it simply, the proud Uchiha moved as if he was a fat, round, clumsy creature, wearing this ridiculous coat.

The prince reluctantly pulled on the fur-lined hood, ignoring Naruto’s smug glance and sighing quietly at the sweet, sweet warmth.

Yesterday, Sasuke gave in and splurged on some proper Northern clothes. His pride protested at the thought of wearing that big puffy blue... Thing. When he put it on, Naruto got drooly and moon-eyed, then had the **utter nerve** to call him ‘cute.’ Naturally, Sasuke hurled a fireball at that dobe’s dumb blond head and demanded he retract the offensive statement. Said dumb blond refused, so Sasuke threw the coat at his stupid face.

He spent the next twenty minutes shivering. His teeth chattered violently. Small icicles formed at the tip of his nose. After much mutual stewing, Naruto exploded.

“Fuck this!” He barked, grabbing Sasuke’s arm and forcing it into a sleeve.

“Oy, w-what are you d-d-doing?” Sasuke accidentally bit his tongue, trying to talk through chattering teeth. The pain distracted him long enough for Naruto to force his other arm into a sleeve.

“I’ll never call you cute again, okay teme? No matter how ador- uh, cuddl- wait, no-“

“S-stop t-t-t-talking, you utterly embarrassing m-m-moron! I c-ow-c-can-‘ okay, his tongue was definitely bleeding “d-d-dress myself!”

“Fine, you stubborn jerk! Sue me for trying to help!”

…And that was that.

Sasuke’s cheeks burned at the memory- er, the cold. Right.

Ugh.

For the past three days, they had to walk. The air in the Northern sky was too cold and thin for mere mortals (read: everyone but the Avatar) to breathe.

Presently, the group traveled through the Northern forest in the Land of Frost. Dense, prickly trees in every shade of green, blue, and violet covered rolling, snow-covered hills. Amber, crimson, and emerald light danced like inverted tropical waters in the sunless sky. It would all be very beautiful if it wasn’t so damn frigid, with about three hours of sunlight per day.

Sasuke glanced upward and sighed. He missed the sun. His firebending was weaker than ever in this frozen hell.

The prince already had plenty to brood about: the disturbing contents Orochimaru’s book, the weight of keeping a secret from **that** loser (even if it was for the best. And it was. It had to be.) and now, a general, formless sense of dread.

He couldn’t place the reason for it. A crucial piece of the puzzle eluded him. It had to do with one of
the first tiles to topple, or perhaps the man who conspired with fate to set events in motion-

Oh.

Right.

Him.

Silence, punctuated only by the muffled crunching of snow and frozen ground under his feet, amplified the horror of this particular epiphany.

To be absolutely sure, Sasuke asked the question.

“We’re meeting him soon, aren’t we?”

Sai nodded.

“Don’t say anything about,” he made a vague gesture between himself and Naruto, “this.”

Naruto rolled his eyes. Sakura giggled. Hinata stared at the space above Sasuke’s head.

“Why not?” She asked.

“You’ll see- understand when you meet him. That guy can be-“ fucking insufferable “-nosy. So. Please.” The prince almost choked on that last word.

“Alright,” Sakura agreed. Her eyes twinkled in a manner the Uchiha didn’t care for. He decided not to read into it; she jabbed Sai in the ribs, forcing him to grunt his compliance. Hinata shrugged. Sasuke decided to take that as a ‘yes.’

Naruto said “whatever,” which he amended to, “Okay, you prickly bastard!” at Sasuke’s bone-chilling glare.

“Thanks.”

He sighed once more. Thin, white fog escaped his lips, lingered briefly, then dissolved.

Hinata couldn’t come into the village.

“It floats on ice. The earth can’t speak to me there. I’ll be useless.”

Sakura’s furrowed her brow in sympathy. “I’ll stay with you,” she said.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

Hinata tried to glare at Sakura. She ended up scowling a tree.

“I decline, regardless,” the Hyuuga said.
Sakura scoffed. “Hinata, you can’t be serious.”

As they argued, Naruto crossed his arms, scrunched his face, and squinted into the distance. After a few seconds, he knelt and placed his hands on the snow-covered ground. Sasuke watched with mild interest.

“I don’t n-need your charity,” Hinata whispered in a dangerous tone.

Soft crackling filled the air.

Sakura’s eye twitched. “It’s not charity, it’s friendship!”

Steam rose as the ice thawed under Naruto’s palms, revealing the black earth underneath.

“We’re friends?” Hinata asked in a decidedly un-friendly tone. A minor earthquake shook snow from the branches above.

“What kind of question is that?” Sakura took a menacing step forward. Sharp needles of ice sprung up around her feet.

Meanwhile, Naruto dug out a few fistfuls of dirt and made a small pile. He stared at the pile as the argument escalated into a shouting match. Sasuke wondered if he should step in. He opened his mouth to speak. Sai placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

The prince glanced back and forth, considering. In the end, he crossed his arms, leaned on a tree, and watched the lights in the sky.

Naruto nodded, made a ‘hmph’ noise, then sprung to his feet.

“Oy, Hinata, gimme your shoes.”

“Naruto,” Sakura fumed, “can’t you see we’re-“

“Yeah, yeah, have your stupid fight-“

“What did you say?”

“I just wanna try something.”

The waterbender looked ready to lance him with an icicle. (Tch. And people give Sasuke shit for having a temper. Compared to Sakura, he was the epitome of serene.)

Hinata flung her moccasins at the loser’s face. Naruto caught both shoes and began filling them with dirt. Sakura sputtered.

“Now put them back on,” Naruto demanded.

Hinata obeyed.

“Take a few steps on the ice and tell me how ya feel.”

Silently, the earthbender walked from the outskirts of the forest onto the lake. She stopped about twenty feet away, then walked back, slowly but without faltering.

“This will do for now. I can come with you.”
“Ya know, it probably won’t kill you to thank me.”

“Probably,” Hinata echoed. Her lips quirked with the smallest hint of a smile.

There was a fine line between genius and stupidity. While Sasuke walked firmly on one side – though which side depends on who you ask- Naruto… Naruto lived on that line.

He wasn’t smart or stupid; the not-idiotic idiot evaded definition.

Sasuke contemplated this paradox during yet another bout of silence.

Sakura and Naruto used to fill the air with a constant stream of inane chatter. Day by day, that chatter dimmed. And now, it was nearly non-existent.

This was the price of keeping certain types of secrets. Not just guilt or lost sleep or petty fights, but simple, innocuous silence. Maybe that’s why Sasuke didn’t talk much to begin with, why he spoke more a week ago, and why he returned to the thick, muffled safety of silence after inviting a sadistic criminal to be an ally.

Naruto’s growing silences and strained glances could be explained the same way. He was also hiding something.

That moron has some nerve.

Wait.

I’m a hypocrite.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

Then again…

And on it went Sasuke’s thoughts circled like Kurama chasing his many tails. He watched the fox who, after several minutes, collapsed from dizziness.

They were staying in a small, icy port town at the Frost Country border, waiting for his arrival. As usual, he was late, and there was absolutely nothing to do.

Three of them waited on the wooden dock by the port. Hinata stayed on the ice. Apparently, she could ‘see’ on metal and frozen water, but not wood. When Sasuke asked for an explanation, she said, “You wouldn’t understand,” and waved him off.

Sakura informed Hinata that she was being ‘a tad condescending.’

Hinata replied that might be ‘a tad hypocritical,’ coming from her.

Naruto tried to diffuse the tension. He ended up with a black eye and a swollen cheek.

“Isn’t the Avatar supposed to be a master arbitrator?” Sai wondered.
“Leave him be,” Sasuke said to head off another pointless argument.

Sai quirked a brow. Naruto flushed, stared at his feet, and picked at the chapped skin on his lips. Sasuke forced his eyes away from Naruto’s mouth.

*When was the last time we kissed?*

He couldn’t remember.

Not that it mattered.

Sasuke loathed how ice soaked up sound. Voices carried strangely inside igloos, distant and muffled at the same time. No crickets sang at night; no birds chirped at dawn. Wind didn’t rustle pine needles. Even snow fell soundlessly.

In this silence, each unwanted thought screamed and echoed endlessly in his overburdened mind.

Sasuke sighed. He missed the noise.

Naruto looked like he wanted to say something-

*What’re you brooding about now, bastard?*

-but closed his mouth, pouted, and turned away instead.

For some reason, it hurt.

*Spit it out, idiot,* he wanted to snap, but found the words stuck in his throat.

Maybe silence wasn’t harmless. Maybe it killed things gently.

He closed his eyes and remembered a distant summer afternoon when his family visited a vineyard in an Earth Kingdom colony. Itachi and Shisui found an anthill.

“Let’s burn them,” Shusui suggested. His eyes glinted with manic glee.

“I want to try something new,” Itachi replied. He pulled a bottle of amber liquid from his pocket.

“Here, Sasuke,” Itachi handed him the bottle, “pour it on them.”

“But,” the Sasuke wrung his fingers, frowning, “but they’re not hurting anyone… Why don’t we just leave them alone?”

A beat of tense silence passed. Shisui looked amused; Itachi’s eyes widened before his face resumed a blank mask.

“Because I want to teach you something.”

Then, Itachi took the bottle from Sasuke and poured its contents onto the anthill.

Slowly, gently, quietly, the ants dissolved into nonexistence. Being ants, they must have loved everything sweet and never thought that something so sweet could destroy them so completely.

“Do you understand?” Itachi asked.

Sasuke nodded. He can’t say what he learned; it was an understanding that transcended language.
He only knew that he changed that day, and that a million innocent creatures died so he could learn something.

That night, he lay awake, sick with guilt and a strange, inconsolable sorrow.

They were just ants.

He repeated those four words until he fell asleep.

What a weak, peculiar child he was- mourning the death of insects. Ridiculous. The image of furry black bodies dancing against their will flashed through his mind. With the flick of a bony, white finger, they collapsed.

He inhaled sharply.

It doesn’t matter. They were just rats.

Another memory assaulted him: men clinging to life with eyes that screamed for death as their insides lay bare in a dark, sunless lair.

So what? They were just-

Just-

The price of knowledge… Right.

Everything has a price.

A black speck appeared on the horizon as the sun set. Thick, dark plumes of smoke obscured the vibrant auroras. All at once, everyone become alert. Naruto bounced on his toes. Sakura rocked back and forth on her heels with her hands behind her back. Sai shifted his bag from one shoulder to the other. Hinata edged closer to the dock.

“Um, is it just me or did the ship get bigger?” Naruto asked.

“Baka, that’s not the same ship,” Sakura replied.

“Oh,” he rubbed the back of his neck, casting a furtive glance at Sasuke.

What, did the dobe say something stupid on purpose just to-

Figures. How pathetic.

For some reason, Sasuke felt guilty.

The Empire-class battleship pulled up to the tiny dock, dwarfing the rickety fishing ships on either side. A little boy pointed and gasped. His father ducked his head, picked the boy up, and rushed away. An old woman shuffled back, sniffing ‘Fire Nation scum,’ before hacking up some phlem. She spat near Hinata’s feet. Sakura pulled her away just in time.
Slowly, a crewmember Sasuke didn’t recognize lowered the metal bridge. A tall, lean figure waited at the top.

“My adorable nephew how wonderful to see you!”

Sasuke said nothing. He walked up the metal board and onto the ship. Kakashi opened his arms like he expected a hug.

Naturally, Sasuke punched him in the gut. As the old man doubled over in pain, the prince kicked his shin for good measure.

“I deserve that,” Kakashi wheezed.

“This isn’t over,” Sasuke stated with deadly calm. He entered the superstructure, slamming the metal door with a resounding clank.

“Naruto-sama,” Kakashi greeted, recovering his cheer in record time.

Blue eyes regarded the firebender coolly.

“Maa, I know the way we- or rather I managed-“

The arrows on his skin glowed for a terrifying instant. The Avatar took a calming breath, then kicked his other shin.

“We’ll talk later.”

“I look forward to it,” Kakashi lied.

Sakura was next in line.

“Hello Kakashi.” No ‘-san’ for him, apparently; no respect either. He could live with that.

(Though, honestly, it stung a bit.)

“Sakura-chan,” he nodded, “who’s this?”

“Hyuuga Hinata, Naruto’s earthbending sensei and our newest fri- acquaintance.”

“I… See. Pleased to meet you, Hyuuga-san.” He bowed. The pale-eyes girl stared at his forehead. Even this stranger refused to make eye-contact. Kakashi knew he didn’t part with those brats on good terms, what staging a cave-in and abandoning them for months, but this was overkill.

“I’m blind,” Hinata informed him.

Never mind.

“Eh. Alright.”

She walked past him, took her shoes off, and shook them upside-down over the railing. Clumps of dirt splashed into the water below. When Kakashi opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, she walked away, barefoot, on the freezing metal deck.

“Captain Hatake,” Sai greeted, “if everyone in the Fire Nation military is as timely as you, winning this war will be a simple matter.”
“Well, you see, there was this typhoon. No, tropical storm or… More like a mild drizzle. But, we had a productive encounter with a band of pirates. You’ve heard of the Akatsuki, yes?”

Sai nodded.

“I had some leads that I had to follow up on. Or, I would have if my Shoji set didn’t go missing, so- I hate to ramble. The point is, we had quite the adventure getting here. I can tell you all about it if-“

“No, thanks.”

Ouch.

“Fair enough.”

Maybe he deserved that, too.
“Look Sasuke, I’ve had a long day. Yes, yes. I trapped you in a cave. It was for a good reason.”

Useless nick-knacks littered the captain’s mahogany desk. Sasuke stood in front of a globe with an outdated map of the four nations. Grey marked what was once air-bender territory. Green and blue bordered land that should be lined in red.

Madara wanted to paint the whole world red. Then again, so did the late king Fugaku, and his queen Mikoto, and father, grandfather, and all the rest.

“You were supposed to interrupt me,” Kakashi drawled after a long pause, “Or yell, ‘what possible reason could you have for nearly getting me killed.’”

Once upon a time, Sasuke might have found his Uncle’s high-pitched attempt at an impression offensive. He was easily manipulated, and Kakashi exceptionally manipulative.

Not anymore.

Sasuke said nothing..

"No? Alright, bluff called. Dear nephew, you’re so stubborn. Convincing you to- it would have been a hassle convincing you to... Frankly, I’d rather blow up a few boxes of dynamite and let Lady Luck have her way. So, I did. It was for the best, all things considered. Minus the almost dying on your part...”

The prince spun the globe. Faded colors blurred together. The four arbitrary nations and their equally arbitrary borders became a mess of shifting lines. Sasuke watched until the little world stopped turning.

His death -in a cave, desert, mountain, or anywhere else- would be another drop in an ocean of blood.

“I don’t care about that,” Sasuke said.

“How disturbing.”

The prince raised a mildly inquisitive brow.

“Maa,” Kakashi gestured vaguely, “aren’t you supposed to care about staying alive?”

“Tch. You sound just like that idiot.”

“Which idiot? Seems to be a lot of them around these days.”

Sasuke gritted his teeth.

“I’m talking about Nar- the Avatar. Don’t derail this Kakashi. I’m not here for another pointless argument.”

“Then,” he chuckled, "you’ve come to the wrong place.”
“This is important. Please,” Sasuke had to force that word out, “listen. Answer honestly. I’ll know if you lie.”

He let his eyes bleed red, carefully gauging his uncle’s reaction. Kakashi remained as expressionless as ever. Sasuke’s second sight revealed a burst of blue in the center of the other man’s chest. The color of surprise mingled with a dash of hope.

...weird.

“Ask your question.” Kakashi leaned back in his plush seat and rest his feet on the desk.

“What kind of man was my father?”

One eye rolled up to the ceiling. “I was hoping...” he clucked, then huffed, “no, now’s as good a time as any. Fine. Sit down.”

Sasuke crossed his arms. “I don’t want to.”

“For once in your life, listen to your poor uncle.”

For no good reason, Sasuke decided to humor him.

Later, the prince realized, that his knees would have buckled if he had been standing. Kakashi was right to tell him to sit, among other things.

He was also a liar. The occasional yellow spark -the Sharingan’s flag for deception- stained Kakashi’s throat as he spoke.

So.

No surprise there, and not like Sasuke trusted him much to begin with.

“I’m sorry,” Kakashi said at the end of it all, “I was trying to-“

“-protect me. I understand.”

It didn’t change anything. Sasuke glanced off to the side. His gaze stuck on the Fire Nation flag hanging from the wall.

“You’ve changed,” his uncle observed.

