Meant to Be

Summary

Meant To Be is an sns (sasunarusasu) fanfiction, written by yours truly. It’s an AU, featuring the majority of characters from Kishimoto’s Naruto in an American high school and university setting. Naruto is bisexual and a top, while Sasuke is demisexual and vers. They’re both totally in love with each other, but what else is new?

BEFORE: Sasuke Uchiha is starting at a new high school in the city, and he's more than ready to leave behind the drama of his past. His guardian, Tsunade, and his therapist, Shizune, won't just let him be, though. He's gotta put himself out there, make friends, try harder to recover from his past traumas. That's not easy to do when you're persistently distracted by feelings for a certain dumb blonde.

AFTER: Years after a god-awful heartbreak, Naruto Uzumaki is making his mark on the world. He's started college, he's got a great job, and he's become a renowned heartbreaker himself. Nothing could possibly get in the way of his success—except, is that, oh my god, it isn't, it couldn't be... Sasuke Uchiha, back from the dead.
BEFORE first kiss

BEFORE first kiss

I groaned involuntarily, an annoyed “ugh” escaping my lips as I practically fell into my new desk, barely exerting enough energy to land in the seat. Just because it so happened to be the first day of class didn’t mean I had to act like it. I was the kind of teenage boy who’s perpetually tired and more than a little bit annoyed by everything around him, the one with the chipped black fingernail polish and a permanent smirk. I slouched in my seat and carefully pushed my bangs out of my eyes without tucking them dorkily behind my ears, checking my appearance with my phone’s camera app to make sure they fell the right way. My chelsea-cut had grown out over the summer, but it didn’t look bad. I’d gotten the back faded, and suddenly the hairstyle looked purposeful.

Truth be told, I was a little nervous about this wholly unremarkable first day of class—not because it was my first day at a new high school, but because I really did not want to see anybody from my old school here. I was living in a small suburb outside of this city, going to a small school outside of broader sociocultural movements; though I hadn’t made the call to switch schools, it wasn’t something I found myself complaining about. The junior high school I attended was stuck in the 80s, both mentally and physically. It was an excruciating education. Even though no one there voiced a desire to go to high school in the city, I knew the odds were high that at least one or two of them ended up here. With a sigh, I rested my head on my hands and stared straight ahead without seeing anything. The students around me were talking, laughing, reuniting after a long summer, and I rolled my eyes. Shizune, my therapist, said that my animosity toward others was a way of masking my anxiety and feelings of worthlessness, but I steadfastly argued that, sometimes, people are just genuinely revolting. If I really thought about it, though, it made sense. Figures the kid with the fucked up past would be, well, fucked up. To be honest, the idea of coming to a brand-new school, filled with people who had never heard of me or my fucked up past was a huge relief. I would finally be free from the pitying eyes and uncomfortable sideways glances; invisible, attracting no unwarranted attention. That was what I wanted out of this experience. It was a unique opportunity, not for reinvention or self-modification, but for being ignored, forgotten, cast aside. In fact, I dressed with that goal in mind: gray joggers, a black old-school HIM t-shirt, classic black Vans. I would be background noise for the masses.

As the final morning bell rang, several seats remained surprisingly empty. I glanced around the room, trying to get a feel for the protocol, but to my surprise, the teacher was also missing. With an empty desk behind me and an empty desk to my left, I felt perfectly secluded on the far right side of the classroom. Unfortunately, I could already tell that I wouldn’t be isolated for long. A mob of football players—as evidenced by their lettermen, of course—stumbled through the door, all vocals and limbs. The group laughed, shouted, and shoved, evenly disrupting the quiet that had been in place. I felt my eyes rolling back in my head in annoyance, and I could hear my therapist’s voice inside of my head, telling me to stop being a Grinch about other people’s happiness. I took a deep breath and looked up, wanting to give the boys the benefit of the doubt. Not that my derogatory mental classification of them really made a difference to them. One of the boys caught my eye, though, and I felt strangely compelled to watch as the boy interacted with those around him.

The boy was well-built but rather short, and his shaggy blonde hair was offset by his dark complexion. He wasn’t all that interesting to look at—blondes with blue eyes were a dime a dozen—for the most part, but my eyes were immediately drawn to the purplish red scars on the boy’s cheeks. Three on each side, like a child’s drawing of cat whiskers. My focus shifted instantly to the his arms, checking for similar marks, but the sleeves of the lettermen prevented such snooping. His light-wash jeans were a bit too short for him, but they complemented his skin tone well. He wore a t-shirt under
his football jacket that referenced something I didn’t recognize. He stood in the middle of the group, surrounded by a sea of blue and white jackets, though occasionally one or two would break from the cluster to find seats. A brunette with messy hair found his way to the seat directly behind me, but I barely noticed him. I was somewhat enraptured by this bizarre boy, so at ease with being the life of the party despite his evident problems. As the boy erupted in a fit of laughter, a smile split across his face like a bolt of lightning brightening the sky.

“I know, must be queer,” a voice behind me said, much louder than necessary. With a snap, I came back into focus and ceased my staring. It was a little weird that I had become so distracted, but I chalked it up to sleep deprivation. Insomnia was a common reaction to trauma, after all. I felt myself tensing up at the accusation, despite telling myself firmly that this statement was not about me. My anxiety sometimes made me assume that every negative thing I overheard was always about me, but I had been working on this problem with my therapist. I was going to be okay. I reached into my backpack and pulled out a binder, neatly tabbed and arranged according to my schedule, in hopes of distracting myself.

“Yeah, only gays are that organized. I should know—my dads are gay,” the voice quipped. When the comment was followed by what I could only interpret as a shove, I whipped around in anger.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I asked coldly, cocking my head to the side.

“Yeah, Kiba,” someone in front of me said. “What the fuck is your problem? Your dads would be super pissed about this.” I turned back around, my eyes shooting forward and landing directly on the blonde boy I’d been staring at. He was leaning, arms propped on my desk, and his expression was dark. Narrowed eyes, a slight grin. What is this kid doing?

“Dude, he was gawking at the football players. He’s obviously queer. He might as well get that announcement out of the way!” the brunette football player behind me shouted defensively. My eyebrow twitched in annoyance, and I exhaled slowly, ready to go off.

“Oh, he was, was he?” the blonde asked before I could say anything, shifting his gaze to me. Bright blue eyes stared directly into mine, searching my soul. I tried not to squirm. I wanted to seem pissed off, arrogant, unafraid; my eyes had been known to betray my true feelings before, though. The last thing I needed on a day like this was an impromptu fist-fight with the football team. Even though I’d been taking kickboxing all summer, I really did not feel confident enough in my hand-to-hand combat skills to take on so many people at once. I resisted the urge to sigh, to roll my eyes, to look away from the piercing gaze and purse my lips.

All of a sudden, the boy leaned in closer than any normal person would, studying my face with startling intensity. I held my ground, though, not letting the proximity scare me off. His eyes scoured my disdainful expression; I could feel them following every curve and line. I knew that winning this staring contest was crucial to preventing a more physical encounter, and so I stared back without hesitation. Without warning, though, the blonde broke into a grin, winked dramatically, and closed the gap between us, smashing his lips against mine with clumsy force. Warm, slightly chapped. Soft. Before I could process anything, the blonde pulled away and offered a challenging gaze to the rest of the classroom.

“Doesn’t seem that gay for football players to me, Kiba,” the blonde announced with what was quickly becoming his trademarked shit-eating grin. The classroom erupted in laughter, and even the aforementioned Kiba seemed to relax into a bemused smile. The only person whose tension amplified tenfold was in fact mine, since I’d just had my first kiss stolen by a stupid blonde boy as a joke. I sat there, fuming but at a loss for action. What could I possibly say or do when my brain was the equivalent of a frozen computer screen with a Windows 95 error message on display? The
blonde looked at me again, dead in the eye, and said with a casual wink, “I’m Naruto Uzumaki, by the way. You’re welcome.”

Fuming, I gifted the messy grinning idiot with a tight-lipped frown and said, “Eat shit, Naruto Uzumaki.”
BEFORE dealing with the deceased

Chapter Summary

Sasuke’s therapist encourages him to attend a 12-step program, but then the unthinkable happens: he actually goes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE dealing with the deceased

“Since it’s five, we had better get started,” the tall, familiar man announced. “Welcome to Dealing with the Deceased.” He smiled at the group, his brown eyes resting on me a second longer than the others. Great, everyone knows I’m new. “Hi, I’m Iruka, and I’m a survivor.”

All around the room, voices rang out: “Hi, Iruka!” He smiled politely at the gathering and asked if anybody would like to start the meeting off well by reading the passage for the day. A boy with dark red hair and poignant eyeliner held up his hand to volunteer, and Iruka told him the page number he could find the reading on. The boy pulled out a book and flipped.

“Hi, I’m Gaara, and I’m a survivor,” the boy announced. His black Within Temptation t-shirt over a long-sleeved fishnet undershirt and painted black nails drew my attention, and I watched in admiration as he spoke. “Today’s reading is from Leo Tolstoy. It says, Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them.”

“Thanks, Gaara,” Iruka said. “We are all going to contribute tonight. We’re going to go around the room and speak to this quote. If you don’t have anything to say about the quote in particular—” All of a sudden, the door burst open, cutting off the man in mid-sentence.

A messy mop of blonde hair tousled to and fro as a familiarly tan football player bounced into the room. “Sorry I’m late,” Naruto exclaimed, somewhat embarrassed. “Hi guys, I’m Naruto, and I’m a survivor!” The blonde smiled so wide his eyes were closed, and he waved haphazardly at the congregation. Everyone seemed unphased by this event, leading me to believe that this was not the first time Naruto had been here, and it certainly wasn’t the first time he’d been late. I said a silent prayer, hoping to whatever powers that be Naruto would not notice me as he searched for a place to sit.

“As I was saying,” Iruka continued, picking back up where he left off without much thought. “Tell us about your day, about how you felt, about the things you went through. Talk to us like we’re them.” He paused, observing the distorted seating of the room. “I’d like it if we could all move closer together today, guys, and physically strengthen these emotional bonds.”

Each person got out of their seat and meandered toward the front of the room. There were so few people present at the meeting that they barely filled more than one row of chairs. Naruto didn’t move, and I wasn’t sure how to proceed. I didn’t want to be noticed, but if I stayed in my current seat, I was sure to call attention to myself. Sighing tensely, I stood up, inching closer to the front with the rest of the group members and waiting awkwardly for everyone to finish before sneaking quietly into the seat at the end of the second row, far away from Naruto. Naruto, some dark-haired older boy, and I were all spaced out along the second row, which didn’t seem to sit well with Iruka.

“Come on, you three!” he called out, gesturing comically with his hands. “Sit next to each other, offer support. That’s what we’re here for!”

Naruto glanced up and to the left, spying the long-haired boy. He stood, ready to head in that...
direction, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My relief was short-lived, however, when he presumably realized Iruka specified three people. He glanced to his right and spotted me with widened eyes. I was soon cornered as both he and the other boy made a beeline straight for me.

The blonde idiot wouldn’t stop glancing at me throughout the meeting. It was as if he couldn’t believe that another person might possibly have dead parents. He was essentially staring at me, even though Gaara was nobly trying to discuss with the whole group his story of triumph. I caught bits and pieces, but I was unable to focus due to the distracting flurry of nerves in the pit of my stomach. Gaara seemed like the kind of friend I’d been looking for, someone eccentric and depressed with iconic fashion sense. I wished Naruto would stop with his distracting staring so I could pay attention, and my anxiety over all of the internal commotion caused my leg to start jittering with nervous energy. I tensed in my seat, my biceps straining against the thin fabric of my t-shirt, and I stared into space, willing myself to magically become a chair. As Gaara finished up with a cracking voice, Naruto leaned forward and squeezed his shoulder, offering the boy a grand smile. I found myself watching this display of affection and support curiously, intrigued by the ease with which it was performed. Are they… friends? I thought to myself as I observed the exchange. When Naruto released Gaara’s shoulder, he turned back and glanced at me, catching in in the midst of my stare. My face grew red, I could feel it, and the boy had the gall to stick his tongue out at me in a playfully idiotic way.

It took me a moment to notice that everyone was staring at me because it was my turn to speak. Even more embarrassed but determined to play it cool, I stood and looked out over the sparse crowd with cold eyes. “Hello, I’m Sasuke, and I’m a survivor, I guess.” My hair fell into my face, obscuring me from scrutiny.

“Hi, Sasuke!” Naruto shouted, far louder than any of his compatriots. I glared at him.

“My family was murdered when I was 11,” I stated blankly, feeling the disassociation begin to separate me from my experiences with its agile numbness. “The killer made me watch. He was going to kill me, but… I’m still here. I’m still alive. And he’s in prison.” I felt myself rambling, heard the disjointed jumble of words as they escaped through my mouth without emotion. “In the town where I grew up, everyone knows what happened, and they look at me with contemptable pity in their eyes. I have a lot of anger, a lot of hatred, in me. I don’t know that the quote for today really applies to me.” I scowled and sat back down, trying to hide my embarrassment. Without warning, Naruto leaned over and pulled me into a tight hug, his arms wrapped around me with a desperate squeeze. His face ended up in my neck, sending shivers down my spine, and he whispered to me, fierce and firm, “I see you, Sasuke.” I felt my cheeks flush and my eyes go wide at the intimacy of the boy, but he let go as quickly as he’d grabbed on. As if it had never happened, he joined in with the routine, “Thank you for sharing,” and no longer looked at me. Instead, he stood, ready for his opportunity to share.

“Hi, guys,” Naruto called out with a steadfast grin. “I’m still Naruto, and I’m definitely still a survivor.” He paused, letting everyone mumbled the appropriate response. “After my parents died, I didn’t really know how to be around people. Everyone blamed me for what happened, or at least that’s what it felt like. Maybe they really hated me, or maybe they just didn’t care, but I was so young that all I felt was ostracized. Even the people who took me in seemed to dislike me. I started coming here when someone told me about the free donuts, but I didn’t know how much this group would help me. It’s changed everything for me. I finally feel heard. I’ve been able to heal.” Naruto grinned sheepishly at the people around him, rubbing the back of his head.

“Thank you for sharing, Naruto,” Iruka said. “I am glad to hear that this group has been a source of love for so many of you.” There were murmurs of agreement throughout, but they quietened down quickly. There was still someone left, after all. I watched Naruto turn toward the other boy, and I wondered what this kid’s background story was.

“Hi, I’m Neji,” the boy muttered. “And I’m a survivor.”

“Hi, Neji,” everyone answered.

“Normally, I wouldn’t divulge any commentary, but the quote today actually brought something up for me.” He paused, fists clenched in his lap. “My dad died protecting my uncle. I blamed my uncle for the longest time, thinking it should have been him. But,” he muttered through gritted teeth, “I
realized that my dad made that sacrifice of his own volition, out of love for his brother, and by hating him, I was disrespecting the choice that my father made. I don’t understand love, or healing, or how to deal with the pain I still feel, but I don’t feel so angry anymore.”

“Thank you for sharing,” everyone called out.

I saw Naruto place his hand gently on Neji’s arm and offer him a small smile of encouragement. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, he isn’t the biggest dick in the world. Now that the meeting was drawing to a close, however, I made the decision to approach Gaara in an attempt to befriend him.

Naruto flounced over to Iruka, and I followed Gaara as he headed for the door. Amiable and witty, the redhead and I got off to a splendid start. We stood next to his car, casually chatting on the sidewalk, and I had just asked to exchange phone numbers with him when a loud shout caught us both off guard.

“Hey, guys! What’re ya talking about? Is it me?” a boy with messy blonde hair asked with his token grin plastered on his face.

“Naruto, hello,” Gaara greeted. “Sasuke and I were just in the process of making plans to hang out this weekend, actually.”

“That sounds great!” Naruto exclaimed. “What are we doing?”

I raised an eyebrow at the blonde, but said nothing. I was more than a little surprised that he had so cavalierly invited himself along, but the thought of seeing him outside of school again made my heart skip a beat. Gaara just rolled his eyes. “Naruto, you know you’re my best friend, but we don’t have to hang out with each other every weekend.”

“Of course,” Naruto replied, “but I want to hang out with you guys this weekend.”

Gaara glanced at me inquisitively, apparently putting this situation in my hands. I shrugged and eyed the blonde with my best contempt-filled glare. He squirmed nervously, and I smirked. “Hn,” I grunted thoughtfully. “Why should I hang out with you, after you sexually assaulted me this morning?”

“Hey!” Naruto cried with a pout. “I was trying to defend you from bullying! I was doing you a favor.”

Something about that statement irked me, and I felt myself getting angry. He took my first kiss from me, and I was supposed to think of that as a favor. “Maybe,” I said, eyeing him suspiciously. “Or maybe you’re a pervert.”

“I am not!” the blonde shouted, shock evident on his face. I laughed at him, a cold and heartless chuckle, and he stormed up to me in a rage. “Take it back! I’m not like that. I’m not!” I just continued to smirk at him, even as he grabbed a fist full of my t-shirt. He seemed angrier than I would have expected, but I wasn’t going to back down. He shouldn’t have kissed me if it didn’t mean anything to him. He shouldn’t try to do me any more favors. The blonde’s nostrils flared, and he pulled me closer to him, evidently about to grumble some badass retort.

I raised my eyebrow, beating him to the punch. “Are you expecting another kiss, Naruto?”

For some reason, this comment sent the boy over the edge. Enraged, he released his grip and shoved me back with all his strength. I stumbled backwards, taken aback but not caught entirely off guard. He lunged at me, but I side-stepped him quite easily. He fell, his body caught off balance by his momentum. He glared at me from his position on the ground, and Gaara walked over quietly, helping him stand. “Naruto,” the redhead murmured softly, staring him down. “I think you should apologize to Sasuke.”


Gaara said things that I could not hear, and Naruto’s expression softened, the rage leaving his tense face. He glanced at me with a frown, and I glared at him with my arms crossed over my chest. The redhead cleared his throat and announced, “If you two idiots are done now, I’ve got places to go and people to see. Sasuke, we’re still on for this weekend, if you still want to hang out with me.” I nodded at him, my face stoic. Naruto stood, staring at the ground, as Gaara clambered into his hatchback and drove off with a slight wave. I kept my eyes on the blonde, watching him nervously and reluctantly wring his hands. His face was turning red, and his frown seemed to convey more than just irritation. He looked…sad. His letterman looked heavy on his narrow shoulders. I felt my
scowl soften on my face, felt myself taking a step toward him without thinking. Naruto glanced up at me in surprise, his eyes filled with something akin to regret. Before I could say anything, though, two people walked out of the building. Both were engaged in amicable chatter with each other, and they hardly noticed the two of us, standing outside under the streetlight. I could just make out Iruka, walking beside a young woman in her thirties. Shizune, my guardian's wife and my therapist. I looked cautiously at Naruto, taking in his soft face and sad blue eyes with a strange feeling in my chest. Seeing him unhappy like that was unpleasant.

“Sasuke,” Shizune greeted as the pair got closer. “Who’s your friend?”

“Naruto,” I answered simply, hoping she wouldn’t make the connection to the boy I had spent our entire session discussing. Of course, I knew she was far too intelligent not to notice. I glanced between them uncomfortably.

“Oh, this is Naruto?” the young woman asked, looking from Naruto to Iruka with surprise. “It’s so nice to meet you. Iruka and I are good friends. He’s told me a lot about you. He’s really very proud of you, you know.” She smiled, and I felt relief flood through me. The last thing I wanted was for Naruto to know how much I had been thinking of him, of his kiss that day.

“What’s not to be proud of?” Naruto joked, laughing. Iruka chuckled and grinned, patting Naruto’s head with love.

“Haha, I wish Sasuke would display that kind of self-confidence from time to time,” the woman said with a grin.

“Shizune!” I whispered chastisingly, eyes wide.

“How would you like to get some ice cream, Naruto? Shizune and Sasuke were going to get some, and she invited me to join them,” Iruka said quickly, not allowing the tension to grow.

“Sure!” Naruto exclaimed without thinking. I felt my face heat up at the thought of spending even more time around the boy, and I wasn’t sure whether or not I supported the concept.

“How wonderful! It’s all on me, so order whatever you’d like, Naruto,” she said sweetly.

“Oh, no, ma’am, I couldn’t,” Naruto started to say, but she quickly dismissed him.

“I’m happy that Sasuke has a friend who can join us,” she stated, her tone of voice putting an end to the discussion. I rolled my eyes dismissively at her thinly veiled accusation. She had been placing so much emphasis on friends being crucial to my development and improvement in terms of recovering; I shook my head as we walked toward the ice cream shop, hoping that Naruto didn’t think that there was something wrong with me.

Shizune ordered two pints to go: one rum-raisin and one chocolate. Iruka ordered a simple cherry-vanilla milkshake. Naruto watched me, his expression one of mock-horror, as I ordered a chocolate-dipped waffle cone with two scoops of mint ice cream. Now that it was his turn to order, I returned the favor, staring at him with a judgmental smirk as he ordered a sprinkle-covered waffle cone with two scoops of strawberry ice cream, with real sliced strawberries inside. Naruto looked like he had a giddy feeling, despite my glare, and as he joined the others outside, he said, “Thank you so much, ma’am! I can’t remember the last time I had ice cream.”

Shizune smiled kindly at him while they walked along, though her eyes seemed sad. “You’re very welcome, Naruto. Any friend of Iruka’s is a friend of mine, and I’m happy to see that you and Sasuke are becoming friends as well.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Naruto replied, his mouth full of ice cream. I felt his eyes on me as I licked softly at my minty goodness, nibbling every so often at the chocolate cone. Naruto looked embarrassed as he took large, chomping bites of his ice cream, and I wondered if he was immune to the sharp pang that came from biting into cold foods.

“I think this is where we part ways with these two, isn’t it, Naruto?” Iruka asked, taking a sip of his milkshake. He nodded toward the intersection ahead.

“Mm, you mean I get to crash at your place tonight, Iruka?” Naruto asked as he licked the strawberry off his lips, seemingly excited. Iruka nodded, and Naruto immediately pulled out his phone, sending off a text. He panicked as his phone began to ring in response, though, and he gestured frantically at Iruka for help.

Iruka grabbed the phone and answered. “Hello, this is Iruka, Naruto’s mentor.” I couldn’t hear what
was being said, but based on Iruka’s face, things were not going very well. “Ma’am, I can assure you it isn’t like that. No, ma’am. I feel that is entirely unnecessary, ma’am.” Iruka paused, his eyes finding Naruto’s. “Sure, I can put him on.” He passed the phone to Naruto, whose face filled with worry.

“H-hey, Mother,” he mumbled. He avoided the looks Shizune and I were shooting at him, and he tried not to sound scared. He listened patiently, his eyes filled with worry. “Mother, it’s not like that,” Naruto replied softly. Something bad must have happened, because Naruto dropped his ice cream cone in surprise. He stared at it blankly as it melted on the ground, and he put his phone back in his pocket, dazed.

“I have to go,” he said, not making eye contact. “I’ll see you guys later. Thanks again for the ice cream.” Without another word, he turned and left, sprinting down the sidewalk as fast as he could.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Hope y’all like where the story is headed. :(
BEFORE friendship

Chapter Summary

Sasuke thinks Naruto is really really ridiculously good-looking but would rather get stabbed than admit it, so Gaara stabs him.

BEFORE friendship

As I walked around campus, looking for a quiet place to study, my eyes landed on something surprisingly fortunate. The blonde was here, and it looked like he was studying. He hadn’t spotted me yet, so I watched him for a moment, unnoticed. He had a tense, puckered expression on his face—but wait, was Naruto wearing…glasses? I stifled a laugh, staring in amusement at the ugliest pair of glasses I had ever seen. Eager to get a better look, I snuck up on him, edging closer to the boy with a smirk already in place on my face. The short football player was curled up on the grass, backpack opened next to him. His chemistry text book was open on his lap, and he seemed immersed in the page. Part of me was impressed by this startlingly studious Naruto, but that sense of admiration quickly evaporated when I heard him reading aloud. “The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell,” the boy muttered, repeating it over and over again with different inflection. The boy was still on the beginning of the biology review, and the first two weeks of school were almost over.

“The mitochondria,” he began again with a sigh.

“Is the powerhouse of the cell,” I finished for him, walking up and effectively blowing his cover.

“You need to study a lot harder.”

“Sasuke!” the blonde shouted as he looked up in surprise. He fumbled with his glasses in a failed attempt to remove them quickly, and he blushed at his own physical faux-pas. “What are you even doing here?”

“I go to school here,” I retorted, pointing to the main building.

“No, I mean, what are you doing here this early?” Naruto asked, clearly frustrated.

“What are you doing here so early, Naruto?” I asked, sitting down on the grass next to Naruto. I shifted my gaze curiously, turning to the blonde and cocking an eyebrow.

“Huh?” Naruto mumbled, suddenly seeming disoriented. I leaned forward a bit, trying to get a better look at him. His face was flushed; maybe he was sick. “Oh, I…Uh.” He was stammering a lot, and I scooted closer, preparing to feel of the boy’s forehead, when he finally got his response out. “I can’t stand being around my foster family.”

I paused, momentarily abandoning my mission to examine Naruto’s health. “Hn,” I acknowledged carefully, trying to catalogue this within the context of what I currently knew about Naruto’s familial life. After a moment of thought, I decided that the best course of action to take was no action at all, and so, I resigned myself to pulling out a textbook to begin reading. I felt Naruto staring, his warm eyes sending shivers down my spine, so I quickly untucked my long bangs from behind my ear and let them fall into my face, shielding him from sight. After a moment or two, I heard Naruto shuffling beside me. I glanced over, surprised to see the blonde removing his glasses and jacket. I watched as the boy carefully folded the glasses up inside of the coat and lay it neatly on the grass before he popped into a perfect plank. What is this idiot doing? I wondered, though I didn’t wait long for an answer—Naruto began pushing himself up and down on the uneven grass. The wind whipped through his blonde locks, but he kept his breathing even. I was baffled, and the words left my mouth without further consideration. “Are you really doing push-ups right now?”

“by my obvious strength and athletic prowess, nerd?” Bickering didn’t impair his fluid motion even a little bit, and he bobbed up and down in a controlled bounce with ease.

“Am I supposed to be?” I jeered, rolling my eyes instinctively, even though Naruto wasn’t looking at me. His pushups were kind of impressive, though. He had surprisingly sturdy arms with thick veins.

Naruto laughed as he continued pushing himself away from the ground. “Well, if this dazzling show is too much of a distraction for you, you can always go study somewhere else.” He paused at the extension to wink.

“Distracted?” I repeated, bemused but blushing. “By how pathetic your pushups are, maybe.”

“Am I supposed to be?” Naruto snapped, finally stopping the movement. He sat up on his knees across from me and glowered. “My pushups are far from pathetic.”

“You’re doing the most basic pushup known to humankind, and you’re trying to tell me that’s not pathetic?” I retorted, smirk distorting my otherwise emotionless face.

“Well excuse me for not doing diamond pushups first thing in the morning, O Great Judge of the Pushups,” the blonde argued defensively, frowning at me contemptuously.

“It’d be judge, actually,” I corrected. “And this,” I continued, snapping into a plank position, “would be the opposite of pathetic.” Without knowing exactly what had possessed me, I began pushing upwards until my hands left the ground, at which point I clapped them together, only to return them to their starting positions. It had been a minute since the last time I had done clapping pushups, but I was confident in my ability to keep the ballistic movement fluid and steady. I had spent the entire summer getting myself back into shape—I had become gaunt from missing meals and sleeping constantly for a year or two after the death of my family, but the promise of new clothes managed to spur me into action.

“That’s nothing,” Naruto cried, evidently somewhat alarmed by the magnificent pushups I was doing. I smirked as I finished up the set. “Uh,” the blonde sputtered. “You call that a challenge?” I sat up and cocked my eyebrow, looking inquisitively at the fumbling boy, who was desperately trying to find something to say. After a moment, I just laughed and stood up, watching Naruto scramble to keep up with me.

“Look, can we just put a stop to this dick measuring contest now?” I asked, looking Naruto dead in the eyes before following it up with, “Mine’s bigger, and we both know it.” Nervous but arrogant, I winked at the gawking blonde before grabbing my backpack from the ground. “It’s about time for class, idiot.”

“My—” Naruto huffed, grabbing his bag and running after me. “My dick is plenty big!” he shouted. “Bigger than yours, definitely!”

I ran into Gaara in the hallway at the end of the day, calling out to him with unabashed stoicism. He was a junior, and he would be turning 17 before the end of the year, whereas I would soon be turning a measly 16. I felt uncool on principle and vowed to try to make up for it when I hung out with him this upcoming weekend.

“Hey, what are we getting up to this Saturday?” I asked, catching up to walk in stride with my new friend.

“Oh, well,” Gaara began thoughtfully. “I wanted to hit up the Dreadful Dead meeting on the southside, if you want to come. Then we could just chill at my house, I guess.”

“The Dreadful Dead?” I repeated.

“Yeah, I think that’s on Saturday. It might be the Haunted Living, though. Either way,” the redhead replied, teal-green eyes twinkling in the fluorescents.

“Okay,” I said. “Could I bring some records over?”

“Some records?” Gaara asked, drawn-on eyebrow arched artfully.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Do you have a record player?”

“Do I have a record player?” Gaara asked, smirking.

“Yeah?” I replied hesitantly.

“Of course I have a record player,” the redhead laughed. “What do I look like to you? The kind of
“Weird goth kid without a record player?” Gaara smiled wryly, and I rolled my eyes. “I’ve got a really impressive record collection, too. So, you’re more than welcome to bring some records, but I probably already own them.”

I smirked in response, feeling my trusty arrogance return with the dispersion of the mild embarrassment I had felt. “I don’t know about that, Gaara. I wouldn’t be too sure if I were you.” The redhead laughed again, and I was pleased to have found someone who thought my arrogant attitude was entertaining instead of distancing. “I can pick you up from your place around noon for the meeting,” the goth said as we reached the place where our paths parted. “Just text me your address.” I agreed and waved goodbye as he walked off in the other direction.

The meeting on southside—which ended up being called The Phantoms of Our Menace, a play on a movie title I had little to no knowledge of—was far more entertaining than the one I had attended the week prior, though it was oriented around survivor’s guilt and PTSD as opposed to dealing with the tragic death of loved ones. Gaara and I emerged from the church that hosted it grinning broadly. We walked back to Gaara’s parked jet-black hatchback, and the redhead began berating me with musical inquiries. “So, do you play any instruments?” he asked, fishing for the keys in his baggy Tripp pants. Without hesitation, we clambered into the car, and he sped off down the street, headed for a part of town that I had never seen before. I considered Gaara’s inquiry with some trepidation. My musical ineptitude was the bane of my existence, a mockery of my genre-appreciation, but I didn’t want to sound completely pathetic, so I said, “I can play a little guitar,” even though I barely knew the difference between an acoustic and an electric.

“You mean a ukulele?” Gaara retorted with a grin. My initial confusion melted into an eye roll of exasperation after a second of consideration.

“Ha, ha, ha,” I enunciated. “Very funny. But what about you? Do you play an instrument?” “Oh, of course,” the boy answered as he pulled into a driveway with a large black gate. As the redhead entered the code on the electric pad to open the gate, he continued, “I can play the cello and the violin, and right now, I’m learning the piano. It’s actually my favorite thus far.” “Cello? Violin? Piano? That’s…surprising,” I said, watching the building’s silhouette grow as we approached. Gaara shot me a curious look, and I explained, “You just don’t look like you’d play any classical instruments like that.”

“Watch it, pipsqueak,” Gaara said gruffly. “I’m a man of many talents. Some of them musical, others…” He narrowed his eyes. “More dangerous.” “Oh, I’m so afraid of you,” I retorted, rolling my eyes for the millionth time since Gaara picked me up over an hour ago.

“You should be,” the redhead replied. “Afraid you’ll shave my eyebrows off, maybe,” I joked.

“Ouch,” Gaara said with a smile. “By the way,” he added as he emerged from the car. “Another friend is supposed to come over in a little bit, too. Hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s cool,” I answered, hoping it wouldn’t be awkward. “Who is it?” “Oh, uh,” Gaara replied, being intentionally vague and avoiding eye contact. I sighed and followed the boy as he walked toward the building.

“It’s Naruto, isn’t it?” I asked. Gaara raised his eyebrows and grinned, but he didn’t say anything. I groaned and ran my hands through my hair. The boy made me nervous. “Why?” “Naruto is my best friend, dude,” the redhead said. “He asked if we could hang out today, and I said yeah.” “Does he know that you’re also hanging out with me?” I asked, hoping that he wanted to spend time with me. “He will when he gets here,” Gaara answered with a shrug. “You guys really got off on the wrong foot the other day. I think you’d actually get along, if you gave each other a chance.” I grunted in acknowledgement, thinking about how much I would like to put that hypothetical to the test. “So, my brother and sister are here, but my parents are out tonight for some important business meeting or
something. Kankuro and Temari will probably stay in their rooms the whole time, though. We’ve got
the whole place to hang out.” Gaara pointed out different rooms as we entered, kitchen to the left and
living room to the right, and we made our way to the staircase against the wall. He pointed out
Temari and Kankuro’s bedrooms, but we walked in the opposite direction. I followed him into his
bedroom, which looked precisely as I thought it would.

Band posters were plastered to the walls, so thickly collaged they looked like a custom set of Teen
Angst™ wallpaper. A pair of chest of drawers taller than me sat across the room, framing the large
bay window. Each drawer was presumably filled with goth band tees and fishnet fashion accessories.

My eyes followed the rectangular shape of the room, landing on an impressive black desk with a
matching shelving unit atop it. The desk shelves held crate after crate of records, with each crate
meticulously labeled and arranged according to genre. On either side of the desk was a giant speaker,
and in the middle of the desk sat a stunningly aesthetic record player. My eyes kept moving, spying a
small nightstand covered in pens and notebooks next to a huge king-sized bed, unmade. Reds and
blacks comprised the bedclothes and pillows. At the foot of the bed was a gray loveseat, the perfect
accouterment for the gargantuan bookcase on the opposite wall. The books seemed to be arranged
according to color on the dark red shelves, and there were at least as many books as there were
records, if not more. Directly to the right of the bookshelf was a door, presumably leading to a closet,
and a bit to the left of the bookshelf was the door we entered through. The carpeted floor was black
and plush, like a giant shag rug.

“Wow,” I breathed, taking it all in. “You gonna die without enough red and black in your life?”
“I know what I’m about,” Gaara retorted, popping off his shoes and padding over to the shelves full
of crates. He pulled out a record and asked, “Have you listened to Against Me! before?”
“Uh, totally,” I lied, looking at the album cover with intrigue.

“Cool,” Gaara said, popping it back into the crate. “Have you read Tranny yet? LJG is so awesome.
Her music is usually hit or miss with me, but I thought her book was incredibly powerful.” I shook
my head. “She explains so much about each album,” Gaara continued, going off on a rant about a
song called The Ocean. “Straight from the mouth of the goddess herself,” he concluded, still peeling
through records. “Oh, do you like Hawthorne Heights?”
“Yes!” I replied with more enthusiasm than I had managed to express since the school year started.
“Do you have Fragile Future? Can we listen to that?”
“I guess. I wanted to introduce you to something you hadn’t heard before, but I can just do that
later.” He pulled out the familiar record and put it on the turntable. I had been standing awkwardly in
the doorway, but Gaara motioned for me to come in. I began to take off my shoes, bent over to
unlace the tops; I had only gotten one off, though, when all of a sudden something hit me from
behind and propelled me forward until I landed prostrate on the soft carpet. That wasn’t so bad, I
could’ve just shaken it off, but unfortunately, I soon realized I wasn’t in the clear just yet. I heard a
yelp and tensed up as a person fell right on top of me.

The person pushed themself up on their palms, still on top of me, and said, “Hey, Gaara! And hey to
you too, uh, Sasuke?”

“Whoops, sorry,” Naruto said with a laugh, rolling off and sitting up quickly. I pushed myself up and
turned to glare at the blonde boy, whose sheepish grin and bright blush had become all too familiar.
“Wow, what an entrance!” Gaara announced. “Ten out of ten, truly.”


Naruto rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, not making eye contact with me. “I, uh,” he
stammered. “I didn’t mean to knock you over.”

“Okay, no problem!” Naruto exclaimed, giving me a thumbs-up. I rolled my eyes and stood up,
walking over to the couch where Gaara was sitting. The boy had stretched himself out over the
length of the loveseat, so I hopped up on the bed and sat with my legs crossed, leaning against the
wall. Naruto joined me on the bed, laying out on his stomach. “So, what are we getting up to,
“Gaara?”

“Nothing much,” the redhead replied from the couch. “But, hey, can you play any instruments, Naruto?”

“Oh, uh,” the blonde stammered. “I guess I can play a little guitar?”

Gaara opened his mouth, but I deftly beat him to the punch. “The word you’re looking for is ukulele,” I said, unable to contain a grin. Being on the other side of the pun made the joke much funnier, I decided.

“Okay, yeah,” Naruto said. “I don’t know when they changed the name to that u-word. Sorry.” My eyes went wide as I registered what the blonde had just admitted aloud. I looked at him in horror, examining his surprised expression with the hope of finding out that he was simply kidding. His confusion seemed sincere, and I balked. Gaara, on the other hand, laughed amicably, mumbling, “Oh, oh wow,” to himself. Naruto glanced back and forth between the both of us, pouting, until Gaara finally announced, “It was a joke.”

“I don’t… I don’t get it,” Naruto said. He sat up and tucked his knees into his chest, still pouting. Briefly, my brain suggested that this visual was cute, that Naruto himself was in fact cute, but I rejected the thought impulsively on the grounds that the boy was a complete and utter idiot.

“A ukulele,” I began dryly, in a half-hearted attempt to rectify the problem, “is a small musical instrument resembling a guitar.”

“Okay,” Naruto mumbled, his big eyes focused intently on my face.

“So,” I faltered, feeling my cheeks begin to blush from his rapt attention. “It’s funny, because…?” Suddenly, Naruto’s face split into a maniacal grin, and his body began to shake with laughter. He clutched at his abdomen, giggling profusely. Naruto laughed so hard he fell to the side, landing directly beside me. He wriggled in the sheets, laughing with his whole body. When his giggles had subsided enough, he propped himself up on one arm and opened his mouth to speak, only to lose it again when he saw the look on Gaara’s face. His hand slipped, and he fell back on the bed, his head landing awkwardly close to mine. I felt the warmth in my face grow more prominent as I watched the sheer delight evolve on the blonde’s face, and I decided I wouldn’t shove the boy away from me just yet. I wanted to let him enjoy himself a little bit longer.

“You guys,” Naruto gasped. “You guys really think I’m that fucking dumb?” He looked me in the eyes, examining my face with a grin.

“Yes, absolutely,” I answered, averting my gaze from his baby blues. The boy’s smile dimmed for a millisecond, but it returned as he stuck his tongue out at me.

“Wow, Sasuke,” Naruto replied. “That’s so hurtful. I don’t think we can be friends anymore.”

“Are we friends?” I snapped, making eye contact with the boy. “I’m pretty sure we’re not friends.”

“Uh, that’s not what your mom’s hot girlfriend said.” I immediately shoved Naruto, and the boy was in a fit of giggles again. “Don’t be such a grump,” the blonde chastised, grinning at me with his dimpled cheeks.

“Don’t talk about Shizune like that,” I complained. “And Tsunade is not my mom. She’s my guardian.” Naruto furrowed his brows, somewhat somber-looking.

“Well, aren’t you just the most independent?” the blonde finally responded, dryly. “Nobody is your friend, nobody is your family—you’re just one big bundle of self-sufficiency, huh?”

“I’m the only friend I deserve,” I muttered, mostly to myself. I wanted that sentence to sound cocky, but the truth came out with my tone. I crossed my arms over my chest, trying not to look overly dejected.

“Who died and made you Batman?” Gaara retorted comically. He spoke gruffly, doing the best imitation he could. “I’m not the friend I want, but I’m the friend I deserve.”

Naruto laughed, but truth be told, I found the joke in somewhat poor taste. With an inquisitive glare, I said, “Uh, well, obviously my parents?” The other two stopped snickering and fell quiet. I felt a little uncomfortable in the midst of the ensuing silence, so I added in a melodramatic voice, “I am the Punisher, not Batman. My whole family was killed at once, and now I’m seeking revenge, hoping only to quell my own survivor’s guilt.”

“Ooh, so edgy,” Gaara said with a laugh. “Not as edgy as me, though. I’m the supreme edgelord:
Deadpool. Trauma after trauma, I embrace the darkness through memes.”
I let out a chuckle and reached over to give the redhead a high five. “So,” I said with a smirk and raised brows. “Who does that make Naruto?”
The blonde looked up at the two of us from his prone position on the mattress and frowned. “I’m the Arrow, obviously!” he whined.
“You? Oliver Queen?” Gaara said, eyebrows raised in surprise. “Nope. Maybe the Flash, but even that is debatable. At least Barry has a dark side. You’re constantly peppy and always trying to do the right thing.”
“Yeah, you’re absolutely not the Arrow,” I agreed. “You’re more like… Spiderman. Dopey, cute, naïve, charming, amicable—too oblivious to notice being bitten by a radioactive spider.”
“Oh, okay,” Naruto replied. “So, what you’re saying is, I’m passionate, charismatic, and prone to doing good?” He had a cheeky grin on his dumb face, I noted with agitation. “I’m the best hero out of all three of us.”
“Did I mention you’re an idiot?” I asked. “Because you’re also an idiot.”
“Aw, Sasuke!” the blonde boy cooed. “Also an idiot? So you do think I’m the best!”
“No,” I snapped, suddenly afraid that he would find out about my feelings for him. “I hate you.”
Naruto rolled over on his back and scooted closer to me, while I backed up against the wall. “Don’t be like that, Sasuke! You know I’m totally lovable. Why else would you be here, hanging out with me?” He smiled, his eyes full of admiration. I felt myself start to blush again, pinkened cheeks clearly noticeable. Embarrassed but infatuated, I stared at Naruto’s beaming face, taking in the mess boy in his entirety, and I noticed as I looked him up and down that the boy’s t-shirt had ridden up, exposing his abdomen to the soft lighting of the cozy room. He was thin—thinner than I had realized—but muscular, with his tan skin pulled taunt over surprisingly defined abs. The designer label around the band of his black and purple boxer briefs hugged his hip bones, which jutted out more than they should. His jeans were too big for him, and his belt was so tight it folded the fabric over to keep them up—and they still slipped down. His t-shirt fit his chest and arms well, showing off his impressive pecs and biceps, but he usually hid himself away under his swaddling letterman. This was the first time I had gotten to see him so vulnerable, so free, and something shiny and metallic caught my eye as it glinted in the lamplight.
“Do you have your navel pierced?” I inquired incredulously, sitting up and leaning over to examine the boy’s exposed stomach more closely. A curved barbell sat snugly above his belly button, with a bright purple plastic gemstone in the bottom ball.
“Yup!” Naruto replied with a grin. “Am I cool yet?”
“How did you even managed to get that pierced?” I retorted. “You’re like 12.”
“I’m almost 16, actually,” he argued, sticking out his tongue.
“I did it,” Gaara said nonchalantly, examining his fingernails with displeasure.
“Yeah, Gaara is super cool,” Naruto explained. “He knows how to pierce people with safety pins.”
“That seems sketchy,” I said without thinking.
“Nah, my sister is a professional piercer,” the redhead extrapolated. “She’s taught me a thing or two. I only do surface piercings, though. The others are too complicated.”
“Okay, but why?” I asked, looking at Naruto with interest. The boy blushed.
“I used to self-harm a lot,” he said, not making eye contact. “Gaara said he’d give me a piercing if I stopped, so I came over and he stabbed me in the abdomen with a safety pin.” The room grew tense, and the blonde looked uncomfortable. I leaned forward and put my hand on Naruto’s arm without thinking, giving it a gentle squeeze before retracting it in internalized horror.
Before the blonde could comment on what just happened or even glance up and spy my embarrassed expression, I announced, “I want a piercing.”
“No, I want you to do it.” I argued. “Because we’re friends.” I wasn’t sure I really wanted a piercing, and I was scared to let someone I barely knew do it; however, if the alternative was admitting or even acknowledging that I’d just bestowed kindness in the form of a physical gesture on a stupid football player with a pretty smile and sweet eyes, then I’d take the stabbing, thanks.
“Yes, Gaara!” aforementioned stupid football player cried, full of excitement. He sat up and clambered over to the end of the bed, peering over the side at the redhead on the couch. “You’ve gotta do it. Please!”

“Fine,” Gaara said. “It’s not like we were doing much in the first place.” He sat up and looked over at me. I was depending on my ability to maintain stoicism no matter what to keep my growing fear a secret. “What do you want me to pierce?”

I thought about it, imagining how I might look with different piercings. It was strictly forbidden by the high school to have any facial jewelry, and if Tsunade saw it, she would likely sacrifice my soul to Satan right then and there. It had to be easy to conceal, and above all else, it had to match my aesthetic. “I want the back of my neck pierced.”

“Okay,” the redhead agreed with a shrug. “It’s going to be a fourteen gauge, and you’ve gotta keep it clean.” He walked over to the door adjacent to the bookshelf and opened it, revealing a grandiose bathroom. “After you,” he said, nodding to Naruto and I.

Gaara had everything he could possibly need inside of his bathroom, from a mounted mini-bookcase above the toilet to a large jacuzzi-style bathtub covered in aromatherapy candles. His bathroom even had a walk-in closet. Atop his bathroom counters sat a basic plastic storage bin filled with 14-gauge safety pins, lighters, jewelry, tea tree oil, cleansing wipes, and even a pair of clamps. The redhead instructed me to pick out the jewelry I wanted from the minimal selection and then straddle the toilet seat, head tilted down. With a shrug, I picked out a basic curved barbell with black balls, hoping that the jewelry would subsequently blend in with my hairline. Naruto leaned against the wall next to me, grinning excitedly.


“That looks so cool!” Naruto exclaimed. “Do mine, do mine!”

“Don’t be a copycat,” I muttered through gritted teeth. The adrenaline rush began wearing off, and the back of my neck was sorely throbbing. I stood up and walked over to the mirror, turning and peering. I could just make out the swollen lump out of the corner of my eye. Gaara chuckled, handing me a small hand mirror. As I examined the new piercing, I felt a surge of pleasure overcome me. I looked at that bar in my neck, and I felt cool as hell.

“We’re quite the motley crew, huh?” Gaara joked. “No band reference intended.”

“Do you have any piercings?” I asked, glancing at him with my eyebrows raised.

Without warning, Gaara removed his shirt, showcasing six separate surface piercings on his torso alone, along with a tattoo on his ribcage. He pointed to each piercing and explained, “Temari let me get this one when I was…” The two matching ones he had on his collarbones were his first, and he got the matching ones on his hips a year later. His vertical nipple piercings were the most recent. He finished by pointing out the hourglass tattoo, saying, “Temari’s boyfriend gave me this when I caught them having sex on our adoptive parents’ bed.”

“Haha, I remember that,” Naruto replied with a laugh. “That was so fucked up. She was really mad.”

I glanced back and forth between the two, somewhat startled, and asked, “Wait, how long have you guys been friends?”

Gaara and Naruto exchanged glances with accompanying grins. “Four years,” they said in unison. Naruto continued, “We met at Iruka’s group meeting, and we’ve been friends ever since.”

“That makes sense,” I retorted.

“Speaking of us being friends,” Naruto said, turning to Gaara with a pout already in place. “I’m hungry.”

“Sasuke,” Gaara said without looking away from Naruto. “Do you like Ichiraku’s?”
“I’ve never been,” I answered nonchalantly, slouched against the counter. “What kind of place is it?”
“What?” Naruto shouted, suddenly flying into action. He ran up to me, putting his hands on my shoulders and inadvertently shaking me with his enthusiasm. “You’ve never been?” I shook my head, scowling as my heart thudded in my chest from his touch. “Oh, my goodness, you poor thing!”
The blonde yanked me into his arms, squeezing me tight. He turned, taking me with him, and declared, “Gaara, we must rectify this immediately!”
The redhead nodded, face solemn, and said, “Let’s go, then. But, uh, put him down first. He can walk to the car on his own.”
“Are you sure?” Naruto asked, eyeing me suspiciously. “He’s never eaten at Ichiraku’s before. I don’t know how he’s managed to last this long without falling over dead.”
“If he’s made it this far, he can make it another ten minutes and a flight of stairs,” the redhead retorted. Naruto released me with a sigh, and I glared at him like a ruffled cat.
“What’s happening right now?” I muttered to myself, brushing down my shirt and cardigan to remove some of the more pronounced wrinkles. My entire body felt alive with a tingling sensation, and the recent proximity of the blonde had me shivering in delight.
“Friendship,” the dynamic duo replied, grabbing my hands and dragging me down stairs.
BEFORE hbd sasuke

Chapter Summary

Aww, widdle baby Sasuke is turning another year older! Too bad he didn't tell any of his new friends.

BEFORE hbd sasuke

I found myself on campus, the morning mist enshrouding the buildings with its wispy embrace. My heart thudded as I looked around, eagerly hoping to spy the blonde I had come to adore. My face fell when I failed to find him, but thankfully, I did not have to wait very long for him to show up. I saw his car pull up and park; I watched him get out. He saw me looking, and he waved before jogging over. He was such a breathtaking boy, with his shimmering golden hair and sun-kissed skin. I couldn’t help but stare up at his beaming face as he skidded to a halt in front of me. The boy was wearing a maroon Henley with a light gray cardigan and a pair of light wash jeans, though, and he was sweating a bit. I opened my mouth, ready to reprimand him for negligence of his own wellbeing, but something stranger caught my eye. I stood abruptly, coming dangerously close and peering at him with interest.

“Naruto,” I said blankly. “You’re bleeding.”

“What?” Naruto asked. I hesitantly pointed to the trickle of blood flowing from the boy’s ear, which was strangely swollen. “Oh, that? It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

With a dismissive shake of my head, my hand found Naruto’s chin and tilted the boy’s head up at an angle, giving me a better view of the wound. Ugly gashes, barely covered by the boy’s blonde locks, bled down his neck. There were two swollen knots, already beginning to turn purple with bruising. I released the boy’s chin, staring at him as he refused to make eye contact. “Sit,” I commanded, gesturing to the blanket I’d laid out beneath the trees. The blonde obeyed without question, and I got down on my knees, pulling out a mini first aid kit from my backpack. I cleaned the area with an alcohol wipe before applying antibiotic ointment to the open wounds. I placed a large bandaid over the boy’s neck, finishing off the treatment.

As I cleaned up the minute mess I had made, Naruto stayed silent. I felt Naruto’s eyes on me, but I kept quiet as well. I was afraid that anything I might say would come off the wrong way. I was fuming, and I didn’t want Naruto to think that I was mad at him. No, I was furious at whoever did this to him. I returned the kit to my bag and sat down next to Naruto, who had been staring at me with wide eyes the whole time. I looked over into Naruto’s eyes, and the blonde immediately said, “Thank you, Sasuke.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied through gritted teeth.

We sat there in silence a moment or two, neither of us able to find the right words. Finally, Naruto said, “I did something wrong. It was my fault.” I glanced at him, waiting for him to continue. “I knew better, and I was punished. It’s not a big deal.”

With my impulse control at an all-time low, I felt my body moving before my brain could register the action it was taking. I wrapped an arm around Naruto’s shoulders and pulled him in, administering a hug to another human being for the first time in a long time. I held Naruto there, motionless, and said, “You deserve to be treated better. I’m sorry.” I battled the fury inside of me, pleaded with it to calm down for the time being. It was barely listening.

Naruto stayed like that for another minute or two, watching the world around him with his head nestled on my chest and lost in his own thoughts. The blonde was snug against me, and my arm rested gently against Naruto’s. Suddenly, Naruto shifted, moving his head up to look at me. Curious,
I turned, staring into cobalt eyes. “Hey, Sasuke,” the boy said hesitantly. “Can I ask you something?”
“Shoot,” I commanded.
“Well, are you doing anything tonight?” Naruto asked, averting his eyes. I cocked an eyebrow. “The first game of the season is today, and it’s a home game, and it’s at seven…” He trailed off. “I’d like for you to come watch me play.”
“Really?” I inquired, surprised. It was my birthday, and I was supposed to spend time with Tsunade and Shizune. Though, they would probably be excited about me actually having an activity planned with friends on a day such as this. The boy nodded enthusiastically. “Okay. Have you asked Gaara already? Is he coming?”
“I know,” the blonde said, “but please come. I want to know that somebody is there, rooting for me.” “I thought you were the most popular boy in the school,” I teased. “What about all of your adoring fans?”
Naruto smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I guess not,” he said. “I’ll be there, Naruto,” I replied. “But for now, we should probably get to class.”
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Naruto smile softly to himself.

By the time the school day had ended, I was forced to admit to myself that I was a bit more excited about this whole football thing than I originally anticipated. Certainly, there was the appeal of seeing Naruto, but something about being invited by him specifically gave me an insuppressible sense of delight. I hadn’t really done much to celebrate my birthday since my family passed, though Tsunade always did her best. Shizune and Tsunade had planned a relatively simple dinner for me tonight—a traditional Japanese meal, complete with a delicious daifuku dessert and presents from both of them. Altogether, not the extravaganza that an Uchiha birthday usually was, but a new family meant new traditions. They had been excited about the prospect of me attending a football game with friends when I texted Tsunade about it, however, and were more than happy to postpone their dinner celebration until after my return. They encouraged me to invite friends as well, but I hadn’t quite made up my mind on that just yet. It was somewhat exciting to be out and about, doing something for the occasion, but I hadn’t even told anyone it was my birthday. As I stared out the window of the bright blue Volkswagen bug, I felt something akin to giddiness about the night ahead. Though the sport itself seemed ridiculous and insignificant, and I wasn’t typically one for large gatherings, Ino and Sakura had managed to hype me up quite a bit. Earlier that day, I had requested that they accompany me to the game. I certainly wasn’t going to show up by myself. In reality, I’d asked Ino, but she invited Sakura to avoid causing a rift between them. I was supposed to meet them at Ino’s house after school—her mom even offered to pick me and Sakura up and give us a ride home with them.

Ino’s mother had been talking for the past ten minutes, but I’d heard none of it. I was daydreaming about a certain blonde with a shimmer in his eyes; she was just smiling and gesturing while she drove, oblivious to the way that her carpool team was responding. Something caught my attention, though—since Sakura had to stay late to make up a test, Ino’s mom had jumped to the conclusion that Ino and I were romantically involved. I glanced at Ino, hoping she would correct it, but she was completely immersed in her cell phone. I sighed, trying to figure out the right way to respond.
Clearly, if she thought there was potential for a romance between the two of us, Ino’s mother knew nothing about her daughter, and I certainly wasn’t about to give her anything to work with. That being said, it wasn’t like I wanted to admit to this stranger that I was having confusing romantically-inclined bursts of emotion for one of the football players and that’s why we were going to the game together, either.
“Oh, actually, we’re just friends,” I blurted out as quickly as I could, trying to make sure I said something before she could continue and leave the topic behind. “Ma’am,” I added after a second of thought.
Ino glanced up, suddenly attentive. She grumbled, “Yeah, Mom! Gosh, I told you already we weren’t dating. Just leave him alone, okay?”
“Yes, of course,” the woman replied with a laugh. “Friends are just as important as romantic partners. And you’re far too young to be dating, anyway.” She smiled in the rearview mirror at me before casting her grin on her daughter in the passenger seat. Ino rolled her eyes and smacked the gum she was chewing.

As awkward as the ride to her home had been, I felt surprisingly comfortable within the girl’s room. The entire house was covered in cheesy home décor spouting nonsense, like “Live, Laugh, Love,” and dynamically arranged family portraits hung from the walls with the frequency of rain drops on a window; Ino’s room represented a safe haven from the abrasive normalcy of it all. Framed movie posters were the only wall décor she had in place, standing out against the soft blue-gray walls—Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Wristcutters: a Love Story, Blue Is the Warmest Color, and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Her dresser, bedframe, and vanity were all matching in sheer white color and swirling carved designs, and her dark purple comforter covered her silver satin sheets with the sort of tight immaculacy one would expect of a military brat. She had the same number of pillows on either side of the queen bed, with one sequin-covered throw pillow in the middle. As clean and organized as her bedroom appeared, I could see into her walk-in closet through the ajar door—and it was a wreck. Clothes were strewn everywhere, and shoes were a scattered mess covering the floor. A jewelry organizing contraption hung from the back of the door, and it looked as if she had simply chunked necklaces, rings, bracelets, and earrings at it haphazardly until all of the sections were spilling over. The room was significantly smaller than Gaara’s, though it wasn’t much bigger than mine. What was most interesting to me, however, were the instruments she had setup on the far side of the room. An acoustic guitar, resting comfortably in a stand, sat next to a full drum kit, its shiny reds and silvers glittering in the delicate light of the half-mast dimmer switch.
“You play?” I asked, gesturing to the music-oriented section of the room. Ino nodded awkwardly, clearly uncertain of the way she should act in this situation. I tried to smile in a reassuring manner, but based off of her facial expression, I assumed it came out a bit more like a smirk.
At that moment, there was a knock at the bedroom door. It cracked open, and the familiar face of the pink-haired girl peeked through. “Hi, Ino,” Sakura greeted with a smile before turning to me. She said much more quietly, “Hey, Sasuke.” I stopped myself from rolling my eyes.
“Hey, Sakura!” the blonde girl returned in an eager voice. “Did the test go okay? I’m sure you kicked its butt! You’re so smart.”
“Not as smart as you, Ino,” she replied with a soft grin. “I did okay, though.”
“Just okay?” her best friend egged on, a defiant gleam in her eyes.
“You know, just like a 98 or whatever. No big deal,” Sakura replied, erupting into a more prominent smile. “Totally kicked its butt.”
“ Heck yeah, that’s my girl!” Ino shouted, rushing up and wrapping Sakura in a spinning embrace. “I’m so proud of you!”
“Stop it,” Sakura whined. “Put me down!”
Ino laughed and set the larger girl back down, letting her pout playfully. I watched the interaction with muted interest, comparing it to my own more physical encounters with Naruto. The circumstance seemed similar, though Ino was evidently much better at concealing her feelings than me. I decided I should ask her for help with that, once we were no longer around Sakura. With a small smile, I tore my eyes away from the comparative exchange and glanced at my watch, somewhat eager to get the football game underway.
“Hey guys,” I interrupted. “It’s actually almost 6:30. Do you think we should go ahead and head out? I wanted to get there early and get good seats.”

The stadium was packed out. As we wandered inside the stadium, I felt my senses come alive. The
dark tunnel-like entrance broke into a world of shimmering lights; the entire field was cocooned in the glow of LEDs. All around me, sound permeated the air—the stomp of feet, the bellowing vocals of the onlookers, the high-pitched cries of the scantily clad cheerleaders. I could smell hot dogs and cheesy nachos, could feel the sharp sting of the chilly night air like an electric shock. My heart raced as I followed Ino and Sakura up, up, up the bleacher seats, looking for an opening. We found one right above the band and sat down together with concessions in-hand.

“So, what’s happening?” I asked, looking around somewhat wildly. I felt just the slightest bit overwhelmed—it was the same as being in the midst of a fair, with the din of the participants melting with the cry of the splinterheads and carnies as the bright colors, flashing lights, and intoxicating scents bombard you from every direction. It was comfortingly chaotic—a tranquil sort of exciting.

“The band has already played as they marched onto the field, so the football players are about to run through the big paper signs that the cheerleaders are holding up,” Ino replied, pointing to the large crudely-drawn logos being hoisted shiftily by a select few limber wannabe-gymnasts. Right after the words left her purple-coated lips, a horde of doppelgangers ripped through the papers on either side of the field. They came careening through, all strange curves and bulky colored figures. I leaned forward against the narrow chain that blocked off the band from the crowd, my eyes scanning the lookalikes for a familiar face. I frowned when I realized I couldn’t tell any of them apart.

“Did you know that Ino used to be the cheerleading captain?” Sakura inquired, her pink hair falling in staunch ringlets around her face as she turned toward me.

“Oh?” I mumbled, barely interested.

“Mmhm,” the girl answered. “She was the only freshman to ever be elected the captain. It’s honestly a shame she quit.” Sakura pouted.

“Captain is the top, Sakura,” Ino chimed in, rolling her eyes. “I’d rather excel than stagnate. If I already made it to the top without even trying, then it’s certainly not the path for me.”

“Good point.” My comment wasn’t overlooked by Sakura, who seemed to take it as a commendation of Ino’s capabilities. In reality, I was merely distracted, watching intently in hopes of spying my Naruto out on the field.

“You know,” she added abruptly, “I’m the head of the book club. I’ve written four screenplays since freshman year. I even submitted one to the school’s magazine.”

“Did you really?” Ino responded, gasping in admiration. “Wow, Sakura! That is so amazing! You’re so talented.”

Sakura waited, just a little impatiently, for my response. I could see it out of the corner of my eye. She was a little chilly in her pastel blue crop top, erroneously spouting the adjective dangerous in all-caps, though it had been paired with lavender leggings underneath cut-off high-waisted jean shorts. Even with the thin zip-up gray hoodie draped over her shoulders, she wasn’t fairing too well. She wanted to blame the tap, tap, tap of her jittering leg on her inability to properly maintain a well-heated body temperature, but the truth was far less flattering. She was annoyed. With me. And as she continued to stare at me, I could tell.

“Cool,” I finally said, trying again to keep from offending her. I did not want to make things more difficult for Ino, especially since I was really starting to enjoy spending time with her, but I also did not think it would be best to let Sakura continue this type of behavior around me. It wasn’t healthy, not that I could really talk about healthy social interactions. I knew that things wouldn’t be able to stay like this forever, though. I added that to the list of things I needed to talk to Ino about later.

Sakura pouted for the rest of the night, which I would have found drastically more annoying if I hadn’t managed to spot Naruto after the second quarter. She texted Ino angrily as I sat in between them, oblivious to their tete-a-tete. I watched the deeply stunning boy hustle to and fro across the field, staring at the gentle curling tufts of sandy blonde hair as they peeked out from underneath the helmet. Despite my controlled and refined nature, I found myself tensing every time something seemed important, and, to my own chagrin, I realized I would relax each subsequent time that the team scored points.

Once, one of the members of the other team knocked Naruto, number 42, down in an attempt to invalidate a play. I felt myself already standing before I even recognized that my brain had fired off
the appropriate neurons to stimulate the action. The referee was not happy about the circumstance, though, and Naruto’s teammates helped him to his feet with haste. It looked as though there might be a fight on the field, team against team but with fists instead of weirdly-shaped balls. I swore internally when the fight was broken up immediately, however; I strongly felt that the jerk who had knocked Naruto down deserved what was coming to him. I glared at the boy from the stands, though the boy did not make it known whether or not he noticed.