“Yes. It’s long overdue.” The Uchiha pushed his bangs back, turning forward once more. Madara’s mark marred a two-inch strip of skin near his hairline. “This,” Sasuke traced the crimson scar, “doesn’t make me a disgrace.”

“No,” Kakashi agreed, sitting forward to level a sharp look, “that’s one thing you could never be.”

He nodded. “I know. It’s worse.”

“Sasuke...”

“I was a fool.” He stood on trembling legs, shaking his head. Inky locks slid into place, obscuring the young prince’s eyes. Soft footsteps crossed the room. A white hand lingered on the metal door handle.

“Thank you,” he whispered, again for no good reason.
Kakashi sighed.

After everything, his poor nephew remained painfully naïve.

Naruto raised his fist to the metal door. He promised Kakashi the ass-kicking of the century. Or—okay, he promised Sasuke, even though the bastard didn’t know... or care.

Still, a promise is a promise, even one made to empty air. It’s like that old saying about the tree falling in a forest. Even if the poor tree died alone, it mattered.

Wait, that doesn’t sound right—Argh! Focus! Kakashi’s ass desperately needed kicking. Right.

Just as he was about to knock, the door opened.

Sasuke.

“Oh, hi ya teme!” Naruto forced a sunny grin, even as his chest clenched painfully, “fancy meeting you here.”

Sasuke paused. “Excuse me,” he murmured, carefully avoiding eye-contact and brushing past Naruto as if he didn’t exist.

“Oi!” Naruto called out.

The prince quickened his pace. He turned the corner and disappeared.

“Fine, be that way, you—you giant meanie!” Naruto shook his fist the empty corridor. He stepped into the captain’s quarters and slammed the door hard.

“Ah, Naruto-Sama.”

“Kakashi,” the Avatar cracked his knuckles, “what the hell did you do this time?”

Each night, under the waxing moon, Sasuke stood at the bow of the ship. He took off his coat, hung it on the rail, and stared at the sky. The arctic cold stung as it seeped under his skin. He waited, shivering, for pain to numb. He waited longer for his thoughts to still. Eventually, the wind, ocean, and moon were all that existed.

For a while, Sasuke Uchiha -the banished prince, the puppet, the disappointment of a second son-faded away.

On the third night, when half the moon glowed and the other remained in shadow, Hinata stood next
He quashed down a bubble of irritation.

She fidgeted with her fingers, tugging at the fur cuffs of her parka. For a while, only the hum of the engine and the rippling waves filled the silence.

Sasuke put on his coat. He turned to leave. Hinata choose that moment to speak. On a whim, he decided to humor her.

“The elements speak t-to each other,” she stuttered softly without prelude, “N-no, that’s not the right word- it’s not speech. More like… There’s a song only the Avatar hears. I hear a part of it- th-the earth. Water sings with the earth and the earth sings to m-me. When Naruto put earth my shoes, it touched the water that seeped through the soles. Through earth, water guided me.”

So, she decided to answer a question he asked days ago. Sasuke inclined his head, remembered she couldn’t see the gesture and said, “I understand.”

Hinata scraped at the rusted railing with her fingernail. Red powder stained her pale fingers.

“Some elements are friends,” she continued, “and others don’t like each other at all.”

“Is that so.” A note of sarcasm kept into his voice.

“Fire and water don’t get along. Neither do earth and air.” Hinata tapped a forefinger on the rail. More rust crumbled and fell off. A faint ringing pulsed through the hollow metal pole.

The prince observed her idiosyncrasies with detached interest.

“Fortunately, earth and water are compatible. It makes sense: rivers have banks. Oceans meet the shore. Without water, the earth becomes barren. Without earth, water has nothing to rest on.”

He thought about rivers spanning the length of a continent and replied, “Everything is connected.”

Hinata hummed.

“Fire and air they- they love each other. Without warmth, air becomes f-frigid and stagnant. Without air, fire perishes.”

He inhaled a lungful of cold, stinging air, coughing lightly. “You- you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“There are worse to things to think about. Especially when n-no one t-t-tells you anything,” she sighed. Swallowed. Closed her eyes, “when you’ve been left in the d-dark, pitied by the very people who call themselves your friend…”

“That’s not-“

“Save your assurances, Uchiha. I don’t need them.”

He resisted the idiotic urge to try again because it wasn’t his problem, as he was not and never will be some nosy emotional dumbass. No, he was Sasuke Uchiha, and he respected people’s boundaries.

“Fine, why are you telling me this tonight?”

“When you asked the question, you had no use for the answer. I don’t like to waste my breath.”
“And now…”

“Now, I’m going back to bed.” With that, she walked away.

Sasuke shoved his hands in his pockets. He cast the moon a final, longing glance, and went inside.

Hinata was pissy. Sakura was pissy. And Sasuke- ugh, don’t get him started on that bastard. Okay to be honest, even Naruto was being kinda pissy these days. He had a good reason. Guilt, no matter how irrational (cuz he didn’t do anything wrong, damn it!) can really fuck a guy up. But geez, what the hell was everyone’s problem?

Kakashi upgraded to this ginormous ship to make room for new passengers: weirdos from the four corners of the earth, every one of them hellbent on destroying Madara. Yeah, Kakashi was an asshole and Naruto still needed to beat some sense into him, but he nailed this whole ‘recruiting’ thing.

But (c’mon, you know there’s always a catch!) more people meant more opinions.

And more questions.

Turns out that when you vanish for a century, let the world plunge into chaos, and pop up out of the blue to fix the damage, people think you owe them an explanation.

Usually, he’d talk to Sasuke about this crap because he talked to Sasuke about everything- well, not everything.

Not certain war crimes, but again, that’s for his -Sasuke's- own good.

Besides, for a while now things haven’t been…

Point is, people had questions for Naruto. Completely valid questions that made him feel lower than dirt, garbage, shit- he was such a coward. He knew everything was gonna be okay. He’d make everything okay. The tough part was getting people to believe him.

There was a chick with a fetish for the color pink and sharp, dangerous weapons, who straight up threatened to cut Naruto if he even thought about ‘disappearing again,’ then blamed him for her father’s death.

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he settled for an apology and a promise. Just like that, she decided he was cool.

Then, there was this earth bender –Kira? Kisa? Something with a ‘Ki’ in it- who was, like, in love with his polarbear dog. He had giant red tattoos on his face, strange silted pupils, and extra-long canine teeth. Anyway, that guy decided for no good reason that Naruto was ‘unworthy’ or something.

Until his quiet friend –Shiro, maybe?- mentioned how Naruto diffused a volcano to save a village.

“Wait,” dog boy barked, whirring on Naruto, “you blew up a volcano?”
“Er. Actually, the point was for it not to blow up—"

“Dude! How do you even do that?”

Naruto told him the story. Kiba’s jaw dropped.

“Damn, alright, I take it back. You’re actually somethin’ Mister Avatar.”

“Eh-heh,” Naruto rubbed the back of his neck, flashing a sheepish grin, “it was nothing, really.”

“It’s good you’re so powerful or whatever. You can fix this whole mess.” Ki-something’s answering grin oozed with malice. “Seeing as everything’s kinda your fault, anyway.”

Yup. There was always a catch.

“It is,” Naruto agreed, burning with determination, “and I will. Believe it.”

Those were just two people- two of the easy ones. Handling angry skeptics was part of the Avatar job description. He knew how to deal with people who didn’t believe in him; the monks taught him that much, intentionally or not.

It was the hero-worship that almost did him in.

Specifically, fangirls.

Hoo boy. Those fucking fangirls.

Shit, they’d be easier to fight off if he could explain why he wasn’t down to clown, but Sasuke made the rules clear: don’t tell people about their –his words- ‘ill-defined relationship’ or else.

(Not that they had much of a relationship lately, anyways).

Bastard.

Presently, the Avatar was hiding from- er, avoiding- a particularly persistent pair or twins. Ugh, twins were like, so overhyped and he had to try and it really didn’t end well so. Basically, he’d been there, done that, learned his lesson a century ago and wasn’t too keen on a repeat, thank-you-very-much. Naruto turned left, right, right, left, sprinted down the narrow hall at breakneck speed.

“Hey, slow down!” Shouted a passing fire nation soldier.

“Naruto-kun?” Twin One called, ”Yoo-hoo, Naruto-kun?”

Fuck! They were catching up!

Without thinking, Naruto went into the nearest door. He found himself in the overcrowded mess hall.

“Yosh, there’s no way they’ll find me here!”

His stomach rumbled.

“Might as well eat,” he decided, scanning the room for a place to sit. Most tables were full. Others had empty seats… Next to flamboyant earthbenders in green jumpsuits and matching bowl cuts, or… Yeah, better sit next to people he knew, no matter how pissy they were being.

There!
Naruto dodged tables, trays, and a couple of scary-looking thugs to reach a table near the back.

“Hey guys!”

Sakura and Sasuke looked up simultaneously. The conversation immediately died. Sasuke clammed up and refused to look him in the eye. Sakura tried to chat about the weather.

“Y’know, I just remembered. Uh.” Naruto scanned the dining hall, brightening when he spotted a familiar face, “Hinata said she wanted to talk.”

“Naruto-“ Sakura began.

“Catch ya later!”

Sasuke didn’t try to stop him. Big surprise there.

It still kinda hurt.

He kept walking.

“Sup, Hinata. And Sai.”

Strange. Since when did those two hang out? At least it explains why no one else sat there. Sai promptly excused himself. Relief won over irritation. Seriously, why was everyone treating him like crap these days? He was the Avatar, not a damn Leopard!

Or was it leaper... Leap-something... Damn Sasuke, did he suddenly expect Naruto to remember the words for things all on his own?

Naruto coped with his latest burst of impotent rage by stuffing his face. He cleared all the food on the table in minutes. Meanwhile, Hinata, ever the dainty little lady, carefully peeled translucent skin off orange slices, ate the skin, and left the actual orange part on the table. Naruto ended up eating that, too.

When the food was gone, he burped and blurted, “What’s everyone’s deal lately?”

She took her time chewing on a tiny mouthful of nothing before saying, “How w-would I know?”

“Cuz you kinda know everything, oh wise sensei. Wait,” he flinched, ”don’t hurt me! I’m not being sarcastic about the ‘wise’ thing, I swear. Something’s off with everyone, ya know. Like," he shifted, glancing off to the side, "something happened in those woods.”

“You’re right,” Hinata said. “I’ll tell you everything.”

And she did.

About the kidnappings –which was old news- and prisoners under the mountain, the way Orochimaru made them suffer, the way they did nothing and invited the snakey creepto join them.

Naruto pressed a fist to his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep, deep breath.

“Sai talks to you, huh.”

“No one else does. How much did you know before I told you?”
“Just the first part. About the children, I mean.”

Hinata’s lip trembled. “I understand why you didn’t tell Sasuke or Sakura, but why n-not m-m-me? Why doesn’t anyone t-talk to me?”

Naruto wanted to reach out and touch her hand, but he had a feeling she might snap his fingers like twigs. He sat on them -his hands- to stay put.

“I’m sorry, y’know. I was trying to protect you, just like Sasuke and Sakura-chan. Everything’s so messed up. You’re better off not knowing.”

Naruto guessed it was moot, though. Damn them.

Hinata frowned. “You sound like my father.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“That. Wasn’t. A. Compliment.”

“Oh. Right. But he was…”

“Controlling, and a m-miser with secrets.” Hinata flushed. Her eyebrows furrowed. “Through him, I learned to p-prefer the truth. People need the truth no matter how m-much it hurts.”

Heat rushed to his cheeks. His stomach twisted. “Need is a strong word…”

“No. Truth hurts, but lies destroy. You see what’s happening to us.”

Blue eyes went wide with awe. Of course. Duh. Whoa.

And then, something else clicked.

“That’s why you so got mad at Sakura-chan in the Northern Forest.”

“Friends tell each other things. You can’t call someone a ‘friend’ if you don’t treat them like one.”

“Shit, shit.” He jumped to his feet, slammed both hands on the table, and knocked his chair down. A hush fell over the room. Heads turned to the source of the noise, saw Naruto, and turned away. This, too, was business as usual.

“You’re so right,” he lowered his voice, feeling a little self-conscious, “I’m super sorry, Hinata-chan, really.”

Finished with her orange skins, Hinata decided to gnaw on her cuticles instead. A thin line formed between her dark brows.

She sighed. “Just don’t do it again.”

“I won’t cuz we are friends.” Naruto nearly fell over leaning in so close, but he had a point to make, damnit! “We’re a team. Everyone thinks you’re super strong and cool and smart- even Sasuke, believe it or not- so, like, don’t push us away like this. Friends gotta tell each other when- when they mess up. We messed up.”

Hinata seemed to consider this. She nodded.

“And,” Naruto decided to push his luck just a little, “be nice to Sakura-chan. She really thought you
guys were friends. Ano, she even said she was really happy to have another girl around or
something..."

“I don’t understand why,” she murmured.

“Me neither. I figured it was a girl thing but…” he scratched his chin, "anyways, just give her a
chance."

Hinata stared at a point slightly above his forehead. Naruto shifted so her eyes met his, as pointless as
that would be. She sucked in one side of her cheek. For no real reason, he decided to take that as a
‘yes,’ tossed an impish smile over his shoulder, and happily skipped away.
Unlocked

Chapter by ChocolateCannibal, TsundereSasuke (ChocolateCannibal)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They sailed through dark red water. Naruto glew over place a century ago, but couldn’t remember what it was called for the life of him. When he tried asking about it, people shot him funny looks and rolled their eyes.

Which was rude and also kinda...

Eh. He couldn't put his finger on it, but whatever.

The weather warmed over the next few days. For once, there wasn’t a single furry coat or runny nose in sight. Naruto found a secluded spot above deck and laid down. Cotton-pink clouds drifted in the sky above, contrasting pleasantly against the light blue sky. Naruto watched them for a while before closing his eyes and enjoying the soft sunlight.

He wondered why the clouds were pink, why the ocean was red, and if the two things were connected. He wondered if Sasuke knew the answer, and if he, too, enjoyed a break from the cold. Firebenders got their power from the sun, so they should like sunlight. Right?

A soft smile tugged at Naruto's lips as he remembered that jerk's nasty sunburn in Suna.

You're not like the rest of them, are you?

He remembered a lone figure at the front of the ship, basking in the moonlight.

God, you're weird.

He wondered what Sasuke was doing all alone in the middle of the night out in the freezing cold. The answer probably had something to do with 'boundaries' or 'space.' Kami, they could be on different planets and Sasuke would still complain about his precious space.

It took every ounce of Naruto’s self control to give that asshole what he wanted.

I miss you, teme.

Heavy footsteps approached his resting place. A shadow passed overhead and lingered. Reluctantly, the Avatar pried his eyes open.

Above him stood Ki... Ki-something, the earthbender with the polarbear dog that harassed poor Kurama at every chance and slobbered on everything.

They talked a few times -Naruto and Ki- Kim? Kida? No, but he was getting closer- and for some reason, that guy annoyed the crap outta him.

Kida stood with his hands on his hips. The sun was behind him, and his giant, ugly feet were like, right by Naruto's head.

“Let’s fight,” Ki-something said.
“Say what now?”

“The weather’s great,” Kida pressed, nudging Naruto with his foot. See? The guy was a grade-A douchebag! "And everyone’s outside, so we have an audience. Come on Avatar,” too-sharp canines gleamed in stark contrast to the crimson cheeks, “this is a great time to show people what you can do.”

A beat passed. Something didn't add up, and then it did.

“You...” Naruto squinted, “you just wanna get laid, don’t ya?”

Kiri opened his mouth to deny it.

Naruto cut him off.

“You think that if you beat me in some dumb fake fight, girls will want to sleep with you.” He sprung to his feet. Rocked back on his heels, considering. A spar didn't sound too bad, especially if it meant beating the shit outta this jackass.

“You’re wrong,” Kiba insisted.

Naruto raised both brows, held Kimi's beady gaze, and waited.

"I mean," Kiki scrubbed a hand over his face, "fine. Yes, but. Look, it's just one girl."

“If ya tell me who, I could help you out...” Cuz it was the Avatar's duty to help people. Yup. Totally.

“Uh. Um. Fine, just don’t go blabbing to anyone about it.”

Naruto made a twisting motion in front of his mouth, miming a lock, and pretended to throw the key overboard. Kirin scoffed.

“It’s the quiet one. Short hair, kinda skinny, really pretty when she isn’t scowling.”

“Hinata?”

“No, no. Her hair kinda sticks up in the back like—“

“Wait, SASUKE?”

Kira clamped his palm over Naruto's mouth. “Don't be so loud," he snapped.

Naruto yanked away the offending appendage, wiping his lips because ew. “Sasuke's a guy.”

...

“Seriously?”

Oh man, Naruto couldn't wait to whoop this loser's ass.

“I've only seen him from far away but...” the earthbender trailed off, glancing up thoughtfully, "You know, I’d still hit that.”

Naruto inhaled sharply and choked on his spit. He kneeled over, coughing, as Kino stood there, doing fuck-all to help.
“So,” he asked when the Avatar calmed, "are you down?"

“Hell yeah. Bring it on, dog breath.”

The whole thing ended in ten seconds flat. Naruto ducked, dodged, side-stepped, stuck his foot out, let him trip, and laughed as the loser lands on his face, cupping a bloody nose and demanding a rematch.

“You dick!” Kida barked, “you said-“

“That I might help, not let you win. But sure, let’s go again.”

Naruto stuck his tongue out. Kian lunged.

A decent-sized crowd gathered as Ki-whatever got his balls handed to him. Ex fire-nation soldiers, fangirls, that tall creepy guy with yellow eyes and anger management issues, Kakashi, Denden - y'know, the girl with the weapons- Sakura, Sai, a chubby dude with swirls on his cheeks, and others gathered in a wide circle. Some perched on the railing. Others sat on the ground. A few more leaned out of windows or stood on the on the upper deck.

Once again, Naruto let dog boy make all the moves. The earthbender fell on his face a second time. And a third. And a fourth.

"That's enough," Dog-boy's creepy bug-obsessed friend stepped forward, "I'm next."

It went on like that for a while. Firebenders, Waterbenders, Earthbenders -hell, all of them together- came at him. None of them put up a fight. Naruto wondered if they were really weak, or maybe he's just super duper awesome, or probably some combination of the two.

No one landed a blow, save for the earthbender with the bowl cut. Naruto took the kick, ignoring the stab of pain, grabbed the offending leg, and threw its owner clear across the deck, over a few people's heads. He landed near Denden, who sneered, turned on her heel, and stomped away.

Rock-something lay on the ground. Naruto wondered if he went too far. He felt kinda bad, so he walked over and held his hand out. "You okay, man?"

Guy -if that's his name, y'know, the larger version of Rock Dude- was already on his feet, dusting himself off; the pair decided to take the Avatar on 'as a team' and still lost in a matter of minutes.

Rock Dude stared at the offered hand. His lip trembled as his big, round eyes glistened with unshed tears. He launched himself at Naruto, sobbing, and hugged him hard enough to crack a few ribs.

"You," Rock Dude sniffled, "you really can save us! Thank you, Avatar," he pulled away, eyes still watery but burning with passion, "for showing me the true meaning of youth!"

"Uh... You're welcome, Rock, um."

"Lee."

Hey, at least he was kinda close.

“Alrighty,” he laced his fingers inside-out, lifting his arms up to stretch, “who’s next?”
A murmur went through the crowd. No one stepped forward.

Naruto took note of their expressions, which ranged from pure awe to grudging respect, and felt a little smug. The smugness was short-lived when his gaze caught on the figure standing apart from the rest.

Sasuke lingered in the shadows. He leaned against the superstructure, arms crossed, head back, examining the scene with red eyes.

Naruto saw a chance. He took it.

“Oi teme, how ‘bout you?”

Heads turned towards the prince, whose eyes narrowed in displeasure. Everything about the Uchiha’s expression screamed ‘Don’t you dare.’

Naturally, Naruto took that as a challenge.

“I mean,” he continued, “it’s been a while since we,” insert suggestive pause and shit-eating grin here, “ya know.”

Someone -probably Kakashi- had a prolonged coughing fit. Not that he paid it any mind, because for the first time in ages, Sasuke held Naruto’s gaze.

“Fine,” he said, shrugging away from the iron wall. He walked forward. Stopped three feet from Naruto, a hair’s-breadth out of reach. Tilted his head. And took his sweet time before talking. “We need ground rules. Boundaries.”

Naruto scoffed. He’d never understand that bastard’s obsession with rule and lines and arbitrary declinations.

(Wouldya look at that! His vocabulary already got a million times better just from standing in front of him. Amazing.)

“Yeah, okay,” Naruto rolled his shoulders, inclined his head, and started down his nose, “whatever you say, scardy-cat-kun.”

Sasuke’s eye twitched.

“No firebending.”

“Wait, you mean, like, for both of us?” Sasuke nodded “Seriously? But-“

“But nothing, moron. This is a matter of safety. Do you accept?”

“Are you sure?” He pressed, ignoring the insult, "It doesn’t seem fair...”

“Tch. You’re right. Even without any bending, you won’t stand a chance.”

Sasuke smirked.
Naruto’s blood boiled. That arrogant ass seriously spent the last three hours watching him, the freaking *Avatar*, wipe the floor with a hundred people (give or take a couple dozen) and he still—

You know what?

Fine. He was practically begging for it.

“Oh, you are so on.”

Sasuke’s irises bled into that familiar red. He stood there, arms crossed, eyes half-lidded lazily, and did nothing.

Of course. Naruto had to make the first move. He swept forward with the wind at his back. Sasuke stayed where he was. Naruto aimed a kick. At the last possible second, the prince angled his body. The Avatar missed by a millimeter.

Naruto used his momentum, bended the air currents around him, pivoted and punched.

And missed again.

And again.

And again.

“And you’re too predictable,” Sasuke murmured, shifting again at the last second.

“No,” Naruto growled, gathering moisture at his fingertips, “You’re using your creepy magic eyes to cheat. Cheater.”

“This,” Sasuke neatly avoided the frosty needles raining from his furious opponent, “is nothing compared to your power.” A white hand closed around Naruto’s fingers, bending them back painfully, “Avatar.”

Naruto hissed. Fuck -fuck!- that hurt on so many levels.

“I thought,” he rasped, “you were past calling me that.”

“And I thought you’d know better than to hold back.” He leaned forward, whispering in the other boy’s ear, “Na-ru-to.”

“Are you sure about this, Sasuke?” He asked, forced to kneel as his bones were on the verge of breaking. Because yes, Naruto held back on everyone else. Ya know, to avoid accidentally shattering any skulls or killing an ally. That kinda thing might not go over too well.

Sasuke, on the other hand, clearly had a death wish (which was old news) and he'd snap Naruto's fingers to get his way.

A single look was all it took.

Something in Naruto snapped. Seriously thoug, fuck. *This.*

The air bender wrenched his hand away, retaliating with a blurred flurry of well-placed blows. Most
of them missed. The few that landed, landed hard, drawing pained breaths and leaving dark bruises. Sasuke back-pedaled, turned a fall into a graceful somersault, and neatly rolled to the side. The Uchiha managed to move out of range. Naruto flung more ice at him, forcing him further back until he was against the rail. The Avatar rushed forward, poised to grab his opponent.

The prince smirked. He didn't move away. Naruto growled. He gripped the front of Sasuke's shirt, drew back his other hand to land the final blow, when a jolt of white-hot pain turned his muscles to mush.

"Teme, you said no firebending!" He accused.

Sasuke shoved him back, circling to the other side.

"That wasn't fire, idiot."

Naruto wondered what the hell that meant.

Sasuke crouched. He swept his leg out, aiming at Naruto's footing. Naruto jumped, back-flipped, and landed a directly behind him. He retched for Sasuke's neck, but found himself grasping at nothing-

"Wha-" -and made the fatal mistake of blinking.

He didn't know where Sasuke went or what happened in that split-second. When he opened his eyes, he found himself flat on his back with the Uchiha straddling his hips.

A murmur went through the crowd, along with assorted claps, cheers, and 'boo's.'

Naruto didn't hear any of it because this particular position brought back all sorts of fun memories along with a rush of blood straight to his-

"You've got to be kidding me," Sasuke hissed, "this can't be happening again."

"Hey," he shifted deliberately, grinning while the other boy blushed, "don't gimme that crap. It's your fault anyway. Just like last time."

Sasuke's fingers closed around Naruto's throat.

"Geez, chill out. They can't see. Not with you sitting on it like that, anyways." Blonde brows waggled lecherously.

"You're disgusting."

"Pssh, whatever. You love it."

Naruto winked for good measure.

Sasuke's lip twitched. For a second, Naruto thought he'd actually smile.

Instead, the warm, sturdy, oh-so-delicious weight disappeared. The Avatar was yanked to his feet, pushed aside, and faced with the familiar sight of Sasuke walking away.
Victory didn't feel like victory; defeat didn't feel like defeat. In a sense, Naruto lost that match. In another sense, he won. Thinking too hard about it made his head spin.

He could guess why, over the past few weeks, Sasuke had gone from adorably prickly to a giant porcupine-platypus levels of... uh... prickliness. That thing with Orochimaru would mess anyone up, but it didn’t change the fact that Naruto was horny as hell and so over this crap.

Also, he was pissed. Like, well and truly ticked off.

Naruto decided to channel his irritation into, drumroll please...

A prank.

Yup. Nothin’ like a good prank to ease those frazzled nerves. This was gonna be so freakin’ good.

The morning after that fateful sparing session -the one that ended with the latest addition to a long series of inappropriate erections- he found dog boy wandering through the engine room.

"Kiki!” He waved, jogging to catch up.

"For the millionth time, my name is Kiba, you jackass!” Kiba shouted. Partly because the engine room rumbled with machinery, and mostly cuz he was mad. For obvious reasons.

Naruto walked with him towards a group of earthbenders funneling coal into a furnace.

“Okay, whatever man,” Naruto said, refocusing after being distracted by all that hot, blazing fire, “Just shut up an listen, will ya?”

“No. Leave me alone. I have a job to do.” Kiba joined the group, lifted a mound of coal out of the reserves, and fed it into the flame.

Naruto waited for about ten seconds cuz that’s how long he would take to do such an easy job. After that, he decided to help because Kiba was apparently a weakling who couldn't lift more than twenty little coal bits at a time. Like, no wonder this was taking so long.

So, the Avatar took a chunk out of the coal vats, molded it into a boulder barely smaller than the furnace's opening, and tossed the whole thing in.

"Ah!” Squeaked the chubby guy with swirls on his cheeks, flinching from the burst of cinders.

"You're not supposed to do it like that!” Kiba barked.

Naruto eyed the roaring, sputtering furnace.

"I'm sure it's fine," he decided, "this'll only take a minute.” He grabbed Kiba's sleeve and dragged him off to a quiet (ish) corner.

"Fine? Fine? Asshole, people could die if-"

Chubby dude chose that moment to pop in.

"Actually, I don't know how the Avatar did it, but everything's working great. Work’s over. We're goink to eat brunch.” He shuffled away, muttering about barbeque and how meat is the ultimate
breakfast food.

“See, told ya,” Naruto gloated as Kiba gaped in disbelief, "so anyways, I've been thinking. Out of the bazillion people on this ship, you had to get a crush on that bastard. Which- yeah," he scratched the side of his head, glancing away, "But I’ve been with him -Uh ya know, traveling - for a few months so..."

Kiba sniffed. He rubbed the side of his nose. Thought about something. Then shrugged.

"Let's head upstairs. This place stinks."

Translation: keep talking. I'm a dumbass, and you got me hook like and sinker.

Naruto grinned.

"Point is," he followed the earthbender through the maze of pipes, "I know a thing or- or two about what he likes- I m-mean," he chuckled, "what he's like. Sasuke doesn’t care about how well a guy can fight in battles or whatever. He needs someone to fight for him. So, if you want him, go after him and never, ever, ever give up."

Kiba paused halfway up the steep, narrow staircase.

“It sounds like... you want me to harass him into sleeping with me...”

Naruto nudged him forward. “Yup. It's the only way," they reached the upper decks and started down the hall, "He’s real stubborn, ya know."

Kiba wrinkled his nose. “But isn't that a little-

“Stop making excuses, dog breath," Naruto gave him a hearty (violent) pat on the back, "Do you want to get laid?"

“Uh...”

“Then do as I say."

"Okay, it just seems-"

"Look, look, here he comes. It's now or never. Do your best!"

Naruto spent the next week eunsung from fangirls and getting to know the crew. He played poker with a white-haired, purple-eyed waterbender with dental problems, tried to keep up with Rock Lee's insane training routine, got Tenten ("not Denden, booger-brain!") to teach him how to curve shuriken around targets and still hit the mark, and lots of other stuff.

Also he totally one-hundred percent left Sasuke alone, as per his majesty’s wishes.
Knowing that the bastard was suffering from all kinds of unwanted attention made it easy.

Sasuke didn't know how many times he could politely refuse Inuzaka's advances.

"Did it hurt?"

"What?"

"When you, uh, fell out of heaven."

"I don't understand."

"Okay, lemme try another one. Hm... Oh! Are you tired?"

"Yes, so if you'll excuse me-"

"Cuz you've been running through my mind all day, babe."

"Don't call me that."

"Whatever you say, gorgeous."

"Inuzuka, I'm not interested."

"But if you just gave me a chance-"

"No."

"Because from what I hear-"

"We're in the middle of a war. I'm reading a war criminal's record of atrocities committed by the Fire Nation and verifying accounts with people on this ship."

He waved Orochimaru's black book in front of the other boy for emphasis.

"That's exactly my point!" Kiba exclaimed, deliberately invading the prince’s prized personal space, "We're in a war! I could, like, die tomorrow. You wouldn't refuse a dying man's wish, honey- uh-bun..s?"

Sasuke's eye developed a twitch. On a whim, he touched Inuzuka's cheek with his fingertips. Paused, contemplated, then unleashed a razor-sharp sting of electricity. As his harasser fell to the floor screaming, Sasuke bolted. He opened the first door he saw, went inside, and slammed it shut.

The prince found himself in stifling darkness. The air was humid, moist, and carried the sharp scent of lemon and chemicals. He switched to his other sight and saw-

"Naruto."

"Sasuke?"

"Why."

"Ano. I'm uh... Avoiding fangirls."
“In a broom closet, dobe?”

“It’s a great hiding place, ya know! Wait, wait, what the hell are you doing here?”

"Leaving," the prince reached for the doorknob. He pressed down. Pulled up. Jingled it forcefully, grunting with effort.

"Huh," Naruto said, "looks like it's locked."

Chapter End Notes

Ok, it's not a REAL naruto X sasuke fic unless at some point, sasuke says 'na-ru-to' while inflicting some sort of pain on the idiot.

And now they're locked in a closet together.

(Has anyone noticed this fic is, like, a clusterfuck of good-bad cliches?)

Enjoy the cliffhanger ;) If you liked having TWO chapters in TWO days, remember to fuckin review. Writing can be a hellishly lonely process. Knowing that other people can see the pictures in my head makes the whole thing more bearable.

Also, in terms of emotions-- I actually feel NOTHING while I'm writing and when reading what I wrote. Like, sometimes, I chuckle at my own bad jokes, but besides that, it's a total blindspot. I'm dying to know what people FEEL when they read something-like, there are things intended to be sad, or awkward, or angsty, but any actual emotional experience comes directly from readers. Please, if anything makes you emotional (and the only word u can think of is 'feels' or 'emotions' just tell me, along with which part.)

Welp. Something went wrong. This is the second time one of my works stopped appearing in searches. I tried to fix the issue by attaching it to a different pseud, clicked the wrong button, and orphaned it instead.

(AO3 should really have a popup that goes 'are you sure you want to lose all the comments, kudos, and author's notes on your fic?? Are you sure you're clicking the right fucking button?? Bitch, ARE YOU SURE????' to prevent this sort of bs.

I'm... really upset right now.......).
RECAP: A few weeks ago, Sasuke invited Orochimaru to join their side, after seeing his sick experiments on live subjects. Orochimaru gave Sasuke a mysterious black book with records of the Fire Nation's atrocities. In Orochimaru's cabin, Sai shared similar intel with Naruto, who wanted to hide it from Sasuke. Secrets, mutual guilt, and self-rejection (on Sasuke's part) put a huge damper on their already ill-defined relationship.

Weeks later, aboard Kakashi's new ship, Hinata tells Naruto that Sasuke knew all along. Naruto decided to give Sasuke some space (for once) to process whatever he needed to. (Because Sasuke spent most of his life believing Fire Nation propaganda and thinking his parents were good people, so discovering that they endorsed torture, human experiments, and possibly even human trafficking is Kind Of A Big Deal.)