As the football game ended, I wondered aloud whether or not I should wait for Naruto afterwards. I didn’t usually utilize my vocal chords in general, but I essentially never accidentally revealed my thoughts with them. As the words departed from my mouth in an all-aboard non-stop hurtle towards Ino’s ears, blood rushed to my face. I felt my cheeks turning pink, and I averted my eyes, staring into the glinting metal of the bleachers as my hair fell into my face. Though my embarrassment was palpable, Ino and Sakura seemed not to notice. They nodded in agreement, voicing their own opinions without a second thought. Sakura thought it made sense for me to say hello to the only member of the team that I recognized, while Ino believed I should play hard to get. Her terms were different, but the concepts were the same. He had invited me to watch the game—anything more would be overkill. “You can’t be too available,” she’d said.

In spite of her own advice, Ino was going to visit with some of her cheerleader friends from the year before, which meant that her mom wasn’t going to be there to pick her up for a while. I sighed and decided to wait on the outside of the tunnel, leaning against the green-painted concrete. I quietly observed the swarms of people funneling out into the parking lot, witnessing friends and family and datemates alike as they laughed and joked with each other. What I liked the most about the night, I realized, was how much joy and positivity it brought other people. The reason it felt so electric, so alive, was because of how much sheer enthusiasm these very individuals brought with them. They shared their excitement amongst the group, and before long, the happiness everyone felt was coursing through the air like a current. It was endearing.

Things had begun to draw to a close. The parking lot was emptying, and the near-constant wave of exiting people had slowed to a mere trickle, with the occasional drip, drip, drip of a solitary kid meandering through the large opening in the tunnel. I smiled to myself as I looked up at the stars, visible just beyond the huge skyscrapers of the city. The stadium was on the outskirts, making the skyline a lovely sight. The light pollution made the stars hard to see, but being in the midst of all those buildings, so snug and close, gave me a sense of comfort that I found challenging to express. The events of the day had allowed me to find some peace, and I thought to myself, Maybe I should do this again next Friday night. I was so distracted by following the jagged lines in the concrete with my eyes as I thought about how much fun the night had been that I didn’t notice a familiar face, smiling and angelic, as it made its way up to me.

“Hey, you made it!” Naruto exclaimed. I dragged my eyes up and away from the path, taking in the sweaty, beaming football player in all his glory.

“Yeah,” I finally got myself to stammer as I made inadequate eye contact, glancing back and forth from the boy’s eyes to the ground. With his beautiful, glossy skin and shimmering starlight hair, Naruto was a sight to behold. He held his helmet tucked under one arm, and he fanned himself with the other hand. I tried not to look at the tight white pants as they clung to the boy’s hips and legs with fervor.

“So, what did you think?” the blonde asked eagerly, stepping closer. He was either oblivious, or I was doing a better job at pretending to not be attracted to him than I thought. I shoved my fists into my pockets and sucked in a breath, holding it for four counts before exhaling in an attempt to calm my battering teen heart down.

My eyebrows knotted together and the corners of my lips pulled taunt downwards as I said, “Football is stupid.” The blonde frowned at me. “But I had a good time.”

“Really?” Naruto shouted, beaming like a ray of sun. He flung himself on me with enthusiasm, engulfing me in a hug so potent the one-sidedness was practically negligible. “Do you mean it? Are you going to come again?”

“Get off of me,” I retorted with a roll of my eyes. I shoved at the spindly teenager, feeling the boy
writhe against me with glee. I was certainly not about to let Naruto give me an erection in public, and the more the boy pestered me with physical affection, the likelier it was for me to break. “I’ll only come again if you let go, idiot.”

Naruto immediately desisted his walloping hug, and instead showed me all of his teeth. Unless his face spontaneously ripped open, there was no way he could possibly smile with more eagerness. “I’m glad you had a good time, especially since we won!” Naruto let loose a roaring yelp of self-congratulatory praise typical for those prone to athletics. “Me and some guys from the team are going out to celebrate, if you wanna come. All Nite Diner, serves pancakes and coffee 24/7.” The cheesy grin on his face was straddling the line between obnoxious and irresistible.

I sighed, a rife smile on my face. “Actually, Tsunade is making me a birthday dinner, so I can’t. Have fun for me, though.”

“It’s your birthday?” Naruto shouted, completely taken aback. “You mean today, right now, this very second is your birthday?”

I stared at him blankly. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” the blonde shouted, overly fervent as always. He pulled out his cell phone, completely ignoring my mumbled excuses. I watched in amusement as he pulled out his phone. “Gaara, listen, stop what you’re doing,” he declared. “It’s Sasuke’s birthday. Yes, right now. I know, right? Party at his place. Yeah, of course you can come.” Naruto held the phone away from his mouth for a moment and looked at me for confirmation, but I just rolled my eyes, a grin tugging at the corners of my lips. Naruto looked me up and down before yanking me into another firm hug.

“Gaara’s coming to get us. I’ve gotta shower and change clothes—can I do that at your place?”

My mind immediately conjured up the image of a soaking wet Naruto, naked in my shower, and I felt my cheeks turn pink. “No problem,” I stammered, staring up at the sky and moving away from the boy.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me it was your birthday today,” the blonde repeated. “Now I don’t have time to even get you anything. That’s so unfair.”

“Tch, why would you even want to get me anything?” I replied.

“Birthdays are when people tell you that they’re happy you exist! Presents show gratitude for you being a part of their lives,” the boy responded, clutching my arm. “We might be rivals, but I’m still grateful to have you in my life, Sasuke Uchiha.”

“You’ve known me for five minutes,” I retorted with a roll of my eyes, sardonic tone cloaking my embarrassing happiness at his words. “School hasn’t even been in session for a whole month yet. I’d hardly call us rivals, let alone friends.”

“Yeah, well,” Naruto argued, feigning arrogance. “If you think this is intense, just imagine what your next birthday is gonna be like.”

“You really think you and I will be friends a year from now?” I asked, eyebrows raised. I felt my breath catch in my throat at the thought that someone would want to be in my life for such a lengthy duration of time.

“Uh, hell yeah? Why wouldn’t we be?” Naruto replied. Grinning, he threw an arm around my shoulders and ushered me into the parking lot. “Gaara should be here in three… two… one!”

“He’s not here.”

“No, but it would’ve been really cool if he had been, right?”

Once we were finally in the car, headed down the road toward my apartment complex, Naruto pestered Gaara ceaselessly for the AUX cord while the redhead held it out of reach, driving one-handed through the busy streets. He sat on the edge of the seat, leaning in between the driver and passenger seats in front of him. His phone was in hand, extended outward as he grappled for control of the tunes. With a devilish grin, I snatched the phone from his hand. Surprised and pouting, he peered over my shoulder, trying to get a glimpse. Instead of seeing his Spotify playlist open, however, he saw me rifling mischievously through his photos. “Hey, jerk, stop looking at my selfies!”
“Why are you the biggest dork in history?” I asked, doing the exact opposite of what the blonde had requested. I held up a picture in Naruto’s face, wherein the boy was cheesing next to someone else’s dog.

“That was a really sweet dog, actually,” Naruto replied. “I met him while I was jogging! He chased me for three blocks.” The blonde shook his head suddenly, remembering why I had his phone in the first place. “Play my mix, Sasuke! It’s for your birthday! I just made it five seconds ago.”

“Hn,” I grunted in response, face thoughtful. In my gray hoodie with a floral design along the left sleeve, black skinny jeans, checkered Vans, I’m certain I looked rather dashing, but it still unnerved me to feel those blue eyes on me. “I’ve been really into Mariana’s Trench lately,” I said with surprise as I examined the playlist before me.

Naruto cried, “No, that’s the wrong mix!” before diving forward and grabbing his phone out of my hands.

“I picked the one with my name as the title,” I objected, more than a little confused.

“It’s not that one, it’s this one,” he replied, clicking on a new mix. I shrugged, but I looked at him with suspicion on the way home.

Ino and Sakura had beaten us to my apartment, Naruto noticed aloud as I watched the blonde girl and her chubby friend getting out of a blue bug when we pulled up. Naruto leapt out of the car as soon as Gaara parked, and he yanked open my door. I stared at him with a look of mild annoyance. Instead of offering an explanation, though, he grabbed me by the arm and tugged, causing me to stumble into the blonde as I emerged from the car. I felt my heart beat faster with his face so close to mine, mere inches away.

“C’mon,” Naruto croaked, unnerved by the proximity. “We can’t let them beat us!”

I sighed, feeling his breath curling around my neck and sending shivers down my spine. I shuddered involuntarily, feeling my face heat up. I felt him staring at me, sneaking glances at my face. I stared at him curiously, one eyebrow raised and eyes narrowed in suspicion. I finally said, “Well, are you going to move or not, blondie?”

“Oh,” Naruto exhaled, taken by surprise. He stumbled backwards, trying to get out of my way in a hurry, and he tripped over the curb of the sidewalk. He saw the cement headed directly for his face and felt his body tense preemptively. Eyes closed, he waited for the impact. Instead, I’m certain he felt a jarring sensation that nearly ripped his shoulder out of socket. As he opened his eyes, he saw that I had saved him from an untimely fall. I had managed to grab him by the arm and yank him up, pulling him against my frame with the other arm. Naruto, roughly a head smaller than me, was tucked comfortably into a steady embrace, his head resting against my taunt chest.

Naruto was horrified, and he scrambled to get away from me as quickly as he could. He pushed himself out of my grip, stumbling up onto the sidewalk and toward the door with vague ambition. Ino and Sakura were waiting nearby, having watched the whole scene with bemused expressions. Naruto had never looked so embarrassed in his entire life, and I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. Instead, though, I sighed and walked up a moment later, wrenching the door open and heading inside.

“Tsunade,” I called as I entered the apartment. “Is it alright if I invite a few friends over for my birthday?”

The blonde woman dashed into the living room with Shizune in tow, a camera dangling from her neck. She exclaimed, “Of course it’s alright! We’ll whip up a bit more food. Who all is coming? When will they be here?”

I unceremoniously opened the door the rest of the way and revealed the party to my guardian, face unreadable. She and Shizune exchanged happy glances, and they immediately urged everyone inside, with Tsunade snapping photos the whole time. I cringed when I saw decorations everywhere—a Happy Birthday banner, balloons, and even streamers plagued the living room and kitchen. I glanced at my gathered cohorts, wary of their judgement, but each of them seemed intrigued by the surroundings. Ino and Sakura wandered around, examining the miscellaneous décor, while Gaara politely entered the kitchen to inform the two chefs that they needn’t worry themselves over making large quantities of additional food when he and Naruto would be more than happy with instant
ramen. I smirked as I overheard, knowing that Tsunade would never let someone eat instant ramen in her house. Naruto’s eyes were on me, though, and I eventually succumbed to my nervous desire to talk to him.

“Hey,” I said, getting his attention. “Did you still want to take a shower?”

His eyes wandered up to mine, a sheepish expression on his face. “Yeah, I really don’t want anyone to think I smell bad.”

“Follow me,” I replied briskly, heading down the short hallway to the left. I opened the first door, showcasing the bathroom, and grabbed a towel from the closet across the hall. After I got the shower started for him—the knobs were a little less self-explanatory than most—I meandered back into the living room. Everyone, it seemed, was gathered in the kitchen, laughing and chatting with Tsunade and Shizune. Gaara and Sakura were even helping prep more onigiri appetizers for everyone. Ino and Tsunade were deep in conversation; I could see the admiration on her face from here. I sighed, readying myself to engage in such convivial chatter, when I suddenly remembered that Naruto had asked for a change of clothes. In a dash, I was down the hall and in my room, searching through my closet and dresser for something that Naruto might want to wear.

Hesitantly, I selected a black sweatshirt with the inscription “Sorry I’m Late, I Didn’t Want to Come,” and a pair of gray joggers. Naruto had a thicker waist than I did, despite his slender nature, and I wasn’t sure if a pair of my regular pants would fit him. I was just about to head toward the currently occupied bathroom and knocked lightly on the door.

“Hey, Naruto,” I called out, anticipating a response. Nothing. I opened the door cautiously, easing inside as I said, “I brought you a change of clothes!”

Much to my surprise, Naruto stood outside of the shower, towel wrapped around his waist. He was bent over, fumbling with the knobs in a frenetic attempt to turn the shower off. He seemed to be growing distressed, and it was evident from his demeanor that he had yet to hear a word I’d said. Clutching the clothes to my chest and trying not to blush, I reached out and gently pressed my cold fingers against his shoulder. He screamed, surprised, and whipped around, staring at me with his mouth hanging open. Before I could explain myself, he cried, “Sasuke, make it stop! I can’t figure out how to turn it off! Please help me!”

Shaking my head, I set the clothes down on the counter and traded places with Naruto, leaning over the tub to turn off the spewing faucet. He exhaled in relief when the water finally stopped, and I stood up, awkwardly turning to face him. “There,” I stated calmly, patting my hands against the nearby hand towel. “I brought you a change of clothes, by the way.” I nodded to the pile on the counter. “Just keep the underwear. I don’t really wear boxers,” I added, watching him inspect the pile with curious look on his face.

He turned to me, eyebrow cocked, and mumbled with a cheeky grin, “So you prefer going commando, then?”

I felt my face grow warm, and it contorted into a deep scowl. “No, idiot. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Whatever you say, Sasuke,” he answered with a chuckle. “You wanna give me some privacy to get dressed, or were you planning on watching the show?”

“Tch, you wish, dobe,” I muttered, stumbling my out of the suffocating bathroom in a hurry. I stood in the hallway, my back against the door, and I took a deep breath, trying to wipe the blush from my cheeks before anyone—Ino—could see me and ask questions.
The group was still gathered in the kitchen, and before long, I went to join them. Naruto showed up soon thereafter, recognized immediately by Shizune. She stole him away from me, chatting amicably yet intently in a corner of the room. By the time the dinner preparations had been completed, everyone was starving. We scarfed down the onigiri like ravenous wildebeests, and the kushiyaki Tsunade had specially prepared was a big hit, even though she had little to no experience with cooking Japanese-style dishes. They did end up tasting remarkably Western, but I wasn’t complaining. I appreciated how much she tried to keep my cultural upbringing alive, in spite of my parents’ demise. It always surprised me how much Tsunade had come to understand and appreciate me, my tastes and my interests, though I must have been quite the handful initially. I recalled with some trepidation the first birthday I celebrated with her, embarrassed on behalf of my foolish younger self. She was trying to show me that I was still loved, but all I saw was someone who didn’t even know about my distaste for cake. I had flung the dessert on the ground in anger and despair, wondering if I would ever get used to a world without my family in it. She held me in her arms as I cried, kicking and screaming, and she served Japanese sweets every year afterward.

Truth be told, I expected everyone to leave after the dinner. As the last plump daifuku was snatched from the platter and shoved greedily into an open maw, though, I realized that everyone was far too comfortable-looking for people about to leave. It occurred to me that, perhaps, none of them intended on leaving just yet, which meant that I had to come up with some method of entertaining them. This thought brought with it far too much anxiety, and I stood up from the table abruptly, startling my guests. “Typically,” I said, glancing around the table, my eyes resting on the sloppy chewing face of Naruto for a moment longer than the rest. “Tsunade, Shizune, and I watch a movie after dinner. If you don’t want to do that, then you may leave.”

“What movie?” Ino asked kindly. “Is it the same one every year?”
“No,” I replied, easing back into my seat with a vague sense of discomfort. “This year we planned on watching Brief Interviews with Hideous Men.”
“That sounds interesting,” Sakura said with a smile. “I’m in!”

Of course, that meant… “Me too,” Ino agreed immediately.

“Hm, why not?” murmured Gaara, glancing from person to person with a strange look on his face. Only Naruto failed to contribute a response in a timely fashion. He stared at me from across the table, seeming thoughtful despite the crumbs on his cheeks. I raised my eyebrows, imploring him silently for an answer. I hoped against hope that he would stay, that he would sit next to me on the couch, that we could watch this movie with each other. He looked away, glancing at his phone with a frown. “Sorry, Sasuke,” he muttered to his plate. “I’ve got to go home.”

Gaara immediately checked the time on his cell phone as well, his eyes growing wide. “He’s right,” the redhead said suddenly. “And I’ve got to take him. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Tsunade and Shizune bode them a safe goodbye, and I waved them off as they got up from the table in a hurry. A sigh escaped my lips as I realized it would just be me, surrounded by Sakura and Ino, watching the movie while Tsunade and Shizune cleaned up. Normally, we would wait to start until the kitchen had been cleaned, but I knew they would insist on keeping the guests entertained. Ino shot me a look from across the table, eyes filled with a supportive pity. What an end to an otherwise great day, I thought.

Despite my negative outlook, watching the movie with Sakura and Ino proved to a thought-provoking and overall enlightening experience. I found it quite enjoyable, truth be told. Tsunade and Shizune chimed in as well, offering their own perspectives on certain topics addressed within the flick. Perhaps the most surprising of all, Sakura’s input was the most engaging, and I found myself discussing point after point with her as the movie progressed, effectively keeping me distracted from my former displeasure at Naruto’s departure. Celebrating my birthday with all of the people who cared about me felt better than I had imagined.
BEFORE halloween

Chapter Summary

It's Halloween, and in the name of the Moon, Sasuke'll punish you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE halloween

“Wait, wait,” Ino said, pulling the sucker out of her mouth and staring at the flustered blonde boy. “What’s happening?” Naruto rolled his eyes, annoyed that someone other than me had responded to his initial description, and explained again for the unintended audience. “Gaara does this cool haunted camping trip every year. Or, y’know, his family does. They really go all-out, and it’s always a ton of fun.” I stared at the over-the-top invitation the jock had given me only minutes before. In sprawling calligraphy, it read, “October 30th and 31st, join us. Dead or alive.” There was a phone number at the bottom that I recognized as Gaara’s. “So, they’re doing a fright night type of thing?” I asked, glancing at Naruto.

“Yeah! It’s been a different theme every time, but I heard that they’re doing an abandoned amusement park thing year.” He waggled his eyebrows enthusiastically, his eyes shining in the fluorescent lights of the McDonalds. “So, you’re coming, right?” My mouth opened, but Ino’s voice came out. “Um, no, he isn’t. He already made plans to go to Sakura’s Halloween party. Right, Sasuke?” She stared at me expectantly.

“As if!” Naruto replied. “Your dumb party can’t hold a candle to Gaara’s Camper of 1000 Corpses. Sasuke’s definitely going to come.” I looked down at the table, unwilling to admit that my actual Halloween plans were supposed to consist of pretending to be sick so I could stay home and watch a scary movie marathon with my guardian and her wife. We would always get dressed up in matching costumes and go out to the store to buy ingredients for homemade treats, then settle in for a long night of ghouls and monsters. When I was younger, we would even build blanket forts. This year, though, Tsunade and Shizune wanted to be the Sailor Guardians Uranus and Neptune, and I was Sailor Moon’s beloved talking cat, Luna. Which felt a little less inclusive than our usual group ensembles, truth be told. Maybe they were subtly hinting that I should spend Halloween with my friends this year. Hesitant and nervous, I glanced in Ino’s direction. She was glowering. My eyes shifted to Naruto, who was decidedly pouting with absolutely no shame. I sighed and said, “They did ask first.” This response did not sit well with Naruto, who stalked off angrily, muttering about friendship under his breath. I guess I was riding back to campus with Ino when she dropped off Sakura, then.

It wasn’t long before I found myself phoning Gaara to tell him the tragic, albeit understandable, news. A Halloween-themed ring-back tone played in my ear as I waited for him to answer. “Hey, Sasuke. What’s up?” he greeted, sounding somewhat muffled and distant.

“Hey, Gaara,” I replied with a sigh. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go to your Halloween thing.” “Oh, yeah. I know. Naruto told me,” he said simply. “Oh. Okay. I was just calling to tell you because I thought I had to.” I looked again at the card, admiring its streamlined design and ornate script.
“What? Why?” the boy inquired, sounding confused. He quickly said, “Oh, right, because of that invitation Naruto forced me to make for you.” He seemed distracted, not wholly focused on the conversation.

“Naruto forced you to make me an invitation?” I questioned.

“Yeah, kind of. He said that you’d definitely say yes if I made you a fancy card, with how anal retentive you are and stuff,” he explained. “He wanted to see the look on your face, though, so I let him deliver it. We both really wanted you to come.”

“I had no idea you guys wanted me there that much,” I said regretfully. “I feel bad, but I already promised Ino and Sakura that I’d hang out with them on Halloween.”

“Then why not invite them along?” Gaara asked, confused. “I mean, the more the merrier, am I right?”

As plainly as Gaara had put it, things were not quite that simple. Ino and Sakura had already invited people to Sakura’s party, and they each pitched in to buy party supplies. It seemed at first like no amount of begging and pleading could get Ino to change her mind. She was vehement, but it turned out that all Sakura needed to hear was that I wanted to invite her to a Halloween party. She cancelled the whole thing and agreed to accompany me to Gaara’s get-together without batting an eye. Ino had been annoyed at first, but ultimately, we both knew she just wanted to spend the holiday in the presence of her beloved pink-haired idiot.

When the day finally arrived, Gaara invited me over to his house after school. Ino’s mom would be taking her and Sakura to the campground, but Naruto was the designated driver for Gaara, Temari, Kankuro, and I. We’d be heading there in his Jeep and meeting up with Gaara’s parents, who had been there since the early morning in order to set everything up. According to an irritated Temari, her boyfriend would be making an appearance, though not until tomorrow. He had to work late at the tattoo parlor tonight, and she was clearly upset about it. Kankuro did not express a similar grievance; he just whistled nonchalantly when Gaara inquired about his invitees. We were all standing around in the carport, waiting impatiently for Naruto to arrive. Temari was smoking, Kankuro was listening to Metallica through shitty earbuds, and Gaara and I just shot awkward glances at each other, uncertain about how well this whole ride was going to go. Apparently this was the first time since they were kids that Temari, Kankuro, and Gaara were traveling to the campground in the same vehicle. I heard Naruto coming before I saw him, though his orange Jeep had become remarkably familiar to me over the past two months. The Shukaku brethren were crammed into the backseat, leaving me with the front.

I climbed in next to Naruto and immediately noticed that there was something wrong with the way he was holding his wrist. He was speaking, his voice cheery and resonant, but I wasn’t listening, couldn’t hear him. He’d said something about stopping for gas, I guess, because we pulled into a station shortly thereafter. I grabbed Naruto’s shoulder, holding him back by his car.

“Haha, Sasuke,” he stammered. “Everyone gave me cash for the gas, so I have to go inside to pay.” I wasn’t paying attention; I rifled through my backpack until I found what I was looking for.

“Let me see,” I said quietly, holding out my hand. Reluctantly, he gave me his arm. I moved his wrist around gently while he winced, but it didn’t seem to be broken. “Could be fractured,” I muttered, my mind whirring through the numerous small bones in that area with nervous energy. I unwound the Ace bandage and wrapped his arm up, stabilizing it as best I could.

“Can’t get anything past you, huh?” he commented with a grin that didn’t reach his eyes. I smirked, shaking my head, and snatched the cash from him. Before he could protest, I slid my debit card into the pump and paid for the gas.
“Try not to use that arm too much this weekend,” I advised, my tone more aggressive than usual. “Aye-aye, Captain,” Naruto replied, saluting me as I pumped the gas. I rolled my eyes as he stared at me, face full of emotions I couldn’t read.

Naruto was a surprising thoughtful leader when it came to rallying the car ride. He’d brought everyone’s favorite snacks and designed a playlist full of everyone’s taste in genres. Despite the earlier tension, Temari, Kankuro, and Gaara seemed to be having an alright time. I hadn’t expected him to have anything for me, but as I doled out the treats to other passengers, I pulled out a small pack of cherry tomatoes. He saw me staring at them in confusion and grinned, saying, “I had to ask Ino of all people what you liked to snack on.” My heart fluttered at the thought of him putting in so much effort for me. “She said dick, at first, but eventually I got it out of her.” I rolled my eyes and planned to get Ino back for that later.

It was dark by the time we arrived at the campsite. Gaara’s parents had been there all day making the whole area look like the set of a horror movie. Apparently, they had rented out the entire section of the campground and set up a Halloween paradise. The area was covered with random theme-park equipment, like a single teacup seat with chipping paint and a carnival booth with an undead splinterhead mannequin, and there were colorful lights everywhere. It was eerie and magical, and I was beyond impressed. The Shukaku family certainly knew how to spend their money. I snuck glances at Naruto as we unpacked the vehicle, and he seemed just as awe-struck and smitten with the locale. Despite my ornery nature, I smiled to myself, happy with his excitement and joy. It took the two of us a little too long to notice why exactly each person was racing toward the RV, and by the time we got there, loaded down with the bags they’d left behind, they had already called dibs on the available beds. Gaara’s parents obviously got the master bedroom area of the camper, while Temari and Kankuro got to the built-in bunk beds in the back first. Gaara, having arrived inside of the RV before anyone else, claimed what I soon learned was his favorite spot. He was perched precariously atop a loft-style fold-out bed, directly above the kitchen table. Naruto sighed and shook his head sadly, observing the leftovers with dismay.

“You can have the table-bed, Sasuke, It’s okay. I’ll sleep on the floor,” the blonde finally said, patting my arm with firm resignation.

Glancing suspiciously at the table, I debated my options. I had no idea how the table supposedly converted into a bed, but I did bring a pillow and a sleeping bag. “No. I’ll sleep on the floor. You take the table-bed.”

Naruto started to speak again, his soft lips parting with intent to disagree, but Gaara interrupted him. “Guys. Ino and Sakura have to sleep somewhere, too. Probably with each other and not with one of you idiots.”

The blonde grinned at me sheepishly, having clearly forgotten that the two girls were on their way here. He raised his eyebrows and asked, “Table-bed?”

I sighed reluctantly, still suspicious but willing to agree. My mouth opened, but it suddenly hit me that I would have to sleep with the boy I was in love with. The image of Naruto, clad in nothing but boxers, crawling into bed with me plagued my mind, and I immediately grew nervous. Not only would I not get any sleep throughout the entire trip, but also I might inadvertently reveal my feelings. I shook my head to clear the thoughts from my mind and stated firmly, “Floor.” This is for the best, I told myself, even though the idea of cuddling with Naruto was painfully appealing. The blonde sighed, dejected, but he consented to my demands and tossed his stuff on the floor.

Outside, Mr. and Mrs. Shukaku already had a fire going, and Mrs. Shukaku was at the grill, cooking up something that smelled delicious, while Mr. Shukaku stood by the picnic table, setting places for everyone. “Dinner will be ready shortly, kids,” Gaara’s foster mom announced in a friendly, confident tone.
Ino’s mother pulled up soon thereafter, driving the same blue Volkswagen I’d ridden in oh so many weeks ago, and the three girls hopped out of the car with ill-concealed excitement. Sakura and Ino raced over, tossing their arms around me in a surprising hug. Ino’s mother waltzed up to Gaara’s, chatting nonchalantly about mom-stuff. I dragged Sakura and Ino to the picnic table where everyone else was seated, in wait for the delicious meal being prepared. Gaara, Naruto, Temari, and Kankuro all sat together on the far side of the table, so we sat on the opposite side. The food was soon administered, and the dinner conversation grew incredibly sparse as everyone chowed down. Even so, it felt like Naruto was giving all of his attention to Gaara; I knew I was pouting, but I couldn’t help it. By the time I’d finished my plate, they were deeply engaged in a discussion I didn’t understand, and I felt dejected. Luckily, my only other friend and her would-be girlfriend were finished eating and eager to pay attention to me, or at least make me feel less self-conscious about my silent presence. Ino suggested that we all go on a walk around the camp area, excluding of course those who hadn’t finished their meals yet. It seemed that she had unintentionally invited Kankuro with those specifications, however, and he jumped at the opportunity to accompany us.

With some nerve, Kankuro actually stole Ino’s company from me. This treacherous act left me alone with Sakura, walking by her side as the blonde girl flashed us panicked glances from a few paces ahead. I could hear Kankuro talking about the death metal band he was a part of as Ino faked an emphatic yawn. Sakura was strangely quiet as she stepped in sync next to me, despite my lengthy stride. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, hoping that she wasn’t upset and trying to talk to me about it or anything. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes focused and her lips pinched tightly together. When her brows furrowed, though, I knew she was going to have some words to share with me. Words I probably wouldn’t like. I sighed and looked up at the stars and shadowy tree tops as we crunched along the path.

“Sasuke,” she stammered, her voice wavering softly. “Can I ask you something?” Sakura had stopped walking, and she stood in the middle of the path staring at me with wide green eyes that glinted in the lights. I turned to face her, hands stuffed into the pockets of my jeans. The white in my baseball tshirt seemed to glow, illuminating the slender slope of my figure as I stepped toward her. “Um,” she mumbled, averting her eyes momentarily before fixing them on mine with a strange intensity. “Do you like Ino?”

It was something in the way that she said it that bothered me. The emphasis on the word, the tone in her voice, the hesitation; her nervousness seemed feigned. “No,” I answered, my voice cold and detached. I evaluated her reactionary facial expressions with an unsettled feeling in my gut. “Really?” she asked, sounding surprised but hopeful. I narrowed my eyes. “Then, um…” She paused, looking away again. “Do you like me?”

“No,” I said, just as blunt. Her face fell, but for a split second, I saw pure rage flash in her eyes. I couldn’t imagine how she could have possibly concocted a different expectation for my response, but there she was, obviously upset over this rejection. Despite the disingenuous nature of the show she’d just put on for me, I felt a distant hint of guilt well up within me as her lips began to tremble and her eyes filled with tears. “You’re both my friends,” I explained half-heartedly, staring at her with a bored expression on my face. “Do…” Her voice was low, quiet, and frustrated. “Do you not like me because… I’m fat?”

Surprise was evident on my face; I was taken aback by her question. I knew from the discussions I’d had with my own family members as well as with Tsunade and Shizune that girls in America are raised with different values, pressures, and ideals, but it never occurred to me that Ino or Sakura could have been impacted by such sociocultural malcontent. There was a lot that I didn’t like about Sakura, personality-wise, but both she and Ino seemed so strong, so confident, so sure of themselves—the idea that it was her feelings for me that caused her to doubt herself gave me a headache. The aggravated rants Ino always went on resonated in my chest, and all of a sudden, I hurt for her, for Ino, for every girl who had ever experienced an intransigent crush. It occurred to me with the crushing weight only reality could have that it was entirely possible—likely, even—for me to one
day be in Sakura’s position right now, with Naruto in mine. A creeping clarity swept over me, and I thought about what exactly I would want to hear under such conditions. What could I possibly want him to say to me? How could anything make that crushing disappointment any better? Would I assume that Naruto didn’t like me because of some physical feature? Would I be able to accept that he just didn’t feel that way about me, with no way to change that fact? I sighed, resigned to trying my best with Sakura.

“You know me, Sakura,” I stated plainly. Off to a great start. I looked into her eyes, saying, “You know that I don’t lie to people or try to sugarcoat things to spare someone’s feelings.” She nodded, once. There was fear in her eyes. “You’re beautiful. I mean it. But you’re not beautiful to me, if that makes sense. I’m not… I’m just not interested in you like that.”

“What does that mean?” she asked quickly, tears falling from her eyes like soft rain on a quiet pond. “Why not? What’s wrong with me?”

Without thinking, I put my hands on her shoulders and stared directly into her eyes with somber regard. “I’m in love with someone else,” I said evenly. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Who? Who is she?” She gasped, crying harder now. Her body crumpled, and she fell against me. “Just tell me. What does she have that I don’t have?”

A wry smile emerged on my face as I thought about just how stark the differences between Sakura and Naruto were. A girl I barely knew with attributes I couldn’t care less about was no comparison for the kind-hearted dumb blonde with a contagious smile; it simply wasn’t fair. “Well,” I began with a barely concealed laugh. “For starters, at least six inches.”

Sakura pulled herself together, returning to an upright position in surprise. She stared at me, confusion etched into her face. “Wait, are you… are you gay?” she asked incredulously.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, shrugging. “I’ve never felt this way before, about anyone.”

She opened her mouth, prepared to say more, when Ino’s voice rang out from the left. “There you guys are!” The blonde girl rushed up, leaving Kankuro trailing behind. She immediately noticed Sakura haphazardly wiping her tears and glanced at me in concern. I frowned and left her to deal with the aftermath, heading off Kankuro and redirecting him toward the campsite away from the two girls. Kankuro talked the entire time, giving me only a small glimpse of the hell Ino had been put through. He was an incredibly obnoxious fellow with an arrogance to match. I abandoned him mid-sentence as soon as we spotted the RV, running ahead toward the safety of other people. The remaining members of the Shukaku family were sprawled out by the fire, listening with rapt attention as Naruto, standing and gesticulating, told a scary story. I slipped quietly into the chair next to Gaara and focused my attention on the end of the blonde’s story.

“And as her eyes moved nervously to glance in the rearview mirror,” he said slowly, eyeing us all individually. He winked when he saw me, a grin on his face. “There it was! The alien, come back to collect his—”

“You’re more than welcome to try and take it back from me, usuratonkachi,” I murmured, purposefully refraining from looking at him.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he retorted. “I’m already wounded, so you might just stand a chance, that how it is? Tsk, tsk. You have no honor, Sasuke.”

“Shh,” I replied dismissively. “I’m trying to listen to the story.” I felt his bemused surprise, the roll of his eyes, the downward curve of his smirk, and I couldn’t help but smile as I stared into the warmth
of the fire.

We stayed up late into the night, with everyone trying their hand at storytelling except for me. I did play charades with the group, after much coaxing. Mr. and Mrs. Shukaku were one team, Sakura and Ino were another. Gaara and his foster siblings formed a team as well, under the direction of their parents, which left me on the same team as Naruto. For all of his many good qualities, Naruto was arguably the words charades-player in the history of the game. Not only could he fail to perform basic miming to indicate an action, but he was also so bad at guessing that other teams began guessing competitively against him. The final score did not rest well with my competitive spirit, and I demanded we play a new game.

The Shukakus came prepared, whipping out a deck of cards with lightning speed. After defeating everyone in three consecutive rounds of Bullshit, two games of Rummy, and all five sessions of ER, I felt my pride ostensibly restored. The adults called it a night, heading to bed around one in the morning. The rest of us stayed up, eager to keep the night alive. By three, though, Temari had gone to bed, muttering something about beauty sleep, and Kankuro was surprisingly quick to follow. Sakura ended up whispering something to Ino about not wanting to be around me right now, so they were in bed soon thereafter. Gaara, Naruto, and I were the last ones left, determined to watch the sunrise together. Gaara and I talked music, with interjections from Naruto every so often. The subject switched in a natural way, as subjects sometimes do, to existentialism, and I listened with solemn interest as Gaara told me about determinism.

“I was really young,” he explained, contemplative and sad. “When my mother died. Some kind of complications with the pregnancy, they told me, though she didn’t pass until a year or so after I was born.” He smiled at the stars in the foggy sky, a bitter and pained smile. “My dad blamed me. Hated me for it. He told me so often that it was my fault, I killed her, I was a murderer, that I actually started to believe him. I started thinking that maybe I had done it on purpose, y’know?” He laughed sourly. “As an infant. A fucking baby.” Gaara shook his head in disbelief at his own trauma. He cleared his throat and continued, fidgeting as he spoke. “I was six when he tried to kill me. Got off the bus and he was waiting for me, in the kitchen.” The redhead sucked in a breath, obviously unsettled. “He was drunk, and I called 911. He fell on his knife trying to chase me. They rushed him to the hospital, but he didn’t make it.”

I nodded, soaking in his tale as I stared into the dying fire. A pile of brush fell atop the coals, startling me out of my reverie. The fire roared back to life, and I lifted my gaze, meeting eyes with the weary blue ones belonging to my favorite blonde. He smiled wanly, and I sighed, releasing some of the tension that had built in my shoulders.

“I find solace in the idea that the universe has to exist this way,” Gaara finished. “That there’s only one way for everything to have happened, if the universe is to exist at all.” He looked at us then, a genuine smile on his face. “It’s not my fault she died. It’s not even my fault he died. Those things had to happen because of the way those atoms combined and exploded all of those millennia ago.” I mulled over this for a moment, but I felt a natural objection to the implicit notion that I didn’t have a choice in the way my life played out. I decided to ignore my questions, though, in favor of letting Gaara keep the peace he’d found undisturbed.

“That’s an idea,” Naruto replied quietly. “But sometimes, people need to be held accountable for their actions. They might think they’re not responsible for their misbehavior otherwise.” Gaara was quiet, as was I. “Did you know,” the blonde continued without missing a beat. “That physicists theorize there’s only one electron? And it is constantly in multiple places at once?” He didn’t wait for our responses, barreling through his explanation with fervent need. “There’s even this belief that we manifest our own reality because of it.”

“I’m going to bed,” Gaara announced suddenly, jumping down from his seat atop the picnic table and heading toward the RV in a huff.
As I stared after him, Naruto said, “Ah, don’t worry about him. We do this all of the time.”

“Why would you say that to him?” I snapped.

“What?” he asked, startled.

“He was just telling us what makes him feel better about the things he’s been through. You didn’t have to shit on him like that,” I stated angrily.

Naruto sighed. “I just don’t think people should get a pass for treating others like shit, or for being bad people. I like the idea that we have the power to bend reality to our will, to make our lives the way we want them. Even if that’s not be true so far for me.”

“You want to cling to something, then cling to something! But don’t pry something from the grip of another,” I scolded, my arms crossed.

“Look, Gaara knows that determinism pisses me off, okay?” He knows that my parents’ car accident was my fault. He knows that my foster family abuses me. He knows that I… get what I deserve. I have to be held accountable, whether the universe made things like this on purpose or not.” He stood across from me, defensive. His eyes met mine and he scoffed, touching the lines on his cheeks.

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. Right now.” He glared at me as he continued, his voice low and angry, “Did I deserve it when they held me down, pinning my arms and legs under their knees? Did I deserve it when they held the blade to my face, dragging it nice and slow so I could feel the tug and tear of the fibers in the skin on my cheeks? What would you do if I said yes? What would you do if I told you to your face that I deserved every bit of it?”

I stared at him, eyes wide, from my seat on the picnic table. Before he could do anything more, I wrapped my arms around his waist, hugging him to me in a tight embrace. He shoved and pushed and punched, but I was stronger. I held him against me until he stopped squirming.

“Don’t need your fucking pity,” he grumbled, his head on my shoulder.

“It’s empathy,” I clarified. “Not pity.”

The sun broke on the horizon, lighting up the tops of the pines with surprising gusto. His arms snaked around my waist, and I felt the tension in the taunt muscles of his back as I relaxed my grip into a casual embrace. With his face tucked into my neck and the soft, clean light of the sun exposing the world around me, I admitted something, to him and to myself, aloud for the first time since it happened. My mouth was pressed against the locks of golden hair that hung, disheveled, in his face as I told him a story about a young boy, around 11 years old, who wanted to play with his brother. A boy whose mother made him bento boxes every day, even though the kids at school thought his lunches were weird. A boy whose father taught him how to read in two languages before he’d even started elementary school. A boy whose entire family lived with him and loved him. With a roughness in my voice, I told Naruto about the morning I’d begged Itachi for attention, pleading with him to spend time with me after school.

“He was in college, though. He didn’t have time for me. I was so upset about it, I didn’t go home after I got out of school that afternoon. I walked to the park near my house, and I stayed there until it started to get dark. When I got home, though, I knew instantly that something was wrong. The entire house was silent, deserted, unlit. I called out pathetically for my mother. I found everyone tied up and gagged in the basement, already dead.” Naruto kept an arm around me, but he pulled back, watching me as I choked on my words. “My brother was the one who stepped from the shadows, gun in hand.”

“Sasuke,” Naruto muttered quietly and full of emotion, squeezing me tighter against him.

“I ran, Naruto,” I said bluntly. “I didn’t even try. They died because of me. My whole family.” My jaw was tight, and I fought myself to keep from crying.

“So, what do you believe?” the blonde asked quickly, trying to force a new train of thought. “What do you cling to?”

The question did take me by surprise, and by catching my brain off-guard, I was able to halt the impending melancholy. I thought for a moment, trying to evaluate my own coping ideologies in a way that would make sense for someone else. “Have you ever read Slaughterhouse-5, by Kurt
Vonnegut?” I asked, unsurprised when the blonde shook his head. “In it, there are these fourth
dimensional aliens, called Tralfamadorians, who move through time in a non-linear fashion. And
they can see each moment stretching on, infinitely in a horizontal time-space. The human protagonist
learns that every part of his life exists infinitely, even though he can’t perceive them like the aliens
can.” I paused, making sure he was following me. “I like to think about the good things I’ve
experienced existing infinitely; all those happy moments never ceasing to occur just because I’m not
currently living in them.”
“But,” Naruto interjected hesitantly. I knew what he was going to say before the words could leave
his mouth. “That means the bad things exist forever, too.”
“Yes,” I said quietly. “Yes, I suppose it does.” And as I stared out at that rising crest of orange
ascending slowly above the trees, with Naruto’s arms around me, I thought, Maybe that’s an okay
price to pay for everlasting moments like this.

I don’t remember falling asleep, or even returning to the RV with the intention of getting rest, but all
of a sudden, I was awake, eyes open. Some people come into wakefulness gradually, the way one
might sip a glass of wine. They blink, bleary-eyed and disoriented; they yawn, slowly drifting their
arms overhead, groaning in relief as their muscles stretch. Some people rise like the sun, bit by bit
until they’re awake, functional and present. Me? I’ve never been one of those people. I awaken all at
once, consciousness hitting me like a train. This was no exception, though the stillness around me
suggested that I sprang to life of my own volition. The RV was dark and quiet, and the soft hum of
symphonic breathing patterned throughout the camper. From what I could tell, no one else was
awake. I found myself facing Naruto, our sleeping bags arranged to form the shape of the green
Tetris piece on the floor in front of the table. The linoleum was cold, but the camper itself was warm
from the heat of so many bodies. I stared at Naruto with a pointed curiosity—he was breathing
arrhythmically, his eyes were squeezed tight, his body was tense. A hint of scarlet colored his already
tan face, and he trembled lightly underneath the blanket. Nevertheless, he had a slight smile on his
face, lips curved softly into dimpled cheeks.

Confused and a little wary, I rolled over in my sleeping bag to face the underside of the table. I stared
at the vent on the wall of the RV until I fell back asleep, not waking again until much later. Gaara
was opening the door of the camper when my eyes snapped open, and I sat up. He nodded to me,
holding what appeared to be a cup of coffee. Based on the light outside, it had to be at least two in
the afternoon, so I emerged from my cocoon and padded quietly toward the bathroom. It seemed that
everyone had awoken already and headed outside, except for me, Naruto, and Kankuro. The other
two were dozing peacefully, horrendous expressions on their respective faces. I was happy to see
that Kankuro didn’t leave the metalhead makeup on as he slept, though. After freshening up, I
changed into the dark blue above-the-knee shorts and Brand New t-shirt I’d brought along, tossing
on my black and gray slip-on Vans before heading out the door. The sun shone brightly overhead,
but the wind whipped about in exaggerated gusts. I could tell it was going to get cold tonight. The
majority of the group was gathered around the picnic table, chatting and laughing as they downed
pancakes. I joined them, thanking Gaara’s mom instinctively for the breakfast. It wasn’t long before
both Naruto and Kankuro made their way out of the RV, each looking more disoriented and
exhausted than the rest of us. Mrs. Shukaku wasted no time in expressing her genuine excitement at
their arrival, however.

“Now that everyone is awake,” the small, round-faced woman announced as she stood from the table
and faced the group. “The real fun can begin!”
Mr. Shukaku handed us each a piece of paper with a map and a list inscribed on it. I glanced it over,
but skimming it provided me with absolutely no context for the conversation. It was lost on me, and
it appeared to be rather lost on everyone else as well. Mr. Shukaku kindly provided us with a
whispered hint as he made his rounds, saying, “It’s a scavenger hunt!” in a hushed voice.
Firstly,” his wife continued cheerfully. “We’re dividing into teams! Because we have eight people
here, we’ll split into two teams of four. Each team needs a captain, of course, so prepare to do battle!” She held out her fist as an example, but no one seemed to understand what she meant. With a sigh, she clarified, “We’re playing rock-paper-scissors, so hold ‘em out and pick your opponent. Ready? Three, two, one…shoot!” Surprised but entertained, everyone cooperated within the parameters that their feeble, freshly woken brains could allow. Temari managed to beat her boyfriend with a well-played rock, while Kankuro lost badly to Gaara with the same exactly move. Sakura and Naruto were the underdog winners, however; they beat Ino and I with a rebellious use of scissors. The winners paired off against each other, with Temari and Sakura facing off against Gaara and Naruto, respectively. As Mrs. Shukaku called out the commands, tensions were high. Temari won against her foster brother, deftly out-maneuvering his strategic use of paper. Naruto was victorious over Sakura through sheer dumb luck, of course, but he won all the same.

“Alright, Captains,” Mr. Shukaku said, putting an arm around his wife in a gesture of appreciation and support. “Final round. You’ve got to face off against each other, and the winner gets first pick for the teams. Ready? Three, two, one…shoot!” Temari won with paper, and Naruto sulked in despair as she looked around the table to evaluate our talents for her prospective team. It was impossible for her to have any idea what type of skillset we could bring to the table, but she acted as though she knew everything about each of us. Of course, she selected her boyfriend as the first member, surprising no one. Naruto selected Gaara, which I tried not to take personally, and Temari called dibs on Sakura. Just as I was beginning to feel irritatingly undervalued, Naruto called out my name for his team. In a surprising turn of events, though, Temari snagged Ino, leaving us with Kankuro.

“So, Captains,” Mrs. Shukaku began, a mischievous grin on her face. “Listen up. Each member of your team has to be assigned a role. Someone needs to be the camera person, someone has to manage the map, and someone else…has to be carried at all times.” “What?” Temari and Naruto exclaimed in unison.

“Someone has to be carried the whole time,” she repeated, trying her best to hide her amusement. The two captains frowned, glancing at their recruits nervously. “The two groups will start at the same spot on the trail and walk in opposite directions. The first team to bring back photos of each item will be declared the winner. You have two hours. Have fun!” Naruto turned to us, harried. “Okay, everybody. How much do you weigh?” “137 pounds,” I replied without hesitation. He frowned. Gaara clocked in at roughly 145 pounds, while Kankuro was a heftier 196. I figured I would be the one to get carried, and I sighed in resignation.

“I guess we’re carrying me, then,” Naruto announced. He didn’t look particularly pleased with the news, but his face was mired in grim determination. I was surprised; he was built thicker than me, and even though he was shorter, I had felt certain he’d be heavier than me. At my startled expression, he said, “I weigh 125 pounds. Okay, so, who’s next? You like to take pictures, right, Sasuke? You’re the camera person.” I nodded, accepting my role with much more ease. “Gaara, you’re in charge of the list. Kankuro, you’re on the first shift for carrying me around.” Apparently in quite the hurry, Naruto scrambled atop the picnic table and climbed on the visibly irritated boy’s back.

Watching Naruto in the position of leadership inspired a strange sort of attraction in me. It was as if a new side of him had been revealed to me, a dominant and strategic version of him featuring serious eyes and pensive frowns. A shiver went down my spine when his eyes met mine, eyebrows knotted and mouth curled into a grimace. His expression didn’t match his youthful and colorblind attire; jean shorts and a tie-dye tank top with an orange flannel tied around his waist. As he adjusted himself on Kankuro’s back, Gaara examined the map and the list with a thoughtful frown. We began moving, heading toward the trail entrance to the right of the campsite, and I watched the expression change on the redhead’s face from one of intrigue to one of confusion.

“Guys,” he said, his voice low. “Listen to this. We have to find a unicorn, a ghost,” his eyes scanned the page in disbelief, “proof of alien life… How are we supposed to find any of this?”
“What the fuck,” Kankuro wheezed obstinately.
“Well, we won’t find any of it if we stay motionless!” Naruto exclaimed, his enthusiasm and confidence somewhat contagious. “Come on, guys. Let’s go!”

I stared quietly at the page, examining the list of contents with a frown. I looked up, scanning the trail in front of me for clues. Puzzles were something I had been good at since childhood, and I knew one when I saw it. This was certainly supposed to be a puzzle. “A unicorn,” I mumbled to myself, letting my voice trail off as I walked ahead. “One…horn…” Beside the listed objects were numbers, which I soon realized corresponded to the number of letters within the phrase. “Seven letters, one horn.” Something glinted in the trees above me, catching my eye. Sitting on a branch in a large magnolia tree was a trumpet. I spun on heel and faced my oncoming troupe. “I found it!” I shouted, pointing up in the tree.

“Sasuke,” Naruto said sheepishly, embarrassed on my behalf. “That’s a trumpet.”

“Exactly,” I replied, examining the terrain for an ideal photo-spot.

There was a small tree nearby I could easily climb, so I set to work. I had managed to scramble halfway up the thing before I heard them take notice of my absence. They had been discussing what the significance of a trumpet could possibly be in regards to a unicorn, but when they finally turned to me to demand that I explain myself, I was nowhere to be found. I snickered as I shimmied out along a branch with my arms and legs crossed. Once I felt close enough to get a good shot, I locked my ankles around each other and gently let go, using my core to ease myself down slowly and steadily. The last thing I wanted was to shake and sway on the branch, suspended in the air just above my comrades. My shirt immediately fell down into my face, but I tucked it under my chin and pulled my phone out of my pocket. I leaned, trying to get the right angle, and I snapped a few quick pictures.

“Sasuke, where’d you go?” Naruto called, looking around wildly.
I grinned, amused by the lack of observational talents, and my grip laxed on my cell phone, causing it to plummet to the world below with surprising veracity. “In-coming!” I shouted, hoping the group would move out of the way in time.

“I传闻, my foot!” I heard Naruto cry, and I winced in guilt. Quickly I clambered back down to the trunk of the tree, frenetic and uneasy. Just as I reached the point at which I could safely hop down, the blonde said, “Damn, Sasuke. Did you take this? That’s a high-quality photo. Guys, look at this.”

He was holding my phone, arm outstretched awkwardly, and Gaara examined it while Kankuro craned his neck trying to get a better view. They both seemed impressed—as impressed as two high school boys with no interest in photography could be, I guess—and I was a little embarrassed as I approached, removing the device from the blonde’s hand as soon as I was within reach. A cursory examination of the phone revealed no visible damage from the fall, though it was likely that Naruto’s foot wasn’t so lucky.

“Is your foot alright?” I asked, looking at him with gentle concern.
He laughed as he said, “I’ll be fine. It’s not like I have to use it, anyway.”

“Speaking of, does somebody else want to take over? You’re heavier than you look,” Kankuro groaned, letting his arms go slack. Naruto descended carefully, standing with tentative weight on his left foot.

“I gotcha, buddy,” Gaara offered, stepping forward to collect our injured leader. I stifled my surprise as the redhead shouldered him into a lopsided fireman carry, trying not to laugh at Naruto’s disgruntled expression.

We took off again, and I explained to them the significance of the trumpet as we walked along the trail. They seemed to vaguely understand the implications of the puzzle, but I didn’t have much hope for their ability to contribute. Case in point, we came across what was surely the easiest solution to
one of the items, but it was fairly evident that there was some catch. A large cardboard cutout of a
UFO was suspended in the air by trees, next to a building presumably housing bathrooms. The
cartoonish image was affixed with a bright green LED underneath as a makeshift tractor beam.
Though Naruto exclaimed, “If that’s not proof, I don’t know what is,” I wasn’t convinced.
Gaara was on my side, proclaiming the necessity of the right phrasing. “UFO is only three letters, but
it’s supposed to be 16,” he explained to the others.
“Uh, duh, you just have to spell it out,” Naruto retorted.
“That’s too many letters, dobe,” I snapped, deep in thought. “Tractor beam is too few…”
“Flying saucer?” Kankuro guessed with a shrug.
“12,” Gaara and I retorted at the same time.
“Alien spaceship!” Naruto shouted, overly enthusiastic. “Wait, no… No, dammit.”

It was clear to me at least that we were missing something necessary for the puzzle. There was a clue
here somewhere, and I was going to find it. I examined the structure, walking up to it with slight
trepidation. A basic, childish UFO made of cardboard—colorful, but simple. Cheap, even, in terms
of quality. No notable attributes, nothing emphasized. Except for the light. Why would they use such
expensive and high-quality equipment for such a flimsy decoration? Unless… “It has something to
do with the tractor beam,” I said aloud, peering up at the fixture.
Naruto suddenly exclaimed, “Flying saucer beam! Check me, it’s 16.” He was beaming brightly, a
tractor beam of ineffable charm in and of himself. I felt compulsively drawn to him, and I had to stop
myself from inching closer. Instead, I shrugged and snapped a picture that emphasized the light
fixture, eager to move on.

We found the dragon next, thanks to Gaara’s peculiar interests. He immediately recognized the
symbol that had been carved into a tree, and he explained to everyone in excruciating detail the
difference between a wyvern and a dragon. The vampire was relatively easy to discern as well,
though the word we were given on the list had confused us at first. Cloaked could describe a litany
of things, but once we saw the bloody trail things began to click into place. Of course, vampires
don’t show up on film, so I took a shot of the bloodied leaves on the winding path in place of a
portrait. It was around that time that Gaara tired in our quest, and it was my turn to carry our ignoble
leader. He stood limply, awaiting my assistance, and I felt the nerves creep up inside of me. He was
damnably pretty in the glow of the evening sun; his hair like spun gold, his eyes shining gems of
cobalt. His features were heavily shadowed here in the woods, making him seem far more
mysterious and brooding. I bit my lip as I approached, stuffing my feelings down into a hidden part
of myself to prevent them from being acted upon. As I drew near, the boy flung his arms around my
neck and turned, urging me to carry him bridal style to our destination. I could feel my face coloring,
my heart racing, my skin tingling.

“Anybody else think it’s weird that we haven’t run into the other team yet?” Kankuro asked,
bringing me back into reality.
We all thought it was odd, but my preoccupied mind paid it little attention. I tried not to think about
the way Naruto felt in my arms, tried not to imagine the fiery burn I would feel if we were skin to
skin. We were close to finishing, but finding the ghost was proving harder than we expected. Despite
our initial enthusiasm, we returned to camp unsuccessful. The sun was setting in the sky, and we
were all exhausted from our trek. When we arrived back at the campsite, though, things were not the
way we had left them.
Mr. and Mrs. Shukaku were nowhere to be seen, and the kids from the other team were dancing by
the fire with music blaring. Red Solo cups had manifested on most horizontal surfaces, with Obito
pouring drink after drink from the picnic table. Gaara found Temari and demanded answers, which
were hard for her to give in her tipsy state. Eventually she revealed that their parents had to leave to
handle a business-based emergency, leaving her and Obito in charge until they returned. Obito had
purchased the alcohol at her behest, and now it was time for all of us to really celebrate Halloween. I
noticed that the other team had already donned their costumes, and I wondered whether or not I
should put on mine. Temari wore a basketball uniform, while Obito appeared to just be a basketball. “The player, the game,” she had clarified with a sloppy grin. Ino was an undead ballerina with an emphasis on the makeup portion of the costume, while Sakura was clearly dressed as something other than herself, though I had no idea what.

Naruto, Kankuro, Gaara, and I all entered the RV with the intent of donning our costumes, and again I hesitated. My costume was less of a costume and more of an ensemble, and it required a certain amount of confidence to pull it off. Hesitant but unwilling to sacrifice my participation, I donned my costume rapidly, careful to avoid the others as they struggled in their makeshift dressing rooms. Gaara and Kankuro were in their parent’s room, while Naruto had taken the bathroom. I was left in the open, and I wasn’t about to let anyone walk out while I was less than fully clothed. Rushed but successful, I exited the RV with a sigh, feeling the cool air on my fishnet-covered thighs. I had on a fitted black v-neck, short black cloth shorts with a fluffy black tail sewn to the back, and fingerless black gloves. Atop my head sat a black Sailor Moon baseball cap with Luna’s crescent moon emblazoned on it amid two triangle cat ears sticking up on the sides. Overall, I was happy with the way it had turned out, though I’d originally planned on wearing sweatpants. After talking with Ino, I was convinced to don the more risqué attire, though I made sure to bring my sweatpants along, just in case. The whole thing paid off infinitely when I saw the look on Naruto’s face as he exited the camper, gawking from the step.

His nerd costume was adorable—collared shirt, bow tie, high-waisted khakis, dress socks, masking tape on his reading glasses. He’d even tried to slick down his hair, but it wasn’t going too well. He was certainly stunning, but what really caught my attention was the dumbfounded, borderline mesmerized expression on his face. Slack-jawed, wide-eyed, and frozen on that rickety step in between the ground and the interior of the camper, Naruto stared at me. His eyes followed my figure up and down, tracing the outline of my body until I raised an eyebrow, smirked, and winked at him devilishly. He snapped out of whatever trance he had been in, finishing his descent quickly and beelining for the alcohol. Trying not to seem eager, I meandered casually over to the picnic table, selecting a beverage from the limited modicum. I could feel Naruto watching me out of the corner of his eye, so I turned to face him, mustering up as much courage as I could. Startled like a deer in the headlights, he froze, eyes on me, for far too long. Then, without warning, he ran off, bolting toward the safety of Gaara and Kankuro. Confused and more than just a little annoyed, I headed toward Ino, drinks in hand. She and Sakura were playing some kind of game with Obito and Temari, but it looked like they had taken a time-out for the couple to mack on each other. I sighed dramatically as I approached, and though Sakura looked nervous, she stayed put.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” I asked, taking a sip of the strange concoction in my hand without thinking. It burned, and I coughed a little in surprise.

“Hey there, Sailor Sexy,” Ino greeted with a huge grin. She leaned in to hug me and whispered in a drunken way that more resembled talking, “Guess who’s been gawking at you!” She giggled excitedly as she pulled away.

“Yeah,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “I noticed.”

Sakura stared dismally at her cup, and before I could think the better of it, I asked her who or what she was supposed to be. “Uh, Jenny Johnson, from My Super Ex-Girlfriend. Played by Uma Thurman?” Her self-consciousness intensified as I continued to stare at her blankly. “It’s about this librarian with superpowers who gets dumped…”

“Huh,” I said. “Haven’t seen it.”

“It’s good,” she mumbled as I turned back to face Ino. The blonde girl was clearly already drunk, and she seemed to be on the verge of passing out. “Do you want to go lay down?” I asked her, catching her by the arm as she leaned too far to the side. She nodded, giggling with a tiredness in her eyes, and I led her inside the RV, followed by Sakura.

“Oh,” Ino said suddenly, lurching toward the counter as she lost her balance. “Oh no, I think…” She
gasped, turning toward me with a look of horror. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

I tried to step back, but Sakura was in my way. Before I knew it, Ino had blown chunks all over me. My costume was ruined, and I could feel the vomit trickling down my legs, thick and warm. The panic welled inside of me, fighting with my self-control. I pushed her out of the way and launched myself toward the bathroom, knowing my composure was quickly dwindling. I stripped, tossing the clothes in the garbage, and stepped into a cold shower, ready to have the filth removed. I let myself go under the current of water, twitching and whining as much as my anxiety-fueled disgust demanded. When I finally felt clean, I emerged and threw on my black sweatpants. Ino lay on her table bed, not passed out but not cognizant either. She handed me a shift when I asked her for one, but it was a royal blue cropped t-shirt. She refused to hand me another, sequestering my duffle bag as a cuddle buddy. I noticed that thankfully Sakura had cleaned up the mess, though she was nowhere to be found now. With a roll of my eyes, I put on Ino’s crop top and slid my Sailor Moon cap back into place on my head before exiting the RV once more.

“Sasuke, you changed. What happened?” Gaara asked as I stepped down from the camper. He was leaning casually against the side, red Solo cup in hand. He was a dark fairy, donned in a trench coat and black lace wings.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I replied quickly, glancing down at my subpar new outfit. At my disgruntled expression, Gaara straightened up, handing me his cup with a grin. “Here, you look like you need this more than I do.” I took it from him, and he pulled out a cigarette. “I’m going for a walk, be back later,” he called as he meandered off into the distance.

Sighing, I turned and planned on rejoining the party, but my options were unsavory. I could hang out with Sakura, one on one, but that reeked of probable disaster. There was always Kankuro, who had taken it upon himself to be the new DJ, though I felt certain I’d end up strangling him before he got to the end of this song. Temari and Obito were nowhere to be seen, likely sucking face somewhere in the woods. That left Nartuo, who had been avoiding me the whole night. He was sitting by himself at the picnic table, staring forlornly into a cup. Before I could change my mind, I tilted Gaara’s cup and gulped down the contents, embracing the sour burn as headed toward the table.

Naruto looked up as I wriggled in beside him; his eyes were filled with a strange kind of fear. He didn’t try to get up, though, and I felt myself relax a bit more. I met his eyes, smirking, and said, “Nice costume, dork.”

“Thanks… I…” he hesitated, averting his eyes. “I liked yours, too. What, uh… What happened to it?”

“Ino.” I rolled my eyes. “She threw up on me.”

“Dude, that blows,” he commented emphatically, finally beginning to seem like his cavalier self again. We stared at each other for a moment, our eyes examining each other with investigative curiosity, neither of us wanting to tear them away. Naruto broke first, glancing away momentarily only to return with haste.

“Why were you avoiding me?” I demanded, the words leaving my mouth with more force than I anticipated. His eyes widened in surprise.

“I wasn’t,” he replied doubtfully.

“Tch, bullshit. What’s going on?” I snapped, staring at him intently.

“I’m sorry,” Naruto began, obviously uncomfortable. He glanced at my pointedly stoic expression, and he immediately looked away, eyes landing on the sprawl of cups before him. “Oh, hey. I know. Let’s play Two Truths and a Lie. Loser has to take a drink. We’ll take turns.”

“Okay,” I agreed quickly. “Me first. One, you’ve been avoiding me the whole night. Two, I like tomatoes. Three, I hate Chemistry.”

Naruto hesitated, knowing that if he won, I would have to take a drink, but he would be admitting to avoiding me in the first place. He took a deep breath and looked me in the eye. “You love Chem. Drink.” I obeyed, grabbing a random cup from the table and taking a large gulp.
We played for a few rounds until it was fairly certain that we were both plastered. We didn’t even notice that everyone else had gone inside already. Instead, we were laughing and taunting and touching each other with a level of comfort and amusement only achievable through alcohol. “One,” he said, leaning toward me with a twinkle in his eye. “I’ve never Sleeping Beauty’d someone. Two, I’m interested in somebody right now. And three, I hate cheesecake.” His speech was a little slurred, but the way he was looking at me made my skin tingle in excitement.

“You like cheesecake?” I guessed. He shook his head, bemused, handing me the Solo cup we had begun to share. I finished it off, but something occurred to me. “Wait, which one is it, then?”

“That’s not,” he began, but I put my hand unceremoniously across his mouth.

“Naruto,” I whispered, my face inches from his. “If you tell me, I’ll tell you a secret.” He rolled his eyes as I removed my hand and said, “Fine. I might have kissed someone while they were sleeping.”

I found myself feeling jealous, curious, and somewhat unnerved by this revelation. “What compelled you to do something like that?” I asked.