Presently, Sasuke went into a broom closet to hide from Kiba. Naruto was in the same closet, hiding from rabid Avatar fangirls. Also, the closet can only be opened from the outside, so they're locked in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The spirit world is a blank canvas devoid of shape and color. Just as water saturates empty spaces, our world fills an ethereal void.

Naruto got lost a lot. Hell, he once got so lost, it took a hundred years for anyone to find him again.

Sasuke had a knack for finding him, though—at the South Pole, Kakashi’s old ship, the river with the waterbending scroll, the clock room in the Air temple, the forest outside that Avatar-hating village, and now this weird room full of sticks and buckets.

Naruto knew better than to ask ‘how’ or ‘why.’ The monks beat those questions out of him until he learned not to wonder, but accept. Notions like ‘courage,’ ‘faith,’ and ‘destiny’ took root where ‘doubt’ once grew. He forgave those old men ages ago, and wondered if he shoulda thank them too. They usually turned out to be right. According to them, 'there are no coincidences.'

So. That’s one answer to that question, 'why?' Why was Naruto here of all places? Yeah, he was hiding from crazy fangirls, but also waiting for someone to find him. Since there’re no coincidences, and because he found Naruto over and over, Sasuke had to be the one.

Naruto sensed Sasuke sit down across from him. The prince leaned back against the door, close enough to touch if Naruto reached out. The distance didn’t seem to bother that icy bastard, while Naruto’s skin prickled like the air between them was filled with needles.

He let the silence settle over them. After all, what’s a few minutes (hours? Who knows how long he’s been stuck here…) in the face of weeks or centuries or lifetimes? Sasuke wanted to be stubborn, fine. Naruto could be just as-
“Ne Sasuke, I’ve been wanting to ask…”

-ah, who the fuck was he kidding.

And he totally expected more of the cold shoulder.

“What.”

But his majesty seemed to be in a generous mood; a truly shocking turn of events.

“Why, uh…” Naruto swallowed. He decided to pass up the obvious questions and try a classic Airbender tactic: attack the problem from a new direction. Surprise your opponent- er- the guy you—ah! Whatever. Point he, there’s something he always wanted to ask, except he kept getting distracted by stuff, like Sasuke’s face or mouth or ass eyes.

“Why’s your f-fire white?”

“My…”

“Ya know, when you firebend,” Naruto opened his palm with a shower of orange sparks.

“Idiot,” Sasuke hissed, slapping Naruto’s hand, “don’t do that here!”

“It’s white for you,” he held onto the other boy’s wrist, shifting closer. “No one else makes fire like that... Well, not that I’ve seen, and I’ve seen a lot of stuff.”

Sasuke pulled his hand away. Naruto took the hint and shuffled backwards. Space. Right. Sasuke was all about that space.

“Eh. Sorry.”

“Whatever.”

Naruto winced.

“I didn’t mean- tch, why are you suddenly,” Sasuke sighed. After a pause, he resumed speaking softly, without pretense. “You really don’t know?”

“Duh. ‘s why I’m asking.” Naruto shifted some more and knocked over a bucket. Sasuke caught it before it drenched the floor with dirty water.

(Seriously, what the hell kinda room was this? First the smell, now the… other stuff. It was totally gross!)

“Think about it,” the prince replied in the same tone. Naruto remembered how Sasuke, as a teacher, had all the patience in the world and never, ever judged him for screwing up or being. Uh. Like this. His stomach did a flip.

“I did. That’s why I’m asking. I really dunno.”

A shuffling noise was followed by a muffled clang as Sasuke bumped his head on the metal door. Naruto squinted. Crimson irises, glowing faintly like distant stars, regarded him through the haze of darkness.

“What color are Hinata’s feet?” Sasuke asked.
“Eh?” Naruto scratched his head. “Ano...”

“Her soles, specifically,” Sasuke added as if that would help.

“I never really looked, so. Um.”

“They’re white. Just like her eyes. All Hyuuga have white eyes because they descended from
Hyuuga Midori after she lost her earthly sight and started seeing the future.”

Naruto's heartbeat quickened. He uncrossed his arms, leaning forward in excitement. “Whoa. You-
You’re right!”

“Think of the monster in the Cave of Two Lovers. Sai and Sakura said-“

“That it was white!” Naruto jumped to his feet. “Ow,” he hit his head on something hard and pointy.

“Careful,” Sasuke stated dully.

“And, and,” Naruto flailed, knocking who-knows-what over on those shelves, “its eyes were, too.
Ow, damn it!” He sat down to avoid rattling more shelves.

“Yes, white like Kakashi’s hair,” Sasuke continued, “my uncle is a complicated-“

“Pervert.”

“-man,” he emphasized with sharp flick to Naruto’s ear. Wow, they hadn’t been this close in ages,
and Sasuke was being so... Normal. Maybe... Naruto shook his head. He wiped his sweaty palms on
his robes.

“He’s younger than he looks,” Sasuke said. "Rumor has it that thirty years ago, he had brown hair.”

“What happened?”

“His father killed himself. Kakashi found the body.”

This time, he definitely bruised his arm on a hard, blunt object to his right. “Ow.”

“Dobe, stop moving around so much. Watch your head.”

“Not everyone has magic night-vision,” Naruto grumbled.

“It’s called common sense.”

“Fuck you, I’m allowed to get excited about stuff. Jerk.”

“Whatever, moron. As I was saying, that experience changed my uncle.”

“No shit.”

“Take this seriously.”

Naruto rolled his eyes. "I am, teme. That, like really sucks. Guess it explains why he's so...” He
coughed, feeling guilty for no particular reason. “Y’know. Yeah.”

Sasuke nodded. He closed his eyes. Or turned off the magic red thing so they weren’t glowing
anymore. It was too dark to tell what actually happened.
“When you go into the Avatar state, your eyes and tattoos glow white.”

“Really?”

Dripping with sarcasm, “No.”

“I d-didn’t know cuz I can’t see myself when I’m like that.”

“Fair enough. Now that you have all the pieces, put them together. Why is my firebending white?”

Time flowed strangely in dark spaces. Naruto didn’t know if he took a long time to come up with the answer or if it came to him right away. In the end, he figured it out, and that’s the part that mattered.

“Was it, I mean your firebending, always like that?”

“No.”

“So when you saw -when your brother...” Naruto’s throat closed up. Every time he thought about that, about little Sasuke who loved his family and just wanted to be with them, about how much it must’ve hurt, how he was alone and scared but tried his best to be strong, brave, and so freaking nice- Naruto scrubbed furiously at his stupid leaking eyeballs.

His voice cracked when he spoke again. “B-but then none of the other stuff makes sense, like Hinata and the snake. I don’t think they saw something like that.” *That*, referring to something on par with their older brother brutally murdering both of their parents. “Neither of them can see at all, ya know!”

“White signifies a connection to the spirit world. Connections like that are rare because-“

“-to make them, you have to-to give up on everything in *this* world.”

“It’s easy when there’s nothing left to cling to.”

“I,” Naruto wiped some snot on his collar, “I guess. It wasn’t easy for *me* but then- ah, I don’t wanna think about that right now.”

“What?”

"Nothing."

"Hn."

Sasuke didn’t push it, but his eyes turned red again. Naruto rushed to change the subject.

“Ya know, you’re like really, really smart, Sasuke. But also pretty stupid, too. It’s a par- uh, pair of-“

“Paradox.”

A lighter silence settled over them. Naruto knew Sasuke wanted to smile, though he didn’t. Even in the dark where no one could see his face, the bastard tried his damndest to be unreadable.

It was getting harder to breathe.

"Say, there should be a v-vent in- in here, right? Or else we might suffocate."

"Someone will find you."

"Just me again, huh." Half-forgotten anger returned with a vengeance. Naruto ran his hand through
his hair, letting out a mirthless laugh. "So what's gonna happen to you?"

Cloth shifted as Sasuke (probably) shrugged. The words 'it doesn't matter' didn't need to be said. Naruto knew. He let it go on long enough, so he opened his mouth to give that stupid, selfish bastard a piece of his mind. And closed it when the realized this wasn't the place for what would probably be their last argument, ever, because Sasuke was a stubborn asshole hell-bent on killing his every chance at happiness, and then maybe himself.

That thought blew his rage out like a stubby candle, and replaced it with a frigid, endless ocean of helplessness.

"Uh," Naruto’s voice wavered. He forced another weak, dry chuckle. "Since we’re stuck in here, wanna fool around?"

"Okay. Stand up. There’s something I want to try."

"That’s what I thought," he laughed a little too loud for the cramped space. Then, "wait, what?"

Sasuke moved closer. Naruto scrambled to his feet. A glass bottle fell onto the floor. It cracked, but didn’t break.

"You- I was- but- it's a joke, I was joking!"

"I don’t care." The prince kicked the bottle away, grabbing the front of Naruto’s robes and tugging him forward.

"Sasuke, are you really gonna- oof!"

With dizzying speed, Sasuke spun Naruto around and pushed him against the door.

"Wait, who- whom- wh-wh-why?"

"You said so yourself. It’s been a while. I can’t…"

"Yeah?"

"I can’t focus. It’s your fault. I can’t understand why you, or anyone, would like doing that."

"Um. I’m confused. Though, it just sounds like you’re horny."

Sasuke didn’t deny it.

"Not gonna lie, I’m horny too-"

"When are you not."

"-though this, I mean, we’re kinda- we sh- shouldn’t. Not here, like this."

"If you don’t want me, say so, dobe."

"Of course I want you, bastard, if you m- mmph-"

Soft lips pressed against his own. Naruto’s eyes slid shut. A stinging bite forced him to gasp, inviting the searing heat and intoxicating taste of Sasuke’s tongue. Naruto tried to wrap his arms around the other boy, run his hand through his hair, undo the ties on his tunic and-
Electric sparks repelled his touch. “Asshole, why are you- augh,” he moaned when he felt it. The-uh. Sasuke’s hand. In his pants. For the first time in ages, or possibly ever.

Sasuke broke the kiss. He pressed his forehead against the door behind Naruto as he moved, stilled, and stroked again at an excruciatingly slow pace.

“Put your hands behind your back,” he murmured. Mindlessly, the blond complied, holding his palms against the cold metal behind them. Another firmer stroke made his head loll forward into the crook of Sasuke’s neck. Naruto tried to ask a question. He ended up making a soft, pathetic noise when Sasuke’s other hand pushed against the back of his neck. Warm fingertips trailed upwards into Naruto’s hair, cradling his head. The tender gesture made Naruto’s eyes water. His breath stuttered. A sharp pang of longing lanced through his chest.

Sasuke spoke again. The words didn’t register, but he had such a beautiful voice and they hadn’t done anything in so long, which meant Naruto was, uh, sensitive.

“Hey, s-slow down bastard.”


“If you- ah –say stuff like –nnh –like-“

“Maybe too big,” he continued calmly, like he was figuring out a puzzle or talking about the weather.

Naruto groaned and pleaded and squirmed while Sasuke kept talking.

“… might not fit in my mouth but if it’s-“

“Bastard!” Naruto hissed as his knees buckled.

And it was over.

“Dobe, you didn’t.” Sasuke sounded strained.

“’s your fault. Hey, you’re shaking.”

Sasuke took his spunked-up hand out of Naruto’s pants. Naruto moved his own hands from behind his back to rest on Sasuke’s hips.

“Are you okay? I m-mean, are we okay?”

The shaking continued. Sasuke’s clean hand –the one still in Naruto’s hair- tugged gently. Naruto lifted his head from Sasuke’s shoulder, blinking against the darkness when he was kissed once more. Naruto pressed closer. He almost melted when he felt the prince’s lips curve upward as strange, sticky warmth spread in his hair-

Wait.

“Did you just wipe your other hand on my hair?”

Sasuke continued to shake.

“Oy, y-you- are you laughing at me?”
He nodded.

“Ugh, gross! What the fuck, man?”

“A prank for a prank, loser.”

Sasuke knew. Of course he knew. And now, Naruto would pay.

“How’d you know about Kiba?”

“Inuzuka,” Sasuke spat, “did that pervert steal my underwear and string it on the flagpole?”

“No, all your underwear is black and those were red with the- the- y’know, a giant Fire Nation symbol on the ass and- oh. Oh, babe.”

“Don’t call me that! What else did you put him up to?”

“Huh? Me? I didn’t-“

Magic eyes glared with the ire of a thousand flaming shuriken. Naruto gulped, and decided to tell the truth.

“He already had a crush on you. I just told him to like, go for it. Eh-heh. Pretty funny, ne?”

…

“Um, hello?”

…

“Fine. Be a giant stick-in-the-mud. Teme, I gotta give you a piece of my mind. See here, ever since-“

Just as he warmed up to A Really Good Speech, the door opened. Sasuke shoved him. Naruto landed on his back, hard. He squinted at his savior, this god-like door-opener who towered above him with their arms crossed.

“Hi Hinata,” he greeted, sitting up to glare Sasuke…

…who nowhere in sight. Of-freaking-course. He knew this would happen. Totally. His eyes are watering from dust and, uh, anger and too much light after being stuck in that place.

Naruto glanced past Hinata to the tiny room. It was a broom closet. All of those things happened in a freaking broom closet that locked automatically and could only be opened from the outside. Because if there’s one thing mops, buckets, and cleaning supplies like to do, it’s escape from their crusty, moist home.

Hinata crouched in front of Naruto. She leveled an unsettling stare at his nose, reached into her robes, and pulled out a handkerchief.

“Thanks, but I’m not gonna cry.” No matter how much he wanted to.

“It’s f-for your h-hair.”

Naruto sputtered.

“I d-don’t want it back when you’re done,” She added.
“Wait, wait, how did you know we- I mean, how’d you find- this whole ship is metal ya know!”

“And where does metal come from, Naruto?”

Naruto scratched his head, then yanked his hand away with a scowl. “Ew. I mean, I dunno. Caves?”

“Deep in the earth,” Hinata said, “metal is quiet. Even more stubborn than its source. But not impossible to bend.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Hinata stared at him for a while. She seemed to be waiting for something.

“Oh! Oh!” He sprung to his feet, bouncing up and down, “oh, can ya teach me? Pretty please!”

“Yes. Kindly refrain from t-touching me, Naruto-kun.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

As they walked, Hinata explained the basics: how all metals but the purest contain pieces of earth, how to penetrate the impenetrable (Naruto giggled at that. Hinata gave him a black eye.) and find faint flickers of light in the deepest darkness. She talked about how earth is the bridge between the natural and spiritual worlds. Metal has no such connections; it is a dead construct humans refine into instruments of violence or trinkets with no intrinsic worth.

“…and humans intended it to be ‘pure.’ The earth in metal is called an ‘impurity,’ but like everything else, it serves a purpose.”

Chapter End Notes

The recap reviewed explicit events, but also things that were (heavily) implied. The italicized bit at the top is inspired by the Tao Te Ching (forget which verse). It’s a great read-- you can find the PDF online.

This is only half the 'full' chapter since the second half is even more... ugh... It needs a lot of work.

And yeah, I'm five months late, but can people please stop assuming this story is discontinued... be like Naruto and believe in something for once, jfc.
Metal bending sucked ass in the worst possible way. Naruto came to this conclusion when Hinata handed Naruto a steel stick with a concave round shape at the end.

“Wazzit?” he asked.

“A s-spoon.”

“Uh. I mean, what’s it for?”

“Eating.”

“I don’t get it.”

Hinata explained that while chopsticks were still widely used, for soft food or liquids, people in certain parts of the world used ‘spoons’ instead of slurping stuff up like normal human beings. Spoons were expensive but reusable and came stocked in the ship Kakashi hijacked from the Fire Nation. She added that, while Kakashi’s story was interesting, they should focus on the lesson.

“Wait, since when do you talk to Kakashi?”

Hinata leveled a blank stare until Naruto grumbled and told her to continue. She pulled out another spoon.

“Watch.”

With her thumb, she pushed the round part down.

“Bend th-the s-spoon. Straighten it out.” She moved the neck to its original position.

“Okay,” Naruto nodded, eyeing his distorted reflection on his own spoon.

“You th-think this will b-be easy.”

“I mean…”

“Use only one hand, and only your thumb. You have th-three d-days.”

It took all of two hours. Naruto pressed. He meditated, tried that ‘listening’ thing Hinata always went on about, and resorted to brute strength when all else failed. When that failed too, it pissed him off, so he punched a wall… While still holding the spoon.

“Ow! Ow! Ow, motherfuck, shit, why?!” He slid onto the floor, clutching his hand.

Sasuke chose that moment to walk by. He glanced at Naruto.
“Hey, so what happened here was, I was, uh, see ya later,” he finished weakly when the prince rolled his eyes and walked away. Which was really, really mean, and now his stomach and chest hurt along with his stupid hand. Sakura found him like that: all pathetic and hunched over, sniffling like a toddler.

“Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere,” Naruto whined. Again, as a small child would.

“Baka, don’t be dramatic. Show me.”

Sakura examined the injury. Naruto hissed when she pressed the joint of his thumb. The waterbender clicked her tongue, not bothering to apologize. She healed Naruto’s hand with clear glowing water. Her eyes reflected the pulsing light of her emerald chakra.

“Sasuke-kun told me where to find you. He seemed worried.”

To avoid thinking about that and getting his stupid hopes up all over again, Naruto talked to Sakura about how he punched a metal wall with a spoon in his hand. He fully expected a lecture and a concussion. Instead, Sakura’s gaze landed on something above his shoulder.

“There’s a pretty big dent in the wall. I’m guessing that was you.”

Naruto looked up.

“I didn’t even notice,” he said, feeling all sorts of stupid, “guess I shouldn’t lose my temper. It just sucks, Sakura-chan. I suck.”

“Baka!” She snapped.

…And there’s that concussion. Right on schedule.

“Sakura-chan, why?” Naruto rubbed the lump forming on his head. “You’re not s’posed to kick a guy when he’s down, y’know.”

“Naruto,” her jade eyes remained harder than steel even as they sparkled with mirth, “you know I’m strong.”

He couldn’t help a snort; it was one of those obvious facts of life that everyone knew but didn’t feel the need to talk about. Kinda like when Akamaru kept trying to hump Kurama, or Kakashi walked around looking at porn, or Sai kept a detailed record of all the penises he’s ever seen categorized by length, girth, circumcision status, and labels such as ‘grower,’ ‘show-er,’ or ‘what you see is what you get.’ Similarly, Sakura-chan’s monstrous power didn’t need verbal acknowledgement.

“Hai,” he agreed anyway.

(Naruto vowed to someday find and destroy Sai’s sketchbook. As the Avatar, it was his duty to make the world a better place.)

“Yet even I couldn’t damage a solid iron wall that thick. Not without using bending.”

“I mean, have ya tried?”

“Think about it.”

He did.
It took longer than it should’ve to connect the dots, but when he did, Naruto gasped. He gestured wildly between the dent and his injured hand. “I did it, did I, the thing but-but- how cuz Hinata said to be quiet and gentle, the- I gotta tell someone, this is so cool! I’m gonna show Sa- uh, Sai! Right. Thanks Sakura-chan, you’re one in a billion!”

With all the bluster of a slightly dejected hurricane, Naruto took off.

The Avatar’s hand recovered by nightfall. The spoon still refused to budge; perhaps because steel was more ‘pure’ than iron, and contained less earth. Regardless of the reason, Naruto had a job to do. If Hinata thought he’d take three days, he’d get it done in two. The sense of accomplishment might make up for his… general unhappiness in light of the whole… Ah…

Let’s just call it the ‘Sasuke situation.’

Naruto nibbled on the round side of the spoon. His eyes were fixed on a lone figure in the distance.

Like almost any other night, Sasuke stood at the helm of the ship. He stayed there for a few hours, watching the ocean and the moon, which was okay. The bastard had trouble sleeping (alone) and needed to sort through things. Fresh air and a starry sky helped put shit in perspective.

It’s just… Naruto wished he’d wear a coat. Even he could feel a wicked chill in the air, so he couldn’t imagine how Sasuke dealt with it.

So, like every other night, the Avatar kept watch from the upper decks.

Truth be told, Naruto couldn’t sleep either. Sasuke sometimes leaned too far over the edge. One of these days, he might fall, or drop from the cold, or vanish like frost at the first touch of daylight.

If that every happened-

No. As long as Naruto was there, Sasuke would be safe.
He looked up.

Sitting across from him was Sasuke. He was reading a book, eating a banana, and doing a swell job of ignoring Naruto.

“You!” the blond exclaimed.

Sasuke glanced up, raising a brow but saying nothing. He took a slow, deliberate bite.

Naruto tried to stand up too fast. His knee banged the table.

“Ow."

Sasuke continued to eat. Naruto glared. His eyes flicked down to Sasuke’s lips as they wrapped around the banana as his mind took a dive into the gutter.

“Hentai,” Sakura came outta no where and whacked his head with a metal tray.

“That hurt, damn it! And I wasn’t- I mean, why would you- he’s the one you should yell at! Just look at him!” Naruto waved a finger at the bastard as he babbled.

Sasuke looked up at that. He inclined his head, asking Sakura a silent question. She nodded at the fruit in the princes hand. Sasuke’s gaze shifted from to the Completely Normal banana to Naruto’s beet-red face. His cheeks flushed.

“Tch. Moron.”

And you would think, you would think that the jerk was gonna drop it or get up and leave. If nothing else, the Sasuke that Naruto knew was kind of a prude.

Instead, the prince made sure to hold eye contact as he slowly parted his lips. He took it in his mouth, deep, deeper and held there before slowly, slowly-

“Both of you are disgusting!” Sakura exclaimed, grabbing her cousin by the elbow.

“But I wanted to watch,” Sai protested.

“Like hell you will!”

“Cousin, you are injuring my throwing arm.”

“Oh shove a boomerang in it!”

“Y-you,” Naruto stuttered, “y-you’re the d-devil.”

Oh-so-innocently, Sasuke tilted his head. He looked adorably befuddled and Naruto didn’t buy it for one damn second.

People were starting to stare. Naruto’s head felt like it was gonna explode. The second time he tried to stand, he ended up tripping over the bench. He crawled backwards, scrambled to his feet and dashed out the double doors.

Hinata returned with a tray of food and an uninvited Inuzuka in tow.

“Dude, that was the Avatar,” said Kiba.
“I’m aware.”

“You scared the crap outta him. The Avatar. What’d the poor sap ever do to you?”

Sasuke answered by activating his Sharingan. Kiba took that as his cue to leave. Hinata set her tray down at the table, unphased. Sasuke returned to his book. Oddly, he didn’t mind the company.

Sasuke took a deep breath. The sub-arctic air burned his lungs. His fingertips were tinted blue. He exhaled slowly, feeling the warmth leave him, watching a thin white cloud drift from his lips into the sky.

With red irises orbited by three spinning dots, the prince watched the half-circle moon.

It was odd, knowing his heart from another life hung in the sky, bare, bright, and exposed to the world.

Tsukiko sacrificed herself because the Earth needed a moon. She died to protect her people, and for waterbenders everywhere. Ultimately, her choice was selfish.

“Next time. Next time, for sure,” the princess said.

She died with blood, a smile, and a promise upon her lips.

The moon would orbit the earth for eternity. Her beloved Youta, the Avatar, was the spirit of the earth incarnate. Usually, she accompanied him through lifetimes, but some of his lives were spent alone. Every turn of the wheel moved them further apart. In mere centuries, their souls would be strangers.

Tsukiko saw this barren, sunless future as she held the corpse of the white koi.

She realized moon was bound to the earth, like the Avatar’s spirit. If she became the moon, he’d never be alone again. The fate of the world was too much of a burden for such a silly, lonely boy to shoulder on his own. She hated the thought of leaving him by himself ever again, in that life or any other.

So, she gave her life for a fish and her heart to the sky. Just as the Earth anchored her beloved to this world, the moon anchored her to the earth, and to him.

Sasuke wished he could go back in time and punch some sense into Tsukiko.

“He’s stuck with me because of you,” the prince complained.

The wind picked up. A light breeze playfully rugged at his hair. In the ocean’s rippling reflection, the moon seemed to laugh.

If he were born as anyone else, that wouldn’t have been an issue. Too bad Sasuke was an Uchiha, heir to a cursed clan. A riptide, evil, coursed through his blood and lurked in the shadows of his thoughts. He didn’t know when the current would finally pull him under. He only knew it was always a matter of time.
When Orochimaru offered him power, Sasuke’s heart skipped a beat. He didn’t sleep that night, partly because the dobe snores like an overfed lizard-pig, but mostly because he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Power. Knowledge, truth, freedom. Power came with everything he ever wanted, everything he was denied due to his own weakness. With enough power, he could face the Avatar, the boy who could flatten mountains and raise forests in moments, as a true equal.

Images of apple, blood, and crimson eyes circled in an endless whirlpool through his mind.

In a way, Sasuke admired the wicked, sadistic blood bender. Orochimaru transcended his own humanity. He had no boundaries or limits—only goals to be accomplished at all costs.

In different circumstances, Sasuke could see himself shed this skin and evolve into a similar monster. When he closed his eyes to sleep, those sickly yellow eyes stared back. Ku-ku-ku echoed in his head as he stood in a barren forest with worm-infested trees. Long black hair flowed, as glossy as ice over a bottomless void, while the face in the mirror morphed into something familiar and even more horrifying.

“Knowledge is power,” Orochimaru said.

“There’s power in beauty,” echoed the late queen Mikoto.

Then, the nightmare’s mirror reflected Sasuke himself. Blood dripped from his hands and trickled from the corner of his mouth, falling onto the dry, cracked earth. Naruto lay near his feet. Blue eyes stared up at him, still soft and warm with affection even as they were cold and unblinking in death.

When Sasuke slept alone, the nightmares returned with a vengeance. They were getting worse. Almost unbearable.

He climbed over the railing. For a moment, the ocean below called to him.

It wouldn’t be the first time he fell into freezing water. The moon told him to step back.

To spite her, to quiet his mind, and to stop the nightmares, Sasuke moved forward.

Chapter End Notes

The end

Just got a funeral scene and then we’re done here.

...im kidding.

or am i
anyway i appreciate everyone who comments, sorry for late replies, everyone knows i'm a serial procrastinator

ur insights are much appreciated :) also, everything in this fic is mild, esp for an M rating, but pls let me now if there should be content/trigger warnings.
Warning: no one's actually getting laid tonight.

This chapter has been playing in my head since July last year. Every time it 'plays,' something changes. It's been happening non-stop for eight months and slowly driving me insane. Also, writing about Emotions and Catharsis as opposed to dumb flirting and bad jokes is a hassle.

The end note contains the one of many versions of the second scene, 100% unedited. Hopefully, you'll see why this took so fucking long.

Sasuke expected a burning rush of air followed by enough pain to go into shock. The ship’s hull was high enough for the ocean below to shatter his bones. Then, he could rest until he came back to life. No one would miss him for long except-

Naruto.

His heart, the empty, tainted, worthless organ in his chest ached with regret a moment too late.

In that instant, the wind changed direction. A sweltering gust sent him reeling backwards. Gravity, which should be a weak intangible force, solidified and dragged him backwards into a warm embrace.

"Don't," a voice rasped in his ear.

In the end, a force of nature did pull Sasuke back from the brink of death.

He should’ve expected nothing less from Naruto.

I must be dead.

That was Naruto’s first coherent thought after a century of sleep.

When he woke up, his mind flooded with memories of raging storms and grief that pierced his very soul. He opened his eyes with a soft gasp. The sunlight stung his eyes. Twin images of a pale face shadowed against the lilac sky blurred into focus.
“Worth it,” he had said for no good reason.

As the story goes, Sakura punched through the ice and dragged his body out of the glacier at the South Pole, but Sasuke was the first person Naruto saw.

“What?” the prince had asked.

Naruto’s dazed smile turned impish.

“Come closer.”

Sasuke leaned in.

“Closer,” he whispered.

The prince complied. That wasn’t the smartest move. Y’know, getting up close and personal with a stranger you found hanging out on a block of ice in the middle of literally nowhere. Sasuke wasn’t big on self-preservation back then, either.

Sakura picked that moment to return from the village with medical supplies. She came brimming with decades’ worth of joy, hope, and repressed rage, only to find some freak in Fire Nation armor hovering right above what could be the last Airbender (or even better, the Avatar).

No one could blame her. What happened next was perfectly natural: Sakura flipped a shit. Her hair whipped about like a mass of tentacles, and her eyes glowed. This made Naruto question his own Avatar status.

Nature reacted to her fury. Water bubbled to a boiling point, saturating the air in ominous mist. The block of ice they occupied quaked and nearly split in two.

A particularly violent tremor made Sasuke fall forward lips-first into Naruto’s cheek. Or- that’s what would’ve happened, but Naruto turned his head kinda sorta accidentally on purpose.

Their lips touched.

Sakura screamed in the background. More ice cracked and rattled. Sasuke pulled away –too soon, but not as soon as he should have. He licked his lips, wrinkled his nose, then wiped his mouth. His expression remained blank.

“Uh,” Naruto tried to speak, “what’s your name?”

“Uchiha Sasuke. Are you the Avatar?”

He should have lied. If even one brain cell functioned, he would have.

Instead, Naruto nodded.

“Yup. How’d you know?”

And Sasuke ignored his question.

“Come with me.” He stood up and held out his hand.

Naruto’s eyes shone with hope as his heart lurched into his throat.

“Really?”
Sasuke gave him a weird look. The Avatar flashed a blinding grin. He grasped the prince’s hand and sprung to his feet, accidentally on purpose stumbling forward.

“Moron!”

“Eh-heh. Lemme just- ano, that waterbender might be dan-“ Sasuke yanked him out of the way of a large icicle.

“Ah! Sorry! I was aiming at- hey, you!”

“-gerous,” Naruto finished with a nervous gulp, “I’ll talk to her, and then we can…”

“Fine. Whatever.”

And the rest is history.

Later that same night, the Avatar watched the prince stand at the helm of Kakashi’s old ship. The new moon, a black, silver-lined circle, blotted out the stars behind it. Streaks of colored lights shifted and sang above the inky waves. From the distance, Naruto watched Sasuke’s long, thin fingers absently touch his own lips.

_Maybe he’s thinking about…_.

Naruto’s cheeks had warmed at the thought. He chalked it up to wishful thinking. There was no way that icy bastard wasted time reminiscing about anything as trivial as an ‘accidental’ kiss. A soft breeze caressed Naruto’s hair and edged under his robes. Beneath sound of the wind in his ears, he heard the ocean laugh at him.

Because even she knew that Sasuke didn’t like Naruto. Not like that. Not back then, at least.

And now…

The situation came full circle, didn’t it? They were getting closer to the end and ended up back at the start. The Avatar watched the prince stand at the helm of a much larger ship. He could cross the distance between them in an instant—perks being an Airbender—if his feet weren’t locked in place.

Y’know, due to being a goddamn coward.

Or serial procrastinator.

Same difference, really.

“Wait,” Naruto whispered, “what’s he doing?”

Sasuke stepped over the rail.

Naruto’s heart plummeted.

“No,” he gasped, stumbling, walking, then tripping on nothing and falling down. He leapt to his feet and stormed forward, calling the wind towards him. At the last possible instant, he yanked Sasuke away from the edge and pulled him close.

_Corpses were warmer. Naruto didn’t have much experience with dead bodies; Sasuke was just that cold. Maybe he had already frozen to death, or actually did plummet into the frigid water, leaving this quiet, shivering spirit behind._
Naruto had to see.

He pushed Sasuke away with trembling hands and turned him around. The prince’s form appeared opaque, as it should, though his collarbones stuck out too much. Then again, he was always kinda skinny, so maybe… He examined the lines of the prince’s throat, the curve of his chin, his sharp, pink nose, and higher until their eyes met.

Sasuke’s irises glowed red. A new pattern replaced the symmetrical black dots. It reminded Naruto of a flower, and as before, he lost himself in it. He wondered how, why, when- Well, whatever. As long as Sasuke wasn’t a ghost, nothing else mattered. Sure, he was cold, pale, and beautiful in the way that only spirits could be, but he was also still breathing.

“Sasuke, why-“ he clenched his fists, squeezing his eyes shut against tears threatening to spill, “why-“ his throat closed up. He blinked, ignoring the cold trails of moisture on his cheeks.

Instead of speaking, Sasuke moved closer. He wrapped his arms around Naruto, still shivering.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

The Avatar’s robes dampened where the prince rest his head. Things were worse than he could begin to imagine if Sasuke was actually crying. Damn it all to hell, Naruto thought he was doing the right thing.

Look, every other person in that jerk’s life imposed their will. They never paid attention to what he wanted and expected him to be okay with whatever they made him do. All of the people who should have cared about Sasuke never treated him like a human being. They just- and Kakashi told him- shit, Naruto didn’t want to be another asshole who didn’t listen. He cared about what Sasuke wanted. And he was so, so sure that Sasuke wanted to be alone, needed space to think, so like a moron, he- he-

“I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

The prince remained silent as a wave of sobs wracked his frail form.