“Ah, I don’t… Um.” He scratched his head sheepishly. “It was just an impulsive decision, you know. It wasn’t creepy, though—it was just a peck.”

“Did the person have feelings for you, though?” I asked, trying to justify the behavior in my head. “Were you dating?”

“No, I don’t know how they feel about me,” he replied. “I mean, I’d like to think they find me attractive.”

“Who was it?” I inquired. “Did you tell them?”

“Kind of,” he admitted.

“Who was it? How did they react?” I asked.

“That’s… That wasn’t part of the deal.” He sighed. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, though. It wasn’t sexual or anything. It was just like a momentary lapse in judgement, y’know? I was trying to, I don’t know, be like, affection.”

“Affectionate,” I corrected, stumbling over my words as they rushed out of my mouth. “But wait, when is kissing ever not sexual?”

“What do you mean?” Naruto replied, surprised. “Have you ever kissed anyone before?”

“I blushed, frowning at him. “You of all people should know the answer to that.”

“Right!” he exclaimed. “Exactly. Like that. That kiss wasn’t sexual.”

“I don’t understand the difference,” I muttered, averting my eyes.

“Okay, okay,” Naruto said, putting his hands on my shoulders. “I’ll do you a favor. I’ll show you the difference, so you know. And then you can decide whether or not you think what I did was creepy.” He blinked awkwardly at me, evidently more intoxicated than he or I realized.

"Alright," I consented, trying not to sound nervous.

“So,” he exhaled, closing his eyes slowly. He leaned in and pressed his lips softly against the corner of my mouth, a sweet and brief show of affection.

"Right," I mumbled, nodding as if I had any idea what I was agreeing with. "As opposed to?"

“As opposed to…” he whispered as he pulled back, looking into my eyes for confirmation. They were wide and dark, but a small smile had begun to tug at my lips. He tightened his grip on my shoulders and dove, crashing into my lips with ferocity.

Stunned but overpowered by the jolts of electricity I felt coursing through my body, I found myself eagerly kissing him back. I was soft, uncertain, gentle, but he was rough, dominant, aggressive. He dragged his teeth across my lower lip and slipped his tongue inside, sending shivers down my spine. One of his hands wandered up, tangling itself in my hair, and I pressed mine against his chest, feeling the warmth of his body under that thin shirt. His other hand went down, wrapping itself snugly around my waist and pulling me closer to him. I snaked my arms around his neck and moved closer...
until I was essentially in his lap. We were chest to chest, and his hands roamed around my body with intrigue while mine cupped his face. I felt myself beginning to rock against him unintentionally, and I was surprised at how good it felt.

Too soon, he broke away, retracting from me with a grin on his face. I tried to get control of my breathing, of my flushed face, but he saw me disheveled and smirked.

“Different, right?” he asked, cocky.
“Yeah,” I murmured, my eyes searching his face intently. “Different.”
“So,” he began, sure of himself. “I’m not creepy.”
“Hn,” I scoffed, still scrambling to regain order within my mind. “You’re a different kind of a creepy. Were you in love or something? Seems like you had some unrequited feelings, if ya ask me.”
“Well,” Naruto stammered, not meeting my eyes. “I don’t know about love…”
“Either way, it’s a little creepy, but at least it’s not like sexual predator creepy,” I declared, trying to make him feel somewhat less judged.
“Oh, okay. So you would feel pretty angry if somebody did that to you?” he asked, obviously wanting a frame of reference for the act.
“Uh,” I muttered, considering the concept. “Depends on who. Like, if it was Sakura? Hell yes, I’d be incredibly angry. But if it was someone I had feelings for, under the right circumstances it could be endearing.” I imagined a world wherein Naruto was so unbelievably infatuated with me that he couldn’t help but press a soft kiss on my lips as I slept, and it filled me with a perverse sort of happiness.
“Huh,” he said thoughtfully. “So, you don’t like Sakura, then?”
I blanched. “Uh, no. Not romantically. Not even platonically, most of the time.”
“Oh? What about Ino, then?” he asked, eyes wide. “You like her, right? You guys are always spending time together.”
“Ino’s one of my best friends,” I clarified. “Just like Gaara. And you. But I’m not secretly crushing on her or anything.”
“Well,” Naruto began hesitantly. “Do you have feelings for anyone right now?”
“Do you?” I snapped, unnerved about being put on the spot so soon after he had kissed me. It was a surefire way to expose me, expose my feelings for him. I couldn’t do it, not yet. I sighed.
“Maybe,” he finally replied, eyeing me suspiciously. “Depends on who’s asking.”
I thought for a moment before speaking. “A stranger, sitting next to you on the bus. A sweet and kind old lady.”
“That’s who’s asking?” he inquired with a laugh, looking a bit lost. When I nodded, he smiled.
“Alright, fine. Yes, ma’am, I do have feelings for someone right now. They’re a bit of a bitch, though.”
“You’re going to swear in front of an old lady like that?” I chastised.
He rolled his eyes and started over. “Yes, ma’am, I do have feelings for someone.” He smirked at me. “Okay, your turn. Answer the little old woman.”
“Fine,” I retorted, feelings of jealousy knotted in my gut. Among them, a light of hope. Maybe he was talking about me, I thought desperately. “Yes, I do have a crush on someone right now. An idiot, as a matter of fact.”
Naruto’s eyes held a devilish glint, and he smiled mischievously as he leaned forward and whispered, “Tell me who it is.”
“No,” I said evenly.
“You owe me a secret, remember?” he asserted. “Tell me who your crush is.”
“No way,” I replied definitively.
“C’mon, you’ve gotta tell me a secret,” he whined. “I wanna know who you like!”
“Because,” he replied, faltering. “Because we’re friends.”
“Fine,” I answered hotly. “You really wanna know?”
Naruto nodded enthusiastically, muttering, “Yes, yes, of course,” as I leaned in like I was going to whisper in his ear. Instead, I nipped his earlobe and stood up, bent to stay next to his ear.

I’m not sure how long he was out there before I heard him come in and slip inside his sleeping bag. It felt like a long time, though it was probably only a few minutes. I cracked my eyes open and watched him fall asleep, face inches from mine. I thought about how it had felt to have his lips pressed against mine, and I wanted more than anything to feel that again. As my eyes raked over his soft, dark lips, I began to understand why he would impulsively kiss someone as they slept. I could do it myself, right here and now. It would be easy. Just a gentle, soft peck. I sighed and rolled over, facing away from Naruto so I could fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Um, okay, so if you're reading this, hi! Thanks for checking out this fic I've been working on for the past year and a half. I handwrite everything, because I'm a lunatic, but I should I have the rest of the BEFORE section typed before Christmas rolls around. If you have any questions or you want to leave a comment, that'd make me super happy. Thanks!
Just an FYI, this is so totally not me condoning noncon. The sleeping kiss Naruto gave Sasuke had the purest of intents!
BEFORE the middle

Chapter Summary

Everyone knows that high school is just one long non-stop party train, right? Well, everyone except Sasuke, who's really so done with this whole party concept, no matter how often it results in him mackin' on his super secret crush (2 outta 3).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE whoops

Teen drinking is a problem. An epidemic, as it were. No one would argue that. Well, no one except for the teens themselves, who might suggest that drinking is less of a problem and more of a solution, actually. Childhoods spent developing limited and oft inconsequential socialization techniques as a societal construct lends itself to a demand for social lubricant. And when adults do the same thing for the same reason, well… So it came as no surprise to Naruto when, merely a week later, he was drinking again. He and Gaara had been hanging out, listening to music and talking the way they usually did on Friday nights when Naruto didn’t have a game to win. The blonde was rambling away about nothing, trying to distract himself from the emptiness of his phone screen. He’d texted Sasuke half an hour ago, inviting him over to chill with them, but the asshole had yet to respond. Naruto faltered in his rant, momentarily forgetting what he was going on about. “Uh, what was I saying?” he asked.

Gaara looked up from his notebook and deadpanned, “I wasn’t listening.”
“Are you bored?” the blonde replied. “I’m bored. I feel like we should go out and do something.”
The redhead shrugged and said, “Kiba’s hosting a kegger.”
“Yes!” Naruto shouted. Gaara flinched at his enthusiasm, but he continued unabated. “That’s it! Let’s do it!”

And so the pair of them rolled up to Kiba’s house, which was positively spewing teens from every orifice. People from school littered the lawn, lounged on the balcony, laid out on the roof. Naruto felt the initial surge of energy free him from the burden of fretting over the lack of response on Sasuke’s part, but he knew he’d need to get some liquor in him if he was to well and truly forget. Gaara, being 80% of his impulse control, trailed in after him with a begrudging sigh. The blonde ran into Kiba within minutes of entering the kitchen, and they downed a shot together before starting up a game of beerpong that ended with Naruto dancing on the table. Kiba, Shikamaru, Lee, and Naruto did a round of karaoke after, much to the chagrin of the other partygoers. The blonde wandered around a bit once the song had finished, scanning faces and saying hey to those he recognized, until it dawned on him what he was doing. Naruto Uzumaki, idiot of all idiots, was searching for Sasuke Uchiha at a party. He wanted to kick himself. Groaning, he clambered upstairs to look for a bathroom. Maybe a moment of clarity would happen if he just stood in front of a mirror and stared at his pathetic reflection for a little while.
He stumbled into a bedroom on accident, but it looked big enough to host a bathroom of its own. There were two doors on the left wall, identical and bland. Trying his luck, Naruto pulled open the door closest to him and was jaw-droppingly shocked to discover a closet. The clothes weren’t all that eye-catching, but the person stripping naked within the small space was. Sasuke stood there, pants in a pile by his feet and t-shirt three-quarters of the way off. Naruto felt a delirious grin break out across his face, but he couldn’t suppress it. Thankfully, due to his current visual abatement, Sasuke was none the wiser. Naruto didn’t miss a beat, announcing his presence with a smug, “Uh, you know that Jimmy Eat World music video isn’t supposed to double as an instruction manual for high school parties, right?” He leered at the brunette as the shirt was frantically yanked above his head and dropped unceremoniously into the makeshift pile.

“Oh, eat shit, Uzumaki,” Sasuke snapped. He grabbed some clothes from the closet and hurriedly dressed himself, pointedly aware of Naruto’s bemused gaze. “Some asshole spilled their drink on me,” he explained. “Do you know where the laundry room is?”
“You want to do laundry at a party?” The blonde snickered, and Sasuke pushed past him, clothes in hand.
“Nevermind, I’ll find it myself,” he snapped.
“No, wait, Sasuke,” Naruto said, reaching out to grab Sasuke’s arm. He missed, though, and ended up yanking on the oversized green sweater he’d put on. The neckline dipped over Sasuke’s shoulder, making him look very 80s. “Follow me, teme. I’ll show you the way.”

Naruto couldn’t stop thinking about just how not-scrawny Sasuke was, in spite of how small he looked in his clothes. Thinking about the brunette’s physique brought the hazy memory of making out with him last weekend to the forefront of his brain, and he nearly fell down the stairs at the sheer intensity of the recollection. It was like Sasuke was still in his lap, grinding against him; he could feel the boy’s breath, ragged and sharp against his face, taste the eagerness in his mouth, sweet and aching. He thought about Sasuke’s shoulders, his arms, his chest, and his thoughts drifted to the way his exposed abdomen looked in the warm light of the closet only moments ago. Naruto shook his head, trying to put a stop to the direction his brain was going. Sasuke looked delectable, that much was true, but he also looked like he could take someone in a fight. He was toned, though not particularly bulky or defined. His muscles weren’t for show. They meant something. One day, maybe, Naruto would try to find out what. For now, though, he switched his focus to trying to get Sasuke’s attention, not wanting to lose him to the rest of the party.
“So I guess this is what you’d rather be doing, huh?” he asked. “Can’t say I blame ya.”
“Oh, yeah, last time I went to a party, someone puked on me,” Sasuke retorted. “I was oh-so eager to attend another one and see what would ruin my outfit next.”
“You don’t have the best of luck at these things, huh?”
“I hate parties,” he grumbled.
“Then why are you here?” Naruto wanted to add “instead of hanging out with me” but he clamped his mouth shut just in time. He wasn’t that drunk, not this time.
“Ino made me come. She said I owed it to Sakura or something,” Sasuke sighed. “She’s so defensive over that immature brat. She deserves better.”

A loud gasp from behind turned them around, and they watched as a wide-eyed Sakura rushed off, tears already leaking out. Naruto hesitated, knowing he should go check on her, but he doubted his ability to rectify her feelings. Instead, he faced Sasuke and demanded, “Why would you say something like that? I know you don’t have any romantic interest in her, but she’s still a person!”
“So am I,” Sasuke muttered. Louder, he said, “That’s hardly the worst thing I’ve said to her.”
“What are you talking about?” Naruto asked. “It’s not her fault she’s in love with you. I’m sure most people can’t help it.”
“She’s not in love with me,” Sasuke clarified. “And neither is anyone else. They’re all just in love
with this idea of me they have. The sooner they realize that’s not me, the better it’ll be for everyone.”
“You seem really bitter about this,” the blonde said softly, reaching out and touching Sasuke’s arm.
“I am. Since I came to this party specifically, three girls, five guys, and two ambiguously gendered people have professed their feelings for me, and someone’s boyfriend threw my phone into the swimming pool over it.” Sasuke crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t even know any of their names, and they don’t know anything about me.”

Naruto was about to reply when Gaara spotted them from the stairs. “Hey Naruto, they’re about to start truth or dare. Do you two want to play?”
“Hell yeah,” he exclaimed. “Come on, Sasuke, let’s go!”
“No way,” Sasuke snapped, but he let Naruto drag him to the living room anyway.
The eager blonde dropped to the floor and brought Sasuke down with him. Gaara sat on Naruto’s left, completing the warped circle of participants. Kiba had taken out a fancy green glass bottle with a miniature ship inside just for the occasion, and as host he gave it the first spin. Lee gave Tenten a lap dance, Ino and Temari wound up in a closet together, and Choji shaved his eyebrows off. Naruto found out that Hinata had a crush on him, Neji told everyone about a birth defect he had, and Shino shared a secret kink. Shikamaru dared Gaara to kiss Naruto, so the two of them put on a show in the midst of the circle. The display got the crowd excited and devilish; the revelations and dares quickly became more lecherous in nature. Several of the people began to disappear, leaving for the other parts of the house in groups of two and three. Sakura and Hinata bonded over daring Gaara and Lee to make out. The air was charged with tension and excitement, and everyone seemed on the brink of chaos. The whole room sat in silence as Kiba spun the ship, but when the tip pointed to Sasuke, who had yet to partake in the festivities, the crowd exploded. Ideas were being hurled out of mouths, half-formed and absurd. People were shouting, laughing, grappling to see what Kiba would pick for the mysterious and unanimously attractive Uchiha.

“Truth or dare,” Kiba announced evenly, staring the boy down.
“Dare,” Sasuke retorted. It wasn’t even a decision—he said it like it was the only choice.
“I dare you to spend 7 Minutes in Heaven with…” Kiba paused, knowing how to play the crowd. People sat on edge, eating out of the palm of his hand. “Naruto.”
“What?” Sakura shrieked. Her terror paled in comparison to Naruto’s own, though her abject horror certainly surmounted everyone else’s. Naruto swallowed and glanced around the room, amazed at how enthused everyone looked. Their faces made him declare definitively that the whole situation was not a big deal, and he turned to Sasuke, nodding toward the closet. They walked off together, but Naruto noticed how stiff and uncomfortable his companion was instantly. When he finally got the chance to examine Sasuke’s face, he saw fear there. He was going for annoyed, but his eyes couldn’t lie. Naruto could only guess what was going through the brunette’s mind, but he figured it was the intensity of the passionate embraces he’d had to witness this entire night.

As soon as the closet door shut behind him and they were cloaked with darkness, Naruto said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone, “You know we don’t have to actually do anything, okay? It’s just a stupid game.”
There was an empty silence, stiflingly bare, and then Sasuke muttered, “I hate you, but I hate Sakura more.”

He didn’t elaborate, but for once, he didn’t need to. Naruto felt like he and Sasuke were on the same page. The boy wanted to deter her for good, and words weren’t working. Maybe if he’d been 100% sober and hadn’t just been recollecting the feeling of his skin against Sasuke’s, he wouldn’t have been so quick to agree. He hated hurting other people, never wanted to make anyone feel bad, couldn’t abide by unnecessary malice—but who was he to say what was necessary and what wasn’t? In this circumstance, from Sasuke’s perspective, he was the one being wronged. He was fighting back. And maybe Naruto was a little wary of being used by Sasuke, but another part of him felt electric at the thought. Before his morality could make any headway, his imagination was swept up with the concept—of kissing and licking and moaning, of touching and sucking and biting, of writhing and grinding and rocking—and he was a goner. His cheeks went red, his spine tingled; he
cleared his throat, fought down the nerves, and reached out for Sasuke in the darkness. Sasuke, the perpetual enigma, swatted the hand away, and Naruto stammered, “What’s your deal?”

“Nothing,” he snapped. “I just haven’t done anything like this before.”

Naruto wanted to object to that claim, but then he realized that Sasuke might not even remember their makeout session last week. They had both been really blitzed, and he was surprised he even remembered it himself. Instead of bringing it up, he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll show you how. Just follow my lead, okay?”

“Hn,” Sasuke grunted.

“Sit in my lap,” the blonde instructed. He expected some type of protest, some form of aggression, but was surprised to find none. Sasuke merely did as he was told and straddled him, though it was clear from the way his rigid body grew even stiffer when Naruto touched him that he was still uncomfortable with the concept. Trying to ease the tension, the blonde gently pulled Sasuke into a hug and whispered into his ear, “Relax. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Tch,” Sasuke mumbled, his face buried in Naruto’s neck, “Want is definitely not the word I’d use.”

“Okay, but you instigated this,” he countered. “You have to be a little more intimate if you want this situation to be believable.”

The silence suggested that Sasuke was in agreement, though Naruto wasn’t sure what he was thinking. When he put his hands on Naruto’s chest and brought his face inches from the blonde’s, he reacted instinctively. Naruto’s hands found Sasuke’s hips, gripping them firmly and eliciting a gasp he could feel on his lips. Chuckling softly, Naruto shifted and snaked an arm around his waist, caressing Sasuke’s face with his free hand. Then, ever so lightly, he leaned in and brushed his lips against the brunette’s. Shocked, Sasuke jerked back, breaking the contact, but Naruto held him firmly in his lap.

“Stop, what are you doing?” he whispered.

“Sasuke,” he replied, trying not to sound annoyed. “I am getting some very mixed signals from you. Make up your mind. Do you want to do this or not?”

“Yes,” came the definitive reply. “I just hate touching people. You especially.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I promise I won’t touch you for any longer than necessary.”

Sasuke nodded, but he turned his face away. Naruto pursed his lips, regret begin to bubble up in his gut. Maybe this had been a terrible idea. Maybe Sasuke would resent him for it. Maybe it would ruin their friendship. Maybe he was being too forceful, maybe he was being too mean, maybe he was getting what he deserved if everything went to shit. Well, if he was going out, might as well go out with a bang.

Acting on impulse, Naruto pressed his lips against the exposed neck, causing a delightful shudder. Smirking, he kissed lightly up to Sasuke’s ear, feeling the chill bumps along the skin. Naruto relished in the knowing, feeling the effect this was having on the boy before him, but when he nipped lightly at his earlobe, he got more of a reaction than he’d bargained for. Sasuke, perhaps tired of the power dynamic, ground his hips roughly against Naruto’s lap, triggering quite the automatic physiological response. He felt it, and his eyes went wide; he turned to look at Naruto, whose mouth hung open with an explanation dying on his lips. Without a hint of hesitation, Sasuke dove in and crashed his lips against Naruto’s. He was far from gentle—abrasive, demanding, harsh. He had both hands on Naruto’s face, holding him in place while he got what he wanted. He moved against the blonde, bucking his hips and writhing atop his lap, as Naruto’s hands slid under his shirt, fingertips tracing the muscles with a tinge of yearning. Sasuke moaned into his mouth, and Naruto instantly went back to gripping those slender hips, taking control of the way he rocked against him. Sasuke dropped an arm to Naruto’s shoulder, holding himself tight against the boy, while his other hand tangled itself in those golden locks and pulled. Naruto felt himself letting out an embarrassingly enthusiastic moan just as the door swung open, and like lightning they broke apart.

Naruto watched, heart and head full of nonsense, as Sasuke confirmed the efficacy of his devious
He could still feel the softness of those lips on his, could still feel the way Sasuke had been writhing in his lap. His heart plunged into his stomach as it dawned on him that he was painfully smitten, devastatingly infatuated, utterly and completely fucked. He’d known for a little while now that he liked Sasuke as more than a friend—but not by much. The boy was just the right combination of beautiful and cold; his presence incited a spark of interest in Naruto from the get-go. But Naruto had assumed that as he got to know Sasuke better, that initial attraction would fade. As the mystery of the Uchiha dissipated, his interest would wane. It had happened before—that was how he and Gaara met. Unfortunately, things didn’t seem to be progressing in quite the same way. With Gaara, they’d gone out a couple of times, and then realized they were better as friends. Sasuke was so prickly, though, Naruto was certain he’d lose a limb if he even suggested the possibility of going out on a date.

Though he knew he’d be in trouble when he finally arrived home, Naruto decided he needed to stay at Gaara’s for the weekend. The repercussions for his behavior would likely be severe, but if he went home now, dazed, drunk, and indifferent, it would hardly be any better. Given that he’d be punished regardless, he chose to do what offered him temporary solace, especially given the depressive state he’d fallen into upon realizing the severity of his current romantic situation.

Gaara tried to be supportive; it wasn’t like Naruto to just shut down. The redhead did everything he could think of to inspire his friend into action, but Naruto spent the whole Saturday laying on the bed and staring at the ceiling without seeing it. He wasn’t even aware of how much he’d been zoning out until an apple hit him in the face.

“You need to eat something,” Gaara chided.

Perhaps he was hungry, but he didn’t feel like it. His had wasn’t there, his heart wasn’t in it; he was focused on a singular thought, and his attention was unlikely to waver. Naruto knew Gaara was only trying to help, but he wasn’t in a place where he could listen. Still, he took a bite, not wanting to incur any more fruit to the face.

Initially, he’d figured what had happened on Halloween had been something of a fluke—he was drunk, he was attracted to Sasuke, he craved attention… The math was sloppy, but it added up. After the party at Kiba’s, though, his brain went into hyperdrive, overanalyzing and reevaluating every interaction he’d ever had with Sasuke. He couldn’t help it; he needed to know. Though he rarely ever overthought anything, preferring to act first and consequence later, some things demanded attention whether you wanted to give it to them or not.

When their Chemistry teacher had bullied Sasuke into heading a study group, Naruto had been the first to sign up. Trivial, could be chalked up to his overeager friendliness. He invited Sasuke to hang out every weekend, and he was visibly disappointed every time Sasuke said no. A little harder to pass off as camaraderie, but not impossible. He’d driven Sasuke home from school three times in the past month, nearly leaping at the opportunity every time it presented itself. He’d even been working on a mix tape of all the songs he’d been showing Sasuke as well as a few he’d been wanting to show him. That was definitely a clear indication of romantic interest, no getting around it. He hated waiting for Sasuke to text him back, and his heart would be in his throat every time he called, even though he usually spent an hour and a half just blathering about ramen, lamenting about school, or expressing interest in a niche hobby. The feelings were inherently romantic, but the actions themselves could be seen as friendly. He’d given Sasuke a schedule of every survivor’s group in the city, though he’d only ever seen him show up to Dealing with the Deceased. Again, not an obvious display of romantic interest, but the feelings were far from platonic. He sighed, flipping over onto his stomach on the bed. Even though most of these habits in and of themselves weren’t indicative of a romantic affiliation, when they were combined together—he shook his head, not wanting to think about the likelihood of Sasuke knowing how he felt. He cursed himself for being so obvious with his feelings, he cursed the way his skin tingled at the slightest touch from the brunette, he cursed the giddiness in his gut that spewed out every time he saw the stupid asshole. Finally pulling himself out of his stupor, he asked Gaara if the redhead had noticed that he had these feelings.
Gaara nearly smacked him. “Anybody with eyes could see that you’ve got the hots for Sasuke.”
“Is it really that obvious?” Naruto whined.
“Why do you think Kiba chose you as the contender for yesterday’s closet session?” Gaara retorted.
“Sasuke himself would have to be an absolute idiot not to notice, but lucky for you, I think he’s
distracted enough that he hasn’t caught on yet. Either that or he likes you too, but he doesn’t want
you to know.”
“As if! Don’t get my hopes up like that,” Naruto exclaimed. “He barely tolerates me as a friend.
There’s no way he’s got these kind of feelings for me.”
“You never know,” Gaara said.
“No, I do know,” the blonde corrected. “Ugh, what am I going to do?”
“Seriously, I think you should tell him.”
“Why would I do something stupid like that?” Naruto demanded.
“Hm, maybe because the feelings will eat you alive inside if you keep them locked up. And then, ten
years from now, you’ll reach out to Future Sasuke, meet up for drinks, explain to him that you were
totally in love with him in high school. Then Sasuke will begrudgingly admit that he had feelings for
you too, but he didn’t know what to do about it because he was so emotionally stunted and
inexperienced. Then you’ll both laugh awkwardly, kick yourselves for being absolute idiots, and go
home wishing you could rewrite history,” he replied evenly.
Naruto sank his head into his hands and groaned. “This is impossible.”

Chapter End Notes

Though third-person limited perspectives won't be super common in this story, I do
think they give important insight into Naruto's thoughts, motivations, and actions. What
do you think? Y'all prefer the first-person narrative style of my Sasuke POV chapters, or
this? How do you feel about the progression of the story? The next few chapters are a
bit of a doozy, lots of negativity, but the Christmas one is coming up soon and it's
uplifting. Then we'll have roughly five more chapters before the BEFORE section ends
and we move into...AFTER. Dun dun dun!!! Haha, anyway, hope you've enjoyed the
story so far! Thanks a bunch for the kudos and comments!
I had been my favorite barista long before I’d moved into the city, before I’d ever met Sakura or Naruto or Gaara, before I’d had my “glow up” as she’d put it. We weren’t friends, at least not according to me, but she remembered me every time I came in to the Daily Grind.

My obsession with quiet coffee shops, bookstores, office supplies, and studying aesthetically has to be due entirely to Tsunade and Shizune’s efforts to keep me from locking myself away in an ivory tower, equal parts dragon and princess. The then-girlfriends would force me out every weekend, into the city on some excursion or another. Museums, zoos, roller rinks; nothing was off-limits. They soon realized that the only places I really seemed to enjoy were bookstores—the quiet stillness and obvious disinterest in my presence from the patrons gave me a profound sense of calm. In no time, we went weekly to a new bookstore in the city. I think I singlehandedly kept a few of them from closing their doors for good with my repeat visits. After the bookstore, Tsunade would take us all out to eat; I wasn’t allowed to read until after lunch, when we’d go to a park or a café and settle in for the afternoon. I’d sit somewhere, hidden away from everyone, and my ever-vigilant guardians would watch from a distance, giving me the space I needed.

The Daily Grind became my favorite coffee shop for two reasons. Firstly, it was enough of a chain that I didn’t feel out of place just walking in, but it wasn’t so corporate that they didn’t sell homemade pastries. Secondly, that particular location featured a literal niche, tucked away from all but especially prying eyes, where I could disappear into the background for hours at a time. Initially, I reveled in that anonymity: I could go into this coffee shop in the midst of this bustling city and be utterly invisible. I wasn’t the kid whose brother had been convicted of murder. I wasn’t just some parentless pity-party walking. I was nothing, no one; another mundane face among the many. But everything changed when the objectively pretty barista with a pale blonde ponytail and plastic smile said, “Hey—Sasuke, right? Green tea latte, extra matcha again this week?”

I was horrified that she’d remembered me, especially since I hadn’t even recognized her. I nodded curtly while Tsunade and Shizune whispered conspiratorially behind me. Ino winked and me and said, “Coming right up!”

The next week, she commented on the book I was reading. “I loved Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe,” she’d gushed. “Do you like it so far?”

“I haven’t started it yet,” I’d retorted.

Some weeks she was there, some weeks she wasn’t. Sometimes she’d make small talk, sometimes
she’d leave me be. I didn’t understand what she wanted from me, not until Tsunade started allowing me to go by myself. It never felt like Ino was flirting with me, and it didn’t seem like she was all too keen to be best friends forever, either. Like recognizes like, as it were, and even if I wasn’t always hyper-aware, I didn’t consider myself especially oblivious. Then again, it never occurred to me until she said it.

“I love your moms,” Ino told me one day, sitting down at my table on her break.

“They’re not my moms,” I corrected her. “They’re my guardians.”

“Whatever,” she’d said with a dismissive wave. “I love them.”

“Maybe you should tell them that,” I said wryly.

“What, ha, no way… I couldn’t. That’d be weird. I’m their barista. I’d have to like, explain why, and I haven’t actually told anyone I’m gay yet,” she replied. Realizing her faux-pas faster than I’d have expected, she winced and stared at me regretfully, evaluating my reaction.

“Who am I gonna tell?” I’d commented, sounding bored. She’d relaxed after that, but she refused to leave me alone again. I think she just wanted to speak and be understood, to feel heard.

That’s how Ino became the one I talked to about a certain blonde idiot—I knew she wouldn’t judge me or jump to conclusions, but more than that, I knew she wouldn’t tell anyone. She owed me. As a junior in a Catholic school nearby, she delighted in tales of my hopeless infatuation, and she confided in me of hers. “I’m like, totally in love with my best friend,” she explained. “Which sucks since Sakura’s like so straight, y’know? Not a gay bone in her body, that girl.”

“Wait, you’re in love with Sakura?” I’d exclaimed, my usually unruffled demeanor evaporating in the shock. “Obnoxious, short, pink hair?”

“She’s not obnoxious. She’s just boy-crazy,” Ino replied. “It’s the society we live in.”

Able to sense one of Ino’s sociological rants from a mile away by then, I immediately broke the news instead. “Ino, she’s obsessed with me.”

“I know,” she’d whined. “You’re all she ever talks about.”

Ino and I had become friends without me even realizing it, not until Gaara and Naruto helped me see what friendship actually was. I guess I had these convoluted, ridiculous notions of what real friendship meant, and in application, the whole thing was far simpler than I could have imagined. I looked forward to seeing them on a regular basis; that alone constituted the foundation for friendship. Amazing. On days like this, after something major (or majorly annoying) happened between Naruto and I, I instantly started craving a latte. My body had become accustomed to the routine; me, green tea latte in hand, spilling my guts across the table from her, cap on backwards to indicate she was on break. Our roles were reversed just as often, and then it would be her leaning in close and letting the words tumble out like a waterfall of confusing feelings as I slouched back and took thoughtful sips of my token drink. Voila: friendship.

Ino had been at the party last night, but she’d disappeared with Temari at some point, and I wasn’t sure how much I’d have to catch her up on. Or how much she’d have to catch me up on, for that matter. Of course, there was also the possibility that she wasn’t working today, which is why I’d brought the book I’d started last night after I got home and couldn’t sleep. It was Call Me By Your Name, of all things—a gift from my birthday, belated but appreciated nonetheless, from Gaara. I think he gave it to me as a sort of test, from the way he analyzed my reaction. That, or he’s an
incredibly nervous gift-giver.

When I pushed through the door and strode inside the Daily Grind, Ino stood behind the counter with her plastic smile and trademark ponytail. “Hey Sasuke,” she greeted as I approached. “I get off in 15, and I’m meeting up with Sakura for dinner—” I raised my eyebrows, she shook her head—“so unless you want to get roped into joining, you might wanna beeline for the bathroom when she gets here.”

“Duly noted,” I replied.

“So,” she began, a curious grin forming on her face. “You and Naruto, huh?”

My lips parted, a long-winded rant seconds from bursting forth, but I thought the better of it. It needed to come out all at once or not at all. Not yet, anyway. “Green tea latte,” I said instead. “Extra matcha.”

“Come on, Sasuke! Just tell me a little bit at least,” Ino whined. “I would kill for the chance to spend seven minutes in heaven with she-who-will-not-be-named. You’re living the dream!”

“I am living a nightmare,” I corrected.

“Trade ya,” she quipped.

“I take it back,” I said. “Being in love with Sakura is the real nightmare.”

“As if your idiot boy-wonder is any better,” she replied, smacking me in the arm. “Speaking of, idiot in-coming. Three, two…”

I turned as casually as I could, spying the mop of fluffy gold hair just out of my periphery. He held the door open for his two companions, and I shifted my gaze, staring at Ino meaningfully. “This isn’t going to end well,” I muttered.

“Nope,” Ino agreed, glancing at the trio with a grim resignation on her face. Louder, she called out, “Hey Sakura! Be right there, last order.”

Sakura glanced up, away from her conversation with Naruto, and her eyes instantly landed on me. I wasn’t sure how she felt about me anymore after the lengths I’d gone to just to make her crush on me disappear. Truthfully, telling her I wasn’t interested in her should have been enough, and maybe it would it have been, with time, but she hadn’t changed in the week that had past since then. She was still following me around as I walked to my classes, still trying to coax me into bestowing even the slightest bit of attention on her, still acting entitled to me, to my time, to my energy. She’d set her sights on me the second she saw me, and far be it from her to even think about leaving me alone since. Maybe last night had been overkill, though, because she faltered when she looked at me, her eyes lingering a second too long before returning to the space where Naruto should have been. A beginner’s mistake, truly, because even Gaara knew that the instant that energetic blonde laid eyes on me, he’d come barreling over. Naruto tackled me with a hug, nearly spilling my drink, and I scowled at him, shoving him off of me before he could do any real damage. Gaara paused momentarily in the doorway, clearly deciding whether or not he should wait with Sakura. He said something to her, voice too low for me to hear, then walked up, leaving her standing awkwardly in the doorway, excluded in spite of her proximity.

“Hi, Shash-kay,” Naruto bellowed with a pronounced lisp, immediately drawing my full attention.

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded, leaning forward to try and inspect his features.
He squeaked, clamping his mouth shut, and Gaara nudged him, chuckling as he held something out for the blonde. The mischievous grin on his face only served to heighten my curiosity. “Take some ibuprofen, dumbass,” he chided. Naruto shrugged helplessly and he realized he had nothing to drink. Ino showed up in the nick of time, handing me my latte and grabbing Sakura by the arm.

“Well, lovely to see you all again, but we’ve gotta run,” she said, rescuing her love interest from the uncomfortable situation. I gave her a snide smirk over their coupled arms, but she just rolled her eyes and waved, tugging the other girl out the door.

“So, Sasuke, what are you doing here?” Gaara inquired, glancing at the book in my hand. His eyes met mine with a glint of recognition, and he smirked.

I held up my cup in response, only to have it snatched from my grasp by an overeager imbecile. He popped two pills out of their packaging and took a swig, gagging and as swallowed hard. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever tasted,” he sputtered. “What was that?”

A small snicker escaped my mouth before I even noticed it happening, but I stopped the grin in its tracks. Forcing a sneer, I wrenched my cup from his hands and snapped, “It’s the only good drink on the menu.”

“That’d be the masala chai, actually,” Gaara interjected, eyeing the clean script on my paper mug with begrudging approval. My tastes weren’t soaring above his expectations, but they weren’t below his standards either.

“If it’s not chocolate, it’s not valid,” Naruto exclaimed. “You’re both crazy!”

“And you’re a five-year-old,” I retorted dryly.

Naruto pouted, expertly proving my point, and I was nearly too distracted by the alarm bells ringing in my head—TOO CUTE, EMERGENCY—to notice the pointed stare Gaara gave him. He shuffled, suddenly sheepish, so Gaara rolled his eyes and focused on me. “We’re going to Ichiraku’s. Wanna come?”

I glanced back and forth between them, thinking I’d missed something. Naruto just stared at me expectantly while Gaara waited for some indication of my intent. I raised my eyebrow at them, figuring that I couldn’t expect to be looped in if I didn’t accompany the pair to dinner. Elio and Oliver would have to wait, I decided, shoving the book in the back pocket of my jeans. “Sure,” I declared. “Why not?”

The place was packed when we arrived. It was apparently the place to go for dinner on this Saturday night, and if the head chef didn’t have a soft spot for the compulsively-endearing Naruto, then I’m certain we’d never have gotten a table. Even the bar was full-up, but somehow the three of us landed in a booth. I could feel the prickling glare of the waiting-to-be-seated, sprouting bubbles of discomfort in my gut. Though Naruto and Gaara seemed nonplussed, I turned, craning my neck to get a glimpse of just how many people we’d managed to upset with our untimely arrival, and my gaze landed on our two compatriots from earlier. Ino caught my eye and raised her brows, so I nudged the blonde boy beside me.

“Hey, Ino and Sakura are here too,” I stated like an observation instead of a suggestion.

“What, really?” he replied, enthusiastic as ever. He turned around to investigate, spying the pair even faster than I had. “We should—”
“We really shouldn’t,” Gaara interrupted. “I’m not in the mood to listen to Sakura rail you again.”

“She what?” I asked, looking from Gaara to Naruto with restrained surprise.

“Oh, nothing,” Naruto said. “It’s fine. She was just upset when we bumped into her earlier, and you know me—grade A punching bag.”

“It’s more than that and you know it,” Gaara retorted.

“Naruto, what did she say to you?”

“None of your business!” Naruto replied, playfully sticking his tongue out at me. A glint of metal and a flash of purple caught my eye, and I narrowed my gaze.

“You pierced your tongue,” I observed. My brain was coming up with a thousand distractions involving Naruto’s bejeweled tongue, and it was only thanks to muscle memory and sheer force of will that I kept my face a beacon of stoicism during this trying time.

“No,” he said in the drawn-out sing-songy way a small child would. “He pierced my tongue.”

Gaara shrugged. “Guilty.”

Our waitress walked up, escorting Ino and Sakura with a slight frown. “Excuse me, these two say they’re a part of your group,” she said. “Is that right?”

“It sure is,” Naruto beamed, kicking Gaara in the shin to silence him. “Glad you could make it, girls.”

Sighing, Gaara got up and switched sides, squishing me in between him and Naruto so that Ino and Sakura could sit comfortably across from us. The waitress looked familiar, but I couldn’t place her. She probably went to school with us, or perhaps she attended the Monday night meetings. I stared at her face a second too long, trying to force recognition, and she blushed as she handed me a menu.

“Would you guys like to hear the specials?” she asked. We declined, and she walked away, offering me a small smile as she left. The look on my face must have said it all, because Ino began cackling.

“She was cute, Sasuke. What’s the matter, not your type?” she joked.

The waitress was very pretty—that was a fact, supported by a corrupt beauty industry that had warped society’s impressions of human-based aesthetics—but that’s not the sort of answer anyone wanted to hear from me. I raised an eyebrow and said, “She’s not yours?”

“Actually, Sasuke,” Naruto interrupted, saving the table from witnessing an impromptu battle consisting solely of implicit homosexuality repartee. “What even is your type?”

“That’s a good question,” Sakura added. “It seems like no one can measure up.”

“Not no one,” Ino said under her breath. It was meant for me to hear, but I wasn’t the only one.

“That’s true!” the blonde to my right enthused. “You told me you had a crush on someone!”

“You’re remembering that wrong. You were really drunk,” I snapped.

“So were you,” he countered. “I thought you didn’t remember anything about that night.”

A blush started to pinken my cheeks. “Are you two talking about Halloween?” Ino asked. She’d been the drunkest of us all, but I spent several days lamenting over the details with her afterwards,
skipping the part where she blew chunks all over my costume.

“Yes, exactly,” Naruto yelled. “It was Halloween, and you said you had a crush! So spill. Who could possibly be your type?”

Sakura opened her mouth, and my eyes widened in horror. She had enough information to redirect this conversation in a wholly unpleasant way, and she was just oblivious enough to do it, too. I had to say something, anything.

“Crushes are for the weak,” I declared. “I’d have to be a fool to have one.” Well, it wasn’t a lie.

“There you go again, with your antihero I-work-alone bullshit,” Gaara responded.

The beloved waitress who had inadvertently started this whole mess chose to reappear, saving me from further conversational harm. “Are you ready to order?” she asked, “Or do you still need a few minutes?”

Upon receiving our drink orders, she left again, bestowing another smile upon me like a small gift. It was still bothering me that I couldn’t figure out where I knew her from. Another waiter brought our drinks over with speed and proficiency.

“Guys, guys, I figured it out,” Ino announced suddenly. “It’s not that Sasuke doesn’t have a type. It’s that he can’t flirt!”

I cringed at the accusation, knowing full well that it was an undeniable truth. The table hummed and hawed, mulling over the hypothesis; Gaara nodded sagely as Sakura looped a curl around her finger in thought. Meanwhile, Naruto was the epitome of disbelief, and Ino looked like she’d cracked the DaVinci code. Before they could start in on another grueling interrogation, I stepped in and defended myself, saying, “Who needs to flirt when you look like me?”

Naruto choked on his drink, sputtering incoherently. Gaara was the first to speak, making a noise of approval and commending me with a, “Damn, all hail the king!” Ino saluted, which isn’t what people do to show respect to kings, and Sakura laughed softly to herself, nodding in agreement.

“Don’t be stupid,” Naruto finally chimed in, once he’d figured out how to correctly use his mouth. “Everyone needs to know how to flirt.”

“Then why don’t you teach him?” Ino blurted out. She had that insane look in her eyes I’d seen before when asking her for advice.

“That’s a great idea,” Gaara commented, reaching over me to nudge Naruto. “Give us all a lesson.”

He was bright red, but that kid never knew when to back down. He gave us all a curt nod, determination etched into his features. “No problem, guys. Watch and learn. You’ll see.”

First, he took off his jacket and pulled a pair of Aviators out of his pocket, nestling them on top of his head. It was clear that he was going for something, but whatever it was, the look was lost on us. He was wearing a tight red v-neck with a single black pocket on the chest—it looked like it belonged to Gaara, not Naruto—and it showcased his muscles with ease. Who was I kidding? Naruto was the one who didn’t need to flirt, looking like that. People would just strip for him upon eye-contact. Hell, he made me tongue-tied already and he hadn’t even started yet. I wondered who he was going to use for his demonstration, pleading with the universe to not let it be me.

His eyes sparkled as they landed on his target: our poor waitress, returning to check with us about our orders. “What would you like to order?” she asked.
“Are you on the menu?” Naruto inquired.

“Um,” she faltered. “No?”

“Ah, out of stock, I see,” he said. “Well, how about I give you my number and you can call when you’re available?”

“Oh, okay,” she replied, blushing. “Sure.”

“Great,” Naruto declared with a wink. She handed him her pen and notepad, letting him scrawl his digits in the corner. As he handed it back, she glanced at me and looked away instantly, embarrassed. I just rolled my eyes. We all ordered quickly, not wanting to prolong the social situation to the point of extensive awkwardness. Once she’d left, Naruto beamed at us, smug as hell.

“That was barely successful,” Ino complained. “All you did was give her your number. If you’d asked for hers, I bet she wouldn’t’ve given it to you.”

“I’d like to see you do better!” the boy huffed, indignant.

“You’re on, lover boy,” she said, immediately flagging down our waitress.

“Yes?” she inquired upon her arrival to our table.

“Hi, I wanted to apologize for my friend’s rudeness earlier. He can be a little abrasive sometimes,” Ino began, giving the girl a cool smile. “My name is Ino, by the way. What should I call you?”

“Haku is fine,” she replied. “Don’t worry about it. This sort of thing happens all the time.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” Ino commented. “Very fitting. I’m sure you get hit on all the time, with a face like yours.”

“Not as often as you, I bet,” Haku responded. “You’re so pretty. Which one of these lucky boys is your date?”

“Oh, no,” Ino laughed. “I don’t date boys.”

“You’re too good for them anyway,” she said with a smile.

“I wouldn’t say no to a date with you, though,” Ino added.

“I shouldn’t do this, but…” Haku gave a half-shrug and pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Add me on snapchat.”

“Sure thing.”

I’d seen Ino flirting before. I knew she was a master of the art, but apparently no one else did. As Haku walked off, Sakura scoffed, “You did that too well, Ino. People might begin to wonder.”

I looked from Ino to Sakura and back, searching for confirmation. Ino gave me a face, deterring me from vocalizing my thoughts, but I sat back in the booth and frowned anyway. I knew Sakura didn’t know Ino was in love with her. That made sense. You couldn’t just break that to somebody, not when they were your best friend. However, Sakura not knowing that Ino was gay? That took me by surprise. How could Ino even consider the girl her best friend when she hid so much of herself from her out of fear? It wasn’t right. Ino deserved better.

“Ah, let ‘em wonder,” the blonde girl retorted dismissively. “All I did was show dear old Sasuke
here how it’s done. He needed to learn from the master, after all.”

“And now it’s his turn! Show us what you’ve learned,” Gaara declared, waggling his drawn-on eyebrows at me with too much enthusiasm.

“I am not hitting on the waitress,” I argued. “She’s been through too much tonight already.”

“That’s fine,” Ino agreed. “Why don’t you try hitting on one of us? For practice.”

The way she was looking at me had me seconds away from leaping across the table and strangling her. Could she be any more obvious? This was the last time I was going to hang out with her and Naruto in the same building, that was certain.

“I volunteer as tribute,” Sakura mumbled. I think she was making a joke, but I didn’t get the reference. I was relatively certain that Ino would genuinely kill me if I flirted with Sakura, however, on the grounds that, first off, her love for Sakura overpowered her affinity for me, and secondly, if for whatever reason Sakura decided that it meant something more than what it did and I subsequently made her cry when she learned that it didn’t, well, Ino would be the one she bothered with those feelings.

“I think he prefers ‘em blonde,” Gaara countered, simultaneously coming to my rescue and damning me all at once.

“I thought we established that I don’t have a type,” I objected. “But if I did, pretty-boy goths like you would be it.”

Jaws dropped. Personally, I didn’t think it was that witty or even entertaining, but the whooping and hollering of the table suggested otherwise. Gaara stared at me in surprise, eyebrow cocked. “Lucky for you, I’ve got a thing for arrogant little dicks.” He smirked.

“I might be arrogant, but there’s nothing little about—”

“Here you go!” Haku announced, setting down two plates in front of us. A fellow waiter came up on the other side with the rest of the food. She directed him, then bid us adieu—flashing a grin at Ino on her way past. Unfortunately, Ino was so caught up in her utter shock that she barely even registered Haku’s presence at all.

“Of course, you’re a feisty flirter,” she finally declared, shaking her head. “You’re a regular Richard Siken in the making. Sorry about the blood in your mouth, I wish it was mine. That attraction to poetic violence is gonna get you in trouble, kid.”

I made a mental note to ask for a copy of something by Siken later. I hadn’t read him before, though she’d mentioned him a few times in prior conversations.

Naruto’s reaction was what really interested me, though. I turned to find him sullen and leaning against the partition, sulking like a child. I nudged him. “What’s the matter, usuratonkachi? Afraid of me stealing Gaara from you with my devilish charm?”

“Yeah, right,” Naruto said, rolling his eyes. “Gaara might act interested, but we all know he’s only got eyes for me.”

The redhead shrugged. “What can I say? Dumb jocks are my guilty pleasure.”

“Where does that leave Sasuke?” Ino asked with a coy grin.
“Gaara’s not the only one who likes ‘em cocky and depressed,” Naruto retorted. He put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me into a hug, flashing a peace sign just as Ino snapped a picture. I glared daggers at her as she pretended not to notice.

“Naruto might be the sunshine, but who doesn’t like a little rain now and then?” Gaara added, ruffling my hair.

Suddenly, Sakura stood up. “Excuse me,” she said quietly. “I think I should go.”

“What?” Ino asked, unmoving. “You can’t leave!”

“I really don’t enjoy watching the person I’m in love with flirt with a bunch of other people,” she responded, her voice shaking.

“Sakura, we’re all just messing around,” the other girl tried to explain.

“I don’t care!” she yelled. “This whole situation is just way too gay for me. I would think it’d be that way for you, too, Ino, but apparently not.”

I stood up, surprising everyone. “You and Hinata sat in the corner cheering when Gaara and Lee made out at Kiba’s party last night.”

She stared at me. “Yeah, so?”

“So either you’re uncomfortable because it’s me, or you’re uncomfortable because—”

“Because of me,” Ino whispered, the realization dawning on her.

“Yes, okay? Yes,” Sakura shouted, crossing her arms and sitting back down with a huff. “Sasuke, there’s nothing that you could do that would make me uncomfortable. If you want to flirt with other guys, be my guest. But…”

I sat down, landing awkwardly on Naruto’s hand. He yanked it free, but the sensation of him wriggling his fingers against my ass sent my mind in a different direction. It was too easy for me to switch from angry to horny. Ino was right. My penchant for aggression was going to get me in trouble someday.

“You’re uncomfortable because I hit on our waitress,” Ino stated plainly.

“Yeah, it’s weird. I mean, right?” She had to know that no one was going to support her on this.

“It is weird,” Gaara said. “Weird that you’re making it so weird. Why does it matter so much to you?”

“How could it not matter? That’s my best friend,” Sakura replied. “Her hitting on girls weird. I mean, she and I have slept in the same bed before.”

“Predatory lesbianism is a disgusting myth,” Gaara argued. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one Sakura was pissing off. “You just said she’s your best friend. Act like it.”

“She is my best friend! But she’s not gay,” the girl said. “That’s why it’s so weird.”

The silence that followed stretched on for too long.

“I mean, you’re not…you’re not gay, right? Ino?”
“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this here,” Ino murmured. She was handling this remarkably well, all things considered.

“Okay, but who’s not at least a little gay?” Naruto asked, trying to steal some of the spotlight and make things a little less difficult for the girl. “In this day and age? Come on.”

“I’m at least a little gay,” I agreed. Maybe taking the attention off of Ino was the best idea.

“Queerer than a two-dollar bill,” Gaara chimed in. “Soli-fuckin’-darity.”

Ino smiled a bit. “Solidarity,” she echoed. “I don’t think this is the time or place, but fuck it, yes, I’m gay.”

The dinner ended rather abruptly post-confession. Ino spilled the beans about her sexuality, and Sakura left, sputtering something about feeling betrayed. It sounded like nonsense to me, which I mentioned to Ino once the girl was out of earshot. Ino just nodded at me, forlornly dragging her fork through the veggies on her plate. “That’s how she reacted when I told her I’m gay,” she said. “Imagine what she’d have done if I told her I was in love with her.”

“You’re in love with her?” Gaara asked, surprised. “Ino, do you hate yourself or what?”

“That’s what I said,” I added for posterity.

“You guys don’t get it,” Naruto spoke up. “You can’t choose who you have feelings for. And sometimes you fall for someone you don’t have a chance in hell with and no one understands why you even like that person out of all people in the first place and none of it makes any sense, but it doesn’t have to. Because it’s your dumbass heart calling the shots.”

Ino smiled, her respect for Naruto skyrocketing in that moment. “Oh, they get it, alright,” she said. “But they won’t admit it.”

Chapter End Notes

With any luck, the next chapter will be typed and published before the end of the weekend! Hurray! I'm totally a Sakura-sympathizer, though I know you can't tell from any of her characterization in this story. I don't have any excuses. That's just how she comes out when I include her. I'm sorry.
BEFORE still with the bracelet on (part 1)

Chapter Summary

Don't ignore Sasuke or he'll show up at your bedroom window, glowering until you let him in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE still with the bracelet on

Naruto was avoiding me, the brat. He’d been skirting my glances and dodging my interactions for the past week. The jerk couldn’t even nod and smile as he passed me in the hallway—no eye contact, no greetings, nothing. He’d cut me off from him, cold turkey, and like an addict, my frustration became insurmountable. I was slamming my locker closed, shoving bystanders out of my way, punching harder during my kickboxing class. I had a theory about the blonde’s sudden absence from my side, and the thought only made everything worse. It was obvious what had happened: someone told him. Now, Naruto knew I had this gross crush on him, and he was so disturbed by the prospect he couldn’t even confirm it with me. Or worse, I was so blatant with my feelings that the second someone said it out loud to him, he realized I’d been disgustingly in love with him all along. It was a nightmare, and to make matters worse, I had no one to talk to about it. Ino was still reeling from the loss of her best friend, and it would be inconsiderate of me to pester her with such trivial troubles. Shizune might have some advice, but more likely than not she’d tell me I was overthinking things and then ask me questions about my demoralizing self-worth (or lack thereof). Tsunade was the big-sister type of mom, so the second I admitted I had a crush, on Naruto no less, she’d tease me relentlessly. The only other person I could possibly talk to would be Gaara—if anyone knew anything about what was going on with Naruto, it’d be him—but I couldn’t tell him the truth. So where did that leave me?

I was still considering whether or not to bring it up with the redhead as the Monday night meeting drew to a close. Naruto had failed to show his face, which was rare but not entirely unheard of. I just hoped it wasn’t because of me. I didn’t have the chance to make a final decision, because as soon as I gotten up to leave, Iruka of all people stopped me and talked to me near the doorway. Iruka was a bit of a mystery to me; I didn’t know much about him, though Shizune thought highly of him. He was just a simple man, in his thirties, leading a support group in his spare time—forgive me, but I failed to find him particularly compelling, even as a group leader.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Iruka greeted. His eyes were filled with worry in spite of the smile he’d put on for me. “You have class with Naruto, right?”

Oh, that’s what this was about. Of course it was. Naruto had an amazing way of getting people to care about him, and his absence was bound to be noticeable. Iruka reminded me of Holden Caufield’s English teacher in *Catcher in the Rye*—he seemed like the type of adult who got overly emotionally invested in teens who displayed characteristics that resonated with him. Thankfully, unlike Holden Caufield himself, Naruto was an excellent choice to care about. He didn’t recoil when someone showed him they cared, and he didn’t make snap judgements about people to avoid
connecting with them in a meaningful way. He could’ve picked a far worse kid to care about—he
could’ve picked me, for example. The thought nearly made me laugh, but I held it in, knowing that’s
the opposite of what Naruto would do.

“Yes,” I said finally. “I do, but he’s been avoiding me lately.” I don’t know why I admitted that to
Iruka. Maybe I just needed to get it out, to free it from the inside of me.

“That’s worrisome,” the man sighed. “Thanks, Sasuke.”

He walked away, only for his figure to be replaced with that of Gaara. The redhead had been leaning
against the wall, just out of eyesight; he’d eavesdropped, curious and quiet. Gaara gave me a quick
once-over, noticing the dark circles under my eyes and my unusually casual sweatpants plus hoodie
combo. “Naruto’s been avoiding you too, huh?” he asked, though it didn’t sound like a question.

“Is that yours?” I retorted, pointing to the ground. He looked down, then back up in confusion.
“Sorry, I could’ve sworn you were dropping eaves.”

He rolled his eyes. “I think you’re missing the point.”

“And what’s that?” I inquired.

“Naruto hasn’t been spending time with anyone—not you, not me, not even his pseudo-dad, Iruka.
Something’s wrong,” Gaara explained.

“Maybe. Or maybe he’s just busy,” I said, voicing the protests that had sprung up when I thought the
same thing.

“You don’t understand,” the redhead stressed. “He hates his foster family. And with good reason.”

A flash of a memory—that was right, I knew that, he’d told me so himself. Months ago, when he’d
come to school looking battered. Or was it before then? Was I making a faulty connection,
impulsively drawing lines between two unrelated things? I nodded at Gaara. “What are you
thinking?”

“If we show up at his house unannounced, we’ll get him killed,” he mused. “But we need to figure
out how serious of a situation this is.”

The two of us came up with a plan, though it was a bit more pathetic than I’d hoped. My role was to
talk to Tsunade, to mention the possibility of abuse; meanwhile, Gaara would gather what little
evidence he’d managed to collect over the years of knowing Naruto. Tomorrow, we’d approach him,
armed with knowledge and proof, and we’d get him to confess. It seemed a bit brash to me, given
that we didn’t even know for sure that’s why Naruto was isolating himself, but it also happened to be
the best we could do at the time.

“Okay,” Gaara concluded. I could tell his thoughts were still a million miles away. “Need a ride
home?”

“Thanks, but Shizune should be waiting for me outside. See you tomorrow,” I answered.

Family dinners weren’t a big thing for Tsunade, Shizune, and I. They were, however, of the utmost
importance when I was growing up. My mom would cook, and my brother and I would set the table
or help her prep. It was a ritual of sorts. Dad was useless, though. He’d come home from work
chockfull of pent-up aggression, and then he’d sit, reading the newspaper in silence. He was only
one room away from his family, but it felt like we were worlds apart. Sometimes, he would surprise us, joining everyone in the kitchen, but those instances always wound up worse than his silence. He couldn’t just let things be; he had to control everything. Nothing I did was good enough, and he was always barking orders at Itachi. He made my brother redo everything for me. If I set the plates, if I put down the silverware, if I laid out the napkins—wrong, wrong, wrong. God forbid I chopped the vegetables: that would render them inedible! He’d throw them away and take out more, forcing Itachi to fix my mistakes. Sometimes Itachi would stand up to him for me, but I think that made it worse somehow. As if I couldn’t even stand up for myself correctly. Shizune says that I couldn’t be expected to—I was barely five, six years old—but I wonder if things would be different if I was more like the son my father wanted me to be. Maybe Itachi wouldn’t’ve killed him.

Despite the unusual nature of us having a family dinner, once Shizune and I arrived home, I made the request. “I need to talk to you,” I said to Tsunade when she’d looked at me with surprise. “Let’s eat dinner together.”

We ordered pizza—no muss, no fuss—but the two of them sat at the table with me, instead of on the couch. It was a small gesture of respect, and one I appreciated. Tsunade took a hesitant bite, eyeing me with concern. She glanced at Shizune, clearly thinking I’d have mentioned something during my therapy session today, but Shizune was just as lost as she was. They waited expectantly to be clued in, but I still wasn’t sure how to start. Sensing my dilemma, Shizune said, “It’s okay, Sasuke. The words don’t have to be perfect.”

I cleared my throat. “I know you don’t like to bring work home with you,” I began, staring pointedly at my maternal replacement.

“Not since you, kid,” she replied, wiping her mouth with a paper towel. “Why? What’s going on?”

“I think my friend is being abused,” I said evenly.


“What’s going on with Naruto?” Tsunade asked.

That’s what I loved about her, truth be told. She wasn’t one to dawdle, to comfort, to fill up the air with words. She always got to the point, even when it hurt. As a social worker, her intolerance for the trivial occasionally landed her in hot water, but the fact remained that no one was as efficient and beneficial as her. She had a sense for these things. It was her strong, take-no-shit attitude that I gravitated toward when she was assigned to my case. Taking a deep breath and leveling my gaze, I explained it all to her. I told her everything I could think of, from the way he’d come to school with inexplicable injuries to the mannerisms he’d display around authority figures. I left no details out. Well. I left out the part where I was in love with him, deeming it irrelevant. Tsunade listened to me, her face somber and impossible to read. When I finally finished, she nodded once, slowly, and said, “Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

It was the last class of the day by the time I’d started to rethink the mediocre plan Gaara and I had hatched. Sure, there was strength in numbers, but maybe such an abrupt confrontation would only spook him. Maybe we should regroup, come up with something better. I was going to text him and let him know, but something caught my eye. In general, it’s a hard and fast rule of mine to not involve myself in the mundane nuances of others’ emotional fluctuations, but if the expression on Naruto’s face was any indication (and his expressions always were), I knew exactly what emotion was plaguing him. I could use it to my advantage. He hadn’t been in class yesterday—I watched
Asuna, our history teacher, gave him in-school suspension over that stupid tongue ring—so he wasn’t in class when we got our Chemistry finals back. I’d done my damnedest to ensure that the idiot wouldn’t fail since he’d unabashedly joined that insufferable study group, but when Kurenai handed him his test, his face fell. He’d have to answer me if I asked him about it, I was certain. After all, if participants were failing in spite of the study group, that could be grounds to get rid of it once and for all. The final bell rang and I popped out of my seat, approaching the blonde with a dead stare. He saw me and we locked eyes; time slowed to a crawl around us as he racked his brain for an escape plan. He broke right, leaping over a desk and bolting for the only door. Naruto was strong and fast, but he was clearly favoring his left side. Agile and far less injured, I beat him to the exit, arms crossed over my chest.

“What gives, usuratonkachi? One second you couldn’t leave me alone if your life depended on it, and now you can’t even tell me what you made on the test? Is your grade that bad?” I snapped.

He was less than a foot away from me—it was the closest I’d been to him in days. My eyes were instantly drawn to the bruises he’d been trying to hide. The makeup was off-color, his skin was still swollen. His haggard breathing caused him to wince. The sight of him like this alarmed me; I stepped back on impulse and stared at him, the shock and anger welling up in my gut without hesitation. He took the opportunity to slide past me, and though I could have stopped him, the last thing I wanted was to hurt him.

“Sorry, Sasuke, I really can’t talk right now. I have to get home,” he said. “Mother will…worry.”

Maybe I’d imagined the pause. Maybe there wasn’t anything strange or hesitant about the way he’d said “worry.” Maybe he just genuinely didn’t want to see me. Something in me wasn’t buying it, though, and I didn’t want to doubt my intuition. I stared after him as he raced to his obnoxious orange Jeep, certain that he was hiding something. Hiding everything.

Acting on impulse is something I rarely do. I take my time, think things through, strategize and plan according to the variables. But seeing Naruto like that, watching him speed off, it blossomed this urgency in my gut, and I didn’t bother. If I had thought it through, maybe I would have done something different. Something better. Something that didn’t end with anyone in the hospital. Instead, I called Gaara, and together we played detective, lurking outside of Naruto’s home.

His house isn’t great. Wasn’t great. Naruto, for all of his charm and aplomb, lived in a run-down townhouse, a generic duplex in an awful neighborhood. His foster family was evidently impoverished and painfully Caucasian—the type with a MAGA sign in their front yard and a confederate flag flying on the post, though you might not have guessed it from looking at them. The woman Naruto called Mother was a thin brunette with sharp features and high-end taste. She’d been rich once, as evidenced by her demeanor, and there was a dehumanizing hunger in her eyes. Her husband was a small, balding man with a staunch mustache and beady little eyes. He seemed like the subservient type, eager to lick the heels of the woman he’d married. I blanched as Gaara filled me in on what he knew; these were not good people.

“We can’t wait out here all night,” I said, watching as the sun set behind the house. I was antsy, shaking in the passenger seat.

“You’re right, but…” He stopped, thinking. “That’s Naruto’s window, there. I think you should look around, get the lay of the land.”


“Two people creeping into an alley is way more suspicious than one,” Gaara answered. “Plus, if those demons he calls foster parents so much as think they see me, they’ll have the cops out here so
fast it’ll make your head spin.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Be back soon.”

Sneaking up to his window was easier said than done. It’s impossible to be silent in an alleyway that decrepit and trashed. Still, I made it without setting off any major alarms—the local inhabitants likely just thought I was a stray dog or something. As I peered into his room, I heard him speaking. Though I couldn’t make out what he was saying, I saw him laying on his bed talking into a tape recorder. His shirt was off, his hair was disheveled, his brows were furrowed, his eyes were distant. I was starting to feel a bit creepy, like I was doing something wrong, but I couldn’t go back empty-handed. I needed answers. Before I could lose my nerve, I made myself tap on the window—he leapt in the air like a startled cat and bounded over with the recorder still in his hand.