“It’s just- I wanted to give you what you- what you wanted. I wanted- shit, it doesn’t matter. Look, I know, okay? I know about that creepy snake bastard and what your family did and- it- you-“

“You don’t want me anymore.”

Even muffled by Naruto’s shoulder, Sasuke’s voice remained steady and calm. As if he hadn’t been crying, freezing, or less than a second from offing himself.

“That’s not it.”

Sasuke shifted in his arms. He tried, weakly, to pull back.

“Let go.”

“No.”

“Nar-“ a hiccup, followed by an even more violent wave of sobs.

“Listen,” Naruto whispered into his ear, “I thought you’d get it by now. Just in case, though, I’ll tell you.” He held on tighter, maybe too tight, to keep Sasuke from running away.

“I love you.”
Sasuke stilled.

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

“I don’t care.”

The prince struggled. Naruto held on.

“And I don’t care if you don’t care, because it’s the truth.”

Sasuke pushed harder and when Naruto didn’t relent, bit the blond’s shoulder. Hard.

“Ow, bastard!” Naruto flinched. Sasuke slipped away.

“Idiot.” He sniffled. The prince scrubbed at his dripping nose as he glared. “Don’t you dare pretend that this is- that I am acceptable. What I did, what my people are still doing, it’s- you don’t want anything to do with them- us. We’re- I’m not worth it.”

Fucking hell. This again.

“That’s not up to you!” Naruto grabbed the front of Sasuke’s tunic, pulling them nose-to-nose. Sasuke snorted. A bit of snot landed on the Avatar’s face. Neither of them seemed to notice.

“Listen-” the prince started, then snapped his mouth shut. He held his breath to stifle a series of hiccups. His hands came to rest on Naruto’s wrists, seeking an anchor. When the storm passed, Sasuke took a deep breath and began again.

“One of us has to make the right choice. You’re too nice to do it.” His voice finally cracked on ‘nice.’ “Anyone could tell you this relationship is no good and you’re too stupidly infatuated to see what’s in front of you.”

After everything. After everything, is that how little he thought of Naruto? That he was blinded by some stupid crush and- and-

His fist connected with Sasuke’s jaw.

It hurt.

He stared at his own hand with disbelief. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t think.

“Sasuke,” Naruto said. His voice died when he saw twisted satisfaction crackle over the Uchiha’s features. It slammed into him like he was the one that got punched. In a fucked up way, it totally made sense. After all, Sasuke… Sasuke had a way of turning Naruto’s entire world upside-down effortlessly, while Naruto had to scream at the top of his lungs and resort to savage violence just to get noticed.

The first glance from that bastard turned Naruto’s world rightside-up and upside-down at the same time, in this life and every other. This look reached through him like a hand edged with lightning.

So yeah. It wasn’t fair. It was painful and confusing. But lots of things were painful, confusing, and unfair. He’d deal with all of it later.

Right then, Naruto cared about one thing. Even if he had to break all of that bastard’s bones and shake him until his brain rattled, he would make Sasuke listen. Everything else could wait.
With that in mind, he shook his head, found his voice, and carried on.

“No, I get it. I get it, alright? Like, maybe I’m a dumbass, but I know you’re fucked up. Your family’s fucked up, and, and everything in the world is fucked up ‘cause of them. Like, like, Sasuke, they’re batshit insane and guess what? No, it’s a rhe- shut up, I know the word, rhe-” one more try “- rhetorical question. But, but! This is on me too. I fucked up, too. I ran away, knowing exactly what would happen. Like, like, some tree spirit came up to me and showed me what the world would be like without the Avatar to fix shit, and I was like, ‘not my job, not my prob,’ and took off anyway! So, so, do ya hate me?”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow, cocky like he didn’t almost die and get a love confession followed by a punch to the face. Naruto kinda wanted to punch him again, but he had a speech to finish.

“Of course not! Because you’re a good person and you love me too, and none of it makes sense, but it’s- it’s…” Shit, where was he going with this again? “uh, not supposed to.”

Right. That. What the fuck did that even mean, and why did he keep saying it?

No, no distractions. He said his piece, and now he needed to focus, listen, and try to understand. Naruto braced for it; rejection, disagreement, a sneer followed by vehement denial. He could hear Sasuke say the words that would hurt more than anything.

‘Who could love a dead-last like you? Don’t make assumptions, idiot.’

He wouldn’t be wrong.

Sasuke didn’t say any such thing, or anything at all. Instead, he pinched the bridge of his nose, taking time to compose a response.

“You…”

“Yeah?”

“I’m tired, Naruto. I’m…” He closed his eyes, swaying forward at the touch of a breeze. When Naruto held his shoulders, he didn’t pull away, and murmured again, “I’m so tired.”

“Oh.”

“Tomorrow.”

“What?”

“We’ll talk tomorrow. I need to sleep.”

Naruto cleared his throat before asking, “Alone, or… I mean, d’ya, ano. Ya know.”

“Come with me.”

“Alright.” It sounded lame. He didn’t know what else to say.

“And,” Sasuke sighed. He took Naruto’s hand and walked away from the railing, “don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t want to hear those words from you again.”

I love you.

“But-“
“Please. I mean it.”

Naruto rolled his eyes at how typical that was. Of course Sasuke loved- sorry, liked it when Naruto punched him in the face, and hated hearing the best three-word combo in the universe.

“Oh… kay…” The last syllable fluttered in the air, a white flag fluttering in paper-thin silence. It tasted bittersweet.

Naruto would have pressed on, but Sasuke was tired and he promised to talk tomorrow. The fingers wrapped around Naruto’s hand still trembled, frigid and thin. They grew warmer by the second. That was all he really wanted in that moment- for Sasuke to be warm, safe, and alive.

So, he let it be.

As they walked, Naruto tilted his face to the sky. He thought about how they’d fall asleep together, wake up together, and save the world together. Even if Sasuke still shared too little and brushed off Naruto’s confession, he didn’t deny the truth.

Which… meant something.

As many times as they met before, this life and these moments shimmered with a different light. An epiphany lapped at his consciousness, tugging, receding, and advancing until it submerged him entirely.

Naruto spoke that night’s last words to the moon.

“This is the last time,” he promised.

If the prince heard, he didn’t comment on it, and Naruto didn’t bring it up again.

Sasuke lead Naruto down the winding halls inside the ship. Everything shifted into focus. He could see and hear everything: the echo of their footsteps, the irregular thrumming of his own pulse, and each subtle shift of Naruto’s irises. He didn’t have to look; he simply knew.

Even the door to his room changed. The metal took on a rougher texture. The handle resisted when he pressed down, protesting in a strange whisper, as if it were alive. Sasuke hesitated before going inside.

Naruto closed the door behind them and kissed him. The light, chaste touch dissolved like sugar in heated milk. Its sweetness lingered in the space between them, and in the curve of the blond’s lips. Naruto’s smile was warm. He was always warm, generous, and kind. He accepted the horrible truth about Sasuke and this war. He accepted his own faults, admitted his mistakes, and still glowed with hope, light, and a future brighter than the sun.

Sasuke never liked the dark, or being alone, or denying himself what he desired. He missed eating sweets. He missed feeling safe and wanted. He didn’t want to run away or spend his nights shivering or hurt the only person who… loved him.
“I’m glad you came,” Sasuke said, tracing the tattooed lines on the other boy’s cheeks.

“Yeah,” Naruto’s reply bordered on nonsensical. He shifted from foot to foot. His golden skin tinged pink, growing impossibly warmer under Sasuke’s gentle touch.

The idiot was acting shy. Sasuke wondered why. Maybe they were like strangers again. In the long weeks apart, separated by childish avoidance and unfounded fears, they had learned new things, and came to separate conclusions. This Naruto was different from the one who boarded the ship.

“You’re different than you used to be,” Sasuke observed. He leaned forward until their foreheads touched. Naruto’s gaze flickered downwards while Sasuke tried to catch his eye. A long time ago, in that swamp where one tree became a forest, the prince remembered drowning in the colors of the Avatar’s irises and pulling back when all he wanted was to be closer.

Naruto’s eyes were still blue from a distance. Up close, bursts of emerald green, sunset orange, and violet more striking than the northern lights bloomed like coral under a tropical ocean.

Sasuke let the memories wash over him. His lungs burned for air and knew he would drown that night. Fate didn’t care whether it happened in frozen water or the soul of his love. He would drown, and die, and live.

“You’re different too,” Naruto met his gaze briefly before looking down again. The idiot was still too far away, still afraid to ask for more. What a shame. After killing himself (figuratively) there was nothing Sasuke wouldn’t give. Usually, Naruto asked.

This time, Sasuke had to offer.

“Do you still want me?”

Naruto nodded.

“Let’s do this your way tonight.”

“What?”

“Anything you want. Go ahead.”

“You can’t be, uh, I mean.”

Sasuke kissed him to stifle the half-hearted protest.

“Teme, seriously.”

The prince kissed him again.

“So much for being tired,” Naruto grumbled, “you’ll just complain the next day, like always.”

“No, I don’t, and that ever stopped you before. Pervert.”

“Hey!”

“Usuratonkachi.”

“A few minutes ago, you almost. Like. Y’know. And then I,” the blond touched the other boy’s cheek. It stung. “Shit. I’m sorry.”
As if Sasuke I-watched-my-brother-murder-my-parents Uchiha cared about a little bruise. Instead of rolling his eyes, the prince decided to use that stupid statement as leverage.

“Make it up to me, loser.”

“Fine, bastard. Just don’t be weird tomorrow.”

This time, Naruto closed the distance. No one could deny themselves what they truly want; the Avatar was no exception.

The air that left Sasuke’s lungs flowed into Naruto’s mouth. They kissed -Sasuke let himself be kissed- as if they had all the time in the world. Rough thumbs stroked the sensitive skin under his ear, then pressed against the curve of his jaw, silently urging him to part his lips. Naruto still tasted sweet, like summer swirled with liquid fire. The hand on Sasuke’s face moved to his thrumming pulse.

"Your heart's beating really fast." Naruto chuckled softly. “Do you feel good?” He didn’t wait for an answer as he kissed Sasuke’s chin, the corner of his mouth, the soft flesh of his cheek, and the tip of his nose.

Sasuke gasped when teeth scraped the side of his neck. Naruto bumped his forehead playfully. He guided Sasuke backwards until his knees hit the bed, and let him fall. Naruto followed, resting his weight on his forearms.

They stared at each other. Barely breathing, wrapped in a silence that extended deep under the surface of reality, like an iceberg. The flower inside Sasuke’s iris warped the room and did strange things to Naruto’s perspective. For a moment, Naruto was on his back, staring up at himself. For a moment, the heavy, almost stifling weight of another body pinned him down. He blinked, and came back to himself.

“You’re so beautiful,” Naruto whispered. That strange moment faded more quickly than a dream. “Your face is different every time,” meaning in each life they met, “except for your eyes. Why’d you think it’s like that?”

Flaxen hair tickled Sasuke’s forehead. He counted the freckles on the bridge of Naruto’s nose, and watched a tear from the corner of Naruto’s eye, expand in a thin silver line, and darken long yellow lashes.

“I don’t know.” Or maybe he did, and couldn’t remember.

Every inch of Sasuke’s skin burned. He wanted to run away. It was too much. He asked for this, though: everything Naruto wanted to do, every desire he restrained for Sasuke’s sake, all the words he kept inside and bit his lip to keep from blurting out. He told Naruto to let it out.

Even if it was too much, he’d take it.

“Sasuke,” Naruto whispered against his lips. He undid the ties on the prince’s tunic, pushing the material off his shoulders. Sasuke ripped the front of Naruto’s robes in his impatience, while Naruto carefully peeled the cloth from the Uchiha’s skin inch by excruciating inch.

“You’re taking too long, dobe.”

“We’re doing this my way, remember?”

A hand on the inside of his thigh urged him to part his legs. He did. Naruto shifted his hips between them. Sasuke made a noise. Naruto moved again. He knew exactly what that idiot was imagining.
The way he pinned Sasuke’s hips and *thrust* against him made it clear.

As if it wasn’t painfully obvious, Naruto said it out loud.

“I wish,” he panted against his lips, kissed him and pulled back. “I wish, ah, I wish I was inside you, Sasuke. There wouldn’t be room for anything else. Not the sadness or the memories or the,” he shivered, “the type of pain that doesn’t feel good too. One day, if you let me, I’ll show you.”

*If you let me.*

Sasuke’s stomach clenched with an overwhelming mix of pleasure and anticipation.

“Yes,” he said without thinking.

Chapter End Notes

“Don’t jump!” Naruto blurted out.
Sasuke tensed. His head tilted backwards onto the railing, glaring at Naruto upside-down.
“What would you do about it?”
“That’s easy! I’ll go after you. I’ve done the whole, freezing water thing before. Maybe this time we’d share the giant iceberg and wake up in another hundred years. Huh. Wonder what the world would look like after your crazy uncle burns it to a crisp.”
“Hn.”
“Er... I was k-kidding, ba- Sasuke.” Quietly, he added, “Please don’t jump.”
“Why does everyone- look, I don’t mind dying but I’m not going to kill myself. There, happy?”
“Wha- what the fuck does that mean? Shit, teme, if that’s your idea of reassuring people, you- I- we- argh! Fuck it, fuck everything! Gimme your hand.”
Sasuke sighed.
“Now, damn it!”
“I can climb over by myself.”
“Not risking it.”
With another sigh, Sasuke held out his hand. Naruto yanked him to his feet with enough force to dislocate his arm.
“See? I knew it. You’re starting to freeze.”
“I’m fine,” he grumbled, forcing one leg, then the other over the metal railing. As soon as he made it across, Naruto pulled him into a crushing embrace.
Warm...
Exhaustion washed over him in thick, golden, honey-sweet waves. Sasuke’s eyelids fluttered shut.
“Get off,” he murmured, even as he leaned forward.
Naruto held him even tighter.
“I get it now- thought waiting was the right thing cuz people are always doing shit without asking you about what you want, but- but- Sasuke, look. I know.”
“You’re rambling.”
“I know what you’re not telling me-“
Sasuke started to push away. Naruto didn’t let him go.
“-and I. Don’t. Care.”
...
"You should hate me."
"What, cuz ya made a mistake?"
"It wasn’t some stupid accident. I knew what I was doing, Naruto. I knew, and I didn’t care."
"So... We’re the same, then. By your shitty logic, the whole world should, like, hate my guts, ne?"
"Now what’re you on about."
"I ran away and then there was, like, a hundred years of war and genocide and no Avatar to fix anything."
"That’s different."
"You’re right. This is awkward but... the real reason I ran away that night was, ano."
Naruto coughed. Quietly, he said, “the monks wanted to shave my head.”
"What."
"They were gonna make me bald, Sasuke, to ‘strengthen my connection to the spirit world’ or something. Now, I’m sure they were just jealous. You see, I got laid a lot.”
"Congratulations."
"And if I was bald, it wouldn’t happen... as much... probably. That’s it. A lot of horrible stuff lead up to it, but in the end, I screwed everything up because I wanted to keep getting laid. See? That’s a billion times worse than teaming up with one teeny-tiny war criminal."
"Hn."
"So, do you hate me?"
"Yes."
"Sasuke,” Naruto growled.
"Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to."
"Then quit acting stupid. We both know you aren’t. Uh. Stupid, I mean."
"Who told you about Orochimaru?"
"Hinata."
"How did she..."
"Sai. And I’m guessing he heard that from Sakura. Look, in the interest of, ano, the thing, the whole... entire discourse-"
"Full disclosure."
"Heh. Yup. I- Somehow, Sai knew all of it, and he told me some of it, and I told him not to tell you. That’s why... I felt like you’d hate me, so I... but then..."
"I guess it’s true."
"Hm?"
"We have things in common."
"Oh."
"Except, I come from a long line of murderers, sadists, and sociopaths. There’s evil in Uchiha blood. It taints our thoughts and seeps into our actions. A ‘mistake’ doesn’t mean the same thing for me as it does for you."
"Um, if you say so."
"Let’s go inside."
"And Sasuke... can you promise me one little thing?"
...
"Don’t push me away anymore. It’s not worth it. These past few weeks were so- so- it just, it hurt. A lot. So... I know it’s hard for you. I know you don’t like to, um, t-talk but for me... I’m at my limit. To be honest, I hate this more than anything. I hate staying away cuz that’s what you act like you want- so. For me. Please."
Sasuke bristled because... because it was true. All of it, more than he’d like to admit.
"Okay."
"Really? Just like that?"
Sasuke shrugged. Naruto held out his pinky.
“You’re such a child.”
He wrapped his cold finger around Naruto’s warm one and rugged lightly before letting go.
“Stay with me tonight,” the prince commanded.
“Oh?”
“I’m cold.”
Naruto waggled his brows.
“And tired,” Sasuke added after a beat.
Naruto’s shoulders sagged. “Oh.” This sounded more disappointed than playfully suggestive.
Sasuke rolled his eyes and lead him inside.

[End scene]
Okay, this time, I'm actually really sorry for that cliff hanger from hell followed by a four month gap, also from hell. Totally unintentional.

Here's my latest, greatest excuse: you know when your phone vanishes into the crevice between the couch cushions, then dies, and you spend the next three hours tearing your house apart to find it? Multiply that feeling by six. (Megamind reference). That's what an existential crisis feels like. It kept me from writing for a while, but writing this chapter actually pulled me out of the funk. No way out but through, that's life.

Okay, enough over-sharing. Thanks so much for your patience. Hope it was worth the wait :')

This chapter is named after that old Natasha Beddingfield song. You know the one. Also, warning for possible typo's. My brain is not wired to proof a 6k chapter. Will revise later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you remember the first words I said to you?”

_Come closer._ Clear blue eyes fluttered open under a clear sky. A whisper. _Closer._ Midnight sun madness made Sasuke lean in. It was a touch of lips, not a real kiss. When his dreams had turned it into something more, Sasuke left the comfort of his warm bed to seek wisdom from the moon. That was the first time he met Naruto in this life, and the first time in years something other than a nightmare kept him from sleeping.

“I don’t know why,” Naruto continued over the pounding of Sasuke’s heart. “Maybe it was to make sure you were real, but all I wanted, more than anything else in the world, was to touch you.”

Well, at least he got his wish. They were certainly touching now.

“It’s the same for you, isn’t it? Like that time you threw a fit and made the tent collapse before running off into the forest, and I got lost trying to find you.”

I feel like I can’t get close enough. That’s what Sasuke said, before Naruto explained what it meant to be even closer.

“How about now? Is this okay?”

Sasuke grabbed Naruto’s wrist. When the uncomprehending moron made to move away, Sasuke glared and urged him deeper. He still wanted more, they both wanted more. The heavy burn of exhaustion weighed his eyelids down, a lazy, oddly pleasant contrast to the pure heat that ravaged every nerve ending, centered on Naruto’s fingers inside of him.

Something shifted, made Sasuke gasp and arch his back. Naruto’s half-lidded eyes glowed in the
moonlight, flickered minutely as he drank in every detail, but never left Sasuke’s face. He pressed in again, so gentle it was a punishment.

The same desperation as he felt in the cave, his tomb from another life, possessed him all over, all over again. His body moved on its own, giving itself to Naruto without a thought. Actions betrayed words, heart turned traitor to the head, and Sasuke was never so grateful for his own stupidity.

A drop of liquid trickled over his brow and down his cheek; sweat, not blood from an open wound. Moonlight, not stalactites, brought him back to the present. When Sasuke nearly bit through his lip to keep from moaning, Naruto murmured, “It’s okay. Let me hear you.” A rumbling whisper, a tremor quaking his core. The feeling compounded as the earth hissed and ratted under his feet, as the world crumbled and ash fell from the sky. The fortune teller had been right, after all.

Naruto’s thumb pulled Sasuke’s lip from between his teeth, rough as he soothed over the swollen flesh.

“Stop thinking so much.”

Sasuke wanted to snap at Naruto to stop talking so much, but the next press in was harder. Thoroughly satisfying, and left Sasuke even less coherent than when Naruto took him with his mouth for the first time in the air temple. The memory pushed him over the edge. Sasuke gasped, shuddered, and came. Naruto pulled his fingers out, finishing himself off with a deep, rough moan.

“Sasuke,” he sighed, just as the prince’s eyes fluttered shut.

He didn’t sleep for long, maybe an hour or two. Sasuke expected to wake up in a sticky mess, but Naruto must have. Oh. Embarrassment cut through him like a blade through hot butter, sharp, slick-Gross. Sasuke hissed through his teeth. He rolled off the bed onto the floor in a tangle of blankets. Naruto stirred, but stayed asleep. Sasuke scowled down at his own bare skin.

There was a difference between being naked and feeling naked. Clothes, he needed them. Now. There was no way he could go back to sleep, not with how loud it was inside his head.

The last time he’d left Naruto in the middle of the night, things got awkward. The kicked puppy look on Naruto’s face- just the thought of it made him cringe. No, he wouldn’t leave Naruto again for a while. Sasuke raked a hand through his hair, wincing when his fingers caught in a few tangles. It was getting too long. Any more, and he’d have to tie it up like Itachi.

Maybe Naruto was right. Sasuke should stop thinking, or at least get his head on straight.

After pulling on his standard black tunic, he found paper and something to write with. He slipped back into bed, using a hardcover book and his bent knees as a writing surface.

Time unraveled through the quiet scratching of pencil on parchment. As if by magic, the tangled spool of Sasuke’s thoughts spun themselves into words. Meanwhile, Naruto wrapped one arm over
Sasuke’s lap, face buried in his side while he snored and mumbled in his sleep.

“Ramen-Chan noo, I have a boyfriend.”

Sasuke paused his writing to pet Naruto’s soft, stupid head, while he happily drooled on Sasuke’s shirt. The moist fabric clung to his skin like the boy next to him. Sasuke should’ve minded, but he didn’t.

“Maybe... a threesome...”

And maybe he should have minded that Naruto had sex dreams about a noodle dish.

Again, he didn’t.

“Dream on, loser.”

“’kay.”

Naruto stayed quiet after that, with the periodic exception of snoring and slurping his own saliva. Sasuke wondered exactly how asleep Naruto was during these late night conversations. He never remembered anything the next day.

“Because you’re an idiot,” Sasuke informed him.

“Mmmhmm,” Naruto agreed.

Sasuke’s lips flickered upward as he turned over a fresh sheet of paper. The small flame on his bedside table danced from an invisible gust of wind. In that moment, the prince’s heart was softer than both Naruto’s hair and the melted wax dripping from the candle.

Okay, what the hell was that.

Sasuke’s small smile flipped into a frown. He snuffed out the candle and switched to his second sight to review the story of his life: neat black letters crawled across the paper’s yellow surface. Ants in a line, small and insignificant from the right perspective. Ants that were living memories of a troubled past, and had as much of a right to exist as anything else. Sasuke didn’t need to destroy his past to survive. He could see clearly now, standing tall over the tiny hill, that the creatures of his memories were too small to hurt him. Clarity empowered him to do what Itachi couldn’t: let go of the past, instead of letting it destroy his future.

In the hours leading up to dawn, Sasuke watched the ceiling change colors with the sky. In shadows of symmetrical inkblots, a new universe pieced itself together like a teacup unshattering. Impossible, backwards, but finally whole again. The past lost its vibrant varnish. The present became a resting place instead of a cage.

“You’re awake,” Naruto rasped, yawning.

Two words and a shift in the sheets beside him had the same effect as a bucket of ice water.

One moment, Sasuke was at peace. The next, he realized that a good deal of denial was involved. While a sleeping Naruto made Sasuke’s heart stutter and murmur strange things, an open-eyed Naruto put him on edge. By some cosmic irony, Sasuke had the Sharingan, and Naruto was the one who saw too much. It made Sasuke feel naked, stripped bare with no place to hide. He stiffened reflexively, and forced himself to stay put.
No more running. That was his promise; honor compelled him to keep his word.

Softly, Sasuke whispered, “fuck it.”

Fuck honor. What did honor ever do, except give Sasuke the means to make himself miserable. Why did he keep doing this. Who even cared. Certainly not his dead parents, his plotting uncles, or his homicidal brother.

“Hey, you’re not gonna get all weird and distant again, are you?” Naruto asked.

A flood of pictures, promises, and scorching touches washed through Sasuke’s mind, making his cheeks burn.

Naruto raised his head to look at him. Sasuke immediately pushed the idiot’s face into a pillow.

“I’m fine. Don’t look at me.”

Muffled, but undeterred, Naruto spoke. “Okay so... like last night, I didn’t do anything that you, uh, weren’t comfortable with, right? Because-“

“Naruto.”

“-at the time, we were both like, super into it so-“

“Naruto!”

"Yeah?"

“Shut. Up.”

*I wish I was inside you.*

What kind of person went around saying such shameless things?

Then again, he should expect nothing less from Naruto. Even with his clothes on, he bared everything. Couldn’t hide if he wanted to. Sasuke had no clue how someone could live like that.

“You’re being really weird right now. Does your cheek still hurt?” Naruto grabbed the hand that pushed his face down and used it to roll Sasuke onto his back, pinning him against the mattress.

“I told you not to look at me. Or talk.”

“I punched you.”

And Sasuke would never understand how Naruto concerned himself with such trivial matters. He said nothing.

“Sorry.”

“Okay.”

“No, like, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Naruto stared at a spot below Sasuke’s left eye. He pursed his lips, like he wanted to say something more, but exhaled instead.
“So are we, ah, gonna talk about how you tried to kill yourself last night or…”

“That’s not what happened.”

“This is so not the time for one of your shitty jokes, Sasuke.”

“You should know by now that I only make great jokes, Naruto. And again, I was not trying to—“ Sasuke sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth “to do that.”

“What, were you just in the mood for a nice swim in the freezing cold ocean? Did you wanna practice your diving skills by plunging into the thing, the ah…”

“Abyss.”

“I know, shut up, and if you’re gonna act like everything’s fine and nothing horrible almost happened, well. Clearly, I didn’t punch you hard enough.”

“He was apologizing not five seconds ago, and now he’s threatening me again. Incredible.”

“Asshole, don’t talk to yourself about me when I’m right here! I can hear you!”

“And yet, he never understands a word I say.”

“Then help me, Sasuke. Maybe I’m kinda slow, but you’re really good at explaining things. Tell me what happened.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Really?”

“I promised I would, so I will. Please stop looking at me.”

“Can we at least make out for a while before dealing with all this crap?”

“No, thank you,” Sasuke said, tugging himself free. He sat up and turned away, hoping his face wasn’t as red as it felt.

“Not even a little bit?”

Sasuke flipped Naruto off while staring resolutely at the small round window in his cabin. No need to look to see Naruto’s pout; Sasuke knew that stupid expression better than the back of his own hand. After all, Naruto’s stupidity knew no bounds, what with his dumb-cute face, nonsensical declarations, and dangerously persuasive ways.

After a moment of intense contemplation, the prince decided that everything and everyone was stupid. His bare toes curled against the scratchy brown rug on the floor, still embarrassed. If he lumped himself with ‘everyone’ and ‘everything’ in the reality that he spent almost a lifetime denying, it was okay to be stupid.

It was okay to be human.

Stupidity explained why Sasuke blamed himself for his family’s mistakes while avoiding responsibility for his own. He wet his lips, dry but still bruised from the night before. Honesty tasted sweet in his mouth but viscous and hard to swallow. Like syrup, it burned his throat on the way down. Like syrup, he felt like he shouldn’t be drinking it at all, no matter how much he liked the taste.
At least he finally admitted the truth. For the teacup to stay whole, for the ants to continue their peaceful existence, he needed to face himself. Especially the most fragile and embarrassing parts.

Conviction flooded within him, swelling into a great wave before it crashed abruptly against a dam; the wall built by habits formed over the course of lifetimes. An unstoppable force, an immovable object, the person he wanted to be and the one he had been before, were in the middle of some epic battle. Sasuke wiped his clammy palms on the sheets. The small metal cabin turned into an oven, with Naruto the human furnace heating the air inside. He tapped his foot; still tired, but restless.

The stifling heat, along with the uneasy hum in his bones, made Sasuke fumble for his voice as he sat on the edge of the bed, gathering the strength to stand.

He just… Needed a moment.

Spots of sunlight filtered through the porthole, flitting like the speckled deer from his mother’s garden. Once upon a time, Queen Mikoto woke her youngest child hours before dawn to watch a doe give birth. Sasuke remembered staring wide-eyed, terrified to blink and miss even a second of the miracle, as he clutched the dagged sleeve of his mother’s robe. The birth was a gory spectacle, but nothing compared to the suspense when the young fawn tried to stand.

Again and again, she fell. Again and again, she tried to rise on trembling legs. Sasuke winced each time. He itched with the need to help. A hand on his shoulder calmed him.

“Just watch, my love,” Mikoto whispered. As always, Sasuke obeyed.

The fawn eventually wobbled to her feet. By the time sunlight filtered through the apple trees above, she was prancing through the grass, a picture of pure joy, innocence, and determination. A new life, a new day, and nothing was ever the same.

For years, Sasuke had wondered how it was possible; how any creature could go from knowing nothing, not even what it meant to exist, to diving headlong into such a vast universe without an ounce of trepidation.

Back in the present, wobbling as he rose to his feet and still searching for his voice, Sasuke finally knew the answer. Freedom and courage, not oppression or fear, were his birthright, the essence of his soul. His family, the people who were supposed to protect him, tried their damndest to destroy the most precious part of him; the inner fire inherent to all living beings, his will to live. And when they were no longer around to snuff it out, Sasuke picked up right where they left off.

See? Stupid. It was all so stupid.

He caught a speckle of sunlight in his hand. Closed his fist, watched as it danced on his skin, bright and free.

Okay. Enough stalling.

“You want me to lay it all out for you, and I will. A day ago, I wouldn’t have considered telling you a damn thing.”

The sundrop in his grasp shifted into candlelight, then a row of torches. His father had been absent from the dinner table that night. Off running a war council to expedite the destruction of the world, if Sasuke’s memory served. He remembered sulking, moving food around the fine porcelain plate until his mother urged him to eat properly.

Aki, the fawn, had grown braver over the past month. She ate apples straight out of Sasuke’s hand.
when he visited in the evenings. That day, he thought she’d finally let him pet her. His small fingers were curious to know the texture of her ears, sure to be softer than butterfly wings, and the short, glossy fur on her pretty head. Even if Aki didn’t speak his language, Sasuke felt like she understood him. He wanted to understand her, too.

She was his friend.

“Do you know where Aki went?” Sasuke asked. At his mother’s blank look, he elaborated, “the fawn.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Sasuke, but the silly creature tried to run off,” Mikoto answered, dark eyes reflecting a glint of red as her painted lips parted to take a bite. The queen carefully savored the morsel of meat, then took a sip from a clear goblet of dark, pungent liquid. Western wine. Sasuke hated how it looked like blood.

“She wanted to leave her poor mother behind, all alone. At least we found some use for her, in the end. Nothing less than she deserved, of course, though it was a shameful end to such a beautiful thing.”

Itachi had abruptly excused himself from the table. Shusui turned a little green and followed. Sasuke wondered at the way his stomach turned, and at how it was easier to push down reason and bile than to face the gut-wrenching truth. His mother was a good, kind woman. Itachi and Shisui probably ran off to do… Whatever it was they did most nights.

Naruto’s rough voice saying “I know,” dispelled the sordid memory, turning it to smoke in a strong gust of wind.

Blissfully ignorant idiot that he was, Naruto would insist that there’s nothing he wouldn’t want to know about Sasuke. Showing her son a baby animal before feeding it to him for dinner was one of Queen Mikoto’s lesser crimes; Sasuke wondered if keeping some things to himself meant compromising his honor. He picked up the pages from his bedside table, folded and kept them in his pocket, then cleared his throat before speaking again.

“It’s different now. You can trust me to keep my promises. I won’t run away anymore.” All he ended up doing was going in circles, anyway. It was pointless and exhausting.

“Sure,” Naruto let out a soft, almost pained chuckle.

*He doesn’t believe me.*

Fair enough. Sasuke wasn’t sure if he believed himself.

“Get dressed and meet me at the docks.”

Before he left the room, Sasuke wrapped a red scarf around his neck. A black flame, the sigil of his people, was embroidered on one end like a coal nestled in embers. As per his newfound stupidity (or courage, as Naruto might call it) Sasuke refused to hide it away.
The world stung his eyes and crashed against his eardrums. Voices from the port clanged like pots and pans, irritating as fuck. Sasuke glared up at the sky. A patchwork of clouds spiraled lazily overhead, casting a haze over the midday sun. White flakes glowed on their journey to touch the earth. Clumps of snow collected on the ground in a near-perfect reflection of the strange clouds overhead. Sasuke didn’t have a coat, but he didn’t shiver either in the still, pleasant air.