“Sasuke! What are you doing here?” he demanded. “You have to get out of here. You can’t be here.”

He sounded more afraid than upset, so I took my chances. “Just answer some questions and I’ll go,” I negotiated. He hesitated, but eventually gave in. I climbed quickly and quietly through the window, sitting on his bed expectantly. Naruto sighed and sat down next to me, tense and jumpy at the slightest sound.

“What is it, Sasuke?” he whispered, exasperated. “What do you want to know?”

Following his lead, I whispered back. “Where’d you get those bruises, dobe?”

Naruto looked at me, sheepish. “I did something wrong, so I was punished.”

“How do you respond when you realize that the abuse your friend has incurred isn’t rooted in the past but is still on-going? I was about to say something, to say anything, to spit and sputter and rant and rave until whatever I said sunk in, but then we heard it. Quiet, but just loud enough to make the color drain from Naruto’s face. A knock. Wide-eyed and trembling, he whispered, “Hide. Now.”

The frantic desperation on his face was more than enough to convince me to crawl under his bed, grabbing his tape recorder on the way down. If something bad was going to happen, I’d be damned if I let it continue. Proof was key. The room was tensely silent; I could hear my heart thudding in my chest. Then the door opened, and the woman Naruto feared more than anything else walked in, heels thumping against the carpet.

“What have you done?” Mother asked, a seemingly innocent inquiry though her tone sent shivers down my spine. It was saturated with malignance. Naruto, to his credit, answered her honestly and clearly, saying something about coming home immediately after school without a hint of fear in his voice. She stepped forward, he stepped back. She closed the door behind her and walked around him, though for what I could hardly guess.

I could hear her yanking something off the wall and ripping it, I could see the pieces flutter to the floor. Naruto said nothing. He hadn’t moved at all. I heard something snap, and a plastic figure fell the floor, irreparably mangled. Still, though, Naruto said nothing. He didn’t even look at her. With a chuckle, she said, “School called. Do you know what they told me?”

He turned toward her as something else cracked in her hands, and the wreckage of a Millennium
Falcon crashed on the carpet. She backed him into the door. I crawled hesitantly out from under the bed, away from the woman, and I peered over the edge of the mattress, horrified but determined. She smiled, he trembled, I watched. Maybe that would have been the right time to step in, to stop her, to save the day. I didn’t move. I waited. She whispered, “Did you think that the school wouldn’t tell me about your illicit jewelry?”

He cringed when she touched him, grasping his face with her spindle-like fingers. She clenched his jaw in her hand, squeezing until his lips puckered involuntarily and his cheeks began to bleed from the pressure of her sharp nails. He wasn’t looking at her, though. His eyes were locked on me. In a rough voice, she demanded he show her the offending metal, and Naruto, wincing, inched his tongue out of his mouth, putting the stainless steel bar on display.

What happened next nearly sent me into cardiac arrest. Without warning, a cackling, strangled laugh, ripped out of her throat like she’d been possessed, and her free hand found its way to Naruto’s mouth. The grin on her face shifted downwards in frustration—all I could hear was a soft squelching, like a raw chicken breast being torn in half, followed by more of that unsettling laughter. A pool of dark, coppery blood spilled over the brim of his lip, flowing down his chin like a gentle waterfall. The pain must have been immeasurable, because I watched as his eyes fluttered, on the precipice of consciousness, and he slumped back against the door. She released him then, only to push until he fell to the ground. She only got in one good kick before I was on her.

An adult with a high pain tolerance might have been fine, having their tongue piercing ripped out. They’d been angry, even. Perhaps they’d gone on the attack, lunging forward with flying fists until, whump after sickening whump, the offender was finally unconscious on the floor. Then they might have raided the liquor cabinet and sewn their tongue back together after a shot or two of tequila. Maybe I’m giving adults too much credit, maybe not. Doesn’t matter. Naruto wasn’t an adult at all. He’d been held back, sure, making him kind of old for a 10th grader, but he was still just a kid. He was 16 and barely 130 pounds soaking wet—the thought of him defending himself against a literal monster was unimaginable. Which is probably what made me do it for him.

She’d kicked him in the gut with her heel, but it got stuck. She’d barely managed to pull it free and had just started to rear back for another attack when suddenly I was smashing the stupid football trophy against her head. Knocking people out always seems so easy when they do it on TV shows or in self-defense demonstrations, but when it’s just you and the monster, it feels endlessly more complicated. That’s why I hit her again, and again, even after she dropped like a ragdoll to the floor. I was crying when I dragged Naruto to the window, only managing to wake him long enough to get him out and to the car.

Gaara drove like a maniac to the hospital. He was shouting at me, but his words felt far away. They didn’t reach me, I couldn’t understand him. I just kept seeing blood, all that blood, and the bodies. Frustrated with me, he slammed on brakes at the next red light, sending me sprawling against the dashboard and snapping me out of whatever trance I’d entered. “Call your mom,” he barked, eyes grave. I didn’t even have enough in me to correct him.

Tsunade met us at the hospital, though I doubt I’d made much sense on the phone. She was already there, waiting for us with a friend from the police station. The doctors took Naruto back immediately, leaving Gaara and I there to make our statements.

“Where’s Shizune?” I asked. “I think I need her here.”

“He keeps disassociating,” Gaara said to her like I couldn’t hear him. Then again, maybe I couldn’t,
because his mouth was still moving and I hadn’t a clue what was coming out.

Tsunade gently forced me into a seat, plopping down in the chair beside me and putting her hand on mine. Gaara disappeared with the cop, calling his parents as they stepped outside. It felt like world stillled, and time refused to pass for me until Shizune got there. She jarred me out of it with an awkward hug, leaning down to embrace me. I blinked for the first time in what suddenly felt like hours. “Shizune,” I said, surprised. I stood up, as did her wife.

“Thank you for coming,” Tsunade said, pulling her into a tight hug. “I think you should be the one to sit with him when he gives his statement.”

“Okay,” she replied. Turning to face me, she asked, “Sasuke, can you talk about what happened?”

I frowned at her. There was something off about the images in my mind. I kept seeing the bodies. My old house. The blood and brain matter. That wasn’t right, though, was it? I’d been at Naruto’s house. I saved him. From Itachi. Right? No. No, Itachi was in prison. He wasn’t here. He couldn’t be here. Confused and anxious, I shoved my hands into my pockets and furrowed my brows. My intention was to name the streets I grew up on—an effective grounding technique for people like me—but something else drew my attention. My fingers touched something strange, and I pulled it out of my pocket reflexively. A tape recorder. It was humming, still recording as if it had all the tape in world. There was the distinct possibility that it contained everything the state judicial system needed to legally free Naruto from his prison. The thought of Itachi floated through my mind again, but I didn’t let it connect to anything. Instead, I handed the tape to Tsunade. She looked at it with something akin to a grim hope before taking off, headed in the direction I’d seen Gaara disappear to earlier.

Shizune put her hands on my shoulders, giving me one of her reassuring stares. “Everything is gonna be okay, Sasuke,” she told me sternly.

“I think I killed someone,” I replied, my voice sounding distant even to my own ears.

“You’re always so melodramatic,” she said dismissively. “Whatever else happened there, you saved your friend’s life. You’re a hero. Stop trying to turn yourself into a villain.”

“It’s unintentional,” I retorted, a small smile wriggling onto my face.

“It’s ugly is what it is. And stupid, too,” she added. “That self-esteem of yours still needs work, I see.”

“Always,” I answered.

The doctors came out later, after Gaara had returned. My primary guardian had yet to come back, still hard at work with the police to resolve the situation in the best way possible. Apparently, Naruto had lost a lot of blood—more from the puncture wound in his abdomen than from his tongue—and they’d had to stitch him up in quite a few places. He had some broken ribs, too, but those were at least a few days old. He was hopped up on painkillers and fast asleep, but we could see him now. Gaara and I exchanged glances, both of us acknowledging how right we’d been to assume the worst when he was avoiding us. The abuse had gotten to visible, and he knew he couldn’t hide it.

Naruto slept all night, and we took turns sitting up with him. He groaned a lot in his sleep, but mostly he looked peaceful. His hair was a messy golden halo against the starch white pillow, and even washed out, his skin still seemed to glow. Gaara left around dawn, saying that he knew his best
friend and that kid was gonna be famished when he woke up. I think he needed some time to himself, too, to process what had happened and smoke a cigarette or two without any of the adults ragging on him. My turn to talk to the police would be coming up soon, but my thoughts were still too scattered. The memories were blurring together. I nodded off one moment, and then dreamed that I’d beaten my parents to death as Itachi clapped in the corner. I awoke with a start, only to find myself alone in the hospital room. Shizune had stepped out, it seemed, likely making a phone call, but Naruto had completely vanished. I was moments away from screaming when he stumbled out of the bathroom, dragging the metal hanger behind him. I managed to catch him before he fell, and he stayed leaning against me for a long time. When he finally stood on his own and looked me in the eye, he frowned.

“Sasuke,” he mumbled, putting his hand to my cheek. “You were crying?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. I led him back to bed, and he climbed in, a bit disoriented.

“We’re in the hospital?” he asked.

“Yeah, Naruto,” I answered, taking a seat on the edge of his bed.

“Oh no!” he exclaimed before I could say more. “You never call me Naruto. What’s wrong? Am I dead? If I’m dead, does that mean we’re gonna make out? Wait. Is this heaven or hell? Am I a ghost? Are you dead too?”

I laughed, just a little, and tears sprung from my eyes the second I let my guard down. Frowning again, Naruto grabbed me and pulled, urging me into him. I laid there next to him with my head on his chest and his arm wrapped around my shoulders. “You’re not dead,” I muttered. “Neither am I.”

“Hmm,” he deliberated, thoughtfully tracing his fingers against my arm. “Popsicle Jesus.” I looked up at him, only to find that he was staring down at me. “You have pretty eyes,” he added.

I supposed I’d wasted his moment of lucidity by getting emotional, but I couldn’t help it. I waited until he dozed off again before I left the bed and went in search of Shizune. For some reason, I felt like I could give them my statement now.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shiiiiiiit y’all, this bit has been a nightmare to write. I was rereading what I’d written with the intent of typing it all up, and it was all garbage. Absolute trash. I had to rewrite the whole chapter, which ended up making it obscenely long. Now it's in two parts, and I should post part 2 tomorrow.
The title for this one is actually from Raining by The Front Bottoms, so... A little too on-the-nose, but whatever. :)
Naruto bolted upright in bed, chest heaving and the bitter taste of lilac soap ghostly on his tongue. He felt the trickle of sweat running down his back and tried to throw the blankets off in the dark. It was just a dream, a bad dream. He sat on the edge of the bed in the still-unfamiliar room, staring at the floor. It’d been ten days, six hours, and fifty-three minutes since the incident, and though he couldn’t thank the Shukakus enough for their hospitality after he’d been released, staying in their mansion out in the suburbs felt foreign. It was different, when he’d just been crashing here or hanging out with Gaara. Now, though, when he didn’t have anywhere else to go, the isolation only worsened his nightmares.

He got them all the time. Nightmares, bad dreams, whatever. About his parents, about the scars on his face, about anything and everything. This one was hardly the worst, and it wasn’t even based on the most painful thing she’d ever done to him. Okay, there was absolutely nothing pleasant about having a metal bar ripped through your tongue, or being stabbed with a shoe, or having your crush watch the whole thing with terror in their eyes, but ultimately, as far as things went, well…Naruto’d had worse. Still, he needed something to wash that taste out of his mouth. He rubbed absently at his tummy, fingers grazing the bandages that covered the stiletto-shaped stitches soon to be a scar. Just one more to add to his collection.

Quiet as a mouse, Naruto snuck down the hall and breezed through the door, heading for his Jeep. An orange beacon of familiarity in the cool night air. He supposed he had the freedom to rummage through the kitchen if he wanted to, but it felt unnatural, searching for a midnight snack in someone else’s fancy cupboards. Besides, what he really wanted, despite it being 2 o’clock in the morning in the middle of December, was a chocolate milkshake. So that’s how he ended up at the All Nite Diner on the far side of the town, near the high school. That’s the one with the best shakes, even though it was farther away from Gaara’s place. He wasn’t expecting to be the only person in the restaurant when he got there, not by a long shot, but when he walked in and saw two people he recognized, he nearly walked right back out again.

It wasn’t like him to be antisocial, but he hadn’t exactly come out of hiding with that intent. Okay, he wasn’t hiding; he was recovering, alone and away from everyone, without telling them. Or maybe he was hiding, whatever. He was still dazed and disillusioned from his bad dream, and things were always so hit or miss with Sasuke. He hadn’t seen him since the hospital—the raven-haired teenager hadn’t even come to see him when he’d been released. There was a prickle of worry in his gut; maybe Sasuke thought differently of him, having seen him so feeble and defenseless. Perhaps he wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who’d been so easily beaten, so casually victimized. Maybe he even blamed Naruto for it, for letting it happen, for putting Sasuke in the position to be his
savior. Naruto cringed, wondering whether or not he could order a milkshake to go and abscond without Ino or Sasuke noticing him. He wasn’t in a good mood, and it was steadily getting worse. Sometimes, he could talk to Sasuke for hours at a time, and it felt like they understood each other on an atomic level. Other times, though, all they did was bicker with each other until one of them exploded like a bomb. He didn’t want to risk it.

“I’d never seen someone look so vulnerable,” Sasuke was saying when Naruto inched up to the counter. Ino was nodding thoughtfully, engrossed in the conversation. “It was awful. He was just so weak.”

Naruto froze, realizing that they were talking about him. He’d hated it, hated it with every fiber of his being when he’d locked eyes with Sasuke as Mother tormented him. He’d never wanted anyone to see him like that, let alone the merciless Uchiha. He’d been trying his best for days not to be irrationally angry about it; after all, the kid had saved his life. As his social worker, Tsunade had set him up with a counsellor—a man named Jiraiya, who was more than a little initially abrasive—and he’d instantly caught on to Naruto’s resentment. He told him directly, “If you don’t want someone to rescue you, try not to need it.” It was a fair point, though the objective was actually to highlight Naruto’s inability to allow himself to be vulnerable. Still, if people seeing him in a state of vulnerability was a no-fly zone, then people talking about having seen such a thing was definitively grounds for being shot down, with a bazooka. He was still gaping like a fish out of water when the waitress approached.

“Hey there, welcome, c’mon and have a seat. Booth, table, or bar for ya?” she asked, a pleasant smile on her face.

“To-go,” he replied. He was trying not to be loud, trying to get his shake and go, trying to keep his anger contained. He didn’t want to hear anything more, couldn’t even think of seeing Sasuke after he said something like that, hadn’t moved in the slightest in an effort to detract attention. He would allow himself to get pissed off in the privacy of his car; he’d get in and close the door and rant to the empty passenger seat the whole way home.

The sound of his voice must have been unmistakable, apparently, because he heard the distinct lit of Sasuke’s as he said, “Naruto?” and turned in his seat.

“Nevermind,” he told the waitress, spinning on heel and charging out the door. Though his car was straight ahead in the parking lot, he ducked down the sidewalk and rounded the corner for good measure. He figured, if Sasuke was going to follow him out, he’d head straight for Naruto’s car. Which was a stupid thought. As if that asshole would even bother following him in the first place. He hadn’t even bothered to call and ask how Naruto was doing in the past week. Grumbling to himself, Naruto was seconds away from turning back and storming to his car, when suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder and the force of someone spinning him to face them.

“Get lost on the way back to your car, dobe?” Sasuke chided. His eyes twinkled in the moonlight like obsidian gems, and to Naruto they seemed just as cold and lifeless.

“Nevermind,” he told the waitress, spinning on heel and charging out the door. Though his car was straight ahead in the parking lot, he ducked down the sidewalk and rounded the corner for good measure. He figured, if Sasuke was going to follow him out, he’d head straight for Naruto’s car. Which was a stupid thought. As if that asshole would even bother following him in the first place. He hadn’t even bothered to call and ask how Naruto was doing in the past week. Grumbling to himself, Naruto was seconds away from turning back and storming to his car, when suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder and the force of someone spinning him to face them.

“Get lost on the way back to your car, dobe?” Sasuke chided. His eyes twinkled in the moonlight like obsidian gems, and to Naruto they seemed just as cold and lifeless.

He tried to hold it together. He really did. He closed his eyes, counted his breath, squeezed his nails against his palms. He thought he was okay enough to end the conversation and leave, but one look at that pointed smirk on the boy’s face sent him over the edge. He was trembling with anger when he finally met Sasuke’s eyes. “You know what I don’t get,” he muttered, voice low and full of venom. “What the fuck you were doing at my house in the first place.”

Sasuke stared at him, raising an eyebrow and frowning. He said nothing, watching and waiting with those cold dead eyes.
“I know you wanted to ask me about my bruises, my broken ribs, my black eye,” Naruto snapped. “But what I can’t figure out for the life of me is how you ever thought any of that was your goddamn business.”

“Oh, I get it,” the boy said, sneering. “You’re mad at me for seeing you like that. Weak.”

Naruto clenched his fists. He hated that it was so easy for Sasuke to figure him out, to know exactly what bothered him. Shouting, he pushed the boy against the brick wall. “I’m not weak.” He was practically growling.

“I’m not the knight-in-shining-armor type, really, but I know a damsel in distress when I see one,” Sasuke retorted. “Sorry for saving your life. Won’t happen again.”

With that, he twisted out of Naruto’s brash grip and turned his back to the boy. Naruto faltered, then grabbed him. He pushed harder, pressing himself against Sasuke. Sandwiched between the blonde and the bricks, he glowered and hissed, “Let me go, usuratonkachi. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Fuck you,” Naruto spat, eyes glinting with rage. His face was so close, he could feel Sasuke’s uneven breaths coming out in spurts.

“Yeah, I know you want to,” he snapped. “I can feel your erection stabbing me in the hip.”

The words sent a shock through Naruto, who instantly recoiled. He didn’t have an erection. Did he? Sasuke was clearly banking on the blonde’s confusion, because he used the opportunity to mutter, “Eat shit, Uzumaki,” and storm off. He stomped away from the fuming blonde in the darkness and back to the bright lights of the diner, unnerved and frustration. Naruto stood there, alone and quiet for a few minutes, still reeling. He’d been about as hard as a freshly boiled lasagna noodle when Sasuke’d made his remark, but Naruto was growing angry by the second about it. He felt embarrassed, though he couldn’t explain why, and he rushed into the diner, ready to demand an apology.

Except, the diner was empty. So he demanded a chocolate milkshake instead.

Gaara had never thought of Naruto as conventionally smart. The blonde couldn’t name pi to two places, let alone ten, and he nearly always ended Chemistry labs early by inadvertently breaking something. He wasn’t a virtuoso, couldn’t tell the difference between a butter knife and a frying pan, and his artistic pursuits left something to be desired. But as the kid’s best friend, Gaara had also never thought of Naruto as stupid—he had a knack for people, he understood something about them in a fundamental way—until today. “You absolute idiot,” the redhead declared. “You utter fucking dumbass.”

“No, he’s the dumbass!” Naruto shouted, his confusion evident. “The asshole! The stupid jerk!”

“No, Naruto, that’d be you,” Gaara retorted. He’d listened to the boy ranting all morning, pacing around his bedroom like a madman. “How do you even know Sasuke was talking about you? Did he say, Gosh, Ino, it was so hilarious seeing Naruto all defenseless and injured like that? Is that what happened?”

“Yes,” Naruto muttered.

“No, it’s not. First off, what kind of sick son of a bitch would think that abuse is funny?”

“Exactly!” the blonde interjected.
“Not one you’d be friends with, that’s for sure,” Gaara continued, ignoring his friend. “Secondly, I know for a fact that Sasuke didn’t judge you for being vulnerable.”

“How would you know? You didn’t hear him.” Naruto was pouting, sitting on the couch with a pillow clutched to his chest.

“Because, you nitwit, I was there.” Gaara leaned against the bookshelf, facing Naruto. He glared at the blonde boy and crossed his arms over his chest. “I saw him,” he said quietly. “Scared and crying and dragging you to my car.”

Naruto looked up, eyeing Gaara with a hint of doubt in his eyes. “He wasn’t scared,” he mumbled. “He was strong. Stronger than me.”

“He couldn’t even speak he was so freaked out,” Gaara exclaimed. “He needed both of his moms there with him when he spoke to the police! He refused to leave your side until you’d woken up. Does that sound like someone who’d be shit-talking you at a diner in the middle of the night?”

“No, but…if he wasn’t talking about me, what else would he be talking about?”

“That is the most self-centered thing I’ve ever heard you say,” he chastised, shaking his head in disbelief. “Naruto Uzumaki, who once shared his entire lunch with some hungry preschoolers, now can’t believe other human beings exist as possible topics of discussion.”

“That’s not how I meant that and you know it,” the blonde grumbled. He tossed the pillow at Gaara, but the redhead caught it with ease.

“Who cares, dummy,” he snapped. “Go fix what you broke.”

Ino didn’t get Sasuke sometimes. Most of the time, truth be told. He was hyperaware and painfully observant, overanalytical and ruthlessly intelligent. You’d think that’d mean he’d fuckin’ act like it from time to time at least, but if you asked her, he rarely ever did anything to make people think he had a brain at all, let alone a smart one. She stared at him critically as he sat in the clothes-covered chair at her desk, sipping tea from a mug that said “world’s greatest dad” in kindergarten scrawl.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to be here?” he asked again, looking around her bedroom with unease.

“Like I said, since Sakura’s mom told my mom I was a lesbian, her finding you here right now would probably come as a relief,” Ino answered.

Sakura had outed her on accident, but no one apart from Ino believed that. She’d had an anxiety attack, upset over the drama she’d instigated, and when her mother tried to calm her down, the truth came gushing out like a burst pipe. Sakura’s mom, though a bit more on the understanding side of the spectrum, still thought it was her responsibility to make sure Ino’s parents were aware of the damage their daughter’s sexuality was having on her friendships. It was all news to her mom, of course. Her parents had immediately removed her from the all-girls Catholic school, convinced that more exposure was the answer. Could’ve been worse, she’d said with a shrug when Sasuke’d asked.

He sighed. “Fuck, Ino. Why’s he gotta be like that?”

He was talking about Naruto again. It’s where his mind always ended up. “The real question is, why you gotta be like that?”
“What?” he retorted.

“The smell of blood on the first four knuckles. We pull our boots on with both hands but we can’t punch ourselves awake,” Ino replied, chunking a well-worn book of poems at him. “Richard Siken. Little Beast. Study up, it’s your future.”

“You know,” he said, looking over the book with a snide expression. “You don’t make half as much sense as you think you do.”

“Here’s my question, Sasuke,” she answered. “Why are you an ass?”

“All the other personality choices were taken,” he said dryly.

“I’m serious. Why is your instinct to convince Naruto the opposite of the truth?” Ino looked at him pointedly, taking another sip from her mug. “Every time you get the chance, you try to convince him you hate his guts.”

“I don’t want him to know that I like him,” Sasuke mumbled.

“That’s a whole nother problem, buddy,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “No, I mean, why do you turn into this aggressive, belligerent tool? If it were just about throwing him off your scent, you could stick with apathy, but no. You do your best to piss him off.”

He paused. “I hadn’t really given it much thought. It just comes naturally, I guess.”

“And bam, there ya go. Take the Siken and leave,” Ino retorted. “It’s your fate.”

“Have you finished the book I lent you yet?” he asked, standing up and putting the poetry in his pocket.

“When do I have time to read, Sasuke? I spend all my free time listening to you whine about your testosterone-fueled love-hate life,” she said.

“That or moping about your own dreary romantic prospects,” he snorted.

“Hey! Too soon,” she accused. “Go on, leave before I throw you out the window.”

He started to the door and stopped, looking back at her with a somber expression. “It’s bad, right? That I don’t feel guilty about putting her in a coma?”

They’d been discussing Naruto’s foster mother at the diner, after Ino’d called him to bitch about Sakura’s mom. The way Sasuke’s eyes looked when he told her about bashing in that woman’s skull sent shivers down her spine. But there was something Sasuke had yet to realize about himself that Ino had known from the moment she’d met him in the coffee shop; like recognizes like, and it wasn’t just homosexuality she’d seen in him that day. There was a broken, fragmented anger there, reflected in his eyes. She recognized it immediately, from seeing it in her own. She smiled at him and said, “I’d have done the same thing.”

Tsunade was more than a little surprised to see Naruto at her door. She cleared her throat and made a mental note to talk to the boy’s therapist about boundaries. Specifically, how to have some. “Naruto, I wasn’t expecting you. Our appointment is for tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” he replied, looking embarrassed. “I’m not here for that, though. I wanted to see if
Sasuke’s home.”

“You came to my office to ask me if my son is at home?”

He stammered, avoiding her gaze. “No one answered the door.”

“Did you try his cell phone?” she asked.

“The thing is, I maybe sort of said some things to him, and I want to apologize, but—”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Tsunade said. Naruto had learned quickly that was her way of saying goodbye, so he thanked her and left.

She texted him a few minutes before six, suggesting that he show up at the Daily Grind around seven pm. She didn’t say why or what to expect, so Naruto nervously got dressed and arrived ten minutes early. He fidgeted with his coat, tugging on the hem of his sleeves and dusting off the sides impatiently. The dark blue looked good on him, but it would’ve looked better on Sasuke, he was sure. The coat had too many pockets, buttons, strings. He didn’t know what to do with all of them. Eventually, he just took the thing off, preferring the way he looked in the black polo and faded jeans. It wasn’t a typical outfit for him—no t-shirt? no letterman?—but he was trying to look nice. He wasn’t sure why he was dressing up, exactly. Maybe to make up for the way he’d been wearing an inside-out orange sweatshirt and pajama pants the last time he’d seen Sasuke, or maybe to give him a good first impression so he’d bother with hearing the apology Naruto’d written. Mostly, though, Naruto had just wanted to seem genuine; a true apology should come with effort. Then again, maybe he was just being stupid. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Seven o’clock came and went. He sipped a hot cocoa, sitting in the corner near the window. It was dark outside, the streets illuminated by buzzing lights spaced too far apart. He wondered if he was being stood up. When would he know for sure that Sasuke wasn’t coming? 7:30? 8:00? Should he just go home now, head hung low, reeking of abject failure? He was readying himself to leave at twenty-past when the doorbell jingled, signaling entry. He glanced up, not expecting but hoping, and his eyes landed on a forlorn and grim-faced Sasuke. Naruto’s breath caught in his throat, and he felt himself blushing as he stared. Sasuke was always good-looking, to the point where it was more infuriating than attractive most of the time, but sights like this only served to remind Naruto just how into boys he could be. Sasuke had donned a simple maroon sweater, thick but fitted, and dark jeans that hugged every curve. He had a black coat draped over his arm, and his bangs were tucked behind his ears out of habit, revealing more of his face than he usually seemed comfortable with. He looked so dashing, Naruto could picture him as the romance plot for a Christmas-themed romcom.

Sasuke hadn’t seen him yet, was in the midst of ordering, so Naruto pulled out the card he’d gotten at the last minute and gave it a nervous once-over. It had a cute Samoyed on the cover, apologetically looking at a cartoonishly injured mailman. “Whoops,” the inside said. “Didn’t mean to bite your head off!” It was tacky, sure, but on the chance that Sasuke didn’t want to hear him out, he wanted to at least give him the apology he’d written. He’d scribbled it all out there on the card, everything he wanted to say. He looked at it critically, sighing at his handwriting, when he noticed his signature. He’d signed it, “Love, Naruto.” What a dork.

Just then, the card was snatched from his hands. “What this?” a familiar voice intoned, tough it wasn’t the voice he’d been expecting. “A love letter?”

“Fuck off, Kiba,” Naruto snapped, lunging for the card. “It’s none of your business.”

Sasuke was watching them, Naruto could feel it. The stare got under his skin, giving him goosebumps. The asshole was just standing there as he waited for his order, a bemused smirk on his
perfect face. Naruto growled at Kiba, and his teammate stuck out his tongue. “Where ya been lately, cap’n?” the boy asked, holding the card just out of reach.

“Doesn’t matter, give it back,” he spat, groaning as he raised his arms a little too far and stretched the stitches.

“Careful, Kiba,” Sasuke said coolly, drink caddy in hand and coat snugly around his shoulders. “He just got out of the hospital. Wouldn’t want to send him back.”

At the news, Kiba instantly stopped taunting Naruto and handed the card to him with a worried smile. “Sorry, dude. What happened?”

Naruto wanted to respond in a polite and friendly way, but his eyes went wide as he watched Sasuke leaving. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to apologize yet, and the jerk was already taking off. He’d reached the door by the time Naruto mumbled a quick, “Hold on a sec,” as he pushed past the brunette and just barely caught Sasuke by the arm. The tug caused him to drop his drinks, sending them splattering to the floor. He took one look at the mess, then frowned at Naruto.

“I’m beginning to think you were put on this earth just to plague me, Uzumaki,” the boy said.

“I—” Naruto stammered.

One of the baristas appeared with a mop, looking even more annoyed than Sasuke himself, and the two boys moved out of the way so she could clean up. Naruto looked at Sasuke’s face, only to find himself unable to tear his eyes away. The glow of his skin bathed in the soft yellow light. The pale pink of his lips, so inviting and pure. The warmth of his dark eyes—oh, how had he ever thought they were cold! They were smoldering coals, a fire deep and black. He felt his ears turning red; he was so unbearably embarrassed. The pointless fight, the spilled drinks, the obsessive staring; Naruto had too much to apologize for and not enough gusto. He shoved the card in Sasuke’s hands before he could chicken out. He was too distracted, too clumsy, too nervous—and Sasuke was too gorgeous, too perfect, too ruthless. The closest thing to a proper apology Sasuke was going to get was now crinkled in his hands, and Naruto turned on heel, sprinting back to the safety of farcical repartee with Kiba in the corner. He refused to look when he heard the exit bell ring.

Sasuke called him the next day. “You’re an idiot,” he announced.

“Most people start with hello,” Naruto replied, grinning sheepishly.

“Dear Sasuke,” the boy read aloud. “If there’s one thing I should apologize for, it’s being an idiot.”

“No, no, no!” Naruto shrieked, his face falling. “Don’t read it to me!”

“Did you know that the original meaning of apologize was explain?” he asked. “No, I doubt you would.”

“Touché,” the blonde retorted. “I didn’t know that.”

“Your explanation left much to be desired,” Sasuke stated. “But you are an idiot, so I’ll cut you some slack. We’re doing something for Christmas next weekend. You in?”

“This means you forgive me, right?”

“Depends on how great your gift for me is,” he answered, his smirk audible.

Naruto laughed, relief flood through him like a burst dam. “Just you wait, it’ll be the best present
you’ve ever gotten! The greatest gift in the world!”

“Whatever it is, it can’t beat Tsunade’s gift for you,” he replied.

And he was right. At their scheduled appointment, Sasuke’s meaner mom had a remarkable announcement to make. She looked him in the eyes and told him, “Congrats! You’ve been emancipated. It’s a Christmas miracle, kid.”

He stared at her in shock, unable to form a coherent response.

“Let me tell ya, I can’t count how many times the judicial system has taken its dear sweet time with these things. If I were you, I’d give a big ol’ hug to the Shukakus. They must’ve greased the wheels with their influence,” she continued, grinning at the blonde.

“Oh my god,” Naruto breathed. Emancipation had felt like a pipe dream, not the sort of that becomes reality overnight. “What… What about Mother?”

“She’s still in the hospital, pending trial, but her husband is behind bars where he belongs,” Tsunade replied. “This is the closest thing to a happy ending you’re gonna get.”

Naruto threw his arms around her. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he exclaimed. Tsunade hesitated, then hugged him back.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! We’re so close to finishing BEFORE! Here’s a mini outline for y’all:

BEFORE
first kiss
dealing with the deceased
friendship
hbd sasuke
halloween
the middle
the daily grind
the hospital (aka still with the bracelet on parts 1 & 2)
x-mixed feelings
arcade fire
i want to (spring) break free
an untimely confession

Then comes AFTER. I promise it’s not a Looking For Alaska style after. No one’s dead. That’s not my kind of angst. All I want is for my boys to end up happy!!!
BEFORE x-mixed feelings

Chapter Summary

it's CHRISTMAS it's GAY what more do you need to KNOW

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE x-mixed feelings

Naruto showed up at my apartment early—three hours early, as a matter of fact. Maybe he was annoyed by the way I’d ignored his texts and calls all week, or maybe he just has too much emotional energy reserved for such a stereotypical holiday. Regardless, there he was, knocking on the door while Shizune pulled the turkey from the oven, Tsunade took the cookie dough out of the fridge, and I taped the banner above the sectional couch. We all glanced at each other, then the door, wondering who could possibly have arrived before nightfall. I sighed and dismounted the step-ladder since I was the closest, only to have my eyes assaulted by the ugliest X-mas sweater I’d ever seen the second I opened the door. In a flash of greens and reds, Naruto threw his arms around me.

Perhaps because of the dumbfounded stare I was giving him, the blonde boy pouted. “Sasuke! You haven’t forgotten about me, have you?”

“Well if I had, you could rest assured it’d never happen again,” I replied. “Something that ugly will be seared into my brain forever.”

“Mission success,” the boy said. “Mmm, what’s that smell?”

Of course he’d be instantly drawn to the food. He wandered into the kitchen, instantly getting roped into helping the two women prepare the preparations. We weren’t expecting a party, by any means—just a few close friends—but those two always went overboard. Shizune was making finger sandwiches, and she instructed Naruto to cube cheese, slice bell pepper, and chop celery for the platter. She was handier in the kitchen than Tsunade, who was laying out premade cookies on a tray as if it took any skill. Perhaps I ought to have been more worried about them embarrassing me—but my last session, they both knew all about my stupid crush—but instead I felt thankful that they were entertaining him. My social skills still left much to be desired, despite how hard I’d been working on them. I took the opportunity to bring the presents out of hiding and place them under the tree, Naruto’s gift standing out from all the rest. I stared at it, a sinking feeling in my gut, but as I heard the lit of Shizune’s voice from the kitchen, her sage advice from Monday echoed through me.

We’d been discussing The Incident™ (the one where I’d brained someone) at length; for once, I was the one who wouldn’t leave a topic alone. The way it’d made me feel, smashing that plaque against her skull until she went limp, scared me. The darkness in me scared me. I’d hit her again and again, thinking only of Naruto, but each blow gave me an adrenaline rush like nothing I’d ever experienced. I was worried that seeing my parents’, dead with their brains on the floor, had turned me into a psychopath.
Shizune disagreed—she told me that the brain has a way of adapting to trauma, to reworking the narrative in a way that leaves someone more functional than they would be otherwise. She said that the nightmares I’d been having were manifestations of that subconscious process, but she didn’t know about the dreams, the good ones. I hadn’t been able to tell her—the dreams about Naruto, they always started the same. We were always arguing over something inconsequential and mundane, but it would escalate until we were fuming. He would be yelling, inches from me, his hands gripping my shirt collar so hard his knuckles went white. Then I’d cross a line, say something I shouldn’t, and he’d punch me. Hard. Right in the face. Livid, I’d punch him back. We’d beat each other senseless until I’d gotten him on the ground, pinned beneath me. Angry, spitting blood, he’d writhe and twist, but he couldn’t get free. Then, without warning, I’d crash my lips into his, hard. He always gave me the same look in the dream: confusion, desire, rage. He’d respond viciously, hands pulling my hair or nails raking my back. He was unwavering, earnest, brutal. I woke up tasting blood and burning with desire every time. It was too private, too intimate, too revealing.

When I’d kept pressing her about my concerns, though, she looked at me with professional curiosity. “What are you so afraid of, Sasuke?” she’d asked.

“I’m afraid that I’m a monster,” I’d told her. “No better than his foster mother.”

“You’re logical to a fault,” she’d said. “I don’t believe for a second that you think your actions were uncalled for. You didn’t do them because you derived pleasure from the act.”

It was hard to argue with that, but I tried my best. “It made me feel good, doing it.”

“Protecting Naruto made you feel good,” she corrected. “Doing so physically made you feel powerful, strong, dependable.”

Perhaps she’d noticed the subtle way I’d reacted to his name, because she pursed her lips. I mumbled something about being a bad person, and she frowned at me with a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

“You’re afraid of Naruto seeing you as a monster,” she murmured. “But why would you think he’d see you as anything other than a savior?”

“I don’t know,” I remarked. “When I saw him the other day, he looked at me like… Like I was other-worldly. I didn’t like it.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Usually, when Naruto looks at me, I feel like he really sees me. He’s not just seeing whatever he wants to see. But when he stared at me, it looked like he thought I might hurt him.” I shrugged. “And Ino’s always going on about how aggressive I am with him. She even gave me this book of poems.” I rifled through my bag, pulling out the slender copy and handing it over. Shizune’s eyes went wide with recognition.

“Sasuke,” she’d said slowly, her eyes examining me with a detached coldness. “Is it possible that these concerns stem from the fact that you’re in love with him?”

Knowing that it would be impossible to hide something from her once she’d uncovered the truth, I sighed. “Possibly.”

“Have you considered asking him how he feels about you, in regard to your act of heroism? It could clear up some of the confusion and worry you’re feeling.” Shizune took everything in stride; I loved that about her. I could have admitted that I’d wanted to have a sexual relationship with an automobile and she’d nod with feigned understanding.
I hadn’t wanted to admit it, not then, but she was right. She was always right. I glowered at the tree, the presents beneath it, the festive décor surrounding me; I resented the way that I couldn’t come to conclusions like that on my own. Why was I so damaged, why did it have to be so hard, why couldn’t I just be a person. Communication always felt so unnecessarily difficult to me.

Naruto walked into the living room, breaking me out of my thoughts. He squatted down next to me, admiring the visage. He pointed to the stash of brightly colored presents, saying, “Which one’s mine?” with a cheeky grin.

“Oh, you were expecting a gift?” I replied, raising an eyebrow. “That’s too bad.”

“Very funny, jerk,” he said, shoving me playfully. I pushed him back, and he fell onto his butt with a surprised, “Oof!”

“Yours is here somewhere, don’t worry,” I clarified. “Where’s my present, dobe?”

“Oh, were you expecting a gift?” he intoned, mocking me as he stood up. I rolled my eyes and followed his lead, standing a little too close to him. His hand bumped mine as he turned to retrieve his bag from the couch, and I tried to ignore the sparks that ignited across my skin from the contact. “Yours, your moms’, and everyone else’s!” He began placing haphazardly-wrapped boxes under the tree.

Tsunade emerged from the kitchen with a frown. “She kicked me out,” she exclaimed. “Said I was going to burn the house down.”

“I believe her,” I replied, moving away from the boy as he emptied his bag. “You could start a fire with nothing but utter willpower.”

She considered this for a moment, then smirked. “You’re right. I am a miracle-worker.”

A knocking drew our attention before I could make a smart remark and land myself in trouble. “Hey, sorry I’m early!” Iruka greeted as we opened the door. “In my defense, I’ll have to leave early too.”

“No worries,” Tsunade said. “Welcome, welcome. Shizune is in the kitchen, but she’s on the warpath.”

“I heard that,” Shizune shouted.

The pair of them started for the kitchen, but Iruka paused when he spied his favorite teenager lurking near the X-mas tree. “Naruto!” he said, surprised. “I didn’t know you were going to be here. I should’ve brought your present!”

Naruto enveloped the man in a hug, and the two of them stood there, chatting like they hadn’t seen each other in months even though it had only been since Monday. I watched them enviously for a moment, amazed by Naruto’s ability to just naturally engage with others. Tsunade joined the conversation, and I left them there, sneaking off to my room while they were all distracted. I needed to get ready for the impending gathering, and it wasn’t like I could contribute to their discussion anyway.

I’d laid out an outfit earlier, not wanted to risk the possibility of getting it dirty during the preparations. It wasn’t anything extravagant, like Tsunade’s Mrs. Claus ensemble, nor was it a festive monstrosity, like Naruto’s sweater; I liked to keep things simple, same as Shizune. Her dark green dress was the perfect attire for the evening, I thought. For me, there was my maroon sweater, a staple of the season, and a pair of green skinny jeans so dark they were practically black. It was the most effort I was willing to put into a holiday that I didn’t care for.
As I pulled the sweater over my head and fixed my mussed-up hair, I heard a noise like a startled mouse. Tearing my eyes away from my reflection in the mirror, I glanced to the doorway. A blushing blonde stood in the frame, his hand on the door. Evidently he’d pushed it open. I glared at him, leaning against my dresser and crossing my arms. “I didn’t take you for a peeping tom, usuratonkachi,” I remarked.

“Who’d want to peep on you?” he snapped, though his blush worsened significantly.

“You, apparently,” I replied. “Enjoy the show?”

“Fuck you,” Naruto exclaimed. “I just wanted to ask if you wanted anything from the Grind. I’m going out on an errand for your moms.”

“And you’ve never heard of knocking?” I retorted.

“The door was open!” he shouted.

“It was ajar,” I corrected.

“No, it’s a door. Are you having a stroke?”

The thing about Naruto is, he’s an enigma. He’s not what anyone’d usually picture as an enigma—not quiet or brooding, not mysterious or somber—but that never failed to stop him. He was enigmatic by sheer force of will. I could never tell when he was pretending to be stupid for the sake of a joke, pretending to be stupid so people would be surprised when he was actually smart, or just genuinely stupid. Sometimes it frustrated the hell out of me, especially when he’d tease me for being gullible once I’d bought in to his act. Other times, I found it terribly charming. I stared at him suspiciously, until he cracked.

Laughing, he said, “Okay, okay, you caught me. I know what ajar means.”

“Good,” I replied. I grabbed my coat off the bedpost and headed for the hallway, breezing past him. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, you want to come with?” he asked.

I left him standing there, and he raced to catch up with me. He played the most obnoxious X-mas music I’d ever heard on the drive over. Someone with more musical authority than I should really tell him that the Ying Yang Twins do not belong on the same mix tape as the Ramones. In an effort to halt the attack on my ears, I decided to take Shizune’s advice and broach the topic of Naruto’s feelings.

“Hey, dobe,” I interjected, turning down the music. He glanced at me, and I looked away from him. Staring out the window at the passing buildings, I muttered, “How do you feel about me?”

He was quiet for just long enough to make my heart hammer in my chest. “Jesus, Sasuke!” he finally exclaimed. “I told you I wasn’t peeping!”

“Not that, dumbass,” I snapped. “I’m talking about the—the—forget it.”

“What?” he asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Nevermind,” I said. I couldn’t bring myself to admit that things had felt different with him since I’d attacked his foster monster. It made me feel too exposed.
“Sasuke,” he whined.  

My lips were sealed.  

Naruto pouted and pleaded the rest of the way to the coffee shop, seemingly full of annoying energy. He stopped once we’d gotten the drinks and chocolate-covered espresso beans Shizune had requested, though. His silence was unnerving, and I was twitching in my seat, sure that I’d managed to ruin his evening and my entire life, that he was going to drop me off and hightail it out of there, that he wasn’t going to put up with my caustic attitude a second longer. When we stopped at a red light, though, he reached over and put his hand on my thigh, close to my knee. He didn’t look at me, smiling sadly to himself.  

“This is about you rescuing me, isn’t it?” he asked.  

I was dumbfounded, not for the first time. Naruto’s ability to understand and empathize with others was practically sorcery. I nodded, once, and he laughed, squeezing my leg. “It’s not funny,” I snapped. “You’ve been treating me differently.”  

He stopped laughing, looking at me with bright eyes. The light turned green, but he didn’t take his hand off my leg. “Sorry, teme,” he said. “You just amaze me sometimes.”  

“What?”  

“I owe you a debt I can never repay,” he explained. “And part of me resents you for that.”  

“Hn.”  

“But a much larger part of me wishes I was more like you. It’s been hard, navigating those feelings,” he finished.  

“Why would you want to be more like me? I’m dangerous,” I retorted.  

“Dangerously protective, sure, and you don’t let fear hold you back in times of crisis. That’s admirable. You’re admirable.” He flashed me a smile.  

I dropped it, knowing that any rebuttal I made would sound more self-deprecating than intended. He kept his hand on my thigh until we reached the apartment complex, and I did my best to resist the urge to intertwine my fingers with his.  

We made it up to the entrance without issue, but when I opened the door and saw Sakura sitting on my couch, I froze. Naruto, perpetually oblivious, ran right into me, squishing the coffee between us. The contents of the lattes mingled together, dripping down my sweater and into my pants. I could only assume the same for him. “Great,” I muttered. “Just great.”  

My irritation was palpable, but I let Naruto into the bathroom with me anyway. I tried to clean myself off, but it wasn’t going anywhere. With a sigh, I resigned myself to changing clothes once again. I glanced at Naruto, whose sweater was inarguably ruined, and I told him I’d lend him something else to wear. He stayed there for a little while longer, trying in vain to clean off his prized possession.  

I tried to calm down as I searched through my closet, not wanting to make things worse with my reputedly bad attitude, but I couldn’t fathom what the pink-haired girl thought she was doing here, sitting on my couch, when she’d been so incredibly rude at dinner. My guardians were gay women—how could she possibly think she was welcome here? Sighing, I grabbed the green sweater I’d
inadvertently stolen from Kiba’s house and a pair of faded blue jeans for myself. Considering the opportunity I had to see Naruto in something that wasn’t as vibrant or obnoxious as his usual wear, I took a little more time with my choices. The thought of him wearing my clothes gave me a strange sense of satisfaction. Smugly pulling out a dark green turtleneck and some darkwash jeans, I looked up to see him walking in with a pensive frown. I held the clothes out to him, smirk in place, and he thanked me as he took them out of my hands.

Setting them on the bed, he began to strip off the sweater, pulling it up over his head and tugging the black undershirt with it. He exposed his hips, waist, torso—I watched him, entranced, and then my eyes landed on it. The small wound, pulled taunt by black stitching. Without thinking, I reached out and touched it, just as Naruto’s head popped out of the neckhole. He felt my fingers on his stomach and glanced down, but he didn’t say anything. He just let me look.

“Does it still hurt?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” he answered. “Not now.”

A smile ghosted my lips. “Good.”

“Your fingers are cold, though,” he commented, flinching away from my outstretched hand. He pulled the new sweater on over his head, and I stripped down to my underwear, trying to make this whole situation go as fast as possible. He removed his pants, but I could feel his eyes on me.

“Are you going to get dressed or is this going to be one of those kinds of parties?” he teased.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I snapped, hastily tugging the jeans up and buttoning them closed.

“Hey, is that—” Naruto touched the sweater I held in my hands, and I rolled my eyes before putting it on.

“Yeah, I haven’t given it back yet.”

He chuckled warmly, his fingers brushing against my waist as he gently tugged it down into place. I tried not to think about the rush of electricity that surged through my body at the feeling of his skin on mine. I pointedly ignored the way those lips curved into such an easy grin; I wasn’t imagining how it would feel to have them pressed into mine, to have his fingers in my hair, his teeth against my neck, or his hips grinding into mine. “That’s okay,” he was saying. “I won’t tell. Keep it forever if you want.”

“Maybe I will,” I retorted.

It was the way he was looking at me, head cocked to the side and those eyes brimming with mirth. He was looking at me like I was the most interesting person on the planet, and all I wanted to do was punch him for it. The thought of his angry eyes filled my mind, and for the briefest second, I had the deepest need to see him with a busted lip, wiping blood from his mouth. There was something really wrong with me, I decided.

Sakura was still on the couch when we entered the living room, dashing my naïve hopes that she had possibly been the illusory byproduct of an encroaching psychotic break. I narrowed my eyes and demanded, “What are you doing here?”
She hesitated. “Ino told me you were having a party.”

“It’s not a party,” I retorted. “And you’re not invited.”

“I wanted to come over beforehand, to tell you that I’m sorry.” She looked down at her feet, wringing her hands and shifting her weight. “Ino and I are friends again, and I was hoping that we could be, too.”

“We were never friends,” I said.

A knock should have dragged my attention away from her, but my glare was more important to me. She needed to know just how serious I was. Naruto opened the door like he lived her, and Ino came bounding in, screeching to a stop when she saw Sakura a few feet away. “Sakura!” she exclaimed.

“Hi, Ino,” she said. “I was just leaving.”

“Aw, no. You should stay,” Ino replied, looking at me with pleading eyes. “We made up, you guys. Don’t be mad.”

“Are you kidding?” Naruto asked, beating me to the punch. “The only thing I’m mad about is that you didn’t tell me earlier! Then I could’ve gotten her a present.”

I nearly hit him. “Ino, she stopped being friends with you because you’re gay.”

“People change,” the girl replied with a shrug.


“You’re gonna get hurt,” I said.

“Then that’s my problem,” she retorted.

“You’re not the only one. The majority of attendees are queer,” I continued. “She’ll make people uncomfortable.”

“You, Naruto, and Gaara are the only ones who know. She’s changed. She won’t offend anyone,” Ino argued.

“The second she does, she leaves.” I sighed, a tension headache forming behind my eyes. There was little else I could do but mitigate the damage when it occurred. Ino thanked me with her eyes, and the two of them went to join Tsunade, Iruka, and Shizune in the kitchen.

Naruto smiled at me. “You’re a good friend,” he said quietly.

“No. A good friend would’ve kicked her ass to the curb,” I muttered.

“Hey, Naruto, Sasuke,” Ino called, prompting him to join her. I was intending on following when the doorbell rang.

The door opened, and I was relieved to find another sane person on the other side. I welcomed Gaara with more gusto than necessary, likely causing him some minor discomfort, but I was tired of dealing with the irrational blondes I kept trying to protect. He gave me a brief hug, and I quickly recounted the news of Sakura’s presence.

“Wow, that’s fucked up,” he commiserated.
You’re telling me,” I replied.

Once Jaraiya and Gai arrived, Tsunade and her wife finally stopped preparing and joined the congregation in the living room. Naruto and Iruka were engaged in a seemingly riveting discussion, while Jaraiya, Gai, Tsunade, and Shizune reminisced about old times. Apparently they’d all gone to the same university, a few years apart. Gaara and I shot the shit, and Ino tried to keep Sakura from feeling too out of place. They’d disappear every now and again; I imagined the conversation revolved around the way Sakura didn’t feel welcome, with Ino begging her to stay each time. I hoped Sakura would win eventually, if only so she would get out of my house.

Gaara and I were talking about his upcoming family vacation—the Shukakus always went somewhere new and exciting during the holidays, and this year they were all headed to Malaysia. He was going to catch a redeye there tonight, since he’d missed the flight in order to come to the gathering tonight. He’d just finished telling me about their last trip, to Beijing, when I heard Tsunade calling my name. Surprised, I looked around and found her in the hallway with Sakura and Ino.

“Hey,” I said, surveying the scene. Tension hung thick in the air like a miasma, and Sakura was on the verge of tears. “What’s going on?”

“Your friend here said she’s uncomfortable,” Tsunade answered, gesturing to Sakura.

“She’s not my friend,” I replied.

“Wasn’t she here for your birthday?” she asked. “Or was that another girl with pink hair?”

“Yes ma’am, we were both here for Sasuke’s birthday party,” Ino chimed in.

“Okay. Anyway, Sasuke, you should take better care of your guests,” Tsunade chided. “She wouldn’t tell me what’s wrong, but maybe she’ll talk to you.” With that, she walked off, rejoining the party.

I stared at Sakura, raising an eyebrow. “If you don’t want to be here, feel free to leave.”

“Sasuke, wait, it’s my fault,” Ino interjected.

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“Stop defending me, Ino,” the girl declared, finally meeting my gaze. “You don’t like me. I get it. And if you want me to leave, I’ll leave. But I meant it when I apologized, and I hope you’ll forgive me one day.”

“I don’t want you here,” I said simply. “And Ino, I know she’s your best friend, so if you want to leave out of solidarity, I won’t be offended.”

Ino nodded, glum. “Yeah, okay. We’ll go. Do you want to exchange gifts with me on the 25th instead?”

“As long as you don’t invite Sakura,” I said.

They walked to the door and bid me a goodnight as they left, and I snuck off to my bedroom, throwing myself on the mattress and staring up at the ceiling. I let my mind wander. The entire disagreement had been exhausting, and I needed a few minutes to myself before I could rejoin the populace. It frustrated me, knowing that there had to be something good about Sakura for Ino to be
so hung up on her. It upset me even more to see Ino so mistreated by someone so juvenile. The whole thing was a mess, and thinking about it would’ve driven me crazy if my phone hadn’t sprung me from my reflections with its shrill cry.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Sasuke Uchiha,” a voice I didn’t recognize drawled.

“Who’s this?”

“You don’t know the truth. You only know what he wanted you to believe,” the voice said.

“Cryptic. Who is this?” I replied dryly.

“Talk soon.”

Click.

The conversation, despite being so obviously bullshit, left me on edge, so when Naruto knocked softly on my ajar door, I sat up straight and glared at him. He smiled apologetically from the doorway. “Hey, Sasuke. Everything okay?”

I relaxed a little, sighing as I leaned back on the palms of my hands, and he joined me on the bed, a quizzical gleam in his eyes. “No, but it’s not a big deal,” I answered.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, clearly thinking about something else. I looked over at him, the green turtleneck clinging to his form in all the right places. The dark color went well with his complexion, and it brought out the deeper hues of his golden hair. My eyes traced the way his jawline met his neck, following the curve of his shoulders down past his arms. I watched as he fidgeted with his hands.

“You alright?” I murmured, incapable of taking my eyes off him.

“Never been better,” he replied, trademark Uzumaki grin in place. “Iruka just asked me to be his roommate. He said I don’t have to pay for anything as long as I do well in school.”

I let out a small chuckle. “Of course he did.”

“I’m just so lucky, y’know?” Naruto mumbled. His eyes looked bigger and bluer somehow. “To have people like you, and Gaara, and Iruka in my life.”

A tear slid down his cheek, and I wiped it away without a thought. “It’s a Christmas miracle,” I replied, hoping that would get a smile out of him. It worked, and he beamed at me, bright as the sun, before yanking me into a deadly hug.

“Thanks, Sasuke, for everything,” he mumbled into my shoulder.

“Is that why you came in here? To tell me about Iruka?”

“No, actually I wanted to tell you that your moms are starting *The Polar Express*. Come watch it with me!” He pulled away and flashed me a grin. I would watch it with him—of course I would. He’d practically given me no choice, looking like that. I’d follow him off a cliff if he wanted me to.

“With us,” he suddenly corrected, blushing at his faux-pas.

“I’m sure you’ll be the only one watching it,” I remarked.
In the living room, Naruto quickly became caught up in conversation with Jiraiya. He seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed to love him. I was hardly even surprised anymore. I took a seat near Gaara, who was chatting with Shizune about the meetings Iruka led. Wondering where he was during such a praise-laden discussion, I looked around and found him saying his goodbyes near the door. Thanks to a prior obligation, he was on his way out. Opening the door and taking a step backwards, he bumped directly into Kakashi, late as always. Kakashi smirked, grabbing hold of Iruka when he stumbled in his eagerness to undo the damage.

“Sorry,” Iruka mumbled, blushing.

“That was quite the fender-bender,” Kakashi replied. “I’m going to need to see your license and registration.”

His wink seemed to throw Iruka off balance. “I don’t… have any?”

“Then your contact information will have to suffice,” the other man said.

“Um, okay,” Iruka replied, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Do you just want my cell phone number?”

“A name would also be nice,” he answered.

“I’m Iruka,” the brunette said.

Kakashi introduced himself, and Iruka quickly rattled off his phone number before leaving, apologizing again for the mishap on his way out the door.

Gaara was the next to leave, citing his red eye as an excuse, but I made sure to hand him his present before he disappeared. He and Naruto had already exchanged gifts; he gave me mine with a small smile. “Merry Christmas, hope you like it,” he said. And then he was gone.

“What’d you get?” Naruto asked. He examined my oddly flat gift with confusion.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No, he said I’d end up telling you what it was.” The blonde frowned at me.

“That’s believable,” I replied. “It’s clearly a record.”

“Aren’t you going to open it?” he asked.

“No, I’ll wait.” I stuck it under the tree.


“A red and black ukulele.” I’d painted it myself. It was cheap and overly sentimental, but I thought he’d like it.

Naruto seemed to think that was the funniest thing in the world. He was choking back laughter, gasping out incoherencies like some kind of prophet. “You’re so thoughtful, I wonder what you got me,” he finally managed to get out.

“Let’s not do that right now,” I suggested. Watching him open his gift was going to humiliate me.
“You’re right! We should go look at lights first,” he declared, jumping up off the couch.

I’d never seen the appeal of driving around foreign and familiar neighborhoods solely to see decorations, but it was impossible for me to decline when he gave me that excited smile. “Fine, I’ll get my coat.”

He brought our gifts, tucking them in the backseat with care. The stuffed bear I’d gotten him stared at me from atop a pile of clothes, its dead eyes judging me. His Jeep had knickknacks and trash scattered everywhere, but it smelled like his cologne. Naruto drove all the way out to the suburbs, past Gaara’s house, looking for a decently decorated neighborhood. We rode around for a while, passing house after glowing house as his wretched tape played in the background. A light snow was falling, and in the twinkle of the X-mas lights, I felt the slightest hint of magic inside me. After a little while, he pulled into the driveway of a house marked with a “for sale” sign and leaned back in his seat. Lacing his fingers behind his head, he said, “What a year, huh?”

“Things have certainly been unexpected,” I agreed.

“I’m glad I met you, ‘suke,” he mumbled. My eyes on the falling snow, I couldn’t tell if he was tired or embarrassed as he spoke.

“What a lazy mouth you have,” I said dryly. I glanced over at him, surprised to find him watching me.

He grinned, saying, “You of all people should know my mouth is far from lazy.” Then he winked.

My cheeks turned pink under the heat of his gaze, and before he could say anything, before he could do anything, I grabbed the present from the backseat and toss it unceremoniously in his lap. “Open it,” I commanded, my voice rougher than I’d intended.

“You got me a stuffed animal,” he observed, a bemused glint in his eye.

“Not exactly,” I replied. His present was more akin to a pinata of sentimentality, and I cringed when he figured it out.

It was a red and green bear with the year embroidered on the paw, and down the middle I’d given it dark red stitches of yarn, tied in a bow at the neck. Curious, he untied it and slipped his hand inside. The first thing his wriggling fingers encountered was the cassette tape. He and I didn’t see eye to eye musically on most occasions, but I figured he’d like a podcast episode about the history of the holiday. Next, he retrieved a barbell for his navel piercing with a decorative spiral in the place of plastic gemstone. The final item hidden within the bear was my heavily annotated copy of my favorite book, and I was only giving it to him because he’d asked me once what I thought of it. There was no better way to tell him. When he turned to me, his eyes were shiny with tears unshed.

“This is… These are…” He cleared his throat. “I have never gotten anything like this in my entire life. It’s the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me. Thank you.”

Naruto carefully place each item on the dashboard before tossing himself at me, clutching me to him with a need so fervent I could feel it in the pressure of his fingertips. Reluctantly, I hugged him back, and we stayed like that for a while—silent, warm, grateful. His lips were pressed against my neck when he mumbled, “You’re my best friend.” Then he leaned back and dumped the aesthetically displeasing present in his place.

The first thing I noticed was the envelope, taped to the box. The tacky yet humorous card inside was
not unlike the one he’d given me to apologize nearly a week ago. Both had a stupid animal on the cover, and both were filled with his messy scrawl. He’d written, “Merry X-mas, Sasuke! Tis the season of giving and being gracious, so I wanted to tell you plainly how grateful I am for you. Not many people would do the things you’ve done for me this year, but then again, none of those people would rant about hating me the whole time either. I wouldn’t have it any other way. You’re kind, brave, sincere, and above all else, honest, in ways I’ve never been. I hope I can be more like you some day. In the meantime, I’ll just settle for liking you, period.” He’s signed it illegibly at the bottom. I smirked, unwrapping the box and removing the cassette player inside. I rolled my eyes when I saw that he’d included a copy of a mix he’d made specifically for me; it had a hand-drawn label and everything.

“Thanks,” I said. The gift had been a bit self-important, but it made me happy knowing that he thought about me when I wasn’t around.

He drove us back in silence, opting to drop me off at home since it had gotten late. I wanted to hug him, to kiss him, to stop him from leaving, but all I did was grab my gift and get out of the car, issuing a bland “goodbye” at his departure. I spent the night lying awake in bed, thinking of what I could have done differently.

Chapter End Notes

WOOOOW I rewrote this like five times and I'm still not that happy with it BUT WHATEVER.

In the original draft, Sasuke ended up fighting with everyone and kinda sorta starting the new year off with no friends, but I didn't feel like that fit his character development very well. He seems hyper self-aware to me, and it didn't make sense for him to be picking fights.

New Year's chapter is next, and maybe just maybe it'll be out this weekend. Maybe. I really ought to spend some time studying. But I probably won't, so who cares!
It had been days, and Naruto was still angry. School would be starting soon, and Naruto was still angry. He had been angry for so long, he was beginning to think it would be the only emotion he ever experienced for the rest of his life. It felt like he was drowning in rage, and there wasn’t a thing that he could do to stop it. Every day, he was overwhelmed by his anger. And he was so, so angry. He’d never felt this gypped in his whole sixteen years of existence. New Year’s Eve had been a rip off, and he wanted his money back. He’d tried talking to Iruka about it, but the father-figure just shook his head and advised him to tell the truth. He’d even called up Shikamaru, only to be chastised for bothering the boy with something so inconsequential. He’d tried Kiba after that, and the whole conversation was a waste of everyone’s time. It had crossed his mind once or twice to give his therapist a chance, but that would be asking for trouble. Who knew what the spontaneous Jaraiya would do if he found out? Nothing good, that was for sure. Still, his anger refused to dissipate, which is how he managed to convince himself that calling Gaara was a good idea.

“I’m so pissed off I could scream,” he said into the phone as soon as his friend answered. He was pacing around the half-unpacked labyrinth he called a bedroom and scowling at the empty walls.

“Dude, you know long-distance calls aren’t reasonably priced, right?” Gaara replied. The sounds of the busy marketplace around him drifted into Naruto’s ears, and the blonde wished not for the first time that he’d accepted the invitation to join the Shukakus on their vacation, instead of staying here in this godforsaken shithole.

“It’s just, no one else will listen to me,” he whined. “Like, I tried telling Iruka—”

“Don’t you mean dad?” the boy teased.

“Whatever! I tried telling him, and you know what he said? He told me to confess!” Naruto said.

“He’s right. You should tell Sasuke how you feel.”

“Oh, have either of you met Sasuke? He’d flay me alive with oyster shells if I so much as hinted that I liked him.” He grimaced at the thought.

“My money’s on him ripping your clothes off, but whatever,” Gaara replied.

“More like Neji’ll rip his clothes off,” Naruto grumbled.
“Okay, okay. Tell me what happened.”

“So it’s Kiba’s New Year’s Eve party, right?” he began, quickly recounting the details for his friend.

He’d invited Sasuke with the oh-so secret and not-at-all obvious desire to kiss him when the ball dropped at midnight. He’d had it all planned out. He’d swoop in while Sasuke was lonesomely leaning against the wall and watching the partygoers with a critical eye. Naruto would prattle off some line about honoring the tradition even though neither of them had anyone to kiss, and Sasuke, faced with such irreconcilable logic, would kiss him at the end of the countdown in accordance with the custom. Naruto had even practiced his charismatic grin in the mirror. But when the time came, Sasuke hadn’t been as alone as he’d anticipated. He should have realized that people would gravitate towards the attractive single guy in the room, even if he was mean-mugging everyone. Neji and Ino had him in a corner, blocked off from the rest of the party. Naruto had been pushing past throngs of people and leaping over ill-placed furniture in a futile attempt to reach the boy in time, but the clock struck twelve, turning him from dashing prince into hopeless peasant. Neji, of all people, had pushed Sasuke against the wall and stuffed his tongue down the boy’s throat.

Naruto had felt himself shouting before he even realized he’d done it, and his cry of, “Get off him, you jerk!” didn’t fall on deaf ears. Sasuke himself shoved the brunette back and decked him in the face—square in the jaw. Ino drove him home afterwards, and Kiba and Shikamaru held Naruto back from beating the tar out of a startled Neji. He likely would’ve busted his stitches trying to decapitate the kid otherwise.

“Remind me to thank those two when I get back,” Gaara interjected. “Can’t believe I’m out of the picture for one party, and your ability to make rational decisions jumps out the window.”

“Gaara, you are my ability to make rational decisions. You’re my impulse control. If I wasn’t 16, I’d have already gotten Sasuke Forever tattooed on my ass,” Naruto replied.

“Yeah, yeah. So did you talk to Sasuke or…?”

The following day, a bleary-eyed and deeply hungover blonde boy had awoken with a start at the piercing cry of his cell phone. He’d answered with a less-than-chipper “Hello?” as he rolled over and flipped on the lamp next to his bed.

“Hey, usuratonkachi.”

The sound of Sasuke’s voice always heightened his senses, making hairs stand on end and chills flutter across skin. “Hey, teme,” he’d replied, trying to sound casual.

“So, I have this tradition of calling people on the first day of the year. My mom used to do it,” he explained. “It’s about making amends and expressing gratitude or whatever. I just wanted to say I’m glad you’re a part of my life.”

Naruto had just begun to smile when his sluggish brain decided it was the perfect time to remind him of when he’d last seen Sasuke. His face fell, and the rage boiled up inside of him from where it had been hibernating, subdued by the alcohol. “Did you give Neji a call?” he’d snapped.

“What? No. I’m only calling my friends.”

“Are we friends?” he’d retorted.

“Are you an idiot?”

“Fuck you, Sasuke,” Naruto’d spat, hanging up the phone and throwing it at his pillows with an
exasperated shout. He’d instantly regretted it, of course. None of what he was feeling was Sasuke’s fault, and he’d known better than to take it out on him. Cursing himself for his impulsive anger inclinations, he fished his phone out of the sea of blankets where it’d landed and called the boy back, his heart inching closer to his throat with every ring.

“Are you calling to apologize?” Sasuke’d asked dryly.

“Ha, yeah. Uh, about that,” Naruto’d stammered, cheeks burning with shame.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“Shut up, I’m getting to it!” He’d stood up and begun pacing, kicking boxes out of his way with a deep frown.

“No, by all means, take your time,” the boy retorted.

“Listen, teme, I’m gonna kick your ass next time I see you if you don’t shut up and let me apologize!” Naruto waited a beat, then continued. “Here’s the thing. I’m not mad at you. I was—”

“Misdirecting your anger?” He was smirking, Naruto could hear it. “You know you have a therapist who can help you with that sort of emotional disturbance, right?”

“No, by all means, take your time,” the boy retorted.

“Listen, teme, I’m gonna kick your ass next time I see you if you don’t shut up and let me apologize!” Naruto waited a beat, then continued. “Here’s the thing. I’m not mad at you. I was—”

“Misdirecting your anger?” He was smirking, Naruto could hear it. “You know you have a therapist who can help you with that sort of emotional disturbance, right?”

“No, by all means, take your time,” the boy retorted.

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m not mad at you. I swear. You’ve done nothing wrong. You’re perfect. I’m just mad at myself for stupid reasons, and I took it out on you,” Naruto blathered.

“Why are you mad?” he’d asked.

“It’s just, uh… I’m…” The blonde sighed. “Neji annoyed me.”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear I punched him yesterday,” Sasuke’d said.

“I know, I was there,” he’d replied.

“Oh.” A pause. “He’s so creepy. And irritating.”

“Yes! With his whole master guitar-er who can recite pi to thirty digits thing. Ugh, I can’t believe he kissed you.” Naruto was rambling, but when wasn’t he rambling? When it came to Sasuke, he found himself incapable of shutting up.

“Guitarist,” he’d interrupted.

“What?”

“It’s guitarist, not guitar-er. Dumbass.” Sasuke’s voice had been snide and biting, but there was an underlying humor to his tone that betrayed his amusement.

“Yes! With his whole master guitar-er who can recite pi to thirty digits thing. Ugh, I can’t believe he kissed you.” Naruto was rambling, but when wasn’t he rambling? When it came to Sasuke, he found himself incapable of shutting up.

“Guitarist,” he’d interrupted.

“What?”

“It’s guitarist, not guitar-er. Dumbass.” Sasuke’s voice had been snide and biting, but there was an underlying humor to his tone that betrayed his amusement.

“Whose side are you on?” Naruto’d retorted.

“The side of people who can speak English correctly,” he’d answered.

“Oh, that’s it! Get ready, pretty boy,” the blonde’d shouted. “Square up. We’re fighting.”
“Did you just call me a pretty boy? Are we complimenting each other now? Should I say something like, I’m going to deck you in your beautiful face? Would you like that?”

Naruto’s breath caught in his throat, and his anger evaporated at the words. “Ha, maybe,” he’d croaked. “I’m not complaining.”

“Alright. Name the time and place, and I’ll be there to kick your surprisingly perfect teeth in.”

He’d frowned. “Backhanded compliments don’t count.”

“Sorry,” Sasuke’d said. “I’ll punch those lovely lights of yours out.”

“That’s better, but all the compliments in the world won’t stop me from beating that fine ass of yours.”

“Wow, okay. I’m getting off the phone now. Happy New Year, dobe.”


He could hear the eye-roll. “Bye.”

As he finished explaining it all to Gaara, he felt some of the anger he’d been feeling diminish. Just talking about it seemed to help. Gaara groaned and said, “I can’t believe you went into that much detail just to describe your stupid flirting.”

“It wasn’t flirting,” Naruto replied. “Was it?”

“Oh it definitely was. I’m not even sure what you’re so angry about, to be honest. Unless you’re just mad that someone else likes Sasuke.” Gaara sounded a bit annoyed, and Naruto couldn’t blame him. He wondered if the boy was right about the motives behind his anger. He knew he didn’t have a monopoly on liking Sasuke, though. Didn’t he?

Ino sat across from Sasuke at the Daily Grind, on her lunch break with her cap on backwards and her hair down, as she had done so many times before. He was idly sipping his latte, bangs tucked behind his ears, lost in thought: same as usual. She was giving him her standard appraising stare, evaluating his silence as she normally did. And yet, it all felt different somehow. Stilted, uncomfortable. He was still mad, maybe—though things had seemed fine when they’d exchanged presents, and fine when she’d driven him home from Kiba’s party, and fine when he’d called her on the first. So, not mad then. Or not mad at her, at least. She frowned and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“I’m a teenager. Isn’t something always wrong?” came the dry reply.

“What’s bothering you? Not still Sakura, I hope.” Ino watched his face, having grown accustomed to the way his eyes tended to share more than he knew.

“That will likely bother me until the end of time,” he answered. “But at the moment, no.”

She kept her mouth shut, waiting and watching. She knew if she was patient, he’d actually tell her something of value.

“I don’t think I’m gay,” he said finally. She snorted, and he gave her a biting glare. “Neji kissed me —”

“And you hit him,” she interjected, laughing.
“Yes, well… I didn’t like it. That’s my point.”

“You didn’t like it because you don’t like Neji,” she said.

“If an objectively attractive woman kissed you at midnight on New Year’s Eve, how would you feel? What would you do?” Sasuke asked, staring at her with a magnetic intensity.

“Okay…” Ino realized that this topic was important to Sasuke, and she chose her words carefully. “Sure, if that happened to me, I’d be into it.” It was the answer he wanted, and it was the truth.

“And Neji is objectively attractive, right? Just like Gaara. Or you, or Sakura, even. So, I ought to have felt something, right? If I’m gay?” He slouched back against the chair. “That’s why you make-out with Temari even though you’re hung-up on Sakura.”

“So, let me get this straight. Are you saying you’re not attracted to guys or girls then?” she asked. She wasn’t confused, not really. It was more like she felt that it was the question he needed her to ask.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He frowned. “I’ve never been attracted to someone besides Naruto, and I am attracted to him, but… I think it wouldn’t matter what he looked like. He could be a girl, or a genderless void, or a sentient rock.”

“A superintelligent shade of blue?” Ino quipped, referencing a book they’d both enjoyed. He nodded, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “The thing is, Sasuke, you’ve disliked Neji since you met him. You told me before that you think he’s only slightly less irritating than Kiba, and both of them fall lower on your scale than Sakura. It’s really hard to find someone attractive when they irritate you.”

He gave her a pointed look. “You know Naruto irritates me to no end.”

“Yeah, okay, but he also respects you in ways those other people don’t. Take Sakura, for example. I know you think I have a blind spot for her, but I really don’t. I know how she feels about you better than anyone. She straight up deifies you. She takes you out of context and turns you into this thing to be worshipped. She doesn’t see you as a person, and that bothers you. That would bother anyone. On the other hand, Neji might see you as a human being, but he only sees what he wants to see—someone smart and pretty, with the capability of appreciating his abilities.” She paused, giving him a soft smile. “I think the only reason you and I ended up as friends is because I didn’t put any preconceived notions on you. Naruto didn’t either. So why are you obsessed with him and not me? I am the more objectively attractive one, after all.”

He smirked. “Fair point. Maybe you just don’t irritate me enough.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” she said. “You’re allowed to just like someone, you know? No labels necessary.”

He looked dubious but nodded all the same. “But why do I like Naruto, of all people? Why not Gaara? I mean, he sees me. He respects me. He’s objectively attractive. We have more in common, and he dresses better. If I was gay, I think I’d be into Gaara.”

“If you were really gay, you’d be into Naruto and Gaara at the same time,” she laughed. “Come on, Sasuke. It’s not all about sexual attraction, you know. There’s more to being queer than that.”

“I like that word better,” he said.

“What, queer?”
“Yeah. Gay feels like it comes with expectations I can’t fulfill,” he explained. “Queer doesn’t make me feel like I’m doing it wrong.”

“Doing what wrong? Liking people?” Ino snorted. “Whatever works, kid. Queer it is then.”

She knocked her water bottle against his paper mug with a grin, and he rolled his eyes.

“So,” he began, intent on changing the subject. “How are you dealing with the concept of going to the same school as Sakura?”

“I’m not worried about it,” Ino answered, only half-truthful. “Besides, I’ve been dating Haku for the past like month now, and she’s awesome.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Well, not forget-about-Sakura awesome, but still,” she amended.

“Does she know that you’re hopelessly in love with another woman? I hear that sort of thing tends to be a turn-off,” he said.

“We’re not that serious, don’t worry. It’s just been a few dates. I’ll tell her before things escalate.” Ino waved her hand dismissively, but he didn’t seem all that pleased with her response. “I have to clock back in, but I’ll see you at school this week.”

Sasuke was still giving her that judgmental stare of his when she got behind the counter. It looked like worry and disappointment tangled together in the darkest shade of brown known to humankind. She shook her head, getting back to work.

Naruto sat at the cafeteria table across from Sasuke, Ino, and Sakura. Gaara showed up late, casually sauntering over to the seat he’d saved for him. He’d been thinking about his feelings for Sasuke relentlessly lately, and watching the way Sakura was hanging on the boy’s every word was driving him crazy. She responded so quickly and with so much, it was nearly impossible for anyone else to get a word in. Naruto breathed a sigh of relief when a girl he didn’t know approached the table, interrupting the flow of conversation.

“Hi,” she greeted, glancing at everyone in turn. “My friends and I just wanted to let you guys know that all of you are, like, super beautiful. We call you the Amazingly Pretty People, actually. Creative, I know.” She laughed, a hint of embarrassment on her cheeks.

“Oh, really?” Naruto asked, humoring her. “Well, y’know, as the captain of the football team, I take pride in my appearance.”

“Wow, that’s so neat,” the girl said. She turned to Sasuke and asked, “What do you do? Are you, like, an artist or something?”

“Or something,” he mused.

Ino jumped in, eager to taunt her friend. “Don’t be shy, Sasuke. Tell the nice girl about your photography.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re a photographer? That’s, like, so crazy, because me and my friends are totally models. We should, like, do a photo shoot together sometime,” she replied, placing her hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. Naruto could see him stifling an eye-roll, and if he weren’t so annoyed he might
“Hn,” the boy muttered.

“See you around, Sasuke,” the girl squealed, waving goodbye.

Shaking his head as he watched her leave, Gaara commented, “Wow, that’s the second time today. You are really popular with the ladies, huh?”

As if called forth on cue, a rather skinny boy with short brown hair walked up to their table. Awkwardly, he said, “I’m sorry for my friend. She’s so forward. You’ll have to forgive her.”

“Nothing to forgive. She was very kind,” Ino replied.

“Oh, well, still. Wouldn’t want you guys to think we’re creepy or perverted or anything,” he said.

“That’s okay, we’re into creepy,” Naruto declared, trying to lighten the tension. It didn’t come out the way he’d anticipated, though, and the kid looked even more nervous.

“Don’t traumatize him,” Sasuke chided dryly.

“I, uh, wanted to ask you a question, if you don’t mind. Are you gay?” the boy inquired, eyeing Sasuke hesitantly.

“Are you trying to have sex with me?” Sasuke stared at him with empty eyes, and the kid shook his head vigorously. He started to stammer out a “no” when Sasuke said, “Then I hardly think it’s any of your business.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” the boy said. “I’m gonna…bye.” He turned on heel and practically ran for the exit.

“That was a little harsh. He was just a baby freshman with a crush,” Ino commented.

“Oh, is that what was happening?” Sasuke asked, clearly disinterested. He glanced up at Naruto, and upon seeing the poorly disguised irritation on the boy’s face, he added, “What the hell is your problem?”

Naruto blanched, caught off-guard by the sudden inquisition. He wasn’t especially good at hiding his emotions, but he hadn’t been expecting anyone to pay attention to him either. The frustration he was feeling at watching Sasuke get hit on had crept up on his face without him noticing until the boy mentioned it. His mind raced to concoct some vaguely believable reason, anything other than the truth, his mouth spitting out, “You know what teme?” before his brain was ready.

“What?” Sasuke snapped.

“I’m sick of your shit. You get fawned over day in and day out!” Naruto shouted.

“So?” He raised an eyebrow.

“So,” the blonde floundered, not thinking he’d make it this far. “So, I’m captain of the football team. I’m good-looking. But does anyone care? No! I can’t get a girlfriend or a boyfriend to save my life.”

Naruto tried not to cringe as the words left his mouth, reminding himself of the countless times he’d said dumber things.

“Wow, it’s almost as if playing football isn’t a substitute for having a personality,” Sasuke snapped.
Hook, line, and sinker. He knew if Sasuke wasn’t so distracted, he’d have seen right through Naruto’s act. Gaara certainly had, if the side-eye he was getting was any indication.

“Don’t blame Sasuke for your datelessness,” Sakura scoffed. “It’s not his fault you dress like a colorblind circus clown.”

“Excuse me?” Naruto exclaimed. He didn’t like where this was going at all.

“Sorry, can’t hear you over how loud your clothes are,” Ino added. Sakura gave her a high-five, and Naruto frowned. He knew he wasn’t ever going to be voted *best dressed*, but these insults seemed unfair.

“I don’t dress that bad… Do I?” he mumbled, trying not to look as dejected as he felt. Gaara refused to meet his gaze, and Sasuke nodded somberly. He winced. “Then somebody help me! Please?”

“You’re a lost cause,” Ino said with a shrug.

Sasuke was staring at him, though, with a strangely compelling look on his face. Naruto decided to give it a shot. “Sasuke, you help me. People clearly like the way you dress,” he pleaded.

“It’s a Friday night. Don’t you have anything better to do than play dress-up at my apartment?” His tone was wry, his words harsh. But his eyes—Naruto loved his eyes, they told him everything. There was excitement in those eyes.

“No, and neither do you!” he declared triumphantly. “So dress me up, and we’ll go out on the town. My treat.” He flashed the boy a grin, pleased by how the mere thought of spending time with Sasuke could fix the dismay he’d been feeling.

“Fine,” Sasuke snapped, rolling his eyes.

Hours later, Sasuke stood in front of his closet with narrowed eyes as Naruto sat nervously on his bed. He watched with wide eyes as his friend pulled out a few cursory items, only to put them back after a solitary glance in Naruto’s direction. He had started to feel a bit self-conscious; usually, he was staunchly shameless and confident, but the longer he sat under Sasuke’s evaluating gaze, the worse he felt. There was no way Sasuke could’ve possibly been attracted to him ever before, if his critical eye was any indication, but Naruto refused to lose hope. Maybe this would turn into one of those stereotypical makeover scenes from a 90’s romcom, and Sasuke would be floored by his transformation.

Finally, the dark-haired teen presented Naruto with two options, both of which were remarkably less emo than he’d been expecting. First: a black v-neck with a blue flannel and a pair of darkwash skinny jeans. Simple, easy, straightforward. Second: a red t-shirt with a golden logo Naruto didn’t recognize, a pair of distressed, faded jeans with holes and bleach stains up to the thigh, and a black pleather jacket. Intricate, badass, cool. Sasuke subsequently laid out a few accessories for him to choose from, including fake glasses, aviators, bracelets, and a necklace. When he went, he went hard.

Naruto picked an outfit and headed for the bathroom, but Sasuke stopped him with nothing but his curious expression. “We’ve changed clothes in front of each other before,” he stated. Naruto blushed.

“It’s a transformation; you can’t just see it bit by bit. It has to be all at once,” the blonde argued. At Sasuke’s dismissive shrug, he went to get changed, leaving him with the alternative ensemble.
Sasuke quickly put on the v-neck and the jeans, slipping the book of poems he’d been annotating in his back pocket before shouldering the flannel.

Naruto entered the room hesitantly, lacking all of the pseudo-confidence that comprised his charm. He was out of his element, and it was hard for him to muster up the enthusiasm he typically radiated. The red shirt looked perfect with his complexion, really bringing out his eyes, and the jacket really helped to sell the look he was going for—but something had to be done about his hair. It was a distracting poof of golden chaos, and when he looked in the mirror, it had made him feel like the whole thing was a pathetic charade. If he hadn’t been so wrapped up in his self-consciousness, he might have noticed the painfully obvious way Sasuke was staring at him like a ravenous wolf.

“Can we do something about my hair?” Naruto asked, not looking at him.

Sasuke sighed and led him back to the bathroom, plugging in Tsunade’s flat iron. Naruto closed his eyes and allowed himself the simple pleasure of feeling Sasuke’s fingers in his hair. He was rubbing some kind of serum into it, and the mild massage sent shivers down Naruto’s spine. He let out a surprised yelp when the hot iron got close to his scalp, though, and his eyes remained open and active after that. With minimal effort, the boy was able to turn the frumpy blonde mess into something more manageable, more purposeful. Naruto stared at himself happily in the mirror as his counterpart tied his own hair up in a top knot, letting the aviators rest atop his head.

“Damn, dude, I don’t think I’ve ever looked this good in my life,” Naruto exclaimed, too busy ogling himself to notice Sasuke’s eyes raking over him.

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” came the stiff response.

Naruto looked up, catching the boy staring. Sasuke’s gaze stayed on him, his eyes lingering well past their allotted time. The blonde felt his heart hammering in his chest, and the intensity of the look Sasuke was giving him made his mouth go dry. He thought about reaching out to touch him, the need to feel his skin suddenly overwhelming, but Sasuke beat him to it. Without warning, the boy leaned forward and brushed his fingers against Naruto’s cheek. “You have something on your face,” he said, frowning.

“Oh.” Naruto’s face turned bright red, but he fought down the blush and offered Sasuke a lopsided grin. “We should take some selfies before we go out! Y’know, to commemorate the occasion.”

“Sure,” he replied, fetching the polaroid camera from his desk and returning to the superior lighting of the bathroom. They took a few snapshots and left them on the counter to develop before heading out to Naruto’s Jeep.

The pair ended up at a local arcade fun complex—the kind with bizarrely decorated mini-golf and debatably dangerous go-carts. It was a popular spot for high schoolers who felt that hanging out at the mall was too cliché. Just as Naruto had promised, he paid for everything, getting them both combo packages. They could race, golf, rock-climb—or just play games all night. As a gesture of gratitude, Naruto let Sasuke decide what they would do first. He was more than a little surprised by the boy’s selection, though.

“You want to play DDR?” Naruto asked, staring at Sasuke incredulously.

“No, I want to take a video of you sucking at DDR,” he retorted.

“You wanna watch me play DDR and record it to watch again later?” He grinned, a mischievous
gleam in his eyes. “Should I strip while I’m at it? Make it more interesting for you?”

“Shut up and embarrass yourself for the camera, dobe,” Sasuke snapped. In the glow of the neon lights, it looked like he was blushing.

Naruto shrugged and tossed his jacket to the side of the machine before hopping on. He winked at his friend and relished the way Sasuke’s eyes widened as he realized that Naruto, for all of his clumsy and goofy attributes, was good at DDR. Really, really good. He spent a lot of time here when he had nowhere else to hide, and he’d perfected his talent. He knew he could move his body and work up a sweat, but the expression on Sasuke’s face suggested that he was hypnotized, entranced by what he was watching. Delighted, Naruto laughed and slid a hand down his torso, tugging up his shirt to show off his hips, his abdomen, the underside of his chest. The look he got was priceless. Grinning, he finished up the song and hopped down.

“Not what you were expecting, huh?” He picked up what he’d cast off, eyeing his friend with mirth.

Before Sasuke could respond, a short girl with short hair and an even shorter skirt tapped him on the shoulder. “Who’s your friend?” she asked him, staring at Naruto with lust in her eyes. She wasn’t the last. As the two of them moved around the arcade, going from game to game, more and more people approached, hitting on Naruto. It wasn’t as if he was the only one receiving attention, but he was a lot more receptive than his glowering counterpart. Every time someone came up to Naruto, Sasuke would glare at them as he played a game, and he ended up winning a jackpot on more than one occasion. Naruto wanted to win enough tickets to get a stuffed fox, so Sasuke handed them over each time with a roll of his eyes or a sneer. Of course, when word got out about the sexy blonde guy trying to win a specific prize, Sasuke wasn’t the only one giving him tickets. By the time the two of them ran out of tokens, Naruto had enough tickets for ten foxes.

Sasuke sat at one of the picnic tables to the side of the concession stand, pretending to read his book as Naruto watched him from the line. He could tell the boy was only pretending by the way his scowl deepened and his eyes failed to scan the page. He was clearly pissed off about something, but Naruto couldn’t figure out what it was. He’d been trying all night to make sure that they both had a good time, and it seemed like he was losing to Sasuke’s animosity. Perhaps bringing him to a place full of people had been counterproductive to his goal. He sighed, trying to think of a way to make it all better. He ordered two slushies as his tickets were counted, and the final number filled him with glee.

He walked up to his friend, calling out his name to get his attention, but the boy didn’t flinch.

“Damn, must be some book,” Naruto commented as he shoved a blue slushie in between Sasuke’s face and the pages. He wiggled it around emphatically, earning a half-hearted glare. Sasuke’s eyes flickered to Naruto’s new canvas bag with confusion, and Naruto promptly explained. “They’re thank-you gifts. For the tickets.”

“You’re too nice,” he snapped. “What about your fox?”

“I’m foxy enough on my own, don’t you think?” Naruto chuckled. “I’m gonna give these out real quick, but then we should race go-carts.”

Sasuke nodded as Naruto walked off. The patrons of the arcade had been so kind to him, and he was more than happy to repay that kindness with some of his own. He kept sneaking glances at the unhappy dark-haired boy glowering at his book, wishing he was allowed to run his fingers through that hair and kiss those lips until he won a smile. As Naruto finished up, he rushed over to the picnic tables, eager to make the most of his time with his favorite angst teen, but Sasuke was nowhere to be seen. The blue slushie sat abandoned on the table. In reality, Sasuke was in the bathroom, leaning over the sink and splashing water on his face, but in Naruto’s frantic imagination, he’d been
Naruto searched everywhere, stumbling into the restroom in a panic and running smackdab into the object of his worry and affection.

“Hey! There you are!” Naruto exclaimed, relief flooding him. He put his hands on Sasuke’s shoulders and smiled. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Sasuke shrugged the boy’s hands off, raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

Naruto faltered, not wanting to explain the depth of his concern, then rifled through his bag. “I got this for you,” he said, pulling out a stuffed fox and handing it to his friend without meeting his eyes.

“Nope. Can’t take that,” he retorted.

“It’s a thank-you gift; you have to take it!” He shoved the plush toy against the boy’s chest, pouting.

“I’m not going to take the stuffed toy you traded all those tickets for, dobe. I may be heartless, but I’m not a monster,” Sasuke snapped.

“Who said you were heartless? Point me at ‘em, I’ll beat ‘em up.” Naruto waggled his eyebrows, trying to cheer him up, but Sasuke just frowned and pushed Naruto’s arm away, back against his own chest. “I wasn’t going to mention this until after you accepted my thank-you gift, but I actually had enough tickets for two. This one is for you, Sasuke.”

The boy glanced from Naruto’s face to the fox at his chest and back again before taking it from him with a thoughtful, “Hn.”

Naruto grinned and said, “Let’s go race!”

He insisted that their new fox friends accompany them on the track, if only to see the grimace on Sasuke’s face as he obligingly buckled the orange toy in with him. Racing with the speed demon turned out to be much more fun than he could have imagined, flying around abrupt turns and skidding past other carts with haphazard abandon. It was an adrenaline rush like no other, especially when the two of them began vying for first place. Naruto was still grinning, even when Sasuke zoomed past him and won. There were so many other things he wanted to do with Sasuke—laser tag, rock climbing, roller skating—but the establishment was closing soon, and they didn’t have the time.

“Next time we’ll have to get here earlier,” he commented. They were walking to his car, and he fought the urge to hold Sasuke’s hand.

“Next time?” his friend asked.

“Yeah,” Naruto said with a smile. “Next time.”

“Hn. Your treat again?”

“That depends. Are you going to glare at everyone who tries to talk to me again?” He laughed, but Sasuke scowled.

“I wasn’t glaring. That’s just the way my face looks,” he argued, sliding into the passenger seat.

Naruto was happily chatting away as he drove Sasuke home, trying to keep his mind off of the ways
this night could end. He hadn’t intended for it to feel like a date when he’d made the suggestion at lunch, but now the romantic urges were hard to deny. Sasuke was sitting next to him, holding the plush toy Naruto had won him, and he was having a hard time suppressing the overwhelming desire to kiss the boy. If he kissed him, though…then what? What would Sasuke do? Would his kiss ignite something inside of the gloomy kid, causing him to reciprocate with fire and passion? Would he invite Naruto inside, back to his room, under the pretense of collecting his old clothes? Maybe Naruto would strip, right then and there, but instead of redressing, he’d kiss Sasuke again. He’d hold him close and kiss him deeply, and Sasuke would fumble trying to remove his own shirt. Then—

“Hey, usuratonkachi, we’re here,” Sasuke snapped, his voice jarring Naruto out of his fantasy abruptly.

“Oh, sorry,” he replied, parking outside of Sasuke’s building.

He looked over at the boy and felt a pang of yearning in his heart—for closeness, for sweetness, for love and hope and affection. He couldn’t just let him go, say goodbye and head inside. He had to do something. Anything. He wasn’t sure what he was doing, but as he leaned over the surprised scowl Sasuke gave him urged his next action. Without warning, he lightly slapped him in the face. Startled and pissed off, Sasuke barely had time to react before Naruto’s lips were against his cheek. Placing a chaste kiss on the affronted area, Naruto healed what little damage had been done.

“Sorry,” he murmured into Sasuke’s ear. “I just wanted an excuse to do that.”

Sasuke stared at him, a blush creeping up his neck all the way to his ears. His cheeks were pink, his eyes were wide, and his lips were oh-so kissable. He fumbled with the door handle for far too long, never taking his eyes off of Naruto. He said quickly and quietly, “I have to go now,” before fleeing the car with the fox plushie clutched tightly against his chest. His flannel was crumpled up in the seat, abandoned in his haste.

Naruto drove to Iruka’s—to his home—silently cursing himself. Not only had he found out that Sasuke blatantly did not have romantic feelings for him, he had also obviously destroyed their friendship in the process. He was racking his brain, trying to think of some way he could possibly fix this, when he pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex. Before things got any worse, he had to call. He had to try. Sasuke answered with trepidation, a low “Hello?” resonating from his throat.

“Hey, ‘suke,” Naruto began. “I just wanted to let you know that what just happened didn’t mean anything or anything, y’know? I just thought it would be funny. Just a joke, y’know? But you didn’t laugh, which is actually kind of normal for you and not that surprising, but um you looked kind of freaked out, though, so I just wanted to explain, y’know?” He was babbling, embarrassed but unable to stop.

“If you y’know one more time, I’ll come over and strangle you,” Sasuke growled.

“Great! So we’re good, then?” Naruto asked.

“Whatever, dobe.”

“Cool, that’s all then. Talk to you later!” he said, hanging up before hearing Sasuke’s goodbye.

He held the tears in until he got to his room, then he turned off his phone, crawled into bed, and cried.
Chapter End Notes

I hate to see Naruto sad, but unfortunately that's not the first time nor the last time the beloved sunshine boy will be weeping. :(

When it comes to that New Years Phone Call Scene, tbh, you can't tell me that's not exactly what those two were like in the show.

The next update will probably take a while, but don't worry. I promise it'll be out before next year.
BEFORE i want to spring break free (part 1)

Chapter Summary

"You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men."

WARNING: there's some sex stuff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE i want to spring break free [i want, i want, i want]

“There’s never an easy way to talk about what’s bothering you,” Tsunade had said to me that morning, drinking her coffee as she leaned against the counter.

It embarrassed me, her knowing that something was wrong. Since I’d started getting better last summer, I’d tried to keep up that image for her, even when everything was a mess inside of me. She was just so happy, so proud of me for finally improving; it was weighing on her, my mental instability. I was still trying to project that unflinching better self, just to keep her happy and unconcerned, but it hadn’t been easy. Or successful, apparently. She noticed things that other people might not, and her conclusions were startlingly astute. I should have known—I’ve been home more often this semester, and when I’m not home, I’m at a meeting, kickboxing with Kakashi, or in a therapy session. I still hang out with Ino on the weekends, and I’m still the unwilling leader of the Chemistry study group, but things have changed. Anyone could see that, but only Tsunade could see how much it had impacted me.

The truth is, I’d been much more short-tempered lately. That likely clued her in. I’ve had a dire need for an outlet; my ever-increasing aggression consumes my life. Kakashi bumped my training up from three days a week to five, after noticing my barely-concealed rage during one too many classes. Shizune has been prying, poking, prodding, but she can’t get anything useful out of me. I don’t know how to talk to her about what’s bothering me. Ino’s observant—she picked up on it quickly. She fully believes that my pent-up anger is due to the overly obnoxious way Naruto has been behaving around me for the last two months, but this rage cannot be attributed to something so trivial. No, Naruto’s sudden aversion to me—no more exciting embraces, no more reassuring touches, no more accidental brushes—though undeniably aggravating only exacerbates the condition. It is not the cause. He can stand three feet away from me at all times if he wants, and I can hate him for it; however, he is not as troubling as the phone calls.

Every time my phone rings, I have a panic attack. I wish I was cooler, calmer, meaner even, but I’m not. I’m scared, and then I’m annoyed with myself for that fear. It’s not as if the calls are threatening. It’s the same unrecognizable voice every time, always urging me to search for the truth. Hardly menacing. It didn’t take me long to figure out their not-so-subtle clues, though when I did, it only made things worse. I got so angry, I actually smashed my cell phone—it felt logical, at the time. Tsunade got me a new one, rolling her eyes and asking me why I couldn’t just punch a hole in my wall like every other bratty teenage boy with anger issues. Getting a new phone didn’t absolve me of my tribulations; once a week, like clockwork, I get a call from a blocked number. I could ignore
them, and I did for a while, but they don’t stop. Somebody, somewhere, wants me to investigate my parents’ death.

My parents were murdered six years ago in April. I was there. I saw my brother, covered in blood, carrying the gun that had splattered their brains on the basement floor. He stepped out of the shadows, his eyes never leaving me. I ran. In spite of myself, I check it out—neither google nor the local library’s newspaper archives could tell me anything I didn’t already know. The “Uchiha Family Massacre,” as it became known, was the talk of the town for a little while, but there was hardly anything contradictory in the sources. Every article sounded the same: “Itachi Uchiha is the prime suspect in the ongoing murder investigation that has shaken this city to its core. Police chief Fugaku Uchiha and his wife, Mikoto Uchiha, were murdered in their home last weekend, shortly after the eldest Uchiha child returned home for a brief visit. Reports suggest that the youngest, 10 year old Sasuke Uchiha, witnessed the murder and has become mute from the trauma. No indication as of yet how this condition will impact the legitimacy of his testimony…” The conclusion was unanimous: Itachi killed our parents in cold blood, which was precisely why he was rotting in prison.

I didn’t have the slightest clue whose idea of fun could possibly consist of tormenting me with harassing phone calls, but I did know I needed to punch something about it. I’d been working out with Kakashi for nearly a year already, but the recent increase in sparring had left me with visible changes. I’d gotten stronger, and my naturally lean figure no longer seemed freakish or alien. My violent hobby hadn’t escaped the attention of my peers, what with Sakura and Ino consistently remarking on the size and definition of my chest and arms. Even Gaara play-flirted with me, squeezing my bicep like a superficial attention-monger. Naruto was the only one who failed to comment, avoiding my gaze like the plague. He must have been frustrated by something too, though, because I certainly wasn’t the only one gaining muscle. I might be thin and waifish, but Naruto had no problems putting on weight. He was stocky and robust—or he would’ve been, had he not been enduring abuse for most of his life. With regular meals and stability thanks to his home with Iruka, he actually looked the part of football captain. So it only pissed me off more that I was no longer on the receiving end of his affection.

We hadn’t even spent time alone together since January. He used to invite me out, call me nightly, drive me home. Now all he did was tag along whenever Gaara asked me to hang out. He barely even talked to me anymore. It felt awful, and I had no idea how to fix it. It wasn’t like he was mad at me—we didn’t have a blowout fight, and he didn’t behave like he hated me. It was more like he just stopped liking me, as a person. He didn’t care about me anymore. I hated myself for missing his attention, for wanting it, for going crazy without it, but I hated him even more. I wound up picking fights with him at every opportunity, like some neglected child acting out for any semblance of acknowledgement. It was disgusting, shameful, pathetic; my insatiable desperation for his attention won out over logic every goddamn time. His restraint was admirable, actually. There were times when I thought for sure he’d break and lay hands on me. It sickened me how much I yearned for that.

For my agitation to have become so apparent to Tsunade wasn’t without its perks, as it turned out. She’d followed up her earlier assertion with good news. “Stress is bad for ya, kid. So pack a bag. We’re hitting the beach,” she’d said with a grin. I was beyond grateful for the chance to get away from it all. The phone calls, the school, Naruto. All I had to do was make it to the end of the day, and then we’d all pile into Tsunade’s Mustang, racing to the nearest beach for a few days. Her award ceremony was a week away, so if I was lucky, we’d stay there the whole time. I was happy for her, being recognized for all of her hard work in the community, but getting out of the city that had been causing me so much stress lately was far too tantalizing. I was so excited that I’d even gone to school dressed for the occasion. Black and gray tank top, dark blue shorts, Aviators. My worn Converse and chipped black nail polish didn’t match the aesthetic, but I could hardly claim that they weren’t on-brand.
To my smug delight, the amount of exposed skin and subsequently obvious muscle definition visible in the outfit managed to catch the eye of Naruto, if only for the briefest of moments. I caught him staring a few times, and by the last class, I’d grown needy enough to goad him about it. Smirking, I met his eyes and sneered, “See something you like, dobe?”

“You wish, teme. Fuck off,” he replied, agitated but lacking bite. He was blushing, though.

I frowned at his lack of anger. It only made me more annoyed. “Make me,” I snapped.

“Don’t test me,” he retorted. It was there, the fire—just a glimpse of it, in the eyes, but I saw it.

“As if you’ve ever done anything except fail tests,” I shot back.

Naruto popped out of his desk and whirled on me, one hand on my desk and the other on the back of my chair. He’d pinned me down, breaking his three-foot rule. “Goddamnit, Sasuke,” he growled, sending shivers down my spine. His aversion to physical contact had only worsened my desire for him. He was stunning all of the time, but there was something about seeing him angry that just incited a flurry of reactions in my body. I swallowed hard, trying to think about something besides the way it would feel to have his hands at my throat.

“I’d like to see you try. Go on, do something. Hit me,” I jeered. He stared at me for a moment, then sighed and turned around. He was going back to his desk, away from me. Scowling, I spat, “Usuratonkachi. You’re so fucking useless.”

“What did you just say to me?” he shouted, back in front of me in a heartbeat.

“You heard me.”

I saw his fist clench, and I held my breath. I knew he wanted to hit me, and goddamnit, I wanted him to. I braced for impact, but his fist never collided. Instead of targeting me, he punched the desk and stormed out of the classroom. Adrenaline coursing through my veins, I rushed after him without a thought. He stopped in the hallway, turning to me, and I froze. The final bell rang, filling the world with students, and he disappeared.

Driving down to the beach was exactly the catharsis I’d been needing. The car was a jumble of fast food, cheesy tunes, and amicable chatter; it reminded me just how much I loved and appreciated my guardians. Though they did most of the sharing, it felt nice just to be able to laugh and smile with them. Tsunade and Shizune were truly the only people I could unwind around, comfortable and safe.

Ever the mischief-maker, Tsunade waited until we reached the hotel to tell me about the mysterious surprise she had in store. The two of them had booked a separate room for themselves, which was odd initially until I realized that they’d probably like some alone time during the trip. I thought the second bed in my room was peculiar—wouldn’t that cost more?—but I shrugged it off, tossing my bag on the bed by the window. I pulled open the curtains, reveling in the sight of the ocean illuminated by the moonlight. It was enchanting, peaceful, and yet, quietly alarming. It stirred a primal fear in me, and I felt compelled to get closer. It was calling to me, its beauty and mystery far more intriguing than Tsunade’s intended surprise. I went to their room across the hall and knocked, waiting for either of them to open the door.

Tsunade answered, a boisterous, “Hey there, kid!” leaving her grinning mouth at the sight of me.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m going for a walk,” I said.
“Aw, c’mon. Just wait a little longer before you leave,” she whined. “Any minute now, you’ll see.”

“Hn. I’ll pass.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, closing the door as I departed. She was accustomed to my lack of enthusiasm at this point; it no longer annoyed her as it had before. Listless, I headed down to the lobby and opened the door. The night air hit me with the scent of salt and sand, and it brought me out of the detached lackadaisical mood I’d slipped into—such a feeling always accosted me on trips like these. As I stood there, a slow smile creeping across my face at the thrill of it all, two figures emerged in my line of sight. They were both laden with luggage, stumbling toward the door. It was more inertia than kindness that kept me holding the door open for them, though it wasn’t until they came closer, letting the light of the lobby illuminate their faces, that I realized the error I’d made. Suddenly, it all clicked into place: my mistake and Tsunade’s surprise were one and the same. I stared into the bright blue eyes of my temporary roommate, utterly horrified.

Naruto had opened his mouth, likely to say “thank you,” but when his eyes met mine, nothing came out. He choked.

“Sasuke! What a surprise,” Iruka greeted with a conspiratorial wink. “Thanks for getting the door.”

“Of course,” I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. I acknowledged Naruto with a glance and a curt nod, and he gulped.

“Hey, ‘suke,” he mumbled, casting down his gaze.

“Naruto, why don’t you let the bellhop take your bags, and you can join Sasuke? I’m sure you two are excited to see each other,” Iruka suggested.

This idea narrowly avoided transforming me into a cat—the temptation to round my spine, hiss a warning, and claw at the man’s face regardless was strong. Naruto, on the other hand, exuded all the characteristics of a kicked puppy.

“Oh no, I should take theses myself,” the blonde argued weakly. He sounded pathetic. I wanted to grab him by the shirt collar and shove him against the doorframe.

“Nonsense! I insist,” Iruka replied, and that was that. Naruto gave up.

I didn’t have much a choice. I couldn’t tell him to fuck off, not in front of Iruka. It would get back to Tsunade, and she would deal out a formidable punishment. An upset Tsunade is not one I’d willingly encounter without good reason. So, I sighed and said, “C’mon, dobe. I’m going down to the beach.”

We walked in silence for a while, crossing the street and meandering down the boardwalk before hitting the sand. I paused, taking off my shoes, and he started to follow suit but stopped short. “I can go back,” he said quietly.

He could have said anything else and it probably would’ve pissed me off, but he struck a nerve with a statement like that. He couldn’t even be around me for five minutes anymore? When I had I become so contemptable? I mean, I’d never been amiable, but he’d always put up with it before. I frowned at him, masking my hurt with annoyance. “And tell Iruka what? They’ll be expecting us to come back together.”

I thought he might argue, but he just mumbled something affirmative under his breath and took off his shoes. I was stuck in my head, trying for the umpteenth time to discern what exactly had caused this rift between us, and I didn’t notice when he’d stopped walking behind me. We’d barely made it
twenty feet, but he cleared his throat and stared at me as I turned around in confusion.

“What?” I demanded.

“Can we… Can we please make it through the next few days without fighting?”

He was small and frail, glowing in the light of the moon. His black t-shirt and baggy jeans only made him look younger somehow, more innocent. Who was this kid? Where had the feisty blonde demon who’d been hellbent on torturing me these past few months gone? My instinct was to break him. Fuck his feigned fragility—where had this soft vulnerability been when it mattered? Those big doe eyes were nothing more than a tool at his disposal, useful only to manipulate me into doing his bidding. I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, asking me that,” I retorted. “Ruining my vacation wasn’t enough for you? Now I can’t even be mad at you about it?”

“I didn’t know! Iruka never told me,” he protested.

There was a pleading sincerity in his eyes, and a familiar protective ache echoed inside of me. I couldn’t just hate him, and I knew it. It wasn’t that simple—it never could be. My anger evaporated, leaving behind a thin residue of contempt, and I muttered, “I swear, dobe. You are so stupid sometimes.” I turned away, putting distance between me and those eyes before I did something I couldn’t take back.

Naruto waited a moment, evaluating my response, then bounded up to me and linked his arm in mine. I guess he’d decided I wasn’t painful to the touch anymore. He flashed me a brilliant smile; my heart melted in my chest, and the rush of electricity from the contact was enough to overload my brain with endorphins. “I miss you, Sasuke,” he whispered. I wasn’t sure whether he’d intended me to hear him or not.

“You don’t have to,” I heard myself saying. “You’re the one who stopped hanging out with me.”

“Bakabakashi!” he shouted, erupting into a fit of laughter. I froze, uncertain. “You are a complete and total dumbass. I can’t believe it. And you called me stupid!”

I glared at him. “What?”

“Sasuke,” he wheezed. “You know if you want something, all you have to do is ask, right? You’re allowed to initiate. It doesn’t have to be me every time.”

My cheeks were burning as his words sunk in. “I—I thought if you wanted to hang out with me, you’d ask.”

Shizune’s phantom voice rang out in my head, chastising me for my low self-esteem. It had never even occurred to me to try asking; it would be such an obvious bother. I didn’t call him when I sat on my bed aching for his voice, and I didn’t text him when I checked my phone in the vain hope that he’d sent some message, and I certainly didn’t vocalize my desire to spend time with him, lest the mere acknowledgement of my existence as his friend annoy him. Not for the first time, I wondered why I was like this.

“Try looking at it from my perspective,” he said gently. He wasn’t always gentle with me, but at times like this, his existence felt like a warm blanket, keeping out the monsters. “I was always the one asking. I started to feel like maybe you didn’t want to spend time with me. If you did, why wouldn’t you ask? I was feeling the same way.”
“You?” I scoffed. “No. You’re always doing whatever you want, oblivious to the effect it has on others.”

“I’m not oblivious. Maybe I like the effect I have,” he retorted.

My mind immediately filled with the sensations of his kiss—the one on Halloween, the one at Kiba’s party, and the one on the cheek. I could feel his lips, the whisper of his breath in my ear, the pressure of his hand on my arm, my face, my hip. When he’d so chastely kissed my cheek, my whole body screamed out for me to kiss him, to grab ahold of that sunshine hair and pull him into me. I doubted that was the sort of reaction he’d hoped to inspire. “Sometimes the effect isn’t what you want or expect,” I scolded.

“Like what?” he asked, eyes in search of a challenge.

“Oh, I don’t know, like when you slap someone and then kiss them on the cheek?” I snapped.

His face fell. “I knew it. I knew you were still upset over that. Admit it, Sasuke. That’s the real reason you haven’t been hanging out with me.”

“Usuratonkachi. How does that make any sense?” I gave him a scathing look, and he flinched.

“Nevermind. Just forget it. It doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

Naruto turned away, unlinking his arm with mine, and I winced. The pain was undeniable; back to the three-foot rule. Annoyed with myself for feeling the ache of his loss and frustrated with him for causing it, I exclaimed, “If you’ve got a problem with me, just say so!”

“You’re the one with the problem!” he shouted, whipping around to face me. He was exasperated, glowering at me on the brink of full-blown rage. Something about what I said must’ve really set him off, though for once it hadn’t been my intention. There was a distinct sadness in his eyes, but I ignored it.

“The only problem I’ve got is you.” It was the truth, though I knew he wouldn’t understand it. I pushed him; he stumbled back.

“You’ve made that clear. What I don’t understand is why you still fucking talk to me. Or hang out with me. Or help me.” He took a menacing step forward with each addition, until he was inches from my face.

I faltered. I didn’t have an answer, not a mean one at least, and his proximity made it hard to think. I clenched my fist, and he shoved me, trying to instigate a genuine altercation. My footing wasn’t so steadfast on the sand; I careened backwards, grabbing ahold of him to prevent my fall. He jerked forward and came tumbling down on top of me.

Naruto propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at me in surprise. I could feel my hair splayed out on the damp sand, the water lapping gently at the ends; his legs were tangled with mine, and the warmth of his breath on my face made me blush. His eyes were wide and shimmering, still so vivid even in the dark of night. His hair hung in swirls of soft gold, framing his face, and his lips were parted, soft and inviting. God, I wanted him so badly. He was perfect and beautiful, angelic above me, and I resisted the dark urges within to kiss him, to hurt him, to take away his light. Something twisted and ugly in me wanted to taint him—this pure, innocent boy, all halos and hallelujahs. I yearned to hear him screaming my name, in pleasure or in pain, or perhaps even a bittersweet symphony of both. He dipped his head—for a moment, I thought he was going to do it, to kiss me, but instead he rested his brow against my collarbone and exhaled heavily.
“What do you want from me, ‘suke?’ he muttered, his lips ghosting across my nipple through my shirt. I tried, but I couldn’t suppress the shudder that rippled through me. “Sometimes it feels like all I do is piss you off, and I just know you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” I gasped. “Far from it.”

I willed my brain to shut off blood circulation before it was too late. He would notice instantly, the way he was pressed precariously against me. He moved his head from my chest, peering at me with the eyes of a child. My face was flushed, and I bit my lip to retain my focus. The sharp pain brought me clarity in the midst of my desirous haze, but only for a moment. He was hesitant, uncertain, yet unyieldingly hopeful when he asked, “Really? You mean it?”

“Really. I couldn’t hate you if I tried, and believe me, I’ve tried,” I answered. I could feel my control slipping; I was falling into the pool of insatiable need in the pit of my stomach. “Actually, I…”

He sat up and yanked me into him, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing tight. I was practically sitting in his lap, and the embrace felt too good to deny. I leaned into him, reciprocating the hug and burying my face in the crook of his neck. “Sorry, ‘suke. I didn’t mean to cut you off,” he mumbled against my ear. “What were you saying?”

“Nothing,” I said into his neck, pressing a small kiss there. It was innocuous enough that he’d probably think he’d imagined it, but I felt the way his skin came alive beneath my lips and his body tensed against mine. He felt it, but he didn’t let go. Not for a while.

When we got back to the hotel room, Iruka was passed out on the bed near the door, sprawled out like a child with limbs everywhere. He reminded me of Naruto in the moment: messy, vulnerable, naïve. My heart fluttered as I realized that the beautiful blonde boy and I would in fact be sharing a bed, but there was one large—or at least, average-sized—problem with that scenario. Sharing a bed with someone so painfully attractive meant that sleeping, among other things, would be hard. I hopped in the shower, wanting to wash off the sand and take care of one major issue. My thoughts centered on that perfect face of his and how it might look under delightfully torturous conditions; I came quickly, finished cleaning off, and left the shower feeling infinitely more in control of myself.

I slipped into bed as Naruto took my place in the bathroom. I’d put on a distressed t-shirt and soft shorts that exposed my thighs; I never wore more clothes to bed than I had to. I had my headphones in when Naruto emerged, skin slick with water droplets and thin white towel clinging to his hips. I averted my eyes as he clumsily dressed himself, for my sake and his. The last thing I needed was another ill-timed erection to take care of. He climbed into bed beside me, saying something I couldn’t hear. I took out an earbud, indicating that he should repeat himself. “What are you listening to?” he iterated, peering over my shoulder at my phone screen.

With the lights off in the secluded safety of the hotel room, I let myself relax against him. I handed the other earbud over, saying, “Here.” Our arms touched, hands brushing against each other under the blankets. I started the song over, letting the intro of Taking Back Sunday’s Make Damn Sure play through the tiny speakers.

“This is really good,” he whispered appreciatively. “You know, you might like Despite What You’ve Been Told by Two Gallants.”

We listened to that next, and though it was nothing like what I’d played, it wasn’t the worst thing he’d ever shown me. I had no idea what aspect of my music selection had inspired the connection in his brain, but Naruto was just like that, I’d come to realize. He often made connections between
things that others might not notice. It was one of the many things I liked about him. We took turns showing each other songs until we fell asleep, my head against his shoulder and his hand in mine.

I slept fitfully, as I knew I would, waking up to find myself cuddled up to Naruto’s back. Annoyed with my repeated blatant displays of affection, I would roll over and try to fall back asleep. Each time, though, Naruto rolled after me as if compelled by an unseen force. He’d slip his arm around me and snuggle against me, murmurs of sleepy contentment escaping his throat. Despite myself, I’d relax into his embrace and return to slumber, too tired and too comfortable to fight it.

The sun was blinking through the curtains when I awoke next, the click of the hotel door closing jarring me out of my restless nap. Naruto was still clinging to me, his arm clutching me tightly against him; Iruka must have gone out for coffee. I shifted, trying to get cozy enough to fall back asleep. I relished the feeling of Naruto’s skin against mine, sinking into his warmth with a pleased sigh. Our legs were intertwined, his hand rested on my abdomen, and his breath tingled the back of my neck. The chills it sent down my spine felt nice, so I arched into it, shuddered involuntarily when he nuzzled my neck and ear. My accidental writhing brought my attention to something stiff against my lower back, something I hadn’t felt since that time in the closet all those months ago. I stifled a gasp and tried to inch away without waking him up, but he stopped me. It seemed that the sleeping boy liked the way it felt to have my ass pressed into his cock, because he scooted closer and slowly pushed his hips into mine. I sucked in a breath, feeling my own dick come to life in my shorts, and I rocked against him, adding friction to his meager efforts. He moaned softly in my ear, hand trailing up my torso to my chest. Rational thought having abandoned me to my whims, I pushed into him, enjoying the sensation of his girth against me. His hand slid down and gripped my hip, holding me in place as he moved against me. Forceful, arrhythmic, needy; he let out groan and whispered something that sounded eerily similar to my name before slumping on top of me. He was content with sleeping and cuddling, but I was having a difficult time stopping myself from shoving his hand in my pants. I had never felt so turned on in my life, knowing that I’d just made the boy I was hopelessly in love with cum, and ignoring my erection was getting painful.

Naruto rolled over, still half-asleep as he got up and headed to the bathroom. He let out a string of profanity before stumbling back into the bedroom, and I rolled over on my back to keep him from seeing the stain he’d left on my shorts. Hand holding my dick down and eyes shut, I feigned annoyance at being roused from slumber as he searched my side of the bed.

“Lose something, dobe?” I muttered, my eyes fluttering open and landing on his worried face.


Naruto stepped out into the hallway, and I took the opportunity to lock myself in the bathroom and take care of my throbbing issue. I changed into my swimsuit and an old t-shirt afterwards, but as I stepped out I was surprised to see the blonde leaning against the counter, waiting on me. His eyes raked over me, and I raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’re in a swimsuit,” he observed hoarsely.

“We’re at the beach,” I retorted.

“We’re in a hotel.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to the beach,” I said.

“No breakfast?” he asked.

My stomach betrayed me, answering his question with gusto. Truthfully, I hadn’t even noticed my
hunger until he mentioned it. He grinned at me in triumph. “Okay, fine. Breakfast,” I answered.

We sat in a cold booth at the nearby Waffle House. I was nursing a bitter coffee, while Naruto had ordered a mocha milkshake. His sweet tooth never ceased to disturb me. I was waiting on egg whites and toast, trying to appease my need for simplicity. My breakfast companion looked around nervously, avoiding my gaze, and I frowned. He wasn’t eating, even though the greasy sandwich he’d claimed was a perfect morning meal had been placed in front of him already. The waitress had even smiled at him, her grandmotherly nature urging him to relax and dig in, but still he seemed restless.

“What is it, dobe?” I snapped.

“Uh, Sasuke…” He hesitated. “About this morning…”

I blanched. It hadn’t occurred to me that the insufferable idiot would try to talk to me about it—why would he even want to discuss what had transpired? I’d just assumed he was either genuinely asleep or pretending to avoid accountability, which was exactly what I’d wanted him to think about my own involvement, if he thought I was involved at all. “What about it?” I said sharply.

“Um, I, ah,” he stammered. “Did you, uh, sleep okay?”

“No,” I retorted. “You snore.”

“I do not,” he whined, a small smile undoing his furrowed brow. The relief on his face didn’t go unnoticed, and I wondered if he’d even had anything planned to say or if he was just winging it. Knowing Naruto, he was likely just going with his gut. I shook my head at him, letting my hair obscure the soft smile he’d wrangled out of me.

“You do. Loudly,” I lied. He’d been surprisingly quiet all night, with the exception of this morning’s moans, but complaining about something trivial brought him out of his worrisome analysis.

“Teme,” he muttered. “You’re not so perfect either, you know?”

“No? That’s news to me.” I smirked.

The waitress coughed politely before setting my plate in front of me, a slight blush on her face but kindness in her eyes as she said, “You sure you don’t want nothin’ else, darlin’?”

“This is fine, thank you,” I replied dismissively.

She looked pointedly at Naruto and said sternly, “You take good care of your boyfriend, y’hear? He’s too skinny. Y’all are growing boys. Y’need to eat. Just you let me know if he’s still hungry in a bit, okay sugar?” She squeezed his shoulder in a familial way, oblivious to the effect her words had on us.

My mouth hung open, and a blush so bright I could feel its warmth radiating from the other side of the table spread across Naruto’s cheeks. I didn’t correct her—too much time had passed. He didn’t either, letting her walk away with her faulty assumptions intact. My whole body tensed as I met his gaze. He stared at me with trepidation, as if I might bite his head off in place of hers. I closed my mouth and cleared my throat. “Let’s eat,” I commanded.

“Sasuke, she just—”
“I have ears. Hurry up, dobe. Your food’s getting cold,” I scolded.

We scarfed down our meals in relative silence, the awkwardness palpable. I was itching to leave the establishment and get away from the woman who had so effortlessly dismantled the fragile peace between us. The waitress, sensing our unease, came over with the bill and set it hesitantly on the table, clearly wanting to make amends but not sure how. She walked off without saying anything, and I scowled when I saw that she’d placed the receipt in front of Naruto, evidently assuming that he was the top. I snatched it from him, ignoring his futile protests, and headed to the register with a grimace.

The waitress smiled at me, somewhat bashful, as I paid, saying, “I hope I didn’t embarrass y’all too bad. My grandson’s gay, y’know, and I just wanted to make y’all feel comfortable here.”

I could hardly fault her for doing what she’d want someone else to do on behalf of her grandchild, but it didn’t quell the anxiety that had bloomed in my gut. I was certain that Naruto would lapse into that same painful physical distance that had been destroying me for months; he’d want to prevent anyone else from drawing the same conclusion. I wasn’t sure how to mitigate the damage of her inaccurate assumptions, and my fear of Naruto’s reaction had me putting up walls faster than ever.

As we walked to the beach, he off-handedly commented, “I guess that’s just what happens when two queer friends go out to eat together.” I stared at him in surprise, and he grinned sheepishly. “Ino told me you prefer that term.”

“You talked to Ino about me?” The words were out of my mouth before I’d realized how they sounded.

“Well, uh, yeah. I wanted to know if you hated me or whatever,” he replied.

“And what did she tell you?”

“She made a joke about you sucking dick,” he answered, blushing. Somehow I doubted it was quite so ambiguous. I’d have to kill her when I returned.

“Of course she did.”

“So I asked her if you were gay or if she was just fucking around, teasing you like that. She told me that you prefer queer, but she didn’t tell me why. No specifics,” he continued. “Ino wouldn’t tell your secrets if someone promised her Sakura’s hand in marriage.”

I smirked. He was probably right about that. “Yeah, I like queer. What about you?”

“Oh, I’m bi, but you knew that,” he said. “Didn’t you?”

“It’s not exactly a secret,” I retorted.

“Are you?” he asked.

“Careful, dobe. I’ll embarrass you,” I warned.

“You’re gonna embarrass me anyway,” he replied. “Might as well get the truth out of you. Do you like boys?”

I sighed. “I don’t know if I like boys. I’ve only ever liked one boy.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “But what about girls?”
“I’ve never liked a girl before,” I answered.

“You’re a mystery, Sasuke,” he decided. “But a good one.”

“I don’t try to be,” I said.

“I know. It’s not a bad thing, I promise,” he replied, touching my arm. His eyes widened as he caught a glimpse of the carnival a few piers down the shore, the flashing lights noticeable even in the midst of the sunshine. “Look! A fair! Let’s go, Sasuke. Can we? Please?”

The way he was tugging on my arm, it was hard to believe that he’d been avoiding physical contact with me for months. He was so adorable, it made my heart ache pleasantly. “Carnivals are better at night,” I said.

“You’re right. Can we go tonight? And ride the Ferris Wheel together?”

I could barely look at him, he shone so bright. “Sure,” I murmured.

The two of us had very different ideas about what constituted fun at the beach, as it turned out. Naruto, boisterous and vibrant as ever, busied himself with swimming in the ocean, chatting with strangers, and playing a pickup game of volleyball. His energy levels were insurmountable; just watching him exhausted me. From where I lay, sunglasses perched atop my head as I pretended to read, I could see him, tan and thick and perfect. I was utterly content, just gazing out at him over the tops of the pages. He fit in so well here—the bright sun brought out all of the hues in his hair, eyes, skin. The deep blue of the ocean and the soft white sand played host to the perfect backdrop; my heart swelled with adoration, and I had to tear my eyes away before I made a fool of myself with a ludicrous proclamation of love.

He came running up for the millionth time, checking up on me. “Hey, Sasuke! A few of us are going for ice cream. Wanna join?” He’d invited me to something new every ten minutes since we’d settled in, even though I’d declined each time. His tenacity was contemptable and oh-so endearing.

The “no” had already formed on my lips when a boy clearly a few years older than us walked up and casually slung his arm around Naruto’s shoulders, his dyed gray hair pulled up in a ponytail and glasses glinting in the sun. “C’mon,” he was saying. “We’re heading out.”

Unlike me, Naruto didn’t flinch away from the touch. He seemed more than comfortable with the way the boy felt against his bare skin, an easy grin on his face. “Hold on, I was asking Sasuke,” Naruto was saying. “What do you think, teme?”

I stared at the pair of them, so familiar after only a few hours, and I swallowed the bitterness in my throat.

“What is he, your mom? You don’t have to ask him. C’mon, let’s go already,” the boy urged.

“What’s up? Sasuke?” Naruto asked, ignoring the other boy entirely.

“No thanks. Have fun, dobe,” I forced out.

He pouted. “Aw, come on, teme.”

“Just leave him. If he doesn’t want to come, I’ll keep you company,” the boy said. He was kidding, it was friendly, I told myself. He didn’t intend for it to sound mean.
Naruto looked from him to me and shrugged. “If you’re sure, Sasuke…”

“I don’t like sweets, remember, usuratonkachi?”

“Right,” he replied, grinning sheepishly. “Bye then.”

They couldn’t leave fast enough. I buried my head in my towel and groaned, agonizing over the dumb blonde for the umpteenth time since I’d met him. Naruto was so friendly, so kind, so touchy. And I was so…not. I was angsty and cold, likely to kill someone for simply looking like they might want to touch me. He deserved friends like that guy he’d left with: friends who had no hang-ups with affection, friends who didn’t feel bad asking him to be around, friends who could play and laugh and joke with him. Friends who didn’t harbor secret crushes and resent themselves for not being their own antitheses.

Sighing, I called up Ino. Shizune was constantly encouraging me to replace my negative coping mechanisms with positive ones, and reaching out to my somewhat minimal support network seemed like a better option than engaging in what she would call negative self-talk, even if I felt like I was just being realistic. Ino answered on the fifth ring—maybe she was busy, maybe I was bothering her. “Hey, Sasuke,” she said, out of breath. “What’s up?”

I told myself not to hang up. I told myself to stop making assumptions for other people. I took a deep breath. “Ino, are you busy?”

“Nah, not really. Just at the end of my workout. How’s the beach?” she replied.

“Horrible,” I declared, relaxing a bit. I told her everything, appreciating the way she so casually validated all the things I’d felt with her minor interjections. Who knew something as simple as an “oh my god, no way” could help someone feel more at home with their own emotions? Okay, who knew besides Shizune? She didn’t count; part of me was convinced she was an all-knowing goddess, come to earth purely to help humankind. I finished up, explaining how I’d opted to stay on the beach, and Ino shrieked.

“Sasuke! How could you?” she demanded. My silence clued her in to my confusion, and she scoffed. “Boys are so stupid.”

“That’s the second time I’ve been called stupid in as many days. I don’t like it,” I muttered indignantly.

“Listen to me. Here’s what you’ve gotta do. Step one: get up. Step two: go find him. It’s that simple,” Ino said.

“Why?”

She sputtered angrily into the phone. “Do you even like this kid? Or have you just been making it up the whole time?”

“You know I do,” I said.

“Then act like it!” she shouted. “He knows you don’t like sweets, you moron. He knows you like tomatoes and My Chem and green tea lattes and taking pictures of abandoned buildings. He didn’t just forget. He was asking you to spend time with him!”

“Oh,” I mumbled. “Are you sure?”

“For fuck’s sake, Sasuke. Don’t make me come down there,” she retorted.
“Maybe you should,” I answered. My confidence in my abilities to handle this vacation was steadily declining.

“Just…try, okay?” she said.

Ino’s advice was easier said than done. Finding Naruto in the chaos of spring break at the beach was an insane task, even for such a menial locale. I sent him a text—“Changed my mind. Where are you?”—but he had yet to reply. I went to the plaza of shops nearby, looking around for an ice cream shop, when I caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye. He was across the street, on the outskirts of the group he’d been hanging out with. The boy from earlier was talking to him, and he responded with politeness but was distinctly lacking his usual gusto. He fell back when the boy was distracted, checking his phone. I watched his face light up, a huge smile stretching so wide it had to hurt. I wondered what could’ve possibly shifted his mood so drastically, and then my phone buzzed in my pocket. My heart raced as I pulled it out, careening to a halt when I saw he’d responded. It was me. I’d been the catalyst. He was smiling like that for me.

I stumbled back into a wall, the realization dawning on me. It overwhelmed me, eclipsing everything else. My brain could hardly process the information, but the more I questioned it, the more sense it made. I stared at him across the street and whispered it aloud to myself. “Naruto likes me.” It felt surreal. All of it lined up, though—the kissing, the phone calls, the excuses to spend time around me; Christmas and New Years and that goddamn kiss on the cheek. Not to mention the way he’d behaved this morning. I felt like I was going to throw up. There was no way I was going to handle this correctly.

Ino answered halfway through the first ring. “It was two steps, Sasuke. How’d you mess it up?”

“Naruto likes me, Ino. This is… I’m…” My brain wasn’t working. I squeezed my eyes shut. “Come down here and help me before I fuck everything up.”

She sighed. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Try not to ruin it.”

Naruto and I spent an eternity with the idiot assembly. He’d found a temporary friend group, and he wasn’t letting go, no matter how much disdain I showered them with. I’d have to pry them from his cold dead hands, it seemed. For once, though, his instinctive camaraderie wasn’t a thorn in my side. It was a welcome respite from the sheer terror of being alone with him. I was counting down the minutes until Ino arrived to save the day, and I was more impatient and snarkier than ever. It wasn’t helping that the boy from before—Kabuto was his name—had made his intentions much clearer, obviously flirting with Naruto every chance he got. I gritted my teeth and tried not to strangle him every time he laid his hands on my sunshine boy.

“So, tell me, Naruto. Are you a natural blonde?” Kabuto asked.

“Yup,” the boy replied with a grin.

“Can you prove it?” he asked smugly, the innuendo clear to everyone except Naruto, who stared at him sheepishly.

Tired of his nonsense, I leaned into Naruto and wrapped my arm around his shoulders, smirking at Kabuto. “He’s not a bottle blonde,” I answered. “I would know.” I wouldn’t know, not really, but it felt like the right answer.

Kabuto’s face reflected disappointment for a moment, but then he gave me a devilish smile. I didn’t
like where this was going. “Interested. What are you two doing later? Looking for a third?”

If it weren’t for Ino and her interactions with Temari, I might not have understood his true meaning. Naruto certainly didn’t. “We’re going to the carnival, right, Sasuke?” he beamed. “You’re—”

“Not invited,” I interrupted, pulling Naruto against me. He stared up at me in confusion, but he didn’t contradict me.

“That’s a shame,” Kabuto replied. “I could’ve taken you on the ride of your lives.”

“Naruto,” I said suddenly. “I don’t feel well. Can you take me back to our hotel room?” I glared at Kabuto, who merely smirked at me. I wanted to hit him, my need to protect Naruto from his scumbag tendencies growing by the minute.

“It’s probably because you haven’t eaten enough today.” The blonde scowled. “We’re going to see that nice grandma. I’m ratting you out.”


“Sure thing, ‘suke. See you around, Kabuto,” Naruto called out with a smile.

“Of course. You’ve got my number. Call me anytime,” he replied. I felt my face contort in disgust, and he chuckled as we walked off.

“It’s really hot, teme. You’ve gotta drink more water,” Naruto said was we wandered back toward the hotel.

“Hn.”

“I’m serious! You’ll get dehydrated and have a heat stroke,” he continued.

I was still walking around with my arm on his shoulders, and it suddenly felt shamefully possessive. Worried I was going to ruin it by being far too intimate, I remove the offending appendage from his tawny shoulders. He must’ve thought I was stumbled, because he instantly wrapped his arm around my waist and gripped me tight.

“It’s okay, ‘suke. I got ya,” he assured me.

Committed to my act, I returned my arm to its previous position and sighed. I was already making a mess of things, and I hadn’t even said anything yet. True to his word, Naruto led me back to the Waffle House, steadfastly ignoring my protests. He slid next to me in the same booth we’d used that morning, and he exclaimed, “Granny! We’re back!” much to my chagrin.

“Hello, boys,” she greeted sweetly. “Welcome back. What can I do for you two?”

“We’ll have…” Naruto proceeded to order practically everything on the menu, far more food than necessary, making my eyes go wide. “And a whole lot of water, please.”

“Sounds like somebody took my advice, hm?” she replied.

“Well apparently he’s not gonna take care of himself,” Naruto said with a laugh. “I’m worried he’s gonna pass out from the heat.”

“Don’t you worry, hun. We’ll set him straight.” She blushed as the words left her mouth. “Well, not straight. I mean, we’ll fix him right up.”
Naruto gave her one of his incredible grins, and off she went, on a mission to aid the poor little blonde boy and his incompetent boyfriend. I rolled my eyes at the thought, but then my stomach did an impromptu summersault at the idea of actually being Naruto’s boyfriend. I felt my cheeks go pink, and I groaned at myself for being so stupidly cheesy. What was I, a virgin? Well, yes, in terms of the social construct denotation, but in terms of attitude and persona? Absolutely not.

He rubbed my back, making small circles with his hand. “It’s okay. You’ll feel better soon,” he murmured. The concern in his eyes pushed me off of the precipice; until now, I’d been standing on the edge and peering over. I’d been watching the love rise like flood, filling up the chasm inside of me. I’d acknowledged it, talked about in depth, analyzed it over and over again, but I’d kept my distance. It was there, an irrefutable part of me, but I didn’t let myself fall into it. Naruto, with his unfettered kindness and gorgeous eyes, roundhouse kicked me off the cliff.

“You’re too nice to me,” I chided.

“Someone has to be, since you’re not nice to yourself,” he snorted.

He made me eat all of the food he placed in front of me, pouting when I protested that I was full. I wound up drinking so much water that I thought I might burst like a drain pipe. Finally, though, I convinced him that I’d had enough and just wanted to rest. Naruto reluctantly walked me back to the hotel room, his compassionate nature somehow both severely irritating and undeniably attractive. If I was ever truly sick around him, I’d likely drown in the love I’d feel for him. It was a frightening thought.

As I sat down on the bed, I said, “I don’t need you here babying me. Get out.”

“But what if—”

“Out, Naruto. Go have fun. I’ll be fine,” I interrupted. My stern voice hid my nerves well. Ino would be here any minute, and I didn’t want to lie to Naruto about her arrival. I didn’t want to tell him the truth, either.

“You sure?” he asked. “You’ll be alright without me?”

“Yes, dobe. I promise,” I replied.

“And you’ll call if you need anything? Anything at all, Sasuke, I’m serious,” he said.

I sighed. “If it gets you out of here, yes. I’ll call.”

“Somehow I don’t believe you’d call even if the hotel was on fire,” he grumbled, walking to the door.

“Why would I call you if the hotel was on fire? I’d be busy escaping a fiery death, usuratonkachi.”


As the door closed shut behind him, I threw myself backward and sighed, staring up at the ceiling with vacant eyes. I wrestled with the knowledge inside me, trying my best to come to terms with it. Naruto had feelings for me; what a dumbass. It couldn’t possibly be true, and yet the facts were staring me in the face. I wondered if he’d known the entire time, if he even knew now. A sickening thought—my heart plummeted into my stomach. What if he didn’t even realize his feelings were romantic? Did that negate them, render them obsolete, invalidate them? What if I confessed to him, anticipating a positive response, and he shot me down? After all, if he knew he had feelings for me, he’d have told me, I was certain. I could hardly picture him having the restraint necessary to keep
such feelings quiet. I groaned and hid my face in my hands, dismayed and perplexed by the reality I was living in.

The knock on the door couldn’t have come at a better time. I was sinking into a depressive fit full of self-loathing, all because the boy I liked happened to like me back. I was fairly certain I was the only human being on the planet who could pull off such a stunt. I let Ino in and breathed a sigh of relief. If anyone could make sense of my stupid queer problems, it was her. “It’s a crisis, I’m having a crisis,” I blurted out, closing the door behind her.

“Oh, you’ve got me for three hours, then I have to head back. Catch me up.” She glanced around the room, sitting in the desk chair by the TV as I paced to and fro. When I’d finished recounting everything for her in excruciating detail, she said, “Well shit.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “So, what do you think?”

“I think your low self-esteem is gonna kill me,” she said frankly. “Sasuke, listen to me. You’re hot! You’ve got so much going for you. You’re funny and smart, and you’ve got this whole bad boy with a soft heart thing going on. You’re a total catch. You have gotta stop shitting on yourself.”

“I see the validity of your point, but you cannot seriously just chalk up all of this to my insecurities,” I argued.

“Can’t I?” she replied. “Naruto likes you. And you like him. But instead of doing anything about it, like oh I don’t know making out on the beach as the sun sets, you’re in here alone trying to come up with any reason at all why it’s not real. That’s some self-sabotage if I’ve ever seen it.”

She wasn’t wrong. I sighed and said, “What should I do?”

“Tell him, of course.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” I muttered, laying horizontally on my bed with a dramatic flourish. She rolled her eyes at me, coming over to sit next to me on the edge of the mattress. “How am I supposed to tell him? I can’t even look at him sometimes.”

“You just get tongue-tied because you get all in your head about stuff and you freeze up. All you gotta do is be direct and speak from the heart,” she advised. “Here, pretend I’m Naruto. Give it a whirl.”

I sat up and stared at her. “Isn’t this a bit cliché? Does it ever actually work when people do this?”

“Would it be a cliché thing that everyone did if it wasn’t effective?” she replied.


“Okay, okay. Uh, Naruto,” I tried again, looking away from her. I conjured his face and tried to focus on my feelings. “I’m in love with you. I don’t know why, since you’re a loud-mouthed idiot with a penchant for the absurd, but I’ll be damned if that makes it any less true. You’re perfect, beautiful, holy even. I don’t know, it’s stupid. I’m stupid—” She smacked me again.

“No being mean to yourself. Again,” she commanded.

“Yes ma’am,” I snapped. “The truth is, I’m in love with you. You’re like an angel, all sparkling kindness and spotless empathy, and I’m not, but I’d like to be. I want to take the light inside you and
make myself less dark—” Another smack.

“You’re being weird. Keep it simple,” she critiqued.

“Fine.” I smirked at her, quoting her favorite poet. “I’ll give you my heart to make a place for it to happen, evidence of a love that transcends hunger. Is that too much to expect? That I would name the stars for you?”

Ino let out a little laugh and said, “If you’re going to quote poetry at him, try to pick something less abstract.”

I groaned. “Nothing I can possibly say could ever express the depth of my feelings. Perhaps I should just give up, before I make everything weird by telling him that sometimes he’s so pure and bright I want to make him bleed and thought of him angry brings about a sexual awakening in me.”

“Yeah, none of that strikes me as high-school-crush appropriate,” she replied. “Try once more, and remember, it doesn’t have to be poetically honest. It can just be the truth.”

I took a deep breath, exhaled, fixed my eyes on her. “Naruto,” I began. “There’s something I should tell you.” I heard the door opening, but it didn’t register fast enough in my brain. “I’m in love with you.”

Naruto gaped at me from the doorway, plastic bag from the local pharmacy in hand, and Ino leaned away from me, trying to assess the situation. My mouth stopped working; I just stared blankly at Naruto until he spoke. “Haha, this is awkward. I’m just gonna leave this here and go.”

“Wait, no, I’ll leave,” Ino objected, already standing. “You two should talk.”

“No, no, you guys obviously have some things to say,” Naruto said. “I’m gonna get out of your hair.”

He backed out, shooting me one last glance before closing the door. His eyes spoke of a sadness so profound there were no words for it, and I was on my feet before I even knew what I was doing. She stopped me, grabbing my shoulder.

“What are you going to say to him?” she asked.

“I’m going to tell him the truth,” I answered.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my GOD y'all these last two chapters are killing me. I had to split this one into two parts because guess how long it is!!!!! Fuckin' 56 pages! This first part is nearly ten thousand words, and it's the shorter chapter! Fuck me! So I had this super weird dream recently (I always have really weird dreams and in the grand scheme of things this dream was actually about a two, y'know, but those unaccustomed to the peculiarities of my subconscious--aka everyone ever--might rank it a bit higher on the weirdness scale) about, like, Sasuke and Naruto. I was getting drunk in this dive bar and I glance up from my misery stool to see lo and behold none other than the duo themselves, in the flesh. They thanked me for giving them a world where they could be together?? And I woke up like, "Damn, I need to get some new interests,
holy shit," but on the low it was a really reassuring and positive dream. So I feel more motivated than ever to not only finish posting this monstrosity but also to inspire other fic writers to continue their work!!! Sometimes fictional characters deserve better, y'all, and we're the only ones ready, willing, and able to do it. Props to ya for reading and writing and giving these characters a new home where they can be the truest versions of themselves.

Typing this up was kind of a nightmare. It's roughly two in the morning right now, and I just typed it all while looking at my handwritten rough draft, so if there are any mistakes, I'm so sorry. I'll look over it again in a week or two, but for now I'm trying to tank the second part of this chapter and the ginormous finale before the end of the year, so bare with me.

Okay, okay, I know that Kabuto is a bit out of character, but........... I just find it hard to believe that someone could be that close to Orochimaru for that long and not pick up some of his creepy social skills. Also I know he was canonically after Sasuke, but I can't imagine anyone meeting Naruto and not immediately falling in love with him. Sure, Sasuke's hot, but Naruto is husband material.

I also am totally aware that Make Damn Sure by Taking Back Sunday is more than a little bit on the nose and I really shouldn't have it in here, but y'know what? This is fanfiction. It's not gonna win a Pulitzer. I can put some trope-y nonsense in here if I want. (Next chapter: "Hello, vampire," I said flirtily as I started to sob.")

On a serious note, the next chapter should be up tomorrow. And then comes the nightmare chapter. Here's my apology in advance for the angst, because holy shit it is a-comin'.

Love you all so much! Thank you for reading!

Oh, I saw a fellow author do this, so I figured I'd follow the trend. You can follow me on tumblr--my SNS blog is narutoandzasukeweregayashell and my main blog is arthurindented (yes that is a hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy pun). You can also follow me on instagram--authorindented--and check out my original stories on my fictionpress account--authorindented. Thanks!!!
BEFORE i want to spring break free (part 2)

Chapter Summary

"We have not touched the stars, nor are we forgiven, which brings us back to the hero’s shoulders and the gentleness that comes, not from the absence of violence, but despite the abundance of it."

WARNING: there's sex stuff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE i want to spring break free [god knows i’ve fallen in love]

Naruto hadn’t yet realized he was running. It had been a knee-jerk reaction to flee, and he didn’t notice until his legs started to burn. He’d managed to run all the way down to the fair, which was nothing more than painful reminder of what he couldn’t have. An ironic flashing neon sign, telling him that everything he’d wanted was unattainable. The brightly colored lights and the descending sun no longer seemed fun or inviting; they were just one more backdrop in a life full of nonsensical anguish. Sasuke had just confessed to Ino—Ino of all people! What was she even doing here? Did she come down here just to see him? Naruto shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts from his mind. He disappeared into a department store on the main strip of the shopping plaza that hid the carnival from view on the road. The coats were on sale, their usefulness dwindling with the change of seasons. “He told me he liked a boy,” Naruto mumbled to himself sullenly, the intensity of the notion so strong it leaked out of his mouth. “He said he doesn’t have feelings for Ino. I asked him.”

Slowly it dawned on Naruto that perhaps Sasuke had never entrusted him with the truth at all, thereby negating the severity of their friendship. Perhaps the depth of their bond had been a figment of his imagination the whole time. The whole thing, all in his head.

Naruto gritted his teeth, clenching his fists in the middle of the juniors’ section. Even if it had been one-sided, that didn’t make it any less real. His feelings were real, goddamnit. Sasuke’s dishonesty wasn’t going to invalidate the way he felt about him. It didn’t even make sense, anyway—him liking Ino. Sure, he spent a lot of time with her, but so had Naruto lately. Ever since he’d started working at the Daily Grind after school, he and Ino had become much better acquainted. He knew firsthand that no one could spend that much time with her without realizing just how incredibly gay she was. Sasuke was a lot of things—an asshole, a liar, a piece of shit—but he wasn’t stupid. He was one of the most infuriatingly observant people Naruto had ever met, and his self-control was enviable. There was no way he’d gone this long with a crush on Ino. It didn’t add up. He was puzzling through it, piece by piece, when he bumped into Kabuto.

“Hey Naruto!” he called out. The boy had been looking through the clearance section, only to glance up and spy the familiar face across the way. His greeting jarred the blonde out of his thoughts.

“Oh, hey Kabuto,” came the soft reply as he approached Naruto.
“Something wrong? You don’t look so happy,” Kabuto observed.

Naruto shrugged, not really wanting to divulge everything to this relative stranger. Who he really needed to talk to was Gaara, but two panicked calls about Sasuke drama in one day was likely to get his number blocked for the rest of the trip. He didn’t make eye-contact, saying, “Kind of, but I won’t trouble you with it. Nice to see you again.”

Kabuto blocked his path as he started to walk away, stepping in front of him and putting his hands on the blonde’s shoulders. “It’s that _teme_ of yours, isn’t it? Did something happen? Did he bail on you tonight?”

“Something like that,” Naruto answered.

“C’mon, kid. Let me buy you a drink. You can tell me all about it,” the boy replied.

Three shots and two cocktails later, Naruto had unveiled his life’s story to Kabuto in the sketchiest bar he’d ever seen. No one had even asked him for ID, and Kabuto seemed to be friends with the bartender. He’d instructed the man to keep the drinks coming, feigning compassion for his younger friend. He wasn’t listening, not really, but he knew how to act like it. He smiled and furrowed his brows, making all of the right expressions whenever Naruto needed validation, which was annoyingly often.

“I think you should dump him,” Kabuto interjected at a pause. He was growing tired of pretending to care about the blonde’s grievances, and he was pretty sure the high schooler had finally had enough to drink to make things worthwhile.

“Dump him? You mean like…ditch him?” Naruto asked. “But we were s’posed to ride the Ferris Wheel together.”

“I’ll ride you instead. Whoops, slip of the tongue. I mean, I’ll ride it with you instead,” Kabuto said with a wink. He’d at least been expecting a blush, but the kid didn’t even flinch. Maybe he was more of a slut than he’d initially concluded.

“Really?” he asked, eyes wide.

“Sure,” Kabuto replied. He hadn’t gotten laid on the Ferris Wheel before. It sounded fun.

“Okay, let’s go! Right now, c’mon, go go go,” Naruto exclaimed, stumbling out of his stool and to the door without hesitation. Even drunk, his enthusiasm and vigor were forces to be reckoned with.

He was in such an excited rush, he paid absolutely no attention to the dark-haired person scowling at him as he brushed past—not until that person grabbed him by the hand and dragged him into the alleyway next to the bar. “Naruto? Where’d you go?” Kabuto’s voice rang out, but Naruto couldn’t answer even if he wanted to. His shouts were substantially muffled by the pale hand across his mouth. He went silent when his eyes met onyx ones, glaring at him under expressive brows.

“You idiot! Do you have any idea how long I’ve been looking for you?” Sasuke hissed after the danger of being located had passed. “And you’ve been drinking with Kabuto the whole time?”

He was furious, Naruto could see it in his eyes. Fine, let him be angry. Naruto didn’t care. After all, it wasn’t like he owed Sasuke anything. In fact, he was angry too. In fact, he felt like Sasuke owed him—owed him the truth, for once in their charade of a friendship. He nipped the fleshy part of the boy’s palm, grinning triumphantly when Sasuke yanked his hand away. He was surprised to see that
he’d bitten hard enough to draw blood, but he didn’t stay mired in the initial regret that bubbled up in his gut.

“Fuck off, ‘suke. Why’re you lookin’ for me ‘nyways? Shouldn’t you be hanging out with your girlfriend?” he slurred, spitting the word girlfriend out like it tasted as bitter as it felt. “She’s a girl, by the way. I don’t know if you, y’know, like, know that or whatever. It’s just, y’know, you said you liked a guy. Said you were queer. Said you weren’t bi. So, I mean, y’know, unless you’re a big fat liar, I don’t… y’know?”

He’d lost steam by the end of his retort, forgetting how he’d wanted to end it. He gave Sasuke a smug, expectant look anyway, as if he’d just verbally handed him his ass. Sasuke stared at him with thinly veiled frustration.

“Oh my god, you’re drunk. This is not at all how I wanted to do this,” he muttered, his annoyance finally getting to Naruto. The blonde glowered and tried to step past him, not wanting to participate in this futile discussion a second longer, but Sasuke shoved him flush against the brick wall. The unevenly mortared slabs of brick jutted into his back—it would’ve been more unpleasant if he hadn’t been intoxicated, certainly. The position reminded him of the time when he’d run into Sasuke and Ino at the diner, after the hospital. He wondered with aching scrutiny if Sasuke had known then that he had feelings for Ino, if he’d been lying the whole time.

“Teme,” he growled, angered by his thoughts.

“Look, dobe. Ino’s not my girlfriend. I told you before, I don’t like her like that,” Sasuke said, his voice low and serious. “But I am, as you so eloquently put it, a big fat liar. It’s time I told you the truth.”

Naruto couldn’t hear him over the buzzing rage in his ears. He didn’t want to hear him. He wrenched against the boy’s grip, flailing wildly. His elbow connected with Sasuke’s mouth, unintentionally making him bleed for the second time that night. “Fuck off, I don’t want to hear your truth! Just leave me alone, you annoying son of a bitch,” Naruto shouted. The hurt that flashed in Sasuke’s eyes made him regret it immediately, as did the hand at his throat.

“Pathetic. Is that the best you’ve got?” Sasuke sneered.

Naruto scrambled, fueled by rage, and punched Sasuke hard in the face like he’d wanted to every day for the past two months. The boy spat blood; third time’s the charm. He had Naruto on the ground, pinned beneath him, before the blonde even knew what was happening. He clenched his fist and reared back, with Naruto bracing on the concrete as best he could. He flinched away from the incoming blow, but the pain he was expecting never came. Naruto peered up at Sasuke, confused, and saw his eyes filled with tears unspilled.

“I wanted to hurt you, but the victory was that I couldn’t stomach it,” he whispered, mostly to himself. It sounded familiar, a quote maybe. Naruto couldn’t place it. Sasuke got up and walked off, leaving the blonde there with an aching sickness in his chest. He hurried after the boy, trying not to
lose sight of him in the looming darkness and heady crowd. It wasn’t until they’d arrived at the carnival’s entrance that Naruto realized he was headed toward the Ferris Wheel.

Sasuke stopped next to the enormous ride, leaning against the flimsy metal gate with his arms crossed over his chest. Wordlessly, he met Naruto’s eyes and then looked up at the huge circle with his eyebrows raised. Naruto nodded hesitantly, and Sasuke stood upright, leading them to the entrance. They got inside the gondola without speaking, the silence rife with tension and uncertainty. As they rose in the air, guilt echoed throughout Naruto’s drunken mind, and his need to fix what he’d broken overcame the stilted awkwardness that had settled between them. He slunk over to sit next to Sasuke, grabbing the boy’s hand and holding it tersely. He laced their fingers together and muttered an apology before leaning against the boy’s shoulder. To his surprise, Sasuke rested his head against the top of Naruto’s and sighed, relaxing against him.

“Don’t worry about it, usuratonkachi,” he murmured softly, nuzzling his cheek into the golden locks of hair. Shocked by the intimate display so soon after he’d punched the boy, Naruto felt himself beginning to cry. He thought about the tears he’d seen in Sasuke’s eyes, about the pain he’d caused both physically and emotionally, and he trembled; he wasn’t the kind ray of sunshine that everyone seemed to think, not always. Sometimes, he was more villain than hero.

Sasuke tensed beside him, realizing that the boy was sobbing softly into his shoulder. Naruto couldn’t help it—the tears were unstoppable and infinite, an expression of distress and self-loathing. Sasuke let go of Naruto’s hand, only to reach over and scoop him up, pulling the blonde into his lap and letting his head rest in the crook of his neck. Surprised by the gesture, Naruto’s tears stopped, and he clung to the boy’s chest, unwilling to take the chance that questioning the affection would cause its undoing.

“Naruto,” Sasuke said gently, his lips pressed into the boy’s hair. “There’s something I have to tell you. It’s important.”

“Okay,” Naruto mumbled, unmoving.

“Look at the sky,” the boy prompted. “The stars and the moon.”

He glanced up, sucking in a breath at the beauty. Without the light pollution of the city, the sky was utterly stunning—a seemingly infinite stretch of dark blue, dotted with bright whites. The reflection glistened in the ocean waves, rippled and distorted and somehow all the prettier for it. The lights of the carnival twinkled all around, and as the comforting darkness encroached upon them, Naruto felt himself smiling. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s what you are to me,” Sasuke whispered faintly.

Naruto bolted upright, sliding off the boy’s lap and staring at him in disbelief. There was no way he’d heard that right, even though everything in him ached for it to be true. He forced himself to put up a wall, having sobered up just enough to be distrustful of himself. “What did you just say?” he asked defensively, not letting his hopes grow.

“Naruto, the truth is, I—”

An obnoxious buzzing interrupted him. He pulled out his cell phone, a look of agitation mingled with anguish on his face. He watched the phone ring in silence for a moment, his breathing irregular; Naruto sat still beside him, waiting patiently for things to start making sense.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Sasuke muttered to himself, finally answering the phone. “Great timing you’ve got, asshole.”
A computerized voice responded, saying something that Naruto couldn’t quite make out. He stared at Sasuke’s face, watching his microexpressions with worry.

“Right, as I’ve said before, I didn’t uncover anything new in my search, so—” He paused, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Who? No, I’ve never—What? Wait, hold on.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “That’s fine, just hang up then.”

Naruto asked him, “What was that about?” as Sasuke groaned and rubbed his temples, as if trying to prevent an oncoming headache. The boy froze, looking at him with a strange feeling in his eyes. He nodded, as if deciding something for himself, and let his hands fall by his sides.

“I’ve been getting harassing phone calls once a week since December,” he stated. Naruto faintly recalled something of the sort—he’d walked in after one, hadn’t he?—and nodded, waiting for more information. “Someone wants me to look into my parents’ death. They seem to believe that Itachi is innocent.”

“What? That’s crazy,” the blonde replied.

“Yeah, it’s been…frustrating,” Sasuke said. He looked annoyed, but his eyes held anxiety the likes of which Naruto had never seen. He resisted the urge to pull the boy into a hug, but he wasn’t sure how long he could hold out. “Does the name Danzo mean anything to you, by any chance?”

“No,” he answered instinctively, then frowned. “Wait, Danzo. Like the city council member Danzo? He was interim mayor for a bit, like ten years ago.”

Sasuke’s curiosity was palpable. He shifted, facing Naruto in the gondola. “Perhaps. Any chance he’s connected to my parents?”

“I don’t know. You said your dad was a policeman, right?” Naruto asked, even though he knew he was right. “My dad was the mayor, before he died. Danzo took over after he passed. I’m sure he would’ve at least known your dad.”

“Hn.” Sasuke was lost in thought, considering the implications.

“I think he’s still in office, actually. His secretary still sends me holiday greeting cards. I was actually surprised to get one for Christmas, since I was staying with the Shukakus at the time.” Naruto thought it was pretty odd, all things considered, but he hadn’t paid much attention to it—there were other things on his mind during the winter, after all.

As they got off the Ferris Wheel, Sasuke’s distracted, dismal demeanor demanded Naruto’s attention, taking his mind off of all the unfinished conversations he wanted answers for. The blue behavior was a problem he could actually solve, if he tried hard enough. He grabbed the boy by the arm and tugged him toward the closest booth, full of prizes and promises. The carnie working the stand was enigmatic, to say the least—his top hat was purple, and the matching cape he’d donned was ridiculous. He’d accessorized just as bizarrely, with a black cane and an eye mask. With his curly dark hair and mysterious aura, he actually reminded Naruto of Tuxedo Mask from Sailor Moon. He was tempted to make the comparison to Sasuke, but he thought the better of it.

The man claimed he could guess anyone’s age, astrology sign, or eastern zodiac, and if he got it wrong, then the person won. Simple as that. Naruto pushed his friend forward, ignoring the strange stare Sasuke was giving the man, and urged him to participate. Rolling his eyes, Sasuke gave in and allowed the man to guess his age. The carnie guessed correctly, so Naruto stepped up to try for a prize. If he won, he’d decided he would get the cute stuffed raven—or was it a crow? He couldn’t tell—for Sasuke. The boy deserved something soft and sweet, even if he was a confusing mess. The
man took a guess at Naruto’s astrology sign, and he was spot on, managing to get his sun and rising signs right. He was off on the moon sign, but he only guaranteed the sun. Naruto only knew his placements because of the weird girl in his Chemistry study group—she’d done it for him one day, giving him a complete analysis of his natal chart for fun. What was her name again? He couldn’t remember; she was so quiet and plain, she blended into the background. He was disappointed by the loss, but Sasuke hardly seemed perturbed. His nose was buried in his cell phone, a grim scowl on his face.

“What are you doing, Sasuke?” he asked, trying to sneak a peek.

“Google Danzo,” he retorted.

“Hmm, probably won’t get you very far. He keeps his hands clean,” Naruto said, thinking about the way his dad had talked about the man. He didn’t like thinking about his dad; it upset him how little he could remember, and it felt like he was forgetting more and more each year. He couldn’t recall what his dad had said specifically, but he got the distinct feeling that Danzo wasn’t his dad’s favorite person on the council.

“You don’t appear to be wrong at first glance,” Sasuke replied. “I suppose I’ll quit for now. Not much I can do here, at least. What would you like to do next?”

“Hmm, is there anything you want to do?” Naruto asked.

“I’m here to be with you,” he answered, making the blonde’s face go red. He’d never heard Sasuke say anything so directly amicable before.

“How about the Haunted Mansion ride?” Naruto squeaked, wanting to hide his embarrassment in the dark of the ramshackle setup.

“Isn’t that for little kids?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.


He went to pull on the boy’s arm again, catching his wrist instead. He tugged anyway, leading them to the childish building and climbing into the simple cart with more enthusiasm than strictly necessary. Sasuke yanked his wrist free, only to set his hand on Naruto’s thigh. The gesture was so comforting, Naruto nearly forgot about all of the questions that still lingered in his stupefied mind. He couldn’t focus on anything besides that familiar warmth throughout the ride, even though it was only five minutes of cheap jump-scares and taunting music. They exited without a word, but Sasuke was staring at him pointedly, as if to say I told you so.

“Okay, dobe. Now what?” Sasuke asked after they’d walked a few feet down the boardwalk.

Naruto, feeling impulsive, took his hand and led him around. They went from booth to booth, with Naruto shooting BB guns and throwing darts just to win a prize. He took Sasuke by the hand every time, and Sasuke made the observation that the games were rigged after every loss. Naruto could tell he was enjoying it, though. The attention and the charm were getting to him; he was distracted by Naruto’s determined positivity, on his way to genuine happiness. Suddenly, Naruto’s eyes landed on a booth he knew he could defeat—all he had to do was swing a mallet, let the bell ding at the top, and voila, a prize would be his. His to give to Sasuke. He put on a show, letting his silly charisma enthuse the crowd that had paused to watch. He cracked his knuckles and stretched his muscles, grinning and winking at Sasuke, who merely watched with arched brows. He gave the mallet a few test swings before bringing it down hard on the base. The small metal device shot up, but it was a few inches short of the bell. Oh well, he’d paid for three tries. With a shrug, he swung again—the
outcome was even worse than the first time. Before he could give it another go, though, Sasuke stepped forward and took the mallet out of his hands. He smirked as he swung it down, not even bothering to look up. The bell dinging in his ears only amplified his smug expression tenfold, and he picked the giant stuffed frog from the selection, shoving it in Naruto’s arms with the most captivating smirk he’d worn in a while.

“Here,” he said. “This is for you.”

Naruto gaped at him, dumbfounded. “Just you wait, teme! I’ll win you something yet!” he finally shouted, rushing after the boy and taking his hand.

He wasn’t especially skilled at carnival games, but what he lacked in talent he made up for in determination. He tried his hand at everything, but he didn’t let his losses get him down. He dragged Sasuke onto rides and made him eat fair food—funnel cake, grilled corn on the cob, turkey legs—all the while playing games at the different booths they passed. Eventually they made their way back to the start, running into the guessing man once again. Sasuke waited patiently, fingers intertwined with Naruto’s, as the blonde weighed his options. He was absentmindedly stroking the back of Naruto’s hand with his thumb, and the feeling was so affirming that Naruto couldn’t help but grin.

“Alright!” he said suddenly, eyeing the carnie with determination. “Let’s do this! I’m gonna win you a prize, Sasuke. Believe it!”

Sasuke rolled his eyes but watched in amusement as Naruto challenged the man with the only option they hadn’t tried before. The man had to guess his eastern zodiac—it ought to be as easy as guessing his birth year, but that didn’t deter Naruto’s impetuous hope one bit. He felt a surge of confidence; the universe was on his side, he just knew it. The man considered him for a moment, then made his guess. The word left his mouth, sounding like music to the blonde’s ears, and he grinned triumphantly.

“Nope,” Naruto declared. “Good guess, though.”

The man stepped aside and let the blonde sift through the available prizes, removing his mask to rub his eyes as Naruto grabbed the black bird from the pile. “Thanks for playing,” he said.

Naruto quickly shoved the plush toy in his friend’s hands, saying, “Told you I’d win one for you. The great Sasuke Uchiha isn’t the only one who can win carnival prizes.”

“Who’s prize is bigger, dobe?” Sasuke retorted.

The blonde was gearing up for yet another verbal dick-measuring contest with his formidably verbose opponent when the carnie interrupted them. “Sorry, what did you say your name was?” Naruto looked at him curiously, noticing for the first time that he was completely blind. His scarred eyes and dark hair gave him a creepy aura, intensified by his strange attire.

“Sasuke Uchiha,” the boy answered. He was staring at the man with an annoyed frown. “You’re Shisui, aren’t you?”

“Mikoto’s son! I thought it was you. Granted, I hadn’t heard your voice in years—glad you can talk again!” he said. “How’s Itachi? I still can’t believe they put him in prison without a shred of evidence. That verdict was corrupted.”

If any words could ruin a good mood for Sasuke, those were certainly on the list. Naruto watched Sasuke’s eyes, seeing the anger and confusion twist into sadness. “Good to see you again, Shisui,” he said quietly. “Naruto, can we—”
“You bet. Bye, creepy stranger!” Naruto grabbed Sasuke’s hand and took off, guiding him protectively away from the unintentionally upsetting family member.

They left the carnival and wandered down to the beach, walking slowly without a word. Naruto wondered what Sasuke must be thinking. His cousin, living and working a few cities away near the coast, pestering him about his past only a few hours after Sasuke’s mysterious phone call. Even Naruto thought that seemed suspicious, and he was usually inclined to trust people. He glanced at Sasuke out of the corner of his eye, taken in by his melancholic loveliness. He’d never seen someone who could be so distant, so displeased, and yet so utterly captivating before. The sadness in his eyes was often precluded by the disdain on his face, but even sneering he radiated this ethereal beauty. Naruto thought about how he’d looked just last night, hair tousled against the sand and cheeks flushed the softest shade of pink; he’d been so vulnerable, so open, so exposed. Now, though, he was closed off and isolated, as per usual. His face was stoic, his lips curving naturally downwards and his hair obscuring his eyes. He was born to be a creature of the night—he looked too good, bathed in moonlight. It suited him.

“What is it, dobe?” Sasuke inquired dryly, catching the way Naruto had been staring in spite of his efforts to conceal it.

“Nothing,” Naruto stammered. Sasuke could always inspire a revolution of nerves inside him with the simplest of glances. “I just… Are you okay?”

“Not especially.” Sasuke paused, looking to Naruto with his hair in his face. The blonde unthinkingly brushed the bangs behind the boy’s ears, revealing those sad dark eyes he’d come to love.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked softly.

“No. I just want to go to sleep,” the boy said. “But thank you. For tonight.”

“Yeah, of course.” Naruto hesitated. “Sorry that I got so weird about, uh, about Ino, earlier. Speaking of, though, what was that about?”

“I… I can’t, right now, Naruto. I’m sorry. It’s not right.” Sasuke sighed, and Naruto impulsively brought his hand to the boy’s cheek. He was sure Sasuke would snap at him for crossing the line soon, but he missed the way he felt to be intimate with him. He’d stopped touching him out of fear, and after a while it had just felt too impossible to go back to the way things had been before. Sasuke’s icy stare would stop him dead in his tracks. So he wanted to enjoy this while he had it.

“It’s okay, no worries,” he murmured.

Then Sasuke did something he didn’t expect. In the soft glow of the moon, Sasuke tilted his face and brought his mouth to Naruto’s wrist, placing a gentle kiss against the tender skin. The blonde gasped involuntarily, letting his arm go limp and fall to his side. Sasuke gave him a thoughtful stare, a teasing glint sparkling in his eyes.

They walked back to the hotel in silence, Sasuke showering and sliding into bed as he had the day before. Iruka was nowhere to be seen, and as he took his own shower, Naruto wondered if he ought not sleep in the same bed tonight. He was mulling it over as he pulled on boxers, seeing Sasuke’s sleeping form reflected in the mirror outside of the bathroom. He looked so peaceful, he reminded Naruto of a napping feline. The urge to disturb him, to rouse him and earn a fitful glare, was undeniable; he chuckled to himself at the thought. He decided to sleep next to the boy and climbed carefully under the sheets, wanting to take advantage of the brief time he had to be in the same bed as his crush. He rolled away from the sleeping boy, not wanting to wake him with excessive affection,
but the bed shifted as Sasuke snuggled up behind him and wrapped an arm around his abdomen. Naruto smiled to himself, pleased with the comfortable intimacy, as he drifted off to sleep.

Tsunade came barging in the next morning, not bothering to knock. Iruka stepped in behind her, an embarrassed blush on his cheeks at having stayed out all night. Sasuke tensed and sat up, rousing Naruto from his slumber. "Hey kids, guess what we’re doing today!" the blonde woman declared from the doorway, strutting up to the far bed like she owned the place.

"Uh, sleeping until noon?" Naruto grumbled. He yawned unabashedly, annoyed to see that the sun had yet to rise outside.

"No way!" Tsunade retorted, smacking him with a pillow. He begrudgingly got up, wandering over to the sink and washing his face. He usually had a hard time waking up fully in the mornings, and the vehement energy Tsunade exuded wasn’t exactly helping.

Sasuke had already changed into a v-neck and shorts by the time Naruto finished up. He was idly clipping his bangs back as he said, "Let me guess. It’s a surprise."

Tsunade tucked him under her arm in a sisterly embrace. "Aw, my dear child! You know me so well."

Naruto pulled on his faded jeans, more hole than fabric—the ones he’d inadvertently stolen from Sasuke, with no intention of ever returning—not bothering to change out of the tank top he’d slept in. His unkempt bedhead was a swirling vortex of golden blondes and gentle browns, and his eyes suggested he was more exhausted than he actually felt. The orange flip-flops he’d put on could hardly be said to match, but he shrugged it off. Fashion faux-pas were none of his concern, though Sasuke might assault him with some undesired critiques.

He glanced at the boy, a few feet away from his fake mom, and his heart skipped a beat at the look Sasuke was giving him. As he stifled another yawn, he felt the intensity of the stare; he was either oddly angry or deeply aroused. Naruto blinked. There was no way Sasuke was aroused right now, and certainly not because of him. He was angry, he had to be angry—that was it. Besides, if anyone ought to be aroused, it was Naruto. The shorts Sasuke wore were far too short, and even though they weren’t especially tight, he could see the curve of the boy’s posterior perfectly. If he’d been wearing a cropped version of Naruto’s football jersey, the blonde likely would’ve keeled over and died. That would be a fantasy come to life. Sasuke was gorgeous on a bad day, but right now he was damnably sexy. His messy hair and warm eyes, so focused on Naruto he felt himself turning red. Those soft pink lips, the slope of his neck as it met his shoulders, his toned arms leading to those slender, graceful hands. Hands he’d spent so much time holding yesterday, it almost made up for the nerve-wracking drama that had yet to be comfortably concluded. He smiled at the memory, the way it felt to have those smooth, cold fingers intertwined with his own, and he flashed that toothy smile at Sasuke across the room; the boy gave him a contemptuous frown in return. One day, he vowed to himself, he’d get a genuine smile out of the kid. For now, though, his gaze shifted to Iruka.

"Late night?" he asked, a wry grin taking shape on his face. The man’s embarrassment visibly increased, his nervousness clear. He stumbled over his words, not able to form a coherent sentence to save his life. The blonde smirked and glanced at Tsunade with raised brows. "I don’t think he even came home last night."

"That’s not A+ parenting, Iruka,“ she chided good-naturedly. "If you’re gonna be out all night, you’ve gotta at least call."
“Shame, shame,” Naruto quipped.

Iruka looked as if he were about to die of discomfiture. To make matters worse, a pair of familiar faces peeked through the open door, one of which was the obvious answer to Iruka’s mysterious disappearance during the night. Kakashi held up a set of frappes by way of greeting, saddling up next to the brunette and snaking an arm around his waist with a friendly grin. He set the drinks on the armoire as Shizune closed the door behind herself.

“Sorry we’re late. The line was unenviable,” he said, spiraling into an unnecessary anecdotal recount of the tribulations the two of them had faced in their simple quest for coffee. The way he described it, getting drinks for everyone was something akin to a mediaeval adventure—complete with fire-breathing dragons and handsome knights and a beautiful, if masculine, brunette princess awaiting a triple-shot Americano.

Sasuke hid his surprise well, but Naruto could tell that he hadn’t been expecting his fitness instructor to show up here. Kakashi’s presence was somewhat startling to Naruto as well, but he couldn’t claim that it was entirely unexpected. Iruka and Kakashi had been dating since they’d met at the Christmas party, and he’d figured Kakashi would show up eventually—late, as per usual. Kakashi was a surprisingly private person for someone who seemed so extroverted; that Sasuke hadn’t anticipated his arrival was merely a side effect of his enigmatic personality. He wasn’t one to readily disclose his romantic entanglements.

“Good, I could use a coffee,” Naruto said as the story wrapped up. He grabbed one of the drinks and grinned. “What time is it, anyway?”

“A quarter past This Is Hell,” Kakashi replied, ruffling the boy’s already insane hair.

“I didn’t know you were invited on this trip,” he retorted, ducking away from the contact.

“You thought I’d leave you to bully Iruka all by yourself? I could never,” the silver-haired man answered, planting a kiss on the brunette’s forehead.

“Well, now that we’re all here, let’s get this day started,” Tsunade decreed with all the spirited authority of a dictator. She grabbed one of the coffees and headed out of the door, everyone following her animated lead with stoic resignation.

Kakashi’s car was large and boxy, with three rows of seats and an amazing stereo system. Naruto sat in the back as they drove around, delighted by the way the bass shook the rear window. Iruka sat in the passenger seat next to his boyfriend, while the wives sat next to each other in the middle. Sasuke had eyed the backseat with reluctance, but he conceded and clambered in without a fuss. Naruto was debating whether or not he should try to hold Sasuke’s hand in front of his family when the introvert in question leaned over and laid his head in Naruto’s lap. The blonde squawked, unable to contain his surprise, and Sasuke looked up at him in annoyance.

“Is this alright?” he asked.

Naruto nodded weakly, and Sasuke turned his head to the side, closing his eyes. He stayed like that until the car came to a stop, parked in the back of a sparsely populated lot. They’d arrived, but exactly where they were was a bit of a mystery. Everyone climbed out and stood around, discontent and confusion apparent on their faces. Only Tsunade seemed unphased by the locale, though no one else had any idea what to expect.

“Is this an aquarium?” Iruka guessed, eyeing the only structure in the vicinity.
“If it’s an aquarium, I don’t think the building got the memo,” Kakashi answered.

It didn’t look rundown, exactly, but it was in the middle of nowhere and unlabeled. Naruto’s face reflected his default grin as he sheepishly scratched his head, trying not to seem too confused. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“This is the address it had on the website,” Tsunade said with a small frown.

“Why don’t we go in and ask? I’m sure this sort of thing happens all the time,” Shizune suggested. She led the way, chatting amicably with Kakashi and Iruka.

Tsunade fell back, walking in line with Naruto and Sasuke. She smiled at them and asked how the trip had been thus far, earning a loquacious “fine” from her ward.

Though she was surely used to his surly behavior by now, Naruto still felt inclined to make up for his asocial retort. He grinned broadly, saying, “We’ve been having lots of fun! It’s been weirder than I’d expected, though.”

“ Weird how?” Tsunade asked.

Not wanting to say that things had been utterly different between him and Sasuke not two days ago, he scrambled to come up with an appropriate answer. “Oh, well, yesterday we ran into Sasuke’s—Ow! Teme, what’d you do that for?”

Sasuke’d jabbed his elbow in Naruto’s ribs, and Tsunade stared at him suspiciously. “Sasuke’s what?”

“My cousin,” he muttered.

Tsunade frowned, knowing that Sasuke’s aunt and uncle were a sensitive topic. They’d flat-out refused to take him in as next of kin, and the boy had been destined for foster care otherwise. With his psychological trauma and social problems, he’d have been stuck forever. She put her arm around Sasuke’s shoulders, hugging him into her and saying, “That is weird. I wonder what he’s doing all the way out here.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Sasuke retorted.

Naruto grabbed the boy’s hand at the sound of pain in his voice—it was a familiar, childish anguish that he wished he didn’t recognize. He could hear the way it felt to be rejected, to feel unwanted in the tone, and he squeezed tightly on the boy’s hand. He wanted Sasuke to know that he chose him, that he wanted him, that he was here with him. Sasuke wasn’t alone, no matter who showed up to bring the past into the present.

“That’s good. So what did you guys get up to yesterday?” Tsunade asked, changing the subject.

“We went to the beach, and then we played around at the fair,” Naruto replied. “What about you?”

Tsunade told him about how she and Shizune went to a few historic sites before spending the evening at a comedy club. Iruka and Kakashi had joined them for dinner, but they turned in early and left the boys to their own devices. She asked him what sorts of things he wanted to do while he was here, never noticing how Naruto kept Sasuke’s hand firmly in his own. By the time he’d answered, the group of them had reached the door. Shizune stepped inside and Tsunade hurried to join her, telling them to come in if they weren’t back out in a few minutes.

They didn’t come back. Kakashi looked from Iruka to the two boys and said, “Fuck it. Guess this is
The right place,” before opening the door and stepping inside.

The large structure looked from the outside like it ought to have a wide-open entryway, but the darkened hallway in front of them defied their subconscious expectations. It was pitch black and surprisingly narrow, with a little more than a single-person’s worth of room. In a surprising show of bravery, Iruka led the way, stumbling through the dark in confusion and frustration. The walls seemed to be covered in soft, velvety sheets, and they could hear strange noises in the distance. Sasuke’s hand tightened its grip as the boys wound their way through the maze. Their fearless leaders had begun bickering amongst themselves, and Naruto felt the anxiety creep up in his gut. He paused for a moment, trying to steady his breathing and keep from panicking. It seemed like the hallway was getting narrower and narrower the further they went, and it wasn’t settling well with him.

Sasuke leaned in, probably to give him a hug, but in the darkness he ended up bumping his head against Naruto’s and held his face there for a moment. “It’s okay, dobe. Don’t worry,” he said softly.

Naruto shifted, trying to nod without inadvertently rubbing against the boy, but that was impossible. Their noses brushed, their lips antagonizingly close together. “I just don’t like small spaces,” he whispered.

“I promise I’ll get you out of here as soon as I can,” Sasuke replied, the tingle of his breath on Naruto’s lips. He believed him.

They kept walking, trying to catch up with Iruka and Kakashi, but the pair had vanished. The hall was seemingly endless; it felt like something was going to jump out at them at any moment. Just as Naruto was beginning to get accustomed to the environment, he ran smack into a dead end. The hallway just stopped, right there, with no turns or doors. Their older companions were nowhere to be found. In the darkness, all either of them could tell was that the hallway had abruptly come to an end. Naruto’s heart raced in his chest, and he clung to Sasuke’s arm in fear.

“Usuratonkachi, I’m trying to get us out of here,” Sasuke snapped.

“Sasuke, I’m… I… Don’t leave me here alone, okay?”

The boy paused. Naruto could feel him moving in the dark. A pair of arms encircled him in a quick hug. “Never, dobe. You’re coming with me.” Naruto buried his face in Sasuke’s neck and took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. Sasuke broke away, pushing on the cloth-covered walls and trying to find any indication of an exit. It wasn’t like Tsunade, Shizune, Iruka, and Kakashi had turned around and gone out the way they’d come; there had to be something he was missing. A pensive “hn” escaped his throat as he found what he was looking for.

“What is it?” Naruto asked.

“Come here, you should go first. It’s not wide enough for both of us at the same time, but I’ll be right behind you,” he said quickly.

“What, but I—”

Sasuke leaned in and kissed him, a gentle brush of soft skin against his lips. That couldn’t have been intentional; his brain failed to function adequately, and he froze. “It’s gonna be fine, Naruto. You can do this.”

“S-sorry,” he sputtered, a moment too late. “That was—I don’t—”

“Save it. Let’s go,” Sasuke retorted, dropping to his knees.
Naruto followed suit, entering the tunnel behind the cloth. He crawled forward in spite of his ever-growing fear, knowing that turning back and going through the hallway by himself would be just as bad, if not worse. At least here he wasn’t alone, no matter how small the space got. Which was really, really small. The squishy, soft walls pushed against him, suffocating him—he was scared, he was disoriented, he was breathing really hard, too hard—and Sasuke’s voice cut through the haze of terror. “Take a break, Naruto.”

He slowed to a stop, trying not to think about the narrowing chamber all around him. He took a breath, but his mind refused to quiet. He whispered, “What if we made a mistake, Sasuke? What if this isn’t the way we should’ve come? It’s too tight, we can’t turn back now. I can’t turn around, I can’t go back.”

“Naruto, just breathe. Listen to my voice, and breathe. Okay?”

He fell silent, listening intently.

“Breathe in. One, two, three, four. Hold it. Breathe out. One, two, three, four,” Sasuke said. Just the sound of his voice was soothing, and Naruto tried his best to relax.

They started up again, moving forward until Naruto realized he’d have to drop to his elbows to keep going. The chamber was only getting smaller, and the darkness was overwhelming. He hated himself for being so weak, for feeling such fear; he forced himself along, one elbow in front of the other. He could just make out the faintest light ahead, giving him hope. He trudged forward, but the closer he got, the more the continuity alarmed him. It wasn’t the way it shone that inspired panic, but the way it stayed exactly the same—neither increasing nor diminishing. Naruto didn’t want to freak out, not after Sasuke had tried to calm him, but he could feel the terror brimming in his gut. He took a few deep breaths, slowing his pace to regain a sense of peace.

Sasuke noticed and murmured something unintelligible. When Naruto didn’t respond, though, he called out in a stern voice, “You’re okay. I’ve got you. We’re in this together.”

Naruto mumbled an “okay,” but that was hardly sufficient for Sasuke.

“Say it,” he ordered.

“I’m okay. You’ve got me. We’re in this together,” the blonde repeated. He took another deep breath and sped up, eager to get out of here before he embarrassed himself with even more vulnerability. He was feeling a bit better, feeling up to the task, but that changed almost immediately. He bumped into a soft, squishy wall—the end of the tunnel. The light was right in front of him, a small hole too bright for him to see anything out of. He could just barely make out the rustle of shapes on the other side.

“What is it?” Sasuke asked.

“I don’t know how to get out of here,” he whispered.


He took a shaky breath and tried to think like Sasuke. “Um, there’s a hole of light. Barely the size of my fist. There’s people moving outside, I think. It’s really bright and white.”

“Touch the hole. Tell me what you feel.”

“It feels like rubber, or plastic maybe. Like those weird baby dolls that are supposed to feel like they have real skin or whatever,” he said, his confusion evident in the sound of his voice.
Sasuke had an epiphany, but he declined to share. His voice was confident as he said, “Put your arms through the hole, and squeeze yourself out. It’ll stretch, I promise.”

Naruto did as he was told; he’d managed to wriggle himself halfway out when someone wearing a lab coat and a face mask grabbed him by the hands and hauled him out. Disoriented, he looked around at a group of people, all dressed like doctors and nurses.

“Welcome to life, son,” one of them said from somewhere behind him. He turned to look, only to blink in horror. Protruding from the partition was what had to be the largest vulva in the world, though he hardly thought it was naturally-occurring. He gagged when he realized he’d just crawled out of a giant fleshlight; somehow that only made the aftermath of his claustrophobia worse.

“Oh, it’s twins!” another person exclaimed.

Sasuke came out much easier, thanks to the way Naruto had stretched the makeshift birth canal. He scowled at the pseudo doctors as they welcomed him to life, and he grabbed Naruto’s hand as he stomped toward what had to be the exit. It was door underneath a flashing neon sign that said in no uncertain terms, “LIFE, THIS WAY.”

“What the hell is going on?” The blonde was still gaping at everything around him—the fake hospital room, the actors dressed as gynecologists, the giant cunt on the wall.

Sasuke turned as he yanked open the door, his expression dramatic as he declared, “It’s a goddamn art exhibit.”

As Naruto stepped through the door, he saw that Sasuke was far from right. There was no art exhibit. He wasn’t the most cultured of teenagers, that was for sure; he played football and listened to whiny white men playing the same four chords in different orders. His idea of unique fun was playing DDR or getting something pierced in his best friend’s bathroom. Still, though, he knew what a museum was supposed to look like. This place? Nope, no way. No paintings of abstract fruits or flowers hung on the walls, no sculptures of naked men and women lined the halls, and, most telling, no gift shop with Van Gogh socks and Davinci phone cases beckoned customers in. He might not know the difference between a museum and an art gallery showing, but it couldn’t possibly be this stark. He felt like he’d walked into Wonderland—surrounded by freaks and weirdos, all he could see were familiar objects in obscene or confusing situations. His grip on Sasuke’s hand tightened, and he didn’t let go, even when their adult companions sought them out.

Iruka tutted with concern, approaching Naruto with his mom face on. “Are you alright? I know you don’t do well with confined spaces.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, turning to glare at the sheepish Kakashi. “He said you were right behind us. I was so worried when you didn’t come out.”

“I knew you’d make it out okay,” Kakashi said.

“If I had known you were claustrophobic, I never would’ve chosen that entrance,” Tsunade interjected, giving Naruto a quick once-over.

“You didn’t ask,” Sasuke snapped.

“You didn’t mention it!” she retorted.

“When would I have brought it up? When you neglected to tell me that Naruto was coming along? Or when you said we’re going on a trip to the wide, expansive beach?” He glared at her, his hand gripping Naruto’s painfully.
“Okay, fine,” Tsunade conceded, turning to face Iruka. “You didn’t mention it.”

Wincing, the blonde pulled his hand from Sasuke’s death grip and said, “Guys, guys, it’s fine. I’m fine. But can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Shizune offered him a kind smile, which he readily reciprocated. He gobbled up kindness like a starving child, only to pour it right back into the universe. “It’s an exhibit for interactive art,” she explained. “Each artist or group of artists presents work that hinges on audience participation. We thought it would be a fun cultural addition to the vacation.”

He looked around again, overwhelmed by the strangeness, and said, “That’s…um, cool.”

“What he means is, you shouldn’t’ve brought us all here as a surprise. It’s a goddamn haunted house,” Sasuke declared bitterly. He wasn’t backing down, even though he hadn’t seemed that scared in the giant vagina.

“Hey! Naruto said that he was fine, didn’t he?” Tsunade jumped in, throwing an arm around the blonde with a cheeky grin. “Relax, sourpuss. Enjoy the show!”

Sasuke grumbled, but Naruto interrupted him. “I just have one more question. If the way in is, um, that, what’s the way out?”

They snickered, good-naturedly. As the group wandered around, Naruto was hesitant to participate in any of the exhibits. Sasuke didn’t blame him. The blonde went back to clinging to his arm as they walked around, eyes wide. He stood as far away from each display as possible, not wanting to get roped into joining. He wasn’t having a good time at all—the whole thing gave him the creeps, truthfully—but he refused to seem ungrateful. Tsunade was having a grand time, and he was her guest. That was what was most important. He was resigning to the experience, in spite of his growing hunger and intrepid disdain. Sasuke, as always, had him figured out; when the pair of them reached a niche in one of the labyrinthian turns, he shoved the blonde into the slight hiding spot and glared at him.

“If you don’t want to be here, just leave,” he said. “You can. You don’t have to stay.”

Naruto stared at him in confusion, taken aback by his aggressive demeanor. “I don’t want to offend your moms,” he mumbled.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re well-adjusted adults. They can handle a little rejection,” Sasuke retorted.

“I don’t know how to get out,” he said.

“I’ll find the exit.”

“Where would I even go?” Naruto bit his lip. He didn’t want to say it, but he’d rather be there than be alone.

“There’s a diner down the road,” he replied.

“It’s okay, I’ll stay here,” Naruto said quickly. “With you.”

“Idiot. I’m coming with you,” Sasuke stated plainly. He turned away, frowning as he scanned the surroundings. Naruto resisted the urge to throw his arms around the boy; instead, he stared in silent admiration, his heart nearly bursting out of his chest. The furrow of Sasuke’s brow, the sharpness of his nose, the jut of his jaw—he looked incredibly annoyed, but in this moment, it was the most
wonderful thing Naruto had ever seen.

“Lead the way, captain,” the blonde declared, genuine joy emanating from the stare he was giving Sasuke. The boy rolled his eyes, but at the sight of that grin, his lips twitched in a hint of a smile.

The exits were clearly labeled as per the fire code regulations of the state, and the two of them walked down the road, gas station diner on the horizon. Sasuke sent a quick text to Tsunade before turning off his phone. Naruto followed his lead, texting Iruka an update. He wanted the man to know what he was doing and where he was going; he didn’t want to cause any unnecessary worry. Sasuke warned him to turn off his cell phone, though, lest he receive an unpleasant phone call from Tsunade.

“It’s not you she’ll be mad at,” he said quickly at the sight of Naruto’s fretful expression. “She’ll be upset with me. She won’t like that we didn’t tell her to her face.”

“Why didn’t we?” Naruto asked, though he thought he had the answer.

Sasuke sighed. “She’d want to drag everyone out of there and do something else to make it up to you.”

Naruto cringed. It was what he expected, of course, but he wouldn’t live through the embarrassment of such attention. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience anyone else, though.”

“I know, dobe. That’s why we’re walking to…” He paused, reading the sign ahead. “Big Lou’s Food And Fuel.” He scowled.

“Hey Sasuke,” Naruto said, reflexively squeezing the boy’s hand. “Thank you. For being such a good friend.”

“Tch.” Sasuke looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept his mouth closed in a thin line.

“I mean it. You helped me, even though it’s gonna get you in trouble,” he continued. “If you weren’t there with me in that tunnel, I doubt I’d have made it out.”

Sasuke snorted, shaking his head. “What are friends for, if not to rescue each other from person-sized vaginas passing as art installations.”

They wandered inside the store, eyeing the diner to the left, but when a familiar voice called out a greeting, Sasuke turned around and walked out. Shisui Uchiha stood behind the counter, fairly certain he’d just heard someone whine, “Sasuke,” before the door rattled closed. The two of them spoke outside, Naruto offering to buy some snacks at the least on behalf of the both of them. He walked back inside, grabbing some junk food off the shelves and bringing it up to the counter with curious trepidation. He didn’t like that this man’s mere presence had caused such discomfort for Sasuke, but he admittedly didn’t understand what was so threatening about him. If Shisui was the one haranguing Sasuke with phone calls, then sure the two of them could take him in a fight. Though Naruto wasn’t sure he felt comfortable fighting a blind guy, especially not two-on-one. He frowned. How hard could it be to convince the man to stop? He looked a little crazy, but he didn’t seem unreasonable. Afterall, how unstable could he be if he had two jobs, right? A little voice in the back of Naruto’s head reminded him how many scary movies involved carnies and isolated gas station attendants, and his frown deepened.

A friendly grin on his face, Shisui asked, “That’ll be all for you?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Naruto replied, glancing out the window as if he needed to make sure Sasuke was still there, waiting for him.
“You’re here with Sasuke, aren’t you?” Shisui asked as he rang the goods up. Naruto handed them to him one at a time, trying to ease the process for him.

“He’s waiting outside.”

“How’s he doing? I didn’t mean to upset him yesterday. I just haven’t heard from anyone since I left home,” he said.

“Oh. Well, he’s okay, but you really shouldn’t mention Itachi to him like that,” Naruto answered. He was hesitant to divulge anything about his friend, but Shisui seemed earnest in his apology. Maybe it was the change in outfit—a dark blue polo with a nametag and some jeans was easier on the eyes—or maybe it was the kind light of the gas station, but Naruto was finding the man to be far more amicable and genuine than he had last night. Then again, maybe it was just hard for him to find anything creepy after that gut-wrenching art exhibit.


“Um…” The blonde wasn’t sure how to answer; it wasn’t a question he’d anticipated, and it struck him as resolutely perplexing. “He’s in prison… For murder…”

“Right, but he didn’t do it,” Shisui retorted. His face contorted in dismayed surprise. “Wait, Sasuke knows that, doesn’t he? The only reason I left was because I thought he knew. I wouldn’t have just left Itachi alone like that.”

Sensing the man’s distress and not having a clue what to do with it, Naruto acted on instinct, saying, “I’m sure Itachi knows you didn’t abandon him.”

Shisui nodded, letting out a sigh. “You’re right, but now that I know there’s a problem, I can’t just keep hide out here and do nothing. I must fix it.”

The blonde wasn’t sure what this meant, but he knew it had to involve Sasuke somehow. He admired the man’s determination and belief, but it wasn’t his place to evaluate who was right or wrong. It was his place, however, to keep his friend from unnecessary negativity. “Now really isn’t the best time, Mr. Uchiha. Sasuke’s kind of mean on a good day, and today isn’t a good day,” he said.

“You can call me Shisui,” the man replied. “You’re a good kid, trying to keep him from getting hurt. Let me ask you, though—if he found out later that Itachi was innocent, do you think he’d want to have spent so much time angry with his brother?”

Naruto hesitated. “I’m not sure. I’m not Sasuke. It’s his choice, his life. I just don’t want to make his day worse. It’s my fault he’s cranky; I made him walk all the way here just to get away from that awful exhibit.” He was rambling, but he really didn’t want Shisui to try to talk to Sasuke about Itachi.

“Okay, I respect that. What’s your name?” Shisui asked.

“Naruto Uzumaki,” he replied.

“Uzumaki… Why is that familiar,” he muttered. “Wait, what color is your hair?”

“Uh, blonde?”

“Hot damn! I was an intern for your dad. Uzumaki. Wow, what a coincidence,” he exclaimed, a nostalgic grin on his face. “I’m sorry for your loss, Naruto. Your parents were good people.”
Naruto felt the words coming out of his mouth, unbothered by their cliché nature. “Wait, you knew my parents?”

“Not well. I only interned in the office for a few years while I was going to school,” Shisui said. “But I remember how determined your dad was to make a difference. He was an inspiration, honestly.”

He felt his heart twist in his chest, and he took a shaky breath. “I miss him every day.”

“If you’re gonna be in town for a while, I’d be happy to talk to you about him. And your mom, too,” Shisui replied.

“Okay. I think we’re leaving in a day or two,” he stated. “I’ll see if I can get Sasuke to tag along, too. Maybe he’ll try hearing you out.”

“Oh, Naruto, that would be so kind of you! Could the two of you meet me here tomorrow night? I want both of you to know the truth, about your parents.”

He was hesitant. He wanted to put his faith in Shisui, but his urge to keep Sasuke safe was stronger. He said, “First, can you tell me if you know anything about Danzo?”

Shisui’s mouth fell into a grimace. “I know more than I’d like about that man.”

“If Sasuke had been there, he likely would’ve thought Naruto was a naïve child, easily manipulated by the fancies of a capable liar, but Naruto knew a kindred spirit when he saw one. He saw himself in Shisui—in his earnestness, in his forthcoming honesty, in his amicable grin. With just a few words, the man had earned his unflinching trust, and Naruto doubted he’d regret it.

“I can’t promise that he’ll come, but I’ll do my best, Shisui,” the blonde finally said.

The man thanked him as he headed out the door, the sincerity in his tone affirming for Naruto that he’d made the right call by believing him. Sasuke practically attacked him when he walked outside, though.

“Why did it take so long, dobe?” he snapped.

“Relax. Have some gross tomato-flavored chips and sit down,” Naruto replied. He tossed a bag of chips and a bottled drink at his companion, who caught them begrudgingly and sat on the curb near the newspaper stand.

“Did he try to talk to you?” Sasuke muttered.

“Yeah,” the blonde answered honestly. “He’s kind of weird. He hasn’t always been blind, has he?”

“No. It was a mugging-gone-wrong or something. Someone stabbed him in the eyes with a modified pair of brass knuckles, left him for dead in the street. That’s what my mom told me.” Sasuke ate the chips, but he didn’t seem happy about it.

“That’s terrible,” Naruto commiserated.

“Yeah. It happened a few months before my parents died,” he continued. “Most of our family got so
wrapped up in the investigation that Shisui’s assault fell by the wayside. They stopped trying to help
him adjust, stopped caring about him. He was always a bit of a loner, though.”

“Sounds like you knew him well.” Naruto watched Sasuke’s eyes as he spoke, trying to imagine
what life must have been like for a poor kid who’d just lost his parents at the hands of a murderer.
His anger issues made sense—more sense than Naruto’s own, at any rate.

He paused thoughtfully. “No, not really. He and Itachi were always close, though. I used to think
that maybe what happened to Shisui caused it, caused Itachi to snap.”

“Not anymore?”

“No, I think something like that builds. It only looks like a snap from the outside. Shisui’s eyes
might’ve made it worse, but nothing caused it. It just happened.” Sasuke’s face was grim, steadfast.
Naruto knew that any gesture of affection would cheapen the exchange—he didn’t want pity,
comfort, or reassurance. Acknowledgement would suffice.

“Thanks for sharing,” the blonde said, smiling into his can of tea.

“Tch. Dobe,” Sasuke muttered, shaking his head.

“Do you think Shisui is the one who’s been calling you?” Naruto glanced up to see Sasuke’s intense
stare, curious and bemused.

“That’s a surprisingly astute question,” he said. “I’d never have guessed your dumb ass could’ve put
two and two together.”

“I think you mean fine ass, teme,” the blonde retorted. Bickering like this felt comfortable, easy. It
was yet another part of their friendship that he’d missed. “I don’t think it’s him.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t seem like the type to play games.” He shrugged.

“Naruto, you met him at a carnival booth.”

“You know what I mean. He seems like, y’know, if he had something to say, he’d just come out and
say it. He’s a little weird, but I don’t think he wants to upset you.”

Sasuke looked at him quizzically for a moment, then frowned. “And you know this based on what?
The two minutes you spent chatting him up at the register?”

A familiar tension hung in the air, not as easy to dispel as it had been to conjure. “I wasn’t chatting
him up, teme. I’m just saying, I don’t think things are that simple.”

“If things were any simpler, there might actually be a chance of you figuring them out,” Sasuke
muttered under his breath, clearly annoyed.

“Why is it so hard for you to see the good in people?” Naruto snapped.

“Maybe it’s because the brother I adored murdered my mom and dad, but what do I know? Maybe
things aren’t that simple,” Sasuke retorted, standing up and tossing the remains of his snack in the
nearby trash can.

Naruto scoffed, a bittersweet chuckle tickling his throat. “You want to know what I think, Sasuke?”
he said, sifting through his bag of chips with a devilish grin. “I think every time you feel vulnerable,
you get angry. Being mean is how you put distance between yourself and your connections with other people.”

“Been talking to Shizune a lot lately?” he asked sarcastically. “Any other diagnoses you want to share?”

“Yeah, just one. You’re an asshole,” Naruto answered.

“T ook you long enough to figure that one out,” Sasuke muttered. He let out a deep sigh, drowned out by the approaching vehicle.

The hum of the car’s engine as it pulled into the gas station distracted them from their antagonistic repartee; Tsunade leapt from the side before it had even finished parking, marching up to the boys with a fearsome glower. “Sasuke Uchiha! Of all the irresponsible half-cocked ideas I’ve ever—” she began, but Naruto quickly interrupted her, coming up to stand and instinctively stepping in front of Sasuke to shield him from the dispute.

“Sorry, ma’am. It was my idea, not his,” he said. Sasuke’s stare bored into the back of his head, but he ignored it.

Tsunade gave him a politely irritated smile. “Oh, is that so, Naruto?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered.

“Iruka! Get out here!” she shouted. The brunette floundered as he rushed out of the passenger seat and came to join them, glancing fretfully from Tsunade to Naruto with wide eyes. “This whole excursion was apparently Naruto’s idea.”

Iruka frowned pensively at the blonde, evaluating the situation as Tsunade dragged Sasuke to the car. She made him sit up front by Kakashi while she railed him about his powered-off cell phone. The father-figure put his hands on Naruto’s shoulders and peered into his eyes, his voice soft and stern as he asked, “If you wanted to leave, why didn’t you tell anyone? You know we would’ve accommodated you. You’re important. Your needs are important.”

“I’m sorry, Iruka. It won’t happen again. I promise,” Naruto said, giving the man a chaste hug. He felt bad, but not for his actions—he felt bad that he couldn’t explain himself in a way that would warrant understanding. It would just come out like selfish teenage bullshit, and its likelihood for immediate dismissal, even from someone as intuitive and empathetic as Iruka, was reason enough to keep his mouth shut. It wasn’t that Iruka wouldn’t want to understand, wouldn’t try to understand; it wasn’t that he didn’t give Naruto the benefit of the doubt, didn’t believe in him. Iruka was a far better parental figure than Naruto himself believed he deserved. He just couldn’t put his feelings into words, no matter how hard he tried.

Iruka sighed and walked with him back to the car. The ride back into the main part of town was stilted and awkward. Sasuke was still fuming, silently brooding as he stared out the window and ignored Tsunade’s near constant nagging. Naruto was thankful that Iruka had dropped the issue in favor of letting him come to terms with the negative repercussions of his actions on his own, but truthfully he wished he could be on the receiving end of the blonde woman’s lecture. After all, Sasuke had only done it in the first place for his sake. His selflessness was being rewarded with a rant.

Shizune eventually reigned Tsunade in, putting a stop to the incessant one-sided bickering. She spoke in soft tones, but her words were firm and unwavering. It was her subtle strength that had drawn Tsunade to her in the first place, though Shizune had actually done most of the pursuing in
their relationship. Hearing her quietly say, “He understands that you were worried, dear, but if you keep it up, he’ll stop getting that message,” encouraged Tsunade to reevaluate her approach.

“He needs to know that he can’t do something like that again,” she bristled initially. “I nearly tore the place apart on his behalf.”

“Your anger is yours alone. If you want him to know he hurt you, you have to say it. If you want him to know how you feel, you have to say it. You cannot yell and complain and expect him to intuit your true meaning,” Shizune replied.

Her wife sighed, releasing the tension that had built up inside of her. She took Shizune’s hand and kissed her knuckles, saying, “You’re right, of course. What would I do without you?”

“See a therapist in a nonromantic context, I’d hope,” the dark-haired woman retorted. “You ought to do that anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah. Maybe someday, when I’ve got the time,” she said dismissively. She rubbed her shoulder and scowled; Shizune took over, giving her a simple backrub. Tsunade’s face brightened, an idea occurring to her amidst the comfort of the touch. “Who wants massages?”

“Like at a spa?” Naruto asked. He wasn’t sure if she meant they should all give each other massages, like a shoulder-rubbing train, or if they should visit a professional establishment. He doubted his massage skills were up to par, but if Sasuke didn’t mind being a practice dummy, he’d happily run his hands up and down the boy’s back.

“Well, it sounds kind of expensive. Maybe I’ll pass, but you guys should go ahead tomorrow.”

The boy hesitated, uncomfortable with the eyes on him. On one hand, he’d never been to a professional spa before. A relaxing massage and a rest in a sauna sounded enticing—a great way to work out the remnants of distress—but on the other hand, it wasn’t like he was made of money. He’d only recently started at the coffee shop, after all, and neither his wages nor his hours were particularly high. He frowned, mumbling, “Well, it sounds kind of expensive. Maybe I’ll pass, but you guys should go ahead tomorrow.”

Tsunade turned around so fast for a moment he thought she’d been possessed by a demon owl spirit, spinning her neck 180 degrees around. “If you think for one second you’re not coming if you want to or that I’m letting you pay for yourself, kid, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“Oh no, ma’am, I couldn’t possibly let you—”

“You can and you will, or Iruka gets it,” she threatened, grabbing the brunette in a jovial headlock.

“Hey, hey, hey! Release the eye-candy or the next stop will be off the side of this bridge,” Kakashi declared.

“You hear that, Naruto? Better agree to the spa day quick, or we’re all swimming with the fishes,” Tsunade cried, a wicked grin on her face.

“Okay, okay, yes,” the blonde said. He tried to make eye contact with Sasuke, to gauge whether this behavior was typical for his increasingly goofy mother-figure, but the boy wasn’t paying attention to the absurd antics of the supposed adults.
“Yes what?” she demanded.

“Yes, I’ll go to the spa! I’ll let you pay! Sheesh,” he exclaimed as Kakashi veered too far to the right, scaring some cyclists as well as his friends in the car.

“Good, then it’s settled,” Tsunade decreed. She released Iruka, who laughed and nudged Naruto with his elbow.

“You have to let people do nice things for you sometimes,” he said gently. “You deserve it. You deserve to know you’re not a burden. You’re a blessing.”

He blushed and mumbled a thank-you, happy that Sasuke wasn’t paying attention. Tsunade snorted and said, “Making up for that all-nighter with Kakashi you pulled, I see. Scoring some good parent points.”

Iruka rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, saying, “It’s not a competition. If it were, your wife would have us all beat.” Shizune beamed at the praise.

Naruto opened his mouth before he could stop himself from saying what he was thinking. “You know who’s a good parental figure? Sasuke.”

Everyone was staring at him in surprise—everyone except Sasuke, who just retorted, “Tch, as if. You’re the one who makes the best dad out of the two of us. Taking care of me while I was sick and all.”

Tsunade, knowing full well what she was doing, cooed, “Aw, Daddy Naruto!”

Iruka, Sasuke, and Naruto shouted a collective no, but Kakashi jumped onboard the chaos train. “Daddy Naruto,” he repeated, snickering.

“Don’t say that,” Sasuke chided, earning a smirk and a side-eye from the driver.

“I want you to say it,” Kakashi teased. “Say it once, just once, and I’ll stop. I won’t call Daddy Naruto Daddy Naruto again. You have my word.”

“As if your word means anything to anyone in this car,” Sasuke snapped.

“Ouch, Sasuke,” the man replied, putting a hand to his heart. “To think my favorite pupil could wound me like this.”

Sasuke had opened his mouth to reply, only to be cut off by the sound of Naruto’s stomach rumbling. The boy grinned sheepishly, laughing, and said, “Sorry, guys. I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

“Quick, Daddy Naruto needs sustenance! Step on it, Kakashi,” Tsunade declared, earning a glare from her ward.

“You got it. Anything for Daddy Naruto,” the silver-haired man enthused.

“How about we don’t call me that? Okay? Good,” Naruto stated.

“Whatever you say,” Tsunade said, a giggle on her lips. “Daddy Naruto.”

“It’s official. Sleeping next to the person you’re in love with is the best feeling in the world.”
Gaara sighed into the phone, pausing the video game he’d been making progress in up until Naruto’s call. He’d never been the best multitasker, and it didn’t seem like his best friend would be finished any time soon. “Makes sense,” he replied, standing up and wandering to the kitchen.

“I’ve slept with Sasuke three nights in a row now, and I’m hooked,” Naruto continued.

“It’s about time you two hooked up,” Gaara retorted. He knew that wasn’t what the blonde meant, but he couldn’t resist teasing him about his diction.

“What? No! Gaara, c’mon—don’t do that to me. We didn’t sleep together like that.”

Listening to the blonde kid rant and ramble about his one-sided love life wasn’t Gaara’s favorite pastime, but he didn’t mind it much. He was perpetually telling Naruto to confess—it was obvious to him that Sasuke was head over heels for the dumbass—but his advice fell on deaf ears. He let out a dry “mmhm,” rolling his eyes at the boy’s words.

“It just feels so good, y’know? Reaching out and knowing that they’re right there, next to. Being able to tug them into your chest and smell their hair.” He let out a contented sigh. “I’m dreading tomorrow. We’re coming back, and I don’t know how I’m gonna survive without—without apple-butter and raisin toast for breakfast, it’s so good.”

“I take it Sasuke’s out of the shower?” Gaara mused.

“Yeah, exactly,” Naruto replied. “So how’s your vacation going?”

“Having the house to myself is just as monotonous as I’d expected, but I’m making the most of it.” His mom and dad had gone on a business trip, and his siblings had their own plans to attend to. He could’ve joined Naruto at the beach—the kid had certainly offered enough—but the thought of being surrounded by people for four days straight drove him a little crazy. Without his own space, he’d likely snap.

“You should get out and do something! You don’t have to stay home the whole time,” his friend advised. “Lee’s working at the arcade now. You could always go say hey.”

“Pass,” he said.

“Aw, c’mon. I heard he has a crush on you.”

“Pft. He’s had a crush on me since I pushed him off the swings in kindergarten,” Gaara replied. “He’s a glutton for punishment.”

“Hey, I have to go—we’re doing this thing today,” Naruto interjected. “I’ll call you later, ‘kay?”


Gaara spent another hour playing around in the game before he decided there might be something to what Naruto said. Not about Lee—he wasn’t interested—but about getting out of the house. He probably ought to leave before he started going stir crazy. Taking a page from Sasuke’s book, he showed up at the Daily Grind with an autobiography that had been sitting on his shelf for ages. It was yet another book that he’d bought with the intention to read but hadn’t cracked open.

Ino greeted him when he walked in, but he knew she felt the same awkward energy he did. She was Sasuke’s best friend; he was Naruto’s. Despite the fact that they often hung out together, they weren’t exactly each other’s friend. He smiled at her politely and ordered a chai latte, wondering if he was supposed to make small talk with her or not.
“How’s your break been, man?” she asked, answering his internal dilemma.

“Quite good. And yours?” he replied. It wasn’t the answer he’d wanted, but he knew how to be a people person when the situation called for it.

“Ugh, what a nightmare. All I’ve done is work, work, work,” she griped.

“Wow, they shifted you every day?”

“Nearly! I had Saturday off for the first time in ages, but I ended up having to do a job of a different sort. I’m sure you heard about that mess, though!” Ino laughed as she poured the foam.

“You mean how you drove down to the beach just so Sasuke could declare his undying love for you? Yeah, I heard about that,” he said. “Not that it made any sense to me.”

“Ugh, don’t get me started,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Sasuke’s about as incompetent as Naruto, I swear. Those two are gonna be the death of me.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“Uh-uh, I see what you’re doing. You’re not getting anything out of me, mister,” she replied. “Can’t be consorting with the enemy.”

“The enemy?” he laughed. “Okay, I see how it is.”

“Gaara, c’mon. You two are best friends—if anyone knows, it’s you,” Ino retorted.

She handed him the latte, but he didn’t feel inclined to take a seat. The café was relatively empty, one or two patrons; he stood at the end of the bar and smirked at her. “You’re not wrong, Ms. Yamanaka. So, just tell me one thing: why was Sasuke telling you he loved you?”

“Ms. Yamanaka? Wow, can you not act like a spoiled rich kid for five seconds?” she taunted, a friendly smile on her face. “I’ll trade ya. Fact for fact. Deal?”

“Sounds fair,” Gaara answered, grinning. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, you know what I want to know.” She leveled her gaze at him.

He sighed and took a sip of his chai. “You drive a hard bargain, Ms. Yamanaka.”

The look of triumph in her eyes was nothing less than what he expected. “Okay, let’s rock-paper-scissors to see who dishes first,” she said, holding her fist out.

“Deal.”

He lost, but it didn’t bother him. He knew they were on the same side, even if Ino had implied otherwise. They wanted the same thing: their two idiot friends to shut up and start dating already. He exhaled slowly and took another sip, eyeing her over the lid of his cup. She raised her eyebrows at him, impatience written all over her face.

“Any day now, Prince Gaara,” she urged. “Tell me why Naruto started acting so weird.”

“Okay, okay. You recall the arcade date, yes? Sasuke told you how he reacted to Naruto’s impromptu kissing stunt?” he began, waiting for her to nod before he continued. “He was so upset, so convinced that he’d ruined everything, he decided that he wasn’t going to instigate anything anymore.”
“Ugh, of course he did,” she replied. “What is up with these kids and their melodramatic overreactions to every situation they find themselves in?”

“I take it your own tale is steeped in its own melodramatic overreaction,” he mused.

“Is it ever! So this dumbass calls me up, saying he knows how Naruto feels, he’s figured it out, he’s having a panic attack, can I please come help him not fuck the whole thing up,” she rambled. “And he’s practicing his confession with me when, of course, Naruto walks in. It was like something out of a teen drama.”

Gaara’s face shifted into a distinct frown. “Sasuke knows?”

“Yup. Figured it out all by himself, too. I was so proud,” Ino said.

“But he hasn’t said anything yet?”

“No,” she scoffed. “The hopeless romantic wants the moment to be right or whatever. Total horseshit. It’s like, c’mon y’all, get to the sex already, geez.”

“Exactly! I’m counting down the days until they finally get together. I’ll mark it on the calendar—the day I learned true love is real, and likely not worth the effort,” he exclaimed.

She laughed. “Oh my god, that’s so true. These idiots have been pining after each other for how long now? Eight months? At this rate they won’t get down and dirty until this time next year.”

“To be fair, I don’t think you get to mock anyone for lengthy pining,” Gaara retorted.

“Oh, not cool dude! We were bonding! Why you gotta ruin it by bringing up she-who-will-not-be-named?” Ino whined.

Gaara grinned at her, but something flashed across the television above her and caught his eye, dragging the smile off his face. “Turn up the volume on the TV, please,” he requested grimly.

She turned, curious, and then she saw it. She scoured the counter for the remote control, finally finding it atop the espresso machine and increasing the volume as much as it could go. “Fuck,” she whispered. “That’s not good.”

Gaara shook his head, eyes glued to the screen. “No, it certainly isn’t.”

After a bout of haggling with the receptionist, Tsunade had successfully managed to seal their fates. Three couples combo packages—“More bang for the buck,” as it were, despite the insipid glares she received from her youngest companions. She ushered them off down the hall with some well-placed dismissive tutting before joining Shizune for their own spa experience. The boys entered the small room with trepidation, neither one of them confident about what was to come. They stood next to each other near the exit, ready to bolt like frightened rabbits at the first sign of trouble.

The red walls and nature-themed accents didn’t clash as much as instinct said they should. The bamboo massage tables and framed prints of Chinese-style floral artwork felt somewhat gimmicky, but at least the place wasn’t decked out with marble floors and chandeliered ceilings. There was a small door on the opposite side of the room, and as it opened, the boys jumped back in surprise. A small woman with a kind smile emerged, followed by an apparent bodybuilder with warm eyes.
They were an odd duo—the woman was ancient and distinctly Chinese, but her coworker had the appearance of a typical Western model. He was clearly just as much of a gimmick as the aesthetic—his strong jawline and tan skin just as cringey as the commodified Asian cultural pieces throughout the room.

“Hello, boys,” the Chinese woman greeted with a nod. “Please relax. You can take off your clothes and we’ll begin.”

They disrobed slowly, stripping down to their underwear and avoiding eye-contact. The woman smiled at their hesitation. Her companion laughed, saying, “First time at a spa, huh? Don’t worry, me and Mrs. Chen will take good care of you.” He winked.

“Go on, lay down,” Mrs. Chen advised. “If you feel any discomfort, just say so. Adam and I are here to please you. Come, come.”

Sasuke laid down on her table, Naruto at Adam’s. He felt tense and nervous, especially when the man began to touch him. After a minute, though, he relaxed into the feel of those big, strong hands working into his muscles. The massage itself felt amazing, but the sounds emanating from his throat at the sensation weren’t. He was a bit embarrassed by the way he kept grunting and moaning, but he couldn’t restrain himself. They were the guttural declarations of pleasure, only intensifying as Adam brought out the aromatic body oil. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Chen worked tirelessly on Sasuke, beaming with pride when he finally let out a moan. Naruto’s whole body reacted to the noise, however, and most of him hoped it wouldn’t happen again, lest he truly embarrass himself in front of Adam. A smaller, more selfish part of himself delighted in the sound and ached to hear it and others like it over and over again. His secret wish was granted: that first vocalization of pleasure uncorked, letting a wide array of noises pour out of Sasuke. He whimpered and whined, all the while uttering quiet, restrained moans.

“You have a lot of tension,” Mrs. Chen observed as she dug her elbow into his shoulder. He grunted in response, and she shook her head. “You have too much stress for a young boy. Should try to relax more often.”

Naruto couldn’t see Sasuke at all, but he could guess what face the boy was making at that comment. He stifled a chuckle at the thought of Sasuke’s contemptuous sneer. Adam gave him a few more rubs and then signaled the end of the session, letting them know that the mud bath would be next. Mrs. Chen would come to retrieve them once the preparations had been completed. The two of them lay there in silence for a moment before Naruto felt compelled to speak. Usually, sitting in silence with anyone other than Sasuke tended to bother him; right now, however, he felt like it was odd to lay there with half an erection and say nothing. The quiet peace of his Uchiha friend, though not unpleasant, wasn’t doing him any favors.

“So that was weird, huh, ‘suke?” he said, laughing nervously.

Sasuke cleared his throat, but it didn’t help his raspy voice. “Yeah,” he croaked. Naruto shuddered involuntarily, turned on by the sound. “Not what I was expecting.”

“It felt good, though, right?” the blonde asked. “I mean, it sounded like you liked it.”

The conversational direction was opposite that which he’d intended, but he was having a hard time convincing himself to care. He just wanted to hear Sasuke say he’d liked it, say it’d felt good, so good, say he wanted more in that resonant voice of his.

“According to the sounds, I wasn’t the only one who liked it,” he retorted in typical Sasuke fashion. Perhaps he had yet to figure out that Naruto was flirting with him. “You seemed really into it.”
The boy blushed. “Yeah, I was. Sorry if the noises bothered you.”

“Stop apologizing for your own existence, dobe.” He sat up, towel across his waist. “Nothing you did bothered me.”

“No?” Naruto asked. “It wasn’t annoying?”

There was something different, something coy in his tone—he could hear it when he spoke, and he wondered if Sasuke could hear it too.

“Not at all,” came the gruff reply. “The opposite, really.”

“Yeah? What’s the opposite of annoying?” He sat up slowly, trying to obscure his hips from view. He put his hands on his lap over the towel in what he hoped was an inconspicuous position.

“Tch, only an idiot like you would ask such a stupid question,” Sasuke snapped. His cheeks were pink, and his muscles flexed with tension in spite of the recent massage.

“Maybe I’m not an idiot,” Naruto murmured, hopping off the table and tying the towel low on his hips. He watched the way Sasuke’s eyes followed his fingers as they made the knot. “Maybe I just want to hear you say it.”

He crossed the two feet between the tables and stood an inch away from sliding between Sasuke’s legs. The boy stared at him wide-eyed and blushing profoundly, fists clenched in his lap. “What are you doing, dobe?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” Naruto answered honestly. He took another step forward, fitting snugly in the space between the boy’s knees, and placed his hands on Sasuke’s thinly-covered thighs. “What do you want me to be doing…teme?”

Sasuke was speechless, and his mouth hung open so temptingly. Those soft lips so sweetly parted—and it had been so long since he’d felt them crashing into his own. He leaned in, painfully close, only a breath away, but he couldn’t bring himself to close the gap. A surge of ecstasy surged through his body when Sasuke did it for him, pressing their lips together with a palatable need. His hands moved through the boy’s golden curls, twisting and pulling until they were completely tangled into fists. Naruto wrapped his arms around Sasuke’s waist and pulled him tightly into his chest, skin to skin.

He couldn’t believe it. He was kissing Sasuke, and holy fuck Sasuke was kissing him back. No one was drunk, or coerced, or in danger. It was a genuine makeout session between two consenting—wait, wasn’t he technically an adult now, since he’d been emancipated? Did that make this illegal, or was it still okay since they were both above the age of consent? He frowned into the kiss, causing Sasuke to pull back and give him a confused state.

“You want this, right?” Naruto asked, breathless.

“Usuratonkachi,” Sasuke murmured, yanked the blonde back into him. “I want you.”

The fervency with which he’d made the declaration undid Naruto completely, banishing any and all reservations he might’ve had. He kissed Sasuke deeply, hungrily, impatiently. He wanted more, he wanted everything, he wanted something he couldn’t even put into words. He slid his hands up Sasuke’s thighs, gripping his hips and jerking him to the edge of the table. He was pressed right against Naruto, could feel the stiffness beneath the towel; Naruto held him firmly in place as he rocked fervently against the boy. He splattered kisses on Sasuke’s cheek, his ear, his neck. He groaned softly and bit the skin at the crook of his neck, delighting in the shudder and tension it elicited. Naruto felt the way Sasuke’s hard cock gingerly pressed against his abdomen—it was pure
bliss, rock solid evidence that this wasn’t all just in Naruto’s head. Sasuke jerked his head up by his hair, bestowing upon him yet another needy kiss.

He’d missed this, feeling Sasuke’s skin beneath his hands. He’d missed the ease with which he could touch him before, and he cursed himself for ever letting it get so bad. He’d nearly hit Sasuke on several occasions, just to feel him, but this was so much better. It was magical, feeling the boy against him and tasting the desire on his tongue. No amount of testosterone-addled pummeling could ever be an adequate substitute for the way it felt just to kiss this perfect boy before him. He shivered when Sasuke’s hands ran up and down his back before cupping his face in a tender embrace, pausing to look into the boy’s eyes; he was overwhelmed by the beauty of it all.

“Am I dreaming?” he mumbled, his hands finding Sasuke’s and holding them in place against his cheeks.

“Is this the sort of thing you usually dream about, dobe?” Sasuke asked with a self-satisfied smirk.

Naruto frowned, fumbling with a response. “I—you—agh! You are so infuriating sometimes, you know that?”

Sasuke gave him a soft, seductive kiss and pulled away, his voice dark and sultry as he asked, “Are you complaining?”

Naruto was so distracted by his aching need that he didn’t hear the buzzing at first. Sasuke rolled his eyes and turned to glare at his cell phone, as if that would deter whoever it was on the other end from continuing their apparent quest of annoying him. With a sigh, he hopped off the table and retrieved it from the pocket of the shorts he’d been wearing. He answered, putting on speaker.

“Time’s up,” the robotic voice declared.

“What do you mean?” Sasuke snapped. Naruto came up behind him, wrapping his arms around the boy’s torso and resting his chin on his shoulder.

“The innocent have been given a second chance, but the guilty still walk free,” the voice replied. “He knows he’ll be coming. He’s gonna get to you first.”

“Thank you, that was very helpful,” the boy muttered sarcastically.

“Tonight, Sasuke. A reunion.” Click. The call was over, and Sasuke slumped back into Naruto with a sigh.

His sexual frustration had vanished, replaced with a decisive need to comfort the beautiful boy in his arms. The ominous phone call had clearly caused him undue stress, and Naruto wished there was something he could do to rectify this scourge for him.

The door flung open, a towel-wrapped Tsunade heaving angrily on the other side. Naruto jumped back in surprise, but Sasuke stared at her indifference. “Kid, listen. Do exactly as I say. Get cleaned up. Get dressed. Meet me in the lobby in fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes. Lobby. Do not deviate, Sasuke, I swear to god—”

“He’s out, isn’t he?” Sasuke asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said, her expression grim. “He’s escaped.”

“See you in fifteen,” he replied. She nodded curtly and walked off, leaving him there to adhere to her instructions. Sasuke sighed, looking over at Naruto as he said, “It’s always something, isn’t it?”
Naruto’s heart ached as he gave him a pathetic attempt at a reassuring smile. “Should I come with?” he asked.

Sasuke seemed so small when he stared into Naruto’s eyes and whispered, “Please.”

They gathered in the lobby, all six of them. No one felt comfortable with Tsunade absconding with Sasuke on her own; even though they weren’t sure what sort of help they could provide, they wanted to be there to offer it. They promptly took off, riding back to the hotel as Tsunade explained the plan of action. It was a plan Sasuke had become intimately familiar with, back when he’d first been adopted by the surly woman. Itachi’s escape wasn’t an eventuality by any means, but it was a threat she thought he should be prepared for.

Sasuke would be staying with a distant family member of hers until Itachi had been apprehended. The soonest they could get him there was tomorrow evening; his flight had already been booked. He had one more night at the hotel. It didn’t make sense for them to take him back to the city, not when a small amount of googling could give a known killer his home address. He stayed silent and receptive during Tsunade’s briefing, his face a mask of stoicism and resignation. Anxiety whirled inside Naruto’s gut—one more night, he thought.

One more night. Then no more Sasuke.

Chapter End Notes

I know what you're thinking.
"Okay, Sasuke moving isn't like that big of a deal, like it's depressing but it's not like they couldn't have a long distance--"
no dude this bitch is angst central okay sound the alarms

Sorry, my brain is fried and I can barely remember what all I wrote, let alone try to comment on or explain it. Thanks so much for reading, and feel free to follow me on tumblr (narutoandsasukeweregayashell or arthurindented) or instagram (authorindented).
If you like my writing, you can also check out my original stories on my fictionpress (authorindented).

I apologize in advance for the disaster that's the next chapter.
BEFORE an untimely confession

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay!
This here is the final chapter in the BEFORE section of this story, but before we get
down to it, I've got a bit of a disclaimer.
There is an explicit depiction of underage characters engaging in sexual activity in this
chapter. If you don't want to read it, skip the italicized section. It's relevant to character
development, but it doesn't hold much weight in terms of plot, so you'll be fine if you
pass it by.
There's a taboo around adults writing sex scenes between underage characters that I'd
like to address, if you'll bear with me. When I was a teenager, reading fiction with
explicit scenes about characters my age helped me understand my own sexuality safely,
without necessitating physical exploration. I was curious, as many teenagers are, but I
didn't exactly want to find everything out firsthand at 13. I appreciated being able to
read accounts of sexual interactions that mirrored my age range and things I could
expect in my future. I feel like I owe it to younger me not to shy away from it, but in
truth writing sex between these characters left me uncomfortable. However, I believe
that the sexual interaction is relevant to their character development, and so it was
included. Thanks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEFORE an untimely confession

My eyes snapped open, but the reflex didn’t do me any good. I wasn’t sure what had caused my
abrupt awakening, but as I shifted around, that became the least pressing concern. Where was I? It
was blacker than night around me, and if my hands weren’t restrained, I doubted I’d be able to see
them in front of my face. What happened? The last thing I remembered was… My cheeks went pink
as my brain flooded with the memory of Naruto’s face in between my thighs. I pushed the thought to
the back of my mind—it didn’t answer any of my questions and would only serve to distract me from
my current situation. My head pounded like an off-beat bass drum, which when combined with the
bunds at my wrists and ankles gave me a small clue about what was going on. I’d been abducted—
likely hit over the head and moved to a secondary location. My pulse, feather-light and hummingbird
quick, increased exponentially with my anxiety. I wracked my brain, trying to recall what had
happened to me, and more importantly, what had happened to Naruto.

I could blame Itachi if I wanted to. It’d be easy. He’d murdered our parents, and now he’d taken
away the makeshift family I’d found in the aftermath. But Itachi wasn’t responsible for the regret I
was feeling—I was. I frowned at the ocean, its tranquil waves offering me no solace. I never
vocalized what mattered, always keeping the truth close to heart. Tsunade hadn’t heard me once tell
her I loved her; I’d never told Shizune how much she’d helped me, how much I appreciated her,
how much she’d changed me. Ino knew she was my best friend, but not because I’d ever said it. Gaara knew I cared about him, but not because I told him. The biggest victim of my silence, though, was the one who’d become closest to me. My feelings for him were so deep, so irrational, so powerful, and yet I’d never uttered a word to his face. I wondered if things would be different now, if I’d been honest with him. Was the universe punishing me for my omissions? I gripped the railing until my knuckles turned white.

What if I had told him how I felt, back when he’d invited me to his football game or when we celebrated my birthday? My heart ached at the memory. I should’ve told him. Halloween night, maybe, when he’d drunkenly asked. Or at that stupid party, when he gave me that dumbfounded stare after I kissed him. I could’ve told him in the hospital, even. Christmas. New Years. Every goddamn day since. I’d wasted it all, all that time. We could have been something, but I couldn’t open my mouth long enough to get the words out. What if I had somehow managed to muster up the courage to tell him the truth? Would things somehow be different now? Would I still have to leave? Would I still end up here, on this accursed beach, with a hole in my heart and a lump in my throat?

Tomorrow. I was leaving tomorrow.

“I don’t want to go,” I whispered, not expecting Tsunade to hear me. I had to go, I know I had to, but it wasn’t fair.

“I know,” she said softly. “This isn’t goodbye, kid. It’s see you later.”

“See you later,” I repeated. I wanted to believe her, more than anything.

I climbed down, glancing in the direction she was looking. The disheveled triage had returned and were making their way down to the pier from the parking lot. I watched them for a moment, my eyes drawn to the one person I’d most wronged with my impetuous silence. He seemed rigid and drawn, even from this distance. Tsunade pulled me out of my contemplative stare, putting her hands on my shoulders and fixing me with one of her maternal gazes. “You’re a good kid, Sasuke. Don’t let this turn you cold again.” Her voice was quiet and stern, but I could see the concern in her eyes.

I nodded quickly, hearing the approaching slap of flip-flops against the boardwalk as a discordant proclamation of the others’ arrival. Having successfully completed all of the meaningless errands they’d been sent on, the group had returned to retrieve us, should we consider ourselves ready. I for one would likely never be ready; each passing second ticked away, stolen from me, ruining my need to stay mired here in a timeless respite. No one spoke—no one knew what to say. Naruto’s gaze seared me, his worry a tangible flame. Blue, now and forever the color of concern. I was a formaldehyde frog under the fluorescents of a biology classroom, sliced open and spread apart, with all of my innermost feelings and private thoughts on display for him to try to make sense of.

“Back to the hotel then?” Kakashi inquired, disrupting the silence. Tsunade glanced at me, and I nodded.

“Let’s go ahead,” she replied. She joined hands with her wife as we began the trek back to the car.

It wasn’t as if the hotel was far—only ten minutes or so away—but it would’ve been worse, walking back drenched in awkward silence. Naruto’s hand found mine as we road back, and I didn’t bother to hide the way I was staring at him. We had yet to talk about the way he’d instigated the impromptu makeout session earlier, despite it weighing heavily on my mind. It was one thing to let sexual desire slip during slumber, but it was quite another to flirt with and subsequently kiss a person. It wasn’t as if his kiss had come with a confession, either, though the whole ordeal likely wouldn’t have left so many questions if that damnedable phone hadn’t rung. As things stood, I couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking. His eyes met mine for a moment, probing and sincere; he leaned into me and
rested his head on my shoulder. I resisted the urge to melt into him, knowing that the second I let the tension escape me would be the exact moment I broke down. As Kakashi parked, I nudged the boy off of me and hopped out. The sun was finally setting, dipping below the horizon in smudged blends of oranges and pinks. I watched without seeing, not until Naruto came up behind me and rested his head on my shoulder to say, “Wow, that’s beautiful, ne Sasuke?”

He was right. The scene was beautiful, indisputably, but what gave it that insurmountable awe-striking quality wasn’t the color scheme or the nautical backdrop. It was the way it felt to have Naruto near me, touching me. His voice in my ear. My heart nearly collapsed in on itself as I realized that without that godforsaken blonde idiot, I might never see the beauty in things again. “No, you are,” I replied hoarsely.

Naruto froze at the unanticipated retort, so I took the opportunity to join the others as they wandered toward the lobby door. He caught up moments later, sliding his hand into mine with casual ease. When we got back to the room, I laid back on the bed and closed my eyes, wishing I could make time stop long enough to get a foothold on my emotions. Naruto sat next to me with a frown, his hand resting gently on my thigh. As if recognizing the tension, Iruka muttered an awkward excuse under his breath and snuck off to Kakashi’s room, leaving the boy and I to talk. I wasn’t prepared, and I never would be, but if I didn’t tell him the truth now, I wouldn’t get another chance. No matter what happened, I no longer wanted to live with the truth trapped inside me like a caged bird.

Sitting up startled him, but I rolled my eyes at his nervous demeanor. He stared at me expectantly—I opened my mouth to let the words fly out, but nothing emerged. I cleared my throat, and he waited patiently as I struggled to get anything out at all. It felt like there was a knotted ball of feeling, twisted and gnarled and unbearably large, stuck right in the midst of my vocal chords. The discomfort kept me locked into place, silently scowling. My own ineptitude was sure to be my downfall.

“Um, Sasuke, about earlier…” Naruto mumbled, averting his eyes.

A part of me had hoped that in surrendering myself over to my whims and touching the blonde with all the casual affection I could muster, I would subtly compel him into confessing. Then the emotional labor would be his task, his burden, his concern—all I would have to do is kiss him. Now that things had truly escalated to the point of verbal confirmation, however, I knew I couldn’t do that to him or to myself. Not that he would mind, but that I would lose something from the experience. I had to do it. It had to be me.

I reached out, hand on his cheek, and he brought his eyes to meet mine as he planted a kiss on my wrist. “I’m in love with you,” I ground out, each word sounding like it’d been forced through a woodchipper. It wasn’t one of my most suave moments.

“What? What did you just say? I didn’t hear you right.”

Had he said that one purpose, knowing that it would be easier for me to talk about my feelings if they were guarded on either side by aggressive taunts? Had he heard me, but refused to believe what his ears had told him? It was impossible to tell with Naruto—under such tenuous circumstance, he alone could wrench a smile out of me. The discomfort kept me locked into place, silently scowling. My own ineptitude was sure to be my downfall.

“You love me, teme? Doesn’t sound like it,” he snapped. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head?”
“You’re right. I’ve only been pining for you for months, but now that I think about it, you’re not my type. Nevermind,” I retorted.

“Oh fuck you,” groaned the blonde. “I genuinely can’t tell if you’re fucking with me or what.”

“Oh what,” I replied, eyeing him carefully.

He hesitated, an impatient whine to his voice as he said, “Prove it, Uchiha.”

I sighed, staring pointedly away from him. The words came out slow and full of emotion, the utterance like a prayer. “I’m in love with you, Naruto Uzumaki. I have been since the beginning.” I looked up at him then, too scared to move. My soul laid bare before him.

His arms were around me in an instant; he was clinging to me like a scared kid, and what else were we, really, but two frightened children clinging to each other in spite of the way the universe was trying to tear us apart. “I’m in love with you too,” he said into my neck.

“I know,” I replied. He pulled away to frown his disapproval of my cavalier attitude, but he couldn’t keep it in place. He fought down the giddiness, losing the battle in a split second. The smile that appeared in its place could light a stadium; he was beaming, he was bright, he was brilliant.

“You cocky son of a bitch,” he jeered, sticking his tongue out at me. Then he hesitated, his face falling for a fraction of a second before he masked the emotion with a plastic smile. “You mean it, don’t you?”

I rolled my eyes, trying not to think about tomorrow. I still had tonight. We still had time. “You’re so needy, dobe,” I muttered as I leaned into him and pressed a small kiss at the corner of his smile. It was different, trying to kiss him sober with the lights on. A bundle of nerves pulled at my gut, twisting and jerking as I tried to maintain my composure.

Surprised by the slight gesture of romantic affection, Naruto blushed, his hand coming up to rest at the crook of my neck. For a moment I thought he might strangle me, and the exhilaration that came with the fleeting image ought to have been more worrisome. Instead, when his lips met mine, I deepened the kiss immediately, sliding my tongue into his mouth and pushing hard against him. He let out a startled moan, which sent a jolt of desire straight through me. “Sasuke,” he breathed.

I touched his face, gentle as I traced my fingers along his jaw to his scarred cheek. Being here, right now, with him, was enough to make my whole life worthwhile. Something must’ve shown in my eyes, because he pushed me back on the bed and shifted on top of me, grinning at me like a child.

He blushed when I met his gaze, unflinching, and he buried his face in my neck. My body tingled at his smile against my skin—I never wanted to forget how that felt, how he felt. I welcomed his weight on top of me, the force of his body on mine; it was pure, somehow, cleansing. Elemental. As if it was the most natural state of things, him pining me down and smiling into me.

“Oh my god, do I love you,” I proclaimed, my voice soft and reverent.

He kissed my collarbone in response, moving to my sternum and up to my adam’s apple. I put my hands to his cheeks as I was wont to do, guiding his face above me and staring helplessly into those blue eyes like burning miracles. I didn’t believe in god but I did believe in love, and every fiber of my heart prayed for salvation, for recompense, for him. Naruto bent to brush his lips against mine and I slid my hands into his hair, holding him there near me. He pressed into me with a mounting need, sucking at my lip and forcing his tongue into my mouth, and all I could think of was how beautiful this was, this physical declaration of feeling. I wanted him closer, as close as possible; I wanted him to press so firmly against me that we melded into one another, our existences intertwined.
The moonlight glimmered in through the window, illuminating his hair and casting doubt upon his corporeal form. He was ethereal, glowing in silver light above me—if he weren’t hard against me, I’d think I was dreaming. He was an angel, my angel, so perfect and pure, making all of the darkness in my heart holy with his touch. So gentle, so honest, so real. I kissed him—tongue in his hair, heart on my sleeve. I could feel my ache for him like a tangible emptiness, a black hole in my gut. I pulled at the hem of his shirt, tugging it up overhead and casting it away without a thought. He did the same for me, pausing at the sight. His eyes raked over my body, drinking me in, and he whispered, “God, how are you this beautiful?”

I knew my cheeks were pink but I didn’t care. Hearing him profess attraction to me ignited something primal inside me, and I bucked my hips against his, grinding our bodies together. The blushing groan that escaped his sweetly parted lips furthered my aggression, and I flipped him over, his skin dark against the white sheets. I kissed his shoulder, his neck, his ear, his cheek—I wanted nothing more than to languish in this moment, his perfection eating me alive. Avoiding his waiting mouth, I covered his exposed flesh with murmured softness. He was everything I’d ever wanted, and I was so broken, so fragmented, so jagged that I was worried I’d wound him. My body burned for him, temptation come to life.

“Sasuke,” he growled. He was pulling at my shorts, frustrated fingers fumbling with the feeble button and failing. I pushed his hands away, pinning them to the mattress and eliciting a sharp gasp.

“You first,” I told him, voice rough with need. He nodded dumbly as I planted a kiss on his forehead, his nose, his lips; He pushed against me until the physical ache resonated within me. Delirious with desire, I moved down his chest to his navel, not stopping until my lips met the fabric of his jeans. Button, zipper, gone. I could see him straining against the confines of his underwear, and I pressed my face into the thin cloth, eager to feel him, to taste him, to know him.

He whimpered, soft and needy, hands twisting in my hair; I tugged the garment down his tantalizing hips, my mouth on the exposed skin as soon as it was visible. Naruto was completely naked beneath me, a work of art atop the bed, stained glass perfection. I took him into my mouth after a second of admiration, worshiping his cock with unparalleled fervor. His hands tightened their grip, pulling painfully at my disheveled locks; he was mumbling and moaning, panting and praying as I ran my tongue over every part of him. He began thrusting wildly, his cock hitting the back of my throat and making me gag. Just when I thought I couldn’t take another second of it, he grunted my name and erupted in my mouth. I swallowed thankfully, happy to have brought him to completion before he ripped my hair out or tore my soft palette.

Naruto relaxed against the bed with a content sigh, whispering, “Holy fuck.”

I sat on the edge, suddenly feeling overcome by debilitating awkwardness. I’d just had a dick in my mouth for the first time in my life, and though I’d done it out of love, it was an action I couldn’t undo. Not that I wanted to. It was just…weird. I tensed when Naruto touched my shoulder, but he dragged me down beside him anyway, snuggling me against his chest with affectionate cooing. He planted a sweet kiss on my back.

“I love you, Sasuke,” he murmured. I could hear him smiling, and his comfort relaxed me. I eased into him, letting myself enjoy the feel of him against me. He kissed the back of my neck, nuzzling my hairline. His lips moved to my ear, nibbling softly at the lobe and sending shivers down my spine. I wriggled into him, and he chuckled wickedly. “Your turn, teme.”

He propped himself up on an elbow, using his free hand to trace my outline with delicate fingers. He sucked in a breath; I could feel his gaze hot on my skin. I rolled over to look at him, feeling small and fragile, but the desire in his eyes sparked something to life inside me. I felt a smirk coming to life.
on my face, and he blushed as I sat up on the bed, arrogance evident in my expression.

“What’re you waiting for, dobe?” I asked, gesturing to my erection. His eyes followed my hand hungrily, and he bit his lip at the sight. Hesitant but fixated, he tugged off my shorts and underwear in one go, not bothering to removed them fully before taking me into his mouth.

Seeing him on his knees before me, his lips pucker around my cock and his wide eyes looking up at me—it was an indescribable sensation. I put my hands on his cheeks, the raised flesh of his scars soft against my fingertips, before slipping my fingers into his hair. Naruto was anything but delicate—his determination made up for his lack of grace. He pushed me to the back of his throat again and again, despite the tears forming in his eyes, and I lost it. Any semblance of control left me, abandoned me to my evil impulses, and I held his head still before bucking into him, fucking his face without reluctance. The way he gripped my hips, his nails biting into my flesh, made me thrust faster; I came inside without warning, gasping loudly as I filled his mouth.

Naruto pulled away from my cock, cum dripping out of the corner of his mouth and watery eyes searching my face. I slid down next to him and hugged him against me, kissing his cheek and whispered, “I love you, usuratonkachi.”

“Mm, Sasuke, I gotta clean myself up,” Naruto mumbled, standing up. I held his hand, intertwining our fingers, and he smiled sheepishly at my ridiculous display of affection. “Put your underwear on before Iruka comes back.”

“As if Iruka’s gonna be back tonight,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

A loud, singular knock at the door made him raise his eyebrows at me, and I begrudgingly put my clothes back on as he wandered into the bathroom. I put his tshirt on before answering the door, assuming that Iruka didn’t want to walk in on anything scandalous. I threw open the door without a thought, only to come face to face with a stranger.

“Wrong room,” I snapped. He watched me with a coy grin, his eyes unsettling me.

“Oh no, Sasuke, this is exactly the room I was looking for,” he replied. He took a step forward, and I instinctively backed up.

“Who are you?” I growled.

“I’m just following orders,” he said. “Quickly and quietly.”

I clenched my fists, but he was the one who made the first blow. He swung at me, and I dodged, hitting him with an uppercut. He barely winced before grabbing my wrist and forcing it behind me. Naruto chose that moment to flush and exit the bathroom, rubbing his eyes blearily before turning to the bed. Noting my absence, he shifted to the doorway, jaw dropping at the sight. “Let him go!” he shouted, rushing over.

“Great,” the man muttered, releasing me only to shove me face-first into the floor.

He took a quick swing at the blonde, splintering his clavicle. I leapt to my feet, but I wasn’t fast enough. He grabbed Naruto by the hair and smashed his head into the desk. The boy’s body went limp, and the stranger dropped him to the floor before turning back to me. “Naruto!” I felt myself shouting, jerking forward only to be caught in a painful embrace. I strained against the man’s grasp, desperate to check on my…on my… A sudden pain, and then everything went dark.
In the room where I was being held, the darkness was suffocating, overwhelming my senses with its impossibly all-encompassing presence. It seemed endless, an infinite supply of lifeless void, and I was certain I’d start going crazy if kept there for any longer. And then, without warning, a crack of light so bright it burned manifested on the other side of the room, rapidly spreading into the shape of a door. In the midst of the light, a silhouette.

A small, windowless enclosure with one exit currently blocked by a man I didn’t recognize. Not entirely, at least. His face was somewhat familiar, but it held no meaning for me. He wasn’t the man from the hotel, and I couldn’t place where I’d seen his face before. “Well, well! Sasuke Uchiha, we meet at last.”

Part of my brain had been developing a theory in the corner while the rest of me focused on the situation at hand, but the arrival of this man decimated the theory before it had even gotten off the ground. Though I had no name to pair with the face, he was evidently the perpetrator of this crime—which meant, to my chagrin, I hadn’t been kidnapped by Itachi. My number one suspect, my only lead. Unless… “Danzo,” I greeted. It was a long shot, but it was the only other guess I had.

His face twisted, as if I’d slapped him. “You’re not as quick as your brother, but it seems there is a brain in your head after all.”

This man was Danzo, who’d played an as of yet indeterminably sized part in the deaths of my parents. Danzo, who’d somehow managed to corrupt my brother. Danzo, who’d set the events in motion to change my life forever. He looked more like someone’s racist grandfather than an evil villain, and yet he’d clearly done more wrong than anyone might expect. Appearances could be deceiving. The rage that filled me shone in my eyes, but I tempered it as I was taught.

“Where am I? Why am I here?” I demanded.

“That hardly matters,” Danzo replied. His dismissive tone only further fueled my fury.

“Maybe to you,” I snapped. Taking in my surroundings, I grew all the more agitated. My eyes past over everything, but nothing came of their observations. I was strapped to a cot, easily toppled—but then what? I couldn’t very well fight anyone or abscond with a cot attached to my back. The floor was bare cement, indicating that I might be in a basement, but the lack of stairs seemed to suggest otherwise. The door slid on a hinge—a flimsy thing, no match for a good kick, but I’d have to make it over there first. From there, who knew what awaited me? Danzo was right, I wasn’t as quick as my brother. Itachi escaped prison—this kidnapping attempt would’ve been child’s play.

“All in good time, my boy,” he said. “They’ll be arriving soon, and then I suspect you’ll have as many answers as you need.”

“They?”

“You’ll even get to answer the biggest question of them all. What happens when we die?” His expression was serious, though his eyes glinted with hints of amusement.

“You’re going to kill me. Why?” I kept my face stoic, my tone empty. “Last I checked, I didn’t know anything that would warrant my death.”

“Oh, I’m not going to kill you. Not personally, at least. But someone will see to it that all my problems are solved.”

“How am I a problem for you?” I asked. If he was impressed by my emotionally vacant façade, he didn’t show it.
“You’ve been living on borrowed time, Sasuke. You were supposed to die with your no-good
parents, but things didn’t go according to plan. Now that Itachi has escaped his federal confinement,
well, there’s no better time to tie up loose ends,” Danzo replied. “Which is why you’re here, instead
of bleeding out in a hotel bathroom. You’re my bait.”

“You’re going to lure Itachi here to kill me,” I observed. He didn’t hold himself with the confidence
of a politician or a villain; if it weren’t for the malice of his words, I’d never have guessed he could
orchestrate such atrocities.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Poor Sasuke, trying to put the puzzle together without all of the pieces.” He stared at
me with an icy disdain, as if disappointed but not surprised by my pathetic guesses.

A shout echoed through the open door from down the hall, and a man in a uniform leaned inside,
hesitant to disturb Danzo. His jacket was dark blue with a single patch over the heart, inscribed with
the simple lettering: ROOT. He glanced around his shoulder, wary, as he said, “Sir, they’re here.
There’s more of ’em than we thought. What’re your orders?”

“Tell the men not to engage. Distract them, but let Itachi make it all the way here before you begin to
eliminate them. I want to see his face when his precious little brother dies. It’ll serve him right for all
the trouble he’s caused me over the years,” Danzo commanded. The man nodded curtly and took off,
leaving Danzo and I alone once more. The elderly man turned back to me, noting my agitation with
bemusement. “Excited about your family reunion?”

“Fuck you,” I growled.

“Oh, come now, Sasuke. I’m not all bad. At least I let you have a few tender moments with your
beloved Uzumaki brat,” Danzo retorted. “Like father like son, I suppose.”

“What?” I snapped. My body tensed at the mention of Naruto, adrenaline rocketing through me like
a Jack Parson’s side project. Was he still in danger? If I was a loose end, surely he was too. My
scowl was deepening with every word that left the man’s mouth.

“You and Fugaku both had a penchant for dumb blondes,” he rambled. “Can’t say I’m surprised,
though it seems the nature of your relationship with him is different. All the more reason to get rid of
you now, before you complicate things. You already made a mess of my plans by getting the orphan
emancipated.”

“He was being abused,” I said dumbly.

“Allegedly,” Danzo snapped. “At least your death will give me something else to torture the brat
with until he comes of age.”

“Comes of age for what?” I asked, trying not to let my relief show. He wasn’t planning on killing
Naruto, and that was enough for me, for now.

Danzo said something, but his words were drowned out by the thunderous arrival of someone I’d
hoped I’d never see again. Itachi stood in the doorway, hesitating for a split second as his eyes
landed on mine; the beige prison jumpsuit washed him out, making him pale and sickly, and he
seemed exhausted beyond the physical. Spiritually tired, like a man who’s seen the darkest heart of
humanity. Without a word, he grabbed Danzo and spun him out the door, shutting it behind the man
and bolting the lock. He’d trapped us in darkness, but it wouldn’t last long. Through ragged breaths,
he offered me a simple greeting. “Sasuke.”

I felt him moving in the dark, crossing to me and untying my binds with nimble fingers. I swallowed
the bitter rage and its companion melancholia that had climbed up my throat, saying as casually as I could, “Come to finish what you started then, Itachi?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “But first, I have to make sure you’re safe.”

Even shrouded in darkness, my confusion was clear as day. “You’re not here to kill me?”

Itachi paused, a sigh escaping his lips. I felt his arms around me, his words soft in my ear. “I’m not a murderer, Sasuke. I didn’t kill anyone. And I won’t let Danzo hurt any more of my family.”

He helped me to my feet, his touch gentle and steady. The door burst open, but his eyes stayed on mine, unreadable. “Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” I muttered, shifting my gaze to the battered entryway.

Danzo walked in, ROOT men behind him. “What an unfair trick, Itachi. And here I thought you’d want to face me like a man.”

“That’s why you brought four guards will you, to make it a fair fight,” he mused.

“Well, can’t be too careful. You’re known for your acts of deception, after all.” Danzo glanced from my brother to me, unperturbed by my freedom. “My righthand man is still missing. I suppose I should presume him dead.”

“Oh, if you didn’t like those tricks, you’re going to hate this one,” Itachi announced. The brief flash of panic in Danzo’s eyes didn’t go unnoticed. “Deidara, be a dear and bring in the hostage, would you?”

My eyes widened as three of the four ROOT guards turned on Danzo, restraining him against the wall. The old man squirmed, but he couldn’t wriggle out of their clutches. The fourth guard removed his cap, letting his long blonde hair fall gracefully to his shoulders with a smirk. He stepped out of the room with a flourish, only to return moments later with an unconscious, handcuffed man slung over his shoulder. He dropped the dark-haired bundle to the floor, flashing Danzo a cheeky grin. “Special delivery,” he quipped.

“Thank you,” Itachi said. Deidara blushed, beaming at my brother.

“You expect me to what, give up? Just because you’re returning him to me?” Danzo balked.

“You’re not exactly in any position to be negotiating demands, are you?” Deidara snapped.

“Danzo, you’ve hurt far too many people to just be set free, no matter the consequences,” Itachi began. “Shisui, our parents, countless others—”

The old man cut him off. “Oh yes, can’t forget about those others, can we? Dear old Minato is how you got into this mess in the first place, isn’t he?”

“Minato was a good man, a good leader. He had a family. And you killed him. For power. For politics,” Itachi retorted.

I’ve only ever seen Itachi angry once, when we were little. Our father was always comparing me to my older brother and coming to the conclusion that I’d fallen short. It wasn’t that my grades weren’t good enough or that my behavior at home wasn’t up to the Uchiha standard; our father had long believed that Itachi possessed something I did not, and in his eyes I never measured up. Itachi stood up for me relentlessly, but he never got angry. Not until our dad blew off a simple awards ceremony—I couldn’t even remember now what it was for, but Itachi showcased anger the likes of which I’d
never seen and couldn’t emulate if I tried. His eyes went cold, but everyone could hear the rage in his voice. If he hadn’t been defending me, I’d have been afraid of him. Instead, though, I felt a righteous vindication wash over me. When our parents were murdered, I’d lost more than my mother and father—I’d lost the only person I looked up to. As I glanced at Itachi, momentarily tearing my eyes from the monster against the wall, I saw that same chilly fury marring his features.

“Minato and his liberal brigade,” Danzo spat. “He was ruining my city, corrupting everything I’d built. Him and his feminazi wife.”

I was lost, hopelessly and utterly confused by the bickering in front of me, and yet the circumstances were far too dire for my attention to waver. I listened, trying to cut short my wondering. Who Minato was, I hadn’t a clue. What Danzo had done to Shisui, I could only guess. One thing was steadfastly becoming clear to me, though: Itachi’s involvement in our parents’ deaths was questionable at best. The notion that I’d spent years hating the wrong person, hating my brother, made me sick to my stomach. The sound of boots on floorboards drew my attention as well as Itachi’s, and he nodded at the door. “Kisame, Deidara, investigate.” The blue-haired guard and the familiar blonde one left to discern the cause of the commotion.

“It won’t do you any good,” Danzo antagonized. “You can’t win this, Itachi.”

My brother opened his mouth to respond, but he didn’t get the chance. The body on the floor sprang to life, catching the sole guard in the legs and sending him toppling to the ground. The man with long black hair beelined for Itachi, distracting him as Danzo bolted for the door. He dodged the attack my brother threw at him, managing to land a decent kick and knock Itachi to the floor. He paused in the doorway as he fled, flipping his hair out of his face and grinning at me as he said, “My, how you’ve grown, Sasuke.” I blanched—his was a face from my nightmares, one I’d thought was nothing more than a figment of my imagination. My brother and his heavily pierced friend were on their feet again in a second, but neither moved to go after the villainous pair. They stared at each other, tense and wary.

“The fuck are you gonna do now?” the guard asked quietly.

“There will be more chances for revenge. For now, we have to get everyone out of here.” Itachi said. The words came out of his mouth effortlessly, but I could see the struggle in his eyes. The decision weighed on him.

I didn’t protest as they led me away. Maybe I should have. There are far too many “maybe I should have” moments in my life—I’m barely sixteen, and I already have so many regrets. Would that be the theme for the rest of my time on this earth? Would I always be too little too late? Would all of my chances for happiness slip between my fingers? I hung my head in silent reflection as we walked through the winding corridors, seeking out the remaining members of the gang. Deidara slid into step beside me, frowning at the back of Itachi’s head. My brother was busily whispering to the pierced man, his intensity magnified by the look of pain in his eyes.

“Sasuke, great to finally meet you,” the blonde man said. “It’s good to put a face to the voice, though I’ll be the first to tell you your glare is perfectly audible.”

“Hn,” I grunted, barely registering his commentary.

“You and your brother are so alike,” he continued, oblivious to my apathy. “But it’s far easier to rile you up. Itachi is softer than you, I think, which is funny since he’s the one who’s been in prison.”

Itachi turned briefly to glare, earning a teasing grin from Deidara. I watched the exchange idly for a moment before it occurred to me just what the man was implying. I stared at him, an accusatory tint
in my voice as I said, “You’re the one who’s been calling me.”

“Guilty,” he replied with a shrug.

It was a sucker punch, right in the nose, but I couldn’t stop it. My fist had a mind of its own; like a creature possessed it flew from my side and crash-landed on his face without hesitation. He backed against the wall, hands clutching his nose and blood trickling down his chin. Kisame offered me a companionable grin and a high-five, which I dubiously ignored.

“Itachi, your little brother hit me,” Deidara whined.

“I’m sure he had good reason,” Itachi murmured, but he faced me with a frown.

“This asshole has been harassing me for months,” I retorted. “Calling me week after week with a blocked number.”

“Itachi told me to!”

“He told you to use a voice changer and antagonize me about my dead parents?” I raised my eyebrow.

“No, I didn’t,” my brother said evenly. “I asked him to convince you of my innocence, since he had been released and could contact you freely.”

The stare he gave Deidara could’ve wilted flowers. “You didn’t say I couldn’t have fun with it,” the blonde man pouted.

My brother sighed. “Suffice it to say that I am not pleased with you, Deidara.”

As Itachi turned back to his conversation, Deidara took up bickering with Kisame over the shit-eating grin he’d given me at my instinctive attack. I fell back from the group, preferring to be left alone with my thoughts. It felt like an eternity had passed since I was sitting on the railing of the pier and watching the sun make its slow descent into the ocean, though that had only been a few hours ago. One moment I was confessing my love to a certain blonde idiot, and the next I was climbing into a van with a prison gang. I’d been kidnapped by a crazy villain, only to be rescued by an accused murderer. I sat next to Itachi, knowing that I ought to be worrying about so much more than my relationship with him but unable to escape the thoughts that plagued me. If Itachi hadn’t killed our parents, then I wasn’t the kid whose brother committed patricide. Itachi being a murderer was as much a part of my absolute identity as my parents being dead. Looking in a mirror, I wouldn’t know the boy with a falsely accused brother anymore than I would know the boy staring back at me if he was in love with Sakura instead of Naruto. I should be asking questions, trying to get to the bottom of things; it was useless trying to dissect my feelings while I was still in the midst of them. I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. I sighed and glanced at my brother, wondering where I should start. Luckily, as he caught my eye, he made the decision for me.

“You have a choice to make, Sasuke. I’ll respect your decision, no matter what, but it won’t be easy,” he said softly.

I stared at him, the weight of his words pressing uncomfortably on the anxiety bubbling in my gut. “Hn,” I acknowledged, not trusting myself to speak.

“If you come with me, you’ll be safe. I can keep you safe. Your friends and caregivers here will be safe. If you stay, Danzo will try to kill you. Again and again, until he succeeds. And who knows who he’ll take down in his attempts to get to you.”
“Is that what happened to Mom and Dad?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Itachi frowned, a wistful sadness in his eyes. “Yes, kind of. He wanted to put a stop to Shisui and I. We were going to expose his crimes, bring him to justice. Dad was waiting on me to give him the evidence we’d gathered on the Minato case.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, nodding slowly as his words took root in my brain. I felt more like a child than I ever had; I couldn’t really remember being six years old, but I felt so vulnerable and conflicted that the desperate need for material comfort was overwhelming. A stuffed animal, a soft blanket, a simple hug—anything to soothe the raw ache I felt inside.

“If you stay, someone might get caught in the crossfire,” he continued. “Your guardians, your friends.”

The lull of his voice blended in to the sounds of the road, mingling with the tires on pavement and squeal of brakes. I stopped listening as the reality of his words sunk in. Naruto had been injured when they took me—the sight of him crumpling to the ground like a ragdoll was all I could see for a moment, and I was forever guilty.

“You’re right,” I interrupted. He stared at me, his stoicism far more comforting than mine could ever be. “You really think they’ll be safe from Danzo if I leave?”

“He won’t hurt them, not while he’s still after you.” Itachi’s certainty quelled some of the pain, but nothing could ever take it all away.

“Then we’ve got to give him one hell of a chase,” I replied, resting my head on my brother’s shoulder.

“We will.”

I wouldn’t know for a long time that they thought I was dead, or that Naruto was alone in thinking I’d survived. I wouldn’t know about his meeting with Shisui or the pact that the two of them made to track us down. I wouldn’t know what Shisui told him, not until Itachi told me—about the car crash that killed Minato and Kushina, about Naruto’s inheritance, about Danzo’s plans for our city. And Naruto, Naruto wouldn’t know that I’d left him behind, that I’d chosen to abandon him. In part to keep him safe. But also to make up for lost time. I’d spent years languishing in pain and rage, despising the only family I had left, and for what? For a lie. I loved Naruto with everything in me, but I’d spent too long mired in hatred to let my chance at brotherhood go. What did it matter, anyhow? He was safe, and I’d never see him again. Whatever explanations I constructed, they were for my benefit alone.

Alone.

But I wasn’t, not really. I had my brother back. I had a new family, of sorts. I’d be fine, and so would Naruto.

That’s what I had to keep telling myself.

Chapter End Notes
Whew! So that's that, then. Sasuke's on the lam and Naruto's been left behind. The end.

Except not really.

If you follow me on my SNS tumblr (narutoandsasukeweregayashell) then you'll know why this chapter was delayed. I live in Beijing, and certain political problems have made me question my safety recently. I had to come to terms with the situation and make a decision in regards to my well-being, and I was far too caught up in that mess to focus on writing this chapter. I hate to say it, but I think you can tell, based on the quality of my writing. This chapter feels distracted and messy to me, and I wish I could've done a better job with it. Thankfully, the first chapter of AFTER has already been written--after a few modifications, it'll be good to go, and the quality will be what you'd expect from me, instead of this jumbled mess. I appreciate you reading all the same! Give me feedback, please. I would love to hear what you all think.

In the AFTER section, both Naruto and Sasuke will be adults, and all sexual activities they engage in together will be explicit. They will engage in sexual activities without each other, and those scenes will not be explicit. I know y'all ain't here to read about something that's not-your-ship, so don't worry. All instances of sex outside of SNS canon are necessary for character development and plot, so sorry about that but I wouldn't include it if it wasn't relevant. Brace yourselves ahead of time, folks! AFTER: motorcycle will be up next week, so stay tuned.

Love you byeeeee
Chapter Summary

Welcome to grad school, baby!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER motorcycle (part 1)

Naruto grinned to himself, practically vibrating with excitement as he stood in line at the baggage check of the airport. He’d always been that kid no one expected to make it—from class clown to naïve jock, with barely anyone truly rooting for him. People knew he was a troubled kid, but they didn’t care. There was just too much bad in the world for most people to act with compassion. That’s why he’d be forever thankful for the forces of good in his life—Iruka and Kakashi, who’d been there at his high school graduation to snap photos of his shit-eating grin. He’d been the football captain, all good-natured and athletic, and for most of the townsfolk, the fact that he hadn’t knocked up the head cheerleader was impressive enough. Not for him, though, and certainly not for his dads. He wanted more out of life. When he actually ended up getting a degree in Psychology from a local community college, though, Naruto far surpassed the meager expectations for his provincial life. Even Iruka was surprised to find that Naruto’s goals didn’t end there; he had big plans, like getting a master’s degree in Sociology and moving out of the state. He’d come to terms with leaving long ago, and it didn’t bother him as much, knowing his family, friends, and romantic partner couldn’t come with him. Naruto had spent years undoing trauma and trying to improve himself, and he wasn’t going to hold himself back; he knew he was going places—or rather, one place in particular, at least.

The university was located in the beautiful, sprawling city of its namesake, and the campus was bustling with undergrad, grad, and doctoral wannabes alike. A physically imposing home away from home, it had infamous architecture: mordacious buildings, labyrinthian cobblestone paths, and towering trees, all in the heart of the city. Sitting in the dead center like that, it felt as if the school had always existed, an ancient structure that humans had merely constructed their tumultuous civilizations around. Thousands of applicants each year vied for spots in the multitude of disciplines offered, and Naruto had been lucky enough to make the cut. He’d even been able to snag a dorm room in the nick of time. His enthusiasm was palpable, and he’d packed the second he received his acceptance letter. Though it’d be his first time flying, he was looking forward to every aspect of his new life.

Naruto flipped through photos on his cell phone as he waited for the attendants to announce boarding. He would surely miss his dads—he got teary-eyed just thinking of everything they’d done to help him get to this point. He’d miss his friends—Gaara had already moved away, as had Ino and Sakura, but Shikamaru and Kiba had been invaluable comrades during his stint in community college. And of course he’d miss his girlfriend most of all, because that’s what he was supposed to do. She’d always been so supportive, so kind. If anyone had ever bothered to ask him, Naruto would adamantly deny having a type, and that was nearly true. Countless strings of hookups with men, women, and NBs alike with a wide array of appearances were a testament to this belief, but when it came to good old-fashioned dating, Naruto was more selective than he cared to acknowledge.
Everyone he’d ever been serious about kind of looked like his current girlfriend—dark hair, pale skin, averse to smiling. Hinata wasn’t exactly special, but she’d managed to stick around longer than the rest. It had nearly been a year since they started dating, and he’d agreed to try the long-distance thing with her, out of pity and familiarity tinged with fear. He was moving across the country, and he was scared of being all alone in a new city, scared of trying and failing to be independent. Naruto wanted the emotional security Hinata offered, and he told himself that was love.

Naruto realized far too late that he hated flying. The plane was already in the air, having ripped itself from the runway, when he decided that humans were absolutely not meant to fly. As the buildings shrunk before his very eyes, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was the day he would die, trapped inside of a fiery hunk of metal as it crashed to the ground. It wasn’t just the turbulence, either. It was the sheer impossibility of it all that was getting to him. How much did planes even weigh? The idea that this hulking thing was somehow able to defy gravity was deeply flawed. With a deep sigh and trembling hands, Naruto took out a well-worn book from his carry-on. The plane banked to the right, and he thought he might lose his lunch all over his seat companions. After a few tense moments and some concerned glances, he managed to regain composure and turned to the page marked with a polaroid picture. Perhaps some choice literature could keep his mind off of this flying disaster machine. He busied himself by thumbing through someone else’s copy of his favorite book, scanning the familiar pages with the hint of a smile.

When he landed, Naruto checked his cell and sent off a series of texts proclaiming his miraculous arrival in his new home, eager to share his happiness with everyone. Now that he’d actually gotten here, excitement seeped out of his pores—he could feel it tingling in his fingertips. The truth was, attending this school had been entirely up in the air. Would he be accepted? Would he have enough money for relocation? Would he have the guts to move across the country? It wasn’t until he actually stepped food inside the airport that he felt his future clicking into place. There was one person in particular that he wanted to share his victory with, a friend he’d made through a series of strange events several months ago. In spite of the circumstances leading to their friendship, this guy had quickly become a feature point in Naruto’s daily life. He clumsily navigated through the airport, delighted when his phone rang in response to the text he’d sent. He emitted a chipper, “Hello!”

“Hey there,” a familiar voice intoned. “Uh, why did I just get a text from you that says you’re… wait, let me… let me re-read it.”

Naruto let out a boisterous laugh. “Are you drunk? I can hear you swaying.”

“Shhh,” the boy replied. “Where—where are you? Right now.”

“Okay, you’re definitely drunk,” Naruto commented. “Um, I’m at the airport. I just landed.”

“I only had like three drinks. Chill, Mom,” he answered.

“You’re such a dork. Look, I gotta check in to my room and stuff, but we can talk more later, okay?” Naruto listened to the muffled nonsense on the other side for a moment, searching the cacophony for anything discernable, but he quickly gave up, shrugging and hanging up.

He’d booked an AirBnB a short walk from campus for a full month, giving him plenty of time to get settled before classes started. He wanted to get acquainted with the city and have a job lined up before things heated up. He figured he ought to reach out to Sakura and Ino, too, since they’d gone to undergrad here and could show him around. It had actually been Sakura’s suggestion that he apply to such a prestigious school in the first place; he supposed he owed her a thank-you lunch at least. He sent the girls a message on Facebook before he realized he should probably give Hinata a call. She was always so quiet when they spoke on the phone, letting him talk about anything and everything. Sometimes he liked that about her, her ability to absorb all that he threw at her. Other times, though,
he craved some kind of resistance. She was just so malleable, he sometimes wondered where his personality was buried. He fell asleep as he was talking to her, and Hinata reluctantly hung up on him, lest his battery die before morning.

Naruto dreamed he was in a house—old and a bit run-down, but not unlivable. Pale yellow walls with white trim, paint chipping away in places. A long hallway, chock-full of doors; as he wandered down the corridor, he felt pulled away from all but one. The door at the very end opened when he touched the knob, and he stepped inside. A set of metal bleachers stood off to the right; on the floor in front of him was a dismal mattress, bare and stained. He turned to ask someone what was going on, but when he looked closer, he found Sasuke scowling back at him. Next thing he knew, the room was full of people, drinking from Solo cups and chatting with each other; he and Sasuke had sex on the mattress in front of everyone, and he choked Sasuke, anger outweighing desire. He watched as the life drained from the boy’s eyes. Everyone cheered. Naruto groaned and rolled over, the buzzing of his phone bringing him back into consciousness. He had dreams about Sasuke every so often—it was nothing new. They usually turned violent, and they always left a bad taste in his mouth. The sheets tangled themselves around his calves as he shifted, and the pillows had been scattered all about the bed as he’d slept, making his phone all the more impossible to find. Bleary-eyed and surprisingly shirtless, Naruto tossed his arm out like a fishing line, trying to locate the source of that insufferable buzzing. He grappled with a feisty bedsheet over the object, eventually winning the battle due to his opposable thumbs. The second he brought the phone to his face, it stopped buzzing and promptly informed him of the four calls he’d now missed from Hinata. Sighing at the accompanying slew of text messages, Naruto flung himself out of the bed and lurched toward the shower.

He was far from cognizant enough to have a decent conversation with his girlfriend, and she’d instantly be able to tell that something was wrong. She always got weird when he talked about Sasuke. A distant kind of jealous; she’d retreat even further inside herself, and he hated it. Hoping the hot water would wash away the remnants of his dream and kickstart all of the necessary neurological processes he needed, Naruto hopped in. Washing the conditioner from his long golden tresses, he heard his phone going off again. Annoyed, he toweled off and stepped out to see what all the fuss was about, only to find that the most recent missed call hadn’t been from Hinata at all. He frowned at the screen, confused. His friend had called him, but they hardly ever talked two days in a row. Moonlight, as Naruto had taken to calling him, rarely instigated a phone call to begin with. Which worked rather well for Naruto, actually. Though he’d never given Hinata cause to be jealous, she was perpetually vigilant and invasive, and while it didn’t bother him as much as he supposed it should, it was still irksome enough that when he and Moonlight started talking, he’d hidden it from her. Not that Moonlight avoided calling because of Hinata—he had no idea she existed. All the same, Naruto was unaccustomed to such frequent attention. He felt a strange tingling in his abdomen as he nervously returned the phone call.

Moonlight picked up on the final ring, sounding distracted as he said, “Hey, Sunshine, give me a minute.”

Naruto heard discordance in the background: people shouting, objects clattering. Worried, he replied, “Okay, no problem…” and paced around the room in his tiny towel. He could make out a few words, and he strained to figure out what was going on. It sounded like someone was displeased with the distinct lack of public bathrooms available, while another person, likely a manager, was being pointedly obtuse about the whole thing. Naruto found himself chuckling at some of the snappy remarks, thoroughly engaged as Moonlight tried to calm everyone down. His eyes widened in surprise as the manager shifted from antagonizing the disgruntled customer to blatantly hitting on Moonlight. “Did he just say that, right in front of all those people?” Naruto asked.

“In front of my brother, no less,” Moonlight muttered into the receiver. “It’s the beard. I always get
Naruto’s laughter erupted involuntarily from his throat, and he wheezed as he replied, “You’re a regular Helen of Troy, breaking up a fight with your beauty like that.”

“Helen of Troy started fights, dumbass,” Moonlight retorted.

Naruto chuckled sheepishly, only a little embarrassed. He always said the wrong thing around Moonlight, who was hypercritical by nature. Every so often something flirtatious would slip out on accident, which really made him cringe, unless it was one of those rare occasions when Moonlight would flirt back. Then he felt a whole different kind of a nervous.

“So what’s up? Why’d you call?” Naruto asked.

“Right. Sorry about last night, I was fairly hammered when we spoke. Did you say you’re—”

“Yeah, yeah! Remember how I told you about applying to this university, but not being sure if it’d work out? Well, you’re talking to a bona fide graduate student of the Valley of the End University,” Naruto exclaimed.

“Fuck,” his friend said.

“I think you mean congratulations.”

“That too. Look, Sunshine, there’s something I should tell you—”

“If it’s not I’m outside of your room with champagne to celebrate, then I’m not sure I want to hear it,” Naruto replied.

“I could be. I’m not, but physically? I could be.”

“Okay, enough with your cryptic stoicism,” Naruto said with a yawn.

“I live in the Valley of the End,” Moonlight answered.

“What?” Naruto felt the phone slip through his fingers and heard it land softly on the plush carpet. He picked it up and said, “No, you don’t. You’re lying.”

“I’m telling the truth actually,” he replied.

“Prove it,” Naruto demanded.

Roughly an hour later, Naruto’s phone buzzed at the arrival of a photo message. Moonlight had snapped a picture of his outstretched hand, flipping the bird in front of the Welcome to the Valley of the End sign. Naruto recognized the stick-n-poke tattoos on the boy’s fingers from prior photos, and he sighed at the accompanying text message. “Proof enough for you?” it read. Disbelief turned to nervous excitement in his gut, and he imagined what it might be like to finally meet the person who had become so prominent in his life merely seven months ago.

They’d meet in a café of Moonlight’s choosing, of course. The blasé setting would only make Naruto seem more vivid and exciting. Plus, the dim lighting would better obscure his scars. He’d show up late, an enigma of time itself, wearing his favorite jeans and a snug button-up, sunglasses, maybe a scarf. Moonlight would already be there, slumped in his seat with a lifeless latte, when suddenly, Naruto would burst in through the glass double-doors, scarf whipping wildly in the wind.
Well, maybe not. No, scratch the scarf. Long hair tied up in a manbun, sunglasses covering his eyes, he’d see Moonlight standing in eager anticipation, coffee cast carelessly aside. Dramatically but in a cool way, Naruto would rip off his sunglasses and say, “Hello there, la lune. It is I, le soleil. Allow me to—” and here he’d pull out a single sunflower, handing it to the boy with a devilish smile—“brighten your day.” Swooning, Moonlight would say something about how attractive and charming Naruto was, and he’d beg to be the object of Naruto’s affections. Naruto, charismatic but unsympathetic, would reply, “Sorry, darling. You had your chance,” and flounce out of the coffee shop, tossing one end of the scarf, bringing back the scarf, yes scarf, over his shoulder, sunglasses mysteriously back in place on his face. That was exactly how it would go, and he was determined to make it happen.

“Proof confirmed. Let’s do coffee. My treat,” Naruto mumbled as he typed the response on his phone. Grinning to himself, he finally called Hinata back.

“Um, Naruto, hi,” she answered softly. She always sounded like she’d done something wrong and anticipated a swift recourse. Initially it had endeared Naruto to her—he assumed it was the byproduct of abuse or trauma, and his hero complex kicked in. As it turned out, though, she really wasn’t damaged goods, and she had a hard time relating to his experiences. She was, however, clingier than anyone else Naruto had ever dated.

“Hey, Hinata. How’s it going?” he asked. He was still thinking about the possibility of meeting Moonlight, and his heart was hardly in the conversation.

“How’s it going?” he asked. He was still thinking about the possibility of meeting Moonlight, and his heart was hardly in the conversation.

“Um, are you…are you mad at me?”

“No, why would you think that?” He frowned, but the topic only kept his attention for so long. A few months back, he’d considered dumping Hinata for Moonlight, but he’d decided it was silly to leave a stable relationship for someone he’d never met. Naruto was quick to infatuation—it was part of his charm—but he hardly ever made it farther than that.

“You just… um, you didn’t call…”

“What am I doing right now?” Naruto hadn’t meant it to sound snappy, but he could hear the guilt trip coming. He’d gotten pretty good at deciphering the intent behind her pauses, and at this point he could tell when she was using her soft demeanor against him. He didn’t feel up to catering to Hinata’s feelings all the time, and he was hardly going to apologize for it. She wasn’t exactly more trouble than she was worth, but talking to her for too long often revealed shortcomings he didn’t want to address. He didn’t want to admit that he might not live up to the amazing boyfriend credentials he had on paper.

“Of course, I know, but, um…”

He was barely listening. When Naruto had told Moonlight all those months ago that he’d developed a bit of a crush on him, that boy had shut him down faster than he’d imagined possible. It had only taken a month of back-and-forth for him to suggest a romantic upgrade to their friendship; that was the first time he’d considered the possibility that he wasn’t the pinnacle of health, a caring and wonderful partner, a perfect and loving boyfriend—that maybe there might be some unresolved issues surrounding romance and love that he needed to work through. Moonlight had told him in no uncertain terms that this infatuation was a direct result of his own anonymity, enabling Naruto to superimpose idealized nonsense all over a real, living person. He was brought out of his reverie at the sound of his name, tuning back in to whatever Hinata had been saying.

“Naruto, I, um, I miss you,” she said.
“Miss you too,” he replied. “Uh-oh, gotta go. Talk to you later!”

Naruto hung up, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the ways in which he was failing both as a good boyfriend and a decent person.

He spent the whole day waiting for a text back from Moonlight, but remained consistently disappointed. He toured the campus and scrolled through social media; nothing. He got lunch and wandered around the nearby park; still nothing. He sent Hinata memes, only to frown when she replied. He was being stupid, childish—but he couldn’t prevent the ugly feeling in his gut every time his phone buzzed and it wasn’t Moonlight. He ought to be used to it by now; Moonlight was an awful communicator, failing spectacularly at consistency and sincerity, but what he lacked in emotional availability he made up for in honesty and intrigue. Annoyed by how monotonous his day had been, Naruto decided to hit the job scene early. It was only six pm, but he couldn’t stand being alone with himself for another second.

Naruto had learned the hard way that being a stripper isn’t easy, but he’d never shied away from a challenge. Neither Iruka nor Kakashi made enough money to put him through college, and he’d never been a good enough student to earn a scholarship. According to Danzo, he had to wait until he was 25 to collect his inheritance, and retail wasn’t going to foot the bill for any kind of education. So, Naruto stripped his way through undergrad. Now that he was here, he might as well keep that steady flow of income. He rode the bus downtown and went off in search of a new club to dance in.

“Hey, how’re you doing?” Naruto greeted as he walked in, smiling at the man he assumed was the manager. “I’d like to audition for a spot.”

The man gave him a gruff once-over, saying, “We don’t get a lot of male dancers here.”

“Here’s a copy of my resume. I worked at club called Daydreams for four years,” he replied.

“We definitely don’t get guys with prior experience in here,” the manager retorted. He looked over Naruto’s resume and sighed. “Tell you what, kid. Get on up there and give the girls a show. If they like you, welcome aboard.”

Naruto grinned. “Thank you for the opportunity, sir. You won’t regret it!”

The girls all whistled when he got on stage, and he tuned them out as he focused on the music. Poison by Groove Coverage blared through the speakers as he slapped his thighs and ran his hand sup his body. He’d donned his mesh t-shirt and button-up pants before heading out; the style was a little too emo for his tastes, but it always earned positive reactions from the audience. The pants were a particular favorite—something about him slowly undoing button after button really seemed to resonate with the customers back home. His shiny purple boxer-briefs were a steadfast hit, too. He knew he was a shoe-in before the song had even hit a minute—the dancers were fawning all over him. The manager ushered him off stage with a bemused grin.

“Well, kid, I reckon you’ve got what it takes. When can you start?” the manager inquired.

“Uh, twenty minutes ago,” Naruto replied.

“Ha, alright. Give me a few days to get the paperwork drawn up, and I’ll arrange the schedule for you.”

Naruto left, feeling a bit better though not about anything in particular. He still hadn’t heard from Moonlight, but at least he had gotten a job. At his last club, though, the dancers had to reserve the stage with a deposit—there weren’t schedules, like the manager here had mentioned. He shrugged it
off, though, reconciling the difference by acknowledging the wide array of male coworkers he’d had before. As long as he made enough money here, he didn’t mind adapting to a new way of doing things. He decided to walk around a bit more before heading back to his room, letting the pleasance of the summer night lift his spirits. The outline of skyscrapers against the dark night, the neon signs illuminating the streets, the cars rushing past; it was oddly comforting, being so surrounded by familiarity in a new city.

He grinned to himself as he looked around, gawking like a tourist without shame. Naruto paused as he passed a Daily Grind, chuckling to himself at the coincidence of moving to another city that housed the small chain. He pulled out his phone, ready to snap a quick pic for Hinata’s amusement, but he froze when he saw the motorcycle on his screen. The man standing next to it caught his eye, making his heart stop dead in his chest. He put his phone down and stared at the storefront—the man had turned away, but in the brief moment Naruto’d seen his face, the resemblance was undeniable.

Of course, it wasn’t him.

There was no possible way he could be seeing Sasuke here.

For all intents and purposes, Sasuke was dead. And even if he wasn’t, he was dead to Naruto.

The man by the bike was smoking a cigarette and pulling a fancy camera from his bag. His hair was too long, and his shoulders were too broad. He had a lip ring that twinkled in the warm light of the coffee shop, and the five o’clock shadow on his cheeks made him look tired. His glasses, thick-rimmed and square, obscured nearly a third of his face. Naruto tore his eyes away, annoyed with himself for seeing Sasuke in some random guy on his first day out of his hometown. It was the dream, he told himself. It was only because of the dream. His phone buzzed when he arrived, safe and sound in his room. “Next week?” Moonlight had replied. He frowned.

Naruto turned off his phone and watched She-Ra on Netflix until he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

debating splitting up the next chapter so that there's a "motorcycle 1 & 2" instead of having like way too much going on in an exposition chapter, but i haven't made up my mind about that yet

hope y'all like the direction this is headed. if you don't like the way Naruto is characterized as being a problematic boyfriend, well, sorry, but i can't imagine someone going through their whole ass high school love interest disappearing and then just like moving on in a healthy way. i'd imagine he'd either be super neurotic or super apathetic, and i feel like apathy is more in line with his character. it's easy to be a sociable flirt, a genuinely good person, and charismatic leader but a shitty boyfriend. don't worry, though. he's not gonna stay a shitty boyfriend. they all got growin' to do.
AFTER motorcycle (part 2)

Chapter Summary

in which Naruto is tres typique and Sasuke just wants to feel like a regular person

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER motorcycle (part 2)

Truthfully, I thought about him all the time. On bright, sunny days when the sky looked like his eyes. During winter when all the houses were lit with Christmas lights. Whenever I passed a scruffy blonde stranger on the street. In the beginning, he was all-encompassing. I’d slump against the headrest of whatever car the gang had stolen and spend hours agonizing over every detail. The sound of his voice, the scent of his hair, the feel of his embrace. Not a day went by without me thinking of him, for a while at least. His presence in my mind never diminished, but slowly I stopped wasting hours mulling over the past. I’d think of him in passing, when Kisame told a dumb joke or when we passed a ramen shop, but the thought of him didn’t subjugate me as it had before. By the time I’d gotten my GED and been accepted to college, it had become easy to ignore him. He was still there, buried just beneath the surface, but I’d gotten comfortable with the ache.

Just because I was accustomed to it didn’t mean I’d stopped caring, though. I didn’t visit the graveyard anymore but he still haunted me. Unfortunately, the things you kill don’t always stay buried. It’d been a cool day for August, sun coated in gray clouds, when I moved into my dorm as a freshman. After I said my goodbyes to Itachi, I walked around campus for a bit, enjoying the peace and quiet. It felt easy, wandering around my new home and idly exploring. For once, no tension, no malaise, just leisurely meandering. The Freshman Orientation was impending; all those teenagers cloistered together in a bundle of nervous excitement had the makings of a nightmare. I’d decided to skip it in favor of a green tea latte, bemused by the presence of a Daily Grind near campus. The store itself had been nostalgia-inducing enough on its own, but the universe has a funny way of subverting expectations when it comes to reminiscing. I opened the door, and a girl stumbled out, inadvertently dumping her iced latte all over one of my favorite t-shirts. Apologies spilled from her lips as the smell of hazelnut assaulted my nose; I glanced up, eyeing the offering of napkins before I found myself staring into the panicked face of Sakura Haruno. She’d shaved her head, but it was her alright. And to my absolute horror, she wasn’t alone. Off to the side, casting a suspicious glance my way, was none other than Ino Yamanaka, just as Amazonian as I remembered. Trademark platinum blonde ponytail securely in place, with the minor addition of bangs. It was only a matter of seconds before she recognized me, so I steeled myself for a performance. Adjusting my fake glasses and splitting my face open with a smile, I accepted Sakura’s help with a cheerful, “It was an accident! Don’t worry about it.”

She insisted on buying me a drink to make up for it, so all I’d accomplished with my endeavors was making things worse for myself. I somehow managed to make it through coffee with neither of them blurting out an accusatory, “You’re Sasuke Uchiha!” My dorm room offered no respite afterwards, and my mind was plagued by visions of the past for days. I thought I’d be safe from seeing them
again, what with it being such a gargantuan campus and all, but Ino wound up being in my first class on Monday. She sat right next to me, flashing me her plastic smile, and I knew there was no way I could keep up the act. After class, I took her aside and explained everything—the kidnapping, the Akatsuki, the glasses. She was more concerned with the atrocious state of my hair than my return from the dead, and though I swore her to secrecy, I knew it was only a matter of time until Sakura found out. She was sharper than I’d given her credit for in high school, and I couldn’t avoid her forever. Ino held off on revealing the truth to her far longer than I’d expected, but only because she enjoyed watching me languish in feigned extroversion in Sakura’s presence. Eventually, Sakura put the pieces together herself, and Ino confirmed her theories. Thus, the gang was reunited, or whatever.

Needless to say, their arrival sparked something of a Naruto renaissance inside me. There was so much I wanted to ask, so much I needed to know. Ino entertained my inquiries, mocking me for my unchanged awkward approach to discussing the blonde in question, but she didn’t have all the answers. Everyone thought I was dead, that Itachi had escaped and finished what he started—everyone except Naruto, who knew better. He kept to himself the summer after I left, shutting everyone out. When he came back that fall, he’d changed. New friends, new threads, new perspective. Ino didn’t see him much after that.

Once again I grew accustomed to the incessant thought of Naruto Uzumaki, like a soft hum ever-present in the background. I travelled with Itachi during vacations, and I hung out with the girls during the semester. Things had actually begun to feel normal, stable in a way that they hadn’t since before I’d abandoned everyone. Ino and Sakura got an apartment together; the drama and chaos that ensued only added to my complacency. I’d never felt more normal—when Ino would show up at my dorm room past curfew so we could binge-watch a comforting TV series while Sakura spent time with whatever boyfriend she’d taken at the time, or when I’d crash on their couch over the weekend so my roommate could host a dorm party. Somehow, I’d become a regular person, in spite of it all.

Sakura usually went home for holidays, flying all the way across the country to see her family, but Ino never did. I didn’t ask—if she wanted to tell me, she would. I started renting out Sakura’s room while she was away; the more stable my life felt, the more I craved it, and road-tripping with an ex-con wasn’t exactly the comforting routine I needed. Itachi was always supportive—he would visit me, stay for a few days at a time. Ino, he, and I would have movie nights, or we’d all go out on the town. By the time my final year had rolled around, I genuinely felt something akin to contentment, even when things got bad. The people I’d chosen to surround myself with were used to the way I casually mentioned Naruto whenever he crossed my mind, and they didn’t bother me when I needed to spend a few hours in a lull of melodramatic depression over the choices I’d made that led me away from him.

Ino and Itachi did band together to suggest I get a hobby, though; neither of them liked that I was spending all of my time doing homework for my double-major and thinking of Naruto. I had stopped reading for enjoyment since starting college, and I’d slacked off on my kickboxing a good bit. I spent that fall semester of my final year reorganizing my routine to make room for more things that brought me enjoyment; even though it brought me into contact with strangers more often, I found that it was well worth it.

Sakura was the one who suggested I start a blog. Perhaps she’d grown tired of listening to my incessant philosophizing during lunch, or maybe she thought it would give me the opportunity to connect with people who had similar interests without the bane of physical interaction. Likely she just wanted to shift everyone’s focus away from the disaster atop her head—she’d bleached her hair, and it had turned a peachy blonde. Ino thought it was cute, but she was alone on that.
My relationship with social media had been nonexistent until I took Sakura up on her recommendation; I created space for me to share my photography, pen my thoughts, and seek out inspiration. Initially I’d only followed blogs similar to my own—ones focused on aesthetics, poetry, philosophy—but even I am not immune to the allure of cat photos and memes. I blame Ino for my fall from grace; she and I got drunk together over Christmas break, and she spam-followed a proverbial fuckton of innocuous blogs. My dashboard was suddenly full of everything from short-story sci-fi to Vine compilations. One blog in particular quickly became the bane of my existence. They’d followed me back in spite of how much they seemed to dislike my posts, and the feeling was mutual. I couldn’t discern the purpose of their blog for the life of me—murder mystery and unsolved crime conspiracies mixed with food photography and tips for being a hoe. They were a disaster.

Two weeks after they’d commented on a post I’d made about Barkley’s philosophical theory regarding reality being a manifestation of our own consciousness—I speculated that, if his theory were to be true, humanity’s emphasis on connection and interaction constituted masturbation, and they replied, “Proof that this theory is bullshit: no one cares about this but you.”—our bickering had become an integral part of my routine. We rarely ever caught each other at the same time, but it was satisfying, picking them apart before class in the morning. It gave me something to look forward to, at least until the storm knocked out the wifi for a week. Not being able to access the internet for days put things into perspective for me: without a constant distraction, my thoughts would inevitably turn to Naruto. He’d become my fallback, my daydream; I spent those days imagining what it would be like to see him again.

Maybe I’d be a bartender in my thirties, self-sufficient but isolated and alone, and maybe I’d get lucky. Maybe one day he’d just walk in, laughing at the tail end of a joke, and I’d get to watch the way his presence lit the room. He’d share drinks with the people who’d stuck around, the ones who cared about him the way he deserved. Sometimes I just wanted to see him, happy and breathtaking, one more time. I never imagined us together, though. Not happily, at least. I could be a passionate encounter, I could be closure, but I couldn’t be his future. I didn’t deserve that, not even in my daydreams. I’d made my choice.

When I finally had the chance to return to my blog, I made post featuring a quote from Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. I was nothing if not consistent in my literary depression. A message icon flashed like a siren in the corner of the screen moments after I’d published the entry; “Kind of thought you died,” it read. I’d already typed up half of a response before I began to wonder why the owner of the blog I bullied on a near-daily basis would reach out to me. “Not me,” I’d written. “The wifi. Wasn’t sure I could survive another day without an update on your appalling eating habits.”

They replied in an instant—“The only thing that’s appalling is you not thinking ramen is delicious.”—and thus, enemies became friends. I learned that the blog itself was run by a boy a little older than me, but neither of us seemed inclined to share personal information. We talked about things that mattered—values, beliefs, dietary preferences—and rarely divulged anecdotes, at least at first. On occasion I might complain about annoying classmates or difficult assignments, and sometimes he’d gripe about obnoxious customers or blatant mistreatment, but often we found ourselves discussing societal expectations, ethical behavior, and current TV shows.

I made the mistake of divulging a complaint about being hit-on one day, and he changed our dynamic without hesitation, as if finding out I was in-demand shifting something in his brain. He went from casual conversation partner to notorious flirt in the span of a few minutes. All because I’d
said, “Ugh, got my hair cut today and three strangers have already asked me out.”

That was the worst part about having hobbies. Being around people meant they’d approach me with romantic or sexual intent, and nothing agitated me more.

“Yum, free dinner,” was his innocuous reply.

“If I had known it’d be this annoying, I’d’ve kept it long.”

“You’re too anal retentive for long hair. I figured you had a high-n-tight,” he commented. I rolled my eyes, unsurprised by his retort. He was perpetually mocking me for my controlling attitude.

“I was going through a bout of melancholia when I grew it out. It’s a lot shorter now.”

He was typing, but he paused momentarily. The message he finally sent said, “What do melons have to do with your hair?”

There was the distinct chance that he was joking. He was probably joking. He had to be joking. Still, I told him, “You are the dumbest person on the face of the planet.”

And then it happened. He initiated a process I have never excelled at: flirting. “I never said I wasn’t. But I did say I’m the hottest person on the planet.”

“When did you mention that?”

“Just then.” I could practically feel him smirking through the computer.

“You are so frustrating,” I said. “No amount of physical attraction could possibly outweigh the stupidity of what you just said.”

“Ha, I’m so hot even pretentious jackasses who use words like melancholia wanna hit this,” he answered.

“With their fists, maybe.”

“Fuck you,” he said.

“No thanks, I’m not a morosexual.”

“I bet you a hundred bucks you’d be into me if you saw me,” he declared.

“Is that so? Go ahead, then. Prove it.”

I hadn’t had that much fun antagonizing someone since—well, not for a long time. He attached an image file, presumably of himself, and I felt no fear in opening it. I knew I couldn’t be attracted to him; he was so ridiculous, so aggravating, so idiotic. As I stared at the picture, though, I realized that there might be one way for me to lose the bet. His face hadn’t been featured, but it was evident that he didn’t need it to prove his point. Waves of sandy blonde hair brushed against his collarbones. Even in the dim light, I could make out the shadows of his shoulders, the striations of his chest, the taunt muscles of his exposed torso. One arm angled the camera as the other tugged at the waistband of his jeans. I looked from the splattered scar on his abdomen to his shiny navel piercing, both standing out against his tawny complexion. My eyes returned to his blonde hair, and I sighed, cursing myself for being so predictable. There was one way for me to find him attractive in spite of everything—he could remind me of Naruto. That would do it. “Okay,” I typed. “You win. Do you want your money tucked into the band of your name-brand underwear?”
“Tempting. But I know firsthand that money’s tight for a college kid, so I’ve come up with some alternatives for you.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“You could send me a pic,” he suggested.

“Or…?”

“That’s it. That’s the alternative.”

“Do you know what some means?” I retorted. Still, though, I sent him a picture. He hadn’t specified, so I attached one I’d recently turned in for homework. It was of an empty field at night.

“I meant of you, jackass,” he snapped.

“Looking at an angel’s face can cause permanent blindness,” I warned. I wasn’t going to send him a selfie. I wasn’t that stupid.

“No one said you had to show me your face.”

I hesitated, biting my lip. It didn’t take a genius to know that sending a picture of myself was a bad idea; I’d spent my teenage years on the run from the law with a criminal organization. An outlaw shouldn’t send a picture of themself across the web. And yet, I did it anyway. Impulsive intuition. I sent him a photo I’d done as part of a series. It was a grayscale picture of me in Sakura’s room, standing near the window. I wasn’t clothed, and I wasn’t facing the camera. My body was relaxed, torso turned a quarter to the side, and light emphasized the breadth of my shoulders, bathing my skin in a tender warmth.

The first thing he said was about my tattoos, and I instantly felt deflated. It hardly seemed like an appropriate response to such an artsy nude. As if sensing my derision, he added, “Seeing you’d be worth going blind for. You could be a model.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re more model material than me.”

“Thanks, but I couldn’t do modelling. You’ve got the right look for it.”

Mulling over what he could possibly have meant by that, I replied with a generic, “Well, you’ve definitely got the body for it.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m a stripper. My body really isn’t the problem.”

I wasn’t sure what to say about that, so I said nothing. Ino would’ve chastised me for abandoning such a golden opportunity to garner some social skills, but I wasn’t in the business of entertaining foolish attempts at fishing. If he wanted to be lathered in compliments, he could pester someone else about it. With his looks and his career, it shouldn’t be hard.

He messaged me again a short while later, saying, “I have something important to tell you.”

“Doubtful.”

He continued, undeterred by my caustic nature. “I was out on a date tonight, and I got really sad. I wanted to be out with you instead.”

“You and half a million other idiots,” I commented.
“I’m serious. I like you.”

“No,” I wrote.

“No? No what?” he asked.

“No, you don’t. You don’t know me. I’m an idea to you, a canvas for you to plaster your desires on,” I told him.

“I like talking to you. I like your personality,” he answered. “I want to get to know you.”

“No, you found out I was conventionally attractive, and you decided that warranted attention. You like the idea of me because it requires minimal effort on your part and it allows you the freedom to impose whatever you want onto me. I have no interest in perpetuating that.”

“What world do you live in where attractive people don’t warrant attention?” he asked.

“That’s my escapist fantasy you’re describing,” I told him.

“You’re really weird.”

“Too weird to be romantically interested in.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” I confirmed.

He stopped talking to me for a while after that, but he started back up again like nothing had happened. We were back to our bizarre, antagonistic friendship, engaging in pointless disputes and mocking one another with ease. He and I developed a rhythm, sensing each other’s moods at the subtlest of indications. Our regular repartee became so engaging that I frequently found myself staying up later and later just to talk for a few more minutes, and our comprehension of one another escalated greatly in the months after.

We’d been friends for three months when he asked for my phone number. He’d given me his a while back, but I’d never used it. I didn’t own a phone. Still, I could tell something was bothering him, and it was clear that he needed to talk to someone. I stepped out into the hall and called him from one of the university payphones, wondering why I was bothering. It wasn’t as if this was the first time something had upset him. He usually felt fine disclosing things to me over the website, but he’d been refusing to budge. His poor mood wasn’t something I wanted to continue. He answered on the final ring.

“Hello?” he murmured, his voice deeper than I’d expected.

“Hey, uh… What should I call you?” I asked. His username was leafcitysunrise, and I’d never bothered to ask for his name. I didn’t want him asking for mine. “Leaf?”

“Uh, no. Sunrise. Is that weird?”

“No. What’s wrong, Sunrise?” I replied, my natural dissonance drowning out any audible discomfort. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d chose to participate in a phone call.
His breath hitched like he was hesitating, even though he’d been the one to initiate this encounter by requesting my phone number in the first place. I listened patiently as he exhaled, though the action did little to steady his trembling voice. “Um, I’m stupid, right? Like, I’m a grade-A idiot. Right?”

“What’s this about?”

“I applied for graduate school, and—” he sucked in a breath—“I just don’t know why I even bothered. It’s not like I’m smart enough to get in, and everybody here knows that I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. And the more I think about it, the more I realize that—that—that—”

“Whoa, slow down. Take a deep breath for me, okay?” I interjected. “Just because you’re not a stuck-up intellectual who wastes their life reading Dostoyevsky and quoting academic journals doesn’t mean you’re not grad school material. What’s your degree in?”

“I’m a psych major,” he sniffled.

“Of course you are.” I rolled my eyes. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“It’s just, my life… My life wasn’t great. Hasn’t been great. Like, who am I kidding? I’m just some dumb kid. I’ll never be good enough. Not for grad school, not for a real job, not for anybody.”

“You are good enough,” I told him.

“I’m not, though. And I’m not saying all this because I want you to make me feel better. I just… You remind me of someone I used to know. And I wanted to get this out, to just…” He sighed. “I’m an eternal screwup.”

“No,” I said firmly.

“No what?”

“No, I’m not friends with any screwups. Only capable, kind people who are all, coincidentally, blonde.”

“You have a soft spot for blondes,” he mumbled. “Cute.”


He let out a long breath. “I’ll be 23 in a few months. This stuff shouldn’t bother me anymore. I mean, it’s been years since…”

“Since what?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking out loud.”

Carefully, I said, “Getting over something is never quick. Give yourself time.”

He paused, and when he spoke, his voice was fragile and hoarse. “What if I never get over it? What if him leaving was it for me? That’s all it took, I’m ruined now. Ruined forever.”

“Sometimes, people leave, and it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. You’re not ruined,” I said softly. “Other people’s actions do not reflect your self-worth.”

He sighed. “You’re right, you’re right. I know you’re right. Sorry. This is always a bad day for me.”

“What, Tuesdays?”
“Ha ha, very funny.” He cleared his throat. “Thanks, um. For listening.”

“Sure, Sunshine.”

“Sunrise,” he corrected gently.

“No.”

“No?” he mused.

“No, Sunshine’s better, since talking to you brightens my day.” It felt gross to say, but it was the truth. And it seemed to be a truth he needed to hear. I expected some sort of sardonic quip, but he was just quiet for a long time.

“If I’m sunshine, you’re moonlight. Okay?” he finally said.

“Okay,” I agreed.

I’ve never been one for forging strong bonds with someone. The strongest bond I’d ever had I broke on behalf of my brother. As Sunshine and I engaged in more and more phone calls, though, I found myself in the unpleasant predicament of growing more and more attached to him. His presence in my life filled a void I’d been dutifully ignoring, and I was alarmed by how much I was starting to feel for him. I’d become somewhat enamored with the simplest of things, like the sound of his voice. Hearing him speak when he was excited had made its way into my top five favorite things. He was always so vibrant, like his words came out coated in glitter, and he always sounded so robust and sincere. It wasn’t long before I picked up a cell phone of my own with the primary intention of making our conversations easier to have. He had this strong, full-bodied laugh so boisterous and free it could lift anybody’s spirits. Something about the ease with which he laughed gave me the impression that he had a wonderful smile—not exactly perfect, but big and bright. After some careful thought and consideration, I decided I ought not keep him a secret any longer.

Mentioning him to Ino, as it turned out, had been a mistake. We’d just graduated, which had been a lot more of a challenge than any of had expected. That expensive piece of paper filled me with relief and anxiety all at once. Here I was, clinging to the only things I found familiar: this stupid city, my high school friends, a boy who reminded me of my ill-fated crush, and the comfort of higher education. With no idea what else to do, I’d decided on grad school, trapped by fear and circumstance, a slave to my environment. I’d changed a lot in my time at Valley of the end, internally and externally, though, so it wasn’t a waste. Tattoos and piercings, existential crises and personal revelations. I’d recently gotten blue highlights and an undercut, and for the first time in six years, I had the closest thing to a crush I could possibly imagine. This wasn’t the future I’d envisioned for myself, but it didn’t seem so bad.

The first half of summer break had flown by. I was staying at Ino’s, waiting on Itachi to show up. He came and went as he pleased, never staying too long in one place. Sometimes Deidara came with him, but they were so on-again off-again that I stopped asking. Ino knocked on the door to my temporary room, and I spun around in the desk chair to face her.

“Any word on Itachi’s ETA?” she asked. “I’m starving.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go somewhere with a bar, though,” she replied.
“What is it with you and trying to get my brother drunk? He’s a heavyweight. You’ll never outdrink him,” I scoffed.

“Like you’d know! You can’t handle your liquor at all,” she teased.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve been wanting to try this ramen joint over on Kage Drive.”

Ino pursed her lips, staring at me curiously. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you mention ramen without bringing up Naruto.”

“Yeah, well, my friend also likes ramen, so it’s gotten harder to have an emotional breakdown every time it’s brought up.”

“You don’t have any friends! Who is this mystery person?” Ino exclaimed. She was grinning, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

“I call him Sunshine,” I said.

“That’s so gay! I love it. Tell me more.”

I told her how my thoughts had gradually begun to shift from lamenting over Naruto to wondering about Sunshine in the past few months. I kept it simple, straightforward. I told her what I liked about him, and I told her how we met. When I said, “He runs the blog leafcitysunrise, and all we did at first was argue,” she looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“Are you kidding me?” she shouted. “You guys haven’t even told each other your names?”

It sounded like a question, but I ignored her chaotic intonation in favor of addressing what was clearly the crux of her issue. “I know it’s dangerous for me to be talking to someone online, given the precarious nature of my less-than-legal life, but…” I sighed. “He’s different. I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

“No names,” she repeated, exasperated. “I’m done. I’m so done. You two deserve each other.”

I stared at her for a moment, confused. She couldn’t possibly want me to disclose my name to someone I’d never met—the real one or the fake one, neither would be advisable online behavior. I opened my mouth to speak, but someone else beat me to it.

“Not to interrupt, but you have a guest,” Itachi said as he peeked in through the doorway.

“Thank god you’re here. I need a drink,” Ino declared, grabbing both of us by the arm and dragging us out.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to go with splitting the original first two chapters into one big chapter with three parts, so look out for motorcycle 3 next week.

Naruto’s going through his apathetic slut phase, happens to the best of us. Sasuke is a hopeless romantic who blames himself for the disastrous state of his love life but doesn’t regret his actions. Ino is kind of sort of still in love with Sakura, but that’s taken a backseat for her priorities. Sakura is better but she still has a lot of growing to do. Itachi
likes Deidara about half of the time, and Deidara routinely needs more attention than Itachi feels like giving. Everybody’s just tryna do their best, idk.

Sorry if you feel like Sasuke is a bit OOC...he's not healthier than Naruto but he had the benefit of knowing why he made the decision to leave, which gave him more of a chance to come to terms with the end of things. Naruto's over there like, "???? Wtf why did Sasuke abandon me?????” which has been internalized as reinforced worthlessness. He's gotten past a lot of his trauma, but the Sasuke thing still bothers him. Idk, did any of that come across well in this fic? I'm always trying to improve, so if you have any suggestions on how I can do a better job of portraying their respective characters in terms of mental and emotional health/well-being, I'm keen to listen!

Hope y'all liked this chapter! The inspiration for this dynamic (the blog buddies thing) came from an adorable headcanon that someone posted, and if I can find it again I'll be sure to link it. I wrote this like a year ago, though, so no promises.
I’d only drank like, three mojitos, tops, but I found myself swaying so badly at the urinal that I didn’t trust myself to piss with precision. Grumbling incoherently under my breath, I made my way into a stall and sat down in a huff. I could feel my body moving gently to and fro, like my brain had unwittingly boarded a fleshy roller coaster, and I cursed myself for having too much to drink. I knew that was why I was failing so spectacularly at fending off the battery of questions my companions were hurling at me. It had gotten late again without warning, as if the sun had decided to take off early without notifying management.

Ino had instigate the barrage, still hung up on my *whatevership* with Sunshine. Itachi wasn’t in the loop, but he was far too perceptive not to pick up on the hullabaloo. Even intoxicated, nothing slipped by him. Unfortunately, he was the one person who could really get me talking. All my life, people had called me quiet or introverted, monosyllabic even, but Itachi knew better. And thanks to him, Ino had begun to pick up a few tricks of her own. They were a formidable duo.

We didn’t get home until well past midnight, after I’d spilled way more information that I’d ever intended, and Ino was out like a light the second we arrived. Itachi and I were not so lucky. He sat on the couch, casting a glance my way as I went wandering past him to the kitchen for water. “Sasuke,” he said, getting my attention.

“You’re not supposed to call me that,” I scolded.

He offered me a small smile as I sat next to him on the couch. “I’m sorry,” he said. I knew he wasn’t talking about the slip-up.

“Don’t be,” I told him.

“You deserved better than you got,” he said.

“I made a choice. We all have to make choices.”

“One of us should’ve ended up happy.” Itachi stared straight ahead, his face unreadable. The tension hung thick in the air for a moment longer, before he broke it with another gentle smile. “I’m glad you’re moving on.”
His words sent a bolt of fear to my gut, but I tried not to let it show. “Goodnight, Itachi,” I said.

“Night, little brother.”

It took my several tosses and more than a few turns to finally fall asleep, visions of Naruto bouncing around my skull like the DVD Player logo on an old-school television set.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. I wasn’t sure what other reaction I’d been expecting, after I’d ridden all the way out to the Welcome sign and taken that picture. Of course Sunshine would instigate a meet-up. I’d been willfully foolish to not acknowledge such an outcome. He wanted to meet, and I was out of excuses. It wasn’t just the possibility of danger that left me wary, though he could easily turn out to be a villain—it was the reality of it all, pressing heavily against my shoulders. My crush on Sunshine was soft and subtle, more of a suggestion than a demand; our impending rendezvous would solidify the whispers of affection, turning them into something far more real. In the bottom of my heart, I knew I wasn’t ready for anything so substantial. I wasn’t ready to let him go, to refill his space with someone else.

Still though, I knew if I blew Sunshine off, that would be it. I wouldn’t get another chance.

My thoughts were clouded upon my return to the apartment. I sat through two movies, back to back, with Ino and Itachi, but I didn’t see either of them. I twisted and turned option after option over and over in my head, but all paths led to the same destination. If I met Sunshine, I’d be banishing Naruto. If I didn’t meet Sunshine, I’d lose him entirely. And worst of all, if I didn’t decide in time, the universe would make the choice for me. I didn’t like my odds. Needing fresh air and an excuse to be alone, I went out to the Daily Grind to snap some photos and pick up decaf coffees for everyone. I wanted to clear my head, to turn off my addled brain for a moment. It wasn’t until I arrived that I realized I didn’t have to commit to a final decision just yet, that I could always change my mind later. With that prospect in mind, I put the meeting off, figuring I could bite the proverbial bullet in a week. I should’ve known the excess time would only make things worse for me.

Things were in a state of unbridled chaos when Sunshine called. I’d spent the whole week fretting over what I would say or do when the time came; every second of agonizing thought only served to burn me out, frying what was left of my decision-making skills. I didn’t trust myself to make a good call on my life, but the universe hardly ever waits until I feel ready, I’ve noticed. It was mid-afternoon, and Ino was on the down-swing of one of her baking episodes. She got like that sometimes, when something happened that was beyond her control. Sakura had called earlier with upsetting news, from what I could gather, so the kitchen had been promptly transformed into a panic room. Sweet treats were piled high, as far as the eye could see. I was trying to talk her out of mixing a batch of French toast when my phone began to ring.

“Sushine,” I said into the phone as I exited the room, leaving Ino to her baking madness.

“Moonlight, how goes it?” He sounded just as chipper as ever. “I had a couple of questions for you, if you’ve got a minute.”

“What about?” I asked him.

He’d long since grown accustomed to my inhospitable tone, no longer paying it any mind. Without missing a beat, he said, “What do you think of the university? Classes too hard? Campus too big?”

“Hey, I might be one of those soon,” he teased.

“Somehow I doubt you could be an asshole if you tried.”

“Hmph,” he laughed. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“I suppose I could stand to know you a little better,” I said.

“No one’s stopping you,” he replied. “Let’s hang out. You free today?”

He sprung the question on me in the midst of a phone call, knowing that I’d have to answer on my feet. This was it, the moment of truth. “Sure,” I croaked. It was a split-second decision that I immediately regretted as soon as it left my mouth.

As if sensing my apprehension, he said, “Great! Meet me at that statue park downtown in an hour,” and hung up. He wasn’t going to give me the chance of backing out. Not for the first time, his tenacity reminded me of Naruto.

When I returned to the kitchen, the atmosphere felt different. Ino had halted her frenzy, and she sat at the bar with a cookie in her mouth as she scribbled in a notebook. She glanced up as I entered, grinning broadly around the dessert. “Hey! Just the person I wanted to see,” she said as she took a bite. “I’m planning Sakura’s birthday party, and I need you to attend, even though you’ll hate it.”

I stared at her evenly, disinterest written all over my face. I considered Sakura a friend, and I hadn’t been intending on avoiding whatever cockamamy scheme Ino cooked up; but, to hear her admit that I wouldn’t enjoy the event was another thing altogether.

Noticing my reservation, she said, “C’mon, I’ll owe you one.”

“What is it?”

“Can’t tell you. It’s a secret.” Ino’s smile never wavered, in spite of my palpable disdain.

In the end, it was her newfound optimism that won me over. She’d put a stop to the sweets and had begun focusing on something concrete. I’d be remiss not to support her improvement. “Fine,” I grumbled.

I went up to my temporary room to change, trying not to let my mounting anxiety afflict my fashion choices. By the time I’d settled for the maroon Henley and black jeans, though, I could barely stand looking at myself in the mirror. All I could see were my flaws—the dark circles under my eyes, the five o’clock shadow on my cheeks, the grease of my hair. It was the loud, unfettered sigh like a siren call that brought Ino to my room, standing in the doorway with a rumpled frown.

“If you’re going for a modern-day Ville Vallo, then you nailed it,” she said. “What’re you getting dolled up for?”

“Sunshine invited me to the park.” I didn’t meet her gaze, uncertain about what she might say.

Ino slid inside and waltzed right up to me, picking my brush off the dresser. “You’re gonna want to try a little harder, pal,” she said. She pulled my hair up out of my eyes, tying it back with a band on her wrist.

“I don’t have time,” I told her. “I’m supposed to be there in twenty minutes.”
“Okay, shape up your pseudo-beard and add a dash of cologne. I’ll go start the car,” she said.

“I was gonna take my bike,” I protested.

“Nah, let me drop you off. That way, if you’re late, it’s not your fault.” She winked as she left the room.

Late we were, though not by much. She pulled into a spot overlooking the park, scanning the sparse crowd through her darkened windshield. Out there somewhere was my would-be companion, purportedly wearing an orange hoodie and faded jeans. She grinned at me, asking, “You ready for this date?”

“It’s not a date,” I replied. My gaze swept over the pond and across the decorative bridge, past the statues and through the trees. I wasn’t confident I’d recognize him, even with the description he’d sent. “How will I know for sure it’s him,” I wondered to myself.

“Oh, you’ll know,” Ino retorted.

I rolled my eyes at her optimism and went back to searching

A willow tree fluttered in the wind, its long branches skimming the top of the pond. Betwixt the flowing strands of green, I could just make out a glimpse of staunch orange fabric. It looked like someone might be pacing underneath the tree, and I felt my heart hammering in my chest.

“Park closer to the pond,” I suggested.

Ino complied as I narrowed my eyes at the stranger, their orange-cloaked figure slowly becoming clearer with our increased proximity. The waves of blonde hair gave it away—that was Sunshine, I just knew it. Then, he looked up, eyes full of trepidacious hope at the sound of the approaching car, and my face fell.

“That’s…” I couldn’t breathe. It felt like my insides had been cast alight, flames devouring every part of me. “Is that…”

“Naruto? Yeah,” Ino said casually.

“He’s not,” I faltered. “He can’t be.”

“Call him and see for yourself,” she replied.

I stared blankly at the phone in my hands, forgetting for a moment how to use it. As I called, I watched Naruto Uzumaki answer his own cell as it rang.

“Hello?” greeted the voice I’d become so dependent on hearing.

The pain in my chest was overwhelming. “Hey,” I answered, sounding like I was being strangled. I cleared my throat, tried again. “Hey, Sunshine.”

Naruto’s smile widened. “What’s up, Moonlight? Everything okay?”

“No,” I choked. I was breaking apart, I could feel it. I was crumbling. Everything inside of me was in ruins. “I’m sorry. I can’t… I just can’t…”

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay, buddy. Don’t apologize,” he said, his tone meant to be soothing. I watched
the concern and disappointment mingle on his face, and I couldn’t stop the sob that ripped itself out of my throat.

“I can’t see you. I can’t meet you.” I tried to hold back the tears, but they spilled out, warm and damp on my cheeks.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. It’s okay, I promise. I’m sorry for pressuring you into it. We don’t have to hang out if you’re not comfortable with the idea,” he assured me. His kindness only made me feel worse. He was only trying to comfort his friend, but if he knew it was me… I couldn’t stomach it.

“Sorry,” I said faintly, hanging up. I watched him slump against the tree, worry furrowing his brows and displeasure tugging at the corners of his lips. “Drive, please.”

Ino was quiet as she pulled out, heading down the road with a solemn tension. “You wanna stop by the Grind? Coffee’s on me,” she said softly. She didn’t want for my answer, parking outside the store without hesitation.

I sat in the corner, facing the street as she stood in line. I’d stopped leaking tears at some point, though my face was looking worse for wear. Red, puffy eyes and a vacant stare didn’t do me any favors. The tumultuous emotions in my gut had yet to quiet down, still stirring up trouble throughout my aching chest. The feelings were indescribable, unnamable and overwhelming. It was all I could do just to let myself feel them without something to subdue the pain. Ino handed me a latte and sat beside me, her expression pensive as she looked me over. I sighed and took a sip.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked.

“Fuck if I know.” It wasn’t the nicest of responses, but Ino knew me better than to expect I’d be nice. Not at a time like this.

She frowned, worry marring her features. “I thought you’d be happy to see him.”

There was a time when seeing Naruto again would’ve made me happier than anything else in the world. I couldn’t pinpoint when exactly that time ceased to be, but it was clear now that such a scenario wasn’t the case. “He wouldn’t be happy to see me,” I said. A half-truth, a deflection.

“He’d be glad to know you’re not dead,” she told me.

“Only because he wants to kill me himself, I’m sure.”

Maybe he wanted me dead, maybe he didn’t. I’d want me dead if I were him.

Ino muttered, “You two really should’ve swapped names. You could’ve avoided all of this confusion.”

Something that had been eating at me, gnawing away at the back of my mind, finally broke through. I turned in my seat, facing her as she sipped her latte, staring out the window. The truth dawned on me, basking me in a warm anger. “You knew,” I said.

Her eyes flickered to me. She said nothing.

“This whole time, you knew,” I repeated.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. “Not the whole time,” she said.
“You followed him on purpose. Didn’t you?”

She nodded. “But I didn’t know you would talk to him.”

I scowled at her. “Why? Why would you think that was a good idea?”

“I don’t know,” she exclaimed. “I just wanted you to be happy. I wanted you to know that he was okay.”

“You could’ve told me,” I said.

“I thought you should find out on your own.” She cast a repentant look my way. “You wouldn’t’ve believed me.”

“This isn’t how you resurrect a ghost, Ino. Dead things should stay buried,” I said.

“I just wanted to help,” she mumbled.

I got up and stormed out.

Chapter End Notes

it's technically sunday in the states, right? so that's the end of the week, innit? woohoo! sorry this chapter is kind of short. i cut out a whole scene that i felt was irrelevant to the plot, and since i'd already split it into two chapters i didn't have as much to work with as i'd been expecting.

next chapter in a week! fingers crossed, at least.
i've got a lot of fleeing the country stuff to do this week, so i'll do my best to get the next chapter typed and posted asap.
thanks so much for reading!
AFTER a revelation of sorts

Chapter Summary

Sasuke’s a whiny loser and Naruto is a golden beam of sunshine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER a revelation of sorts

I stared at the ceiling in Sakura’s bedroom, trying to will my body into nonexistence. The cause of my despair sat innocently on my chest, looking for all the world like an average letter. My arms lay limply at my sides, my legs hanging off the side of the bed uselessly. Part of me wanted to ball the paper up and chunk it over my shoulder, pretend it didn’t matter to me. Another part of me wanted to tape the letter to a punching bag and work off all my frustration by pummeling it into an unrecognizable pulp. The majority of me, though, just wanted to keep laying there in terror, uncertain and disheartened.

Itachi returned with mugs of tea, hair down and pajamas on. I shouldn’t have bothered him so late at night, barging into the living room as he slept on the couch. I felt guilty watching him wake up, bleary-eyed but resigned to his fate. He’d never been anything but supportive, and yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that my mediocre drama wasn’t worth his time. I sighed and sat up, letting the letter slide to my lap as I reached for the extended tea. “Alright,” Itachi said kindly. “Tell me what’s gotten you so worked up.”

I picked up the letter, handing it to him in silence. His eyes narrowed as he skimmed the page, but they widened in surprise and recognition about half-way down. He looked up at me, concern etched into his features. I sighed, saying, “Yeah, right? Can you believe this? It’s like the universe is actively plotting against me.”

Itachi sighed too, tucking his hair behind his ears. “Naruto Uzumaki, your new roommate… What a small world we live in.” He smiled softly, his eyes sparkling in the dim lamplight. “He isn’t going to be pleased when he finds out it’s you.”

“Daisuke Nakisaka? No, no, that’s a typo. I’m actually the ex you thought died years ago,” I joked dryly.

“Well, we don’t know anything for sure, little brother. He could still have feelings for you.” His tone was reassuring, but he knew as well I did how unlikely such a scenario was. He frowned as I glared at him, sipping