Something was off.

“Yo, Sasuke!”

No, not that. Something else

“Check it out,” Kiba continued to shout, “Akamaru and I are making snow fairies!”

“Good for you,” Sasuke said. To his credit, he did not immediately turn around and walk in the opposite direction. Instead, he watched, impassive, as the earthbender and his polarbear-dog flopped around on the ground with an uninhibited, idiotic sort of joy that almost made him jealous.

“Wanna join us?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. Maybe Naruto was a dumbass, but at least he had an iota of dignity.

“Reasons beyond your comprehension,” said the prince.

“Huh?”

“Precisely.”

What was taking Naruto so long? Did he get lost on the ship again? Sasuke tightened the scarf around his neck. Feathery warmth wrapped around this ankle. He glanced down at Kurama, back up when someone ran up to him and stood too close. Wide green eyes sparkled at the center of his vision.

“Sasuke-kun,” Sakura prodded at his cheek, prompting Sasuke to hiss and recoil. Instead of apologizing, she asked, “what happened to your face?”

Sasuke had been so preoccupied with covering the hickeys on his neck, he forgot about the fist-sized bruise on his jaw. Salf-consciously, he tugged the scarf up until it covered his nose.

“Naruto punched me.”

Two raised eyebrows and a few blinks to melt the snow caught in her lashes; after shaking off her surprise, Sakura grinned. “Good for him. And have you finally decided to get your head out of your ass?”

Sigh.

“…It’s an ongoing process.”

With a tremble in her shoulders as she laughed, Sakura tilted Sasuke’s chin, seeking his gaze with
her own.

“Let me help with that.” Sakura bent down, gathering snow in her hands. Ice melted to water, which she pressed gently to Sasuke’s face. “And Sasuke-kun,” her voice dropped to a low whisper, “do you want me to heal your neck, too?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Part of getting your head out of your ass involves honesty, Sasuke-kun. Hey, Sai,” Sakura greeted, not the least affected by the infamous Uchiha Ultimate Glare of Doom.

Sai, who had literally appeared out of thin air, chose that moment to add his two cents.

“If your head is no longer in your own ass, that means there’s finally room for Naruto’s-“

“One more word,” Sasuke growled, “and I will burn you to a crisp.”

“Please don’t. Sai is just trying to be supportive.”

Amidst all the dumb, pointless chaos, Kiba had stopped rolling around and sat up. He shook the snow out of his hair and sprang to his feet.“You people are really fucked up, has anyone told you that? I never understand anything you talk about.”

“How fortunate for you, Kiba-kun,” Hinata said, materializing just as Sai did. “Over the course of this arduous journey, I have learned that ignorance is bliss. If only my ears could be blind, too.”

“See,” Kiba gestured to Hinata as he addressed Akamaru, “what the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Akamaru panted and wagged his tail. He did not contribute to the conversation.

“She wishes she were deaf,” Sai explained, “that’s the proper way of saying one’s ears are blind.”

“Huh, So you guys heard it too.”

Now, it was Kiba’s turn to receive confused looks.

“No? Last night, in the hallway by that hideous fire nation banner, Akamaru and I heard these horrible sounds, like someone was being tortured. Moans and screams and stuff. Do you think this ship is haunted?”

Sasuke’s face drained of color, making him as white as a ghost.

Sakura turned to Sasuke. “I’m really glad you two made up,” she said.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts, Kiba-kun. What you heard was something far more sinister,” Hinata added, needlessly ominous and with an exaggerated shiver.

“Don’t listen to her, dog breath.” And just like that, Naruto popped up next to Sasuke. He put one hand on his shoulder, too close as always. “It was definitely a ghost.”

Sasuke’s face flushed to match his scarf. Naruto barked a bright laugh, then grabbed his elbow and pulled him away.
“Hey, we’ll catch you guys later! Tell Kakashi not to set sail without us,” he called back, waving over his shoulder. Then, he turned to Sasuke with a reckless grin; familiar, almost but not quite all there. “It’s your first time on this island, right? C’mon, I wanna show you something.”

It was Sasuke’s burden to bear. He had no problem shouldering it alone. Still, Naruto insisted on answers with the way he stayed in Sasuke’s shadow. Anyone else, in any other circumstance, could mistake the frequent touches and lingering glances for pure, simple affection. A few lifetimes ago, he’d think the same thing. But to his new eyes, the edge of fear, hesitation, and uncertainty that bled into Naruto’s every action screamed at him to take notice. Begged him to offer an explanation.

Sasuke couldn’t ignore it if he wanted to which, for the record, he didn’t.

Naturally, Sasuke’s… near departure from the world left an open wound on Naruto’s heart. It was his duty to stitch the edges back together, even if the needle caused pain to the person he least wanted to hurt. Sasuke clenched his jaw with resolution. Not anymore. Never again. He was done inflicting needless pain, on himself or anyone else.

As they walked further from the docks, skirting the small fishing village and towards the tall red trees in the distance, Sasuke unraveled his scarf. Naruto’s gaze lingered on the trail of dark marks on his newly bared skin. Blue eyes darted away with the speed and force of magnetic repulsion. Sasuke quirked a brow in silent question.

“Sorry, I think I kinda went overboard last night. Because of... yeah...” He trailed off. The same fear that tightened his grip on Sasuke’s hand probably also kept him from speaking his mind. By some morbid miracle, the most raucous and least inhibited person on the planet, one shameless demanding dumbass to rule them all, suddenly drifted into deathlike silence. It didn’t help that Sasuke hated refusing the people he loved, especially when he had the power to give them what they asked for.

Even if they didn’t use words to ask.

Deep breath. Steady steps. With trembling fingers and a fluttering heart, he picked up a needle and used his voice to thread the wound shut.

“Do you know how silk is made?”

Queen Mikoto loved beautiful things, so she let the royal peacocks roam the palace grounds freely. Meanwhile, the peahens stayed in a small fenced-off garden, only permitted to exist because despite their dull colors, they served a purpose.

“And because the peacocks and peahens are kept apart, these eggs do not, in fact, contain baby
birds,” Itachi explained. “Foolish little brother. Stop asking morbid questions and finish your omelet.”

“I don’t know why you like Shusui,” Sasuke grumbled around a mouthful. At Itachi’s sharp look (Manners, Sasuke. Don’t speak with food in your mouth.) he chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “He’s a pattern-ogical liar.”

“Pathological, and he only likes messing with you because you’re adorable.”

Sasuke’s cheeks pinked and puffed out with indignation. “Shut up,” he mumbled, “you’re always making excuses for him.”

All this because Sasuke had asked Shishui why he said, ‘you have to crack a few eggs to make an omelet.’ like cracking eggs was a bad thing. Shisui had flashed a wicked grin and pinched Sasuke’s cheek. He bent forward, leaning in, while Sasuke swatted his hand away and glared. ‘Sweetie, you didn’t notice the crunchy little beaks and bones in your breakfast? Those are baby birds. You have to crack a few eggs, make sacrifices, to get what you want. That part’s the omelet.’

For once, Sasuke was furiously glad that Shishi lied.

Queen Mikoto loved beautiful things, so she favored one child over the other. Just as well; Fugaku treated Sasuke like bothersome fly, shooing him off without so much as a glance. When his father didn’t outright pretend his youngest son didn’t exist, he regarded Sasuke with a cold, calculating contempt. The same look you give a cockroach before you crush it under your boot, then twist your heel to grind it into the ground.

After the servants finished dressing him, bowed, and left the room, Sasuke shifted from foot to foot. The stiff, thick embroidered robe scratched like thorns on his skin. That, and the thought of sitting still for hours at a table, bored out of his mind as his father blatantly ignored him, made Sasuke mutter something he shouldn’t have.

“Don’t take it to heart, my dear,” his mother cut him off, smoothing a hand over his hair. “Your father loves you, and if you’re a good son, you’ll try your best to love him too.”

“But I do love him,” Sasuke insisted, tears pricking the corners of his eyes. And it was the truth. Sasuke loved his father, even when he was afraid.

“Then stop asking silly questions and go brush your hair.”

“Mom-“

“Now, Sasuke. We can’t have tea with the governor while you look like a street urchin. What will people think!”

Sasuke thought his hair looked fine, but he brushed it again all the same. He loved his father, loved his mother and brother. They were his whole world. If he tried hard enough to be good, maybe they’d love him, too.

If only Sasuke didn’t keep doing bad things.

Like that time Shisui talked Itachi into hiding behind a curtain in one of Fugaku’s war meetings to eavesdrop, and Sasuke begged to come along. Itachi pursed his lips, shook his head, opened his
mouth to say ‘no,’ when Shisui cut him off.

“Why the fuck not? Come along, sweetie. It’s about time you learned how the world works.”

Behind that curtain, wide-eyed, stiff-limbed, and barely breathing as Itachi held his hand, Sasuke thought about cracking eggs, real eggs with the baby bird still inside. There would be blood, organs, the worst kind of meat in the omelet. Who’d want something like that?

Sasuke loved his father, even when he ordered his troops to burn an earth kingdom village to the ground and kill everyone but the children young enough to ‘be persuaded’ to serve the Fire Nation. Sasuke loved his father, even as he described how the charred bodies should be displayed to ‘send the proper message.’

He wondered if loving a horrible person made him one too. He wondered if a good son should think of his father, his own blood, as a bad man.

Sasuke squeezed Itachi’s hand as hard as he could, and decided that actually, it was his own fault. He shouldn’t have been eavesdropping in the first place. Besides, like Mikoto, Fugaku was a good person. A just ruler. That’s what everyone, including the servants, always said. The Earth Kingdom village must have done something terrible to deserve its fate and, like they all kept telling him, Sasuke was just too young to understand. He should have listened.

That night, Sasuke cried into his pillow. He clenched the satin sheets, hating that they were red. The color of fire, wine, and his bloodshot eyes when he stared blankly at his reflection the next morning. The boy in the mirror blinked back with his mother’s lashes, his brother’s nose. No trace of his father at all. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing. Sasuke washed his face, brushed his hair, and spent the day in his mother’s study, where Itachi and Shisui would leave him alone.

Queen Mikoto loved beautiful things, so she kept colorful creatures from every corner of the earth. Painted light filtered through the stained glass ceiling, leaving puddles of different colors on every surface. Golden cages hung suspended from above like glittering, singing fruit. Living treasures like her son, they made for docile, pleasant company. ‘That’s why I love them,’ Mikoto once said, kissing the top of Sasuke’s head. Winiking, she added, ‘and why you’re my favorite.’

The words made Sasuke smile as he made a nest of pillows in a quiet corner under a splotch of warm yellow light, and settled in with a book.

An hour or so passed. “Come here, Sasuke. I have something to show you,” Mikoto commanded with a beck of her glossy scarlet fingernail.

Sasuke looked up. He had been reading about a princess with long, long tresses, trapped in a tower. He’d just gotten to the part where a stranger asked her let down her hair, let him in. Break the rules. Sasuke marked the page. He closed the book with a dull thunk, releasing a cloud of dust that made him cough. It was an old volume, abandoned high up, all alone like the trapped princess. Sasuke thought that it was a good book, one that didn’t deserve to be forgotten. He uncrossed his legs to stand.

When he walked over, Mikoto showed him how to look through the lens of the ‘microscope.’

“Where did you get it, mom?”

“The scientist from the South Pole, Uncle Madara’s friend, sent it as a gift.”
Sasuke peered, enchanted, through a narrow tunnel that brought every fiber of the silk beneath it into perfect focus. Colors refracted and opposites coexisted, different but the same, rainbow prisms refracting light like stained glass above. For the first time since Aki ran away, Sasuke felt it; fire, a spark of pure magic. The stuff that made life beautiful.

His mother’s crimson lips twisted upwards, a wicked expression that belong to the vain, the blood-starved queens in the ancient stories. Sasuke gritted his teeth against the traitorous thought. No. She was his mother, and it was nothing more than a kind, gentle smile.

Then, Mikoto told Sasuke about the ancient Earth Kingdom art of making silk. The ugly white berries on the mulberry trees, the ones Shisui tried to get Sasuke to eat, were actually silk worms; safe in their cocoons, working hard, dreaming of their wings, only to be boiled alive and have their empty husks spun into cloth.

“It was a well-kept secret, too. Only one village deep in the mountains of Kumo knew it, but your grandfather... persuaded them. And now that the village has served its purpose...”

His mother’s voice faded away, replaced with Fugaku’s orders.

*Mount the clan heads’ heads on a spike. Burn the rest, but make sure they can be seen. Burn the forest, take their scrolls, burn the fields...*

Maybe it would have been more apt to say, “you have to boil a few worms and commit several war crimes to make silk,” though that didn’t have the same ring to it.

Sasuke told Naruto about all this and more, including the white-haired waterbender with round, cracked eyeglasses. Every time Kabuto, the royal medic, made a mistake, he lost a toe. He always made weird excuses when Sasuke asked, either in a misguided attempt to protect the prince’s innocence, or out of fear for the queen.

“It’s nothing, Sasu-chan. I stepped in a rabbit trap,” Kabuto had chuckled mirthlessly as light gleamed on his glasses, turning them into twin moons.

The next time, “someone left a kunai on the ground. Please be sure to put your toys away. Safety first, kids.” Sasuke had looked around. He was the only kid there.

And the time after that, “I slept outside and a hungry fox wanted a midnight snack. Strange beasts roam the night, though stranger things happen inside the palace walls…”

“Like what?” Sasuke perked up, curious.

“I’ve said too much.” Kabuto turned on his heel and limped away as fast as he could.

By the time Madara banished Sasuke, Kabuto needed to use a wheelchair. On account of not having any toes left…

“... or did Mother order for his foot to get hacked off? I can’t remember. No wonder he was a little,” with his forefinger, Sasuke made a circular motion beside his head. Naruto laughed, then immediately clamped his mouth shut.

“That’s pretty fucked up.”
“I know. I’ve been trying to tell you. According to Madara’s book, he was Orochimaru’s student.”

“Who?”

“The blood bender we met in the forest.”

“You mean the guy who liked to, uh, cut people open and...”

Sasuke nodded. The sun was dipping low. Where ever Naruto planned to take them, he hoped they’d get there soon.

“So, after repressing all this shit, reading Madara’s records kind of... broke the dam. Naruto, you have to understand. I was just, I was tired, and hadn’t slept in almost a month, and... keeping it all to myself didn’t help.” Naruto looked like he wanted to cry. Sasuke rolled his eyes, ignoring the pang in his own chest.

“Though, with your reaction, I think you should get why I didn’t tell you.” He tilted his head and offered a soft smile. “Crybaby.”

Naruto sniffled, lip trembling. Another dam was about to break. Sasuke’s smile fell away. Stitching wounds could be such messy work; he really wished it hadn’t come to this.

“The worst part was knowing that the people I loved more than anything, the only people to ever say they loved me, never existed outside my own,” he had to swallow and force the next word out, “Delusions. All those years of suffering, and for what? Maybe the world is better off without them.”

It hurt. Even more with how Naruto’s hand squeezed his own, reminding Sasuke of the way he had clung to Itachi behind the curtain in the war room, helpless as his own innocence crumbled to ash. It burned when soot tainted his soul, deep inside where no amount of water or salt could wash it away.

And it was nearly unbearable to know that Naruto was probably finding a way to twist everything around, blame himself the way Sasuke did when he was a child.

“It felt like I had nothing left. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. But kind of.”

Naruto wobbled, off-balance. He was thrust into a new world, and didn’t know how to stand.

“Ne, Sasuke?”

“Hm?”

“It’s okay to love them anyway. You’re not a bad person just because love bad people.” Now, already, the light was back in his eyes, blazing even brighter than before. Hope, determination, and acceptance. In the same way Naruto may never understand Sasuke’s darkness, not even in a thousand lifetimes, Sasuke would always be awestruck by his light. They still had a ways to go before running, but Naruto had already found his feet and taken the first step.

“Huh. Maybe you’re right,” Sasuke agreed, eyes drifting from the horizon, where the sky touched
the earth, to the warmth of Naruto’s hand in his own. He decided it was a question for another day; Sasuke had reached his limit for now.

He’d tend to that cut, one of many still on his own heart, some other time.

Chapter End Notes

You know... I love every comment and everyone who comments, you're great, but how did NO ONE bring up the fact that Naruto LITERALLY offered to fuck the sadness out of Sasuke?? Like maybe in context that scene can be interpreted as sexual/romantic but it’s also peak comedy, tbh.

See you soonish. The worst is finally behind us...

...or is it?

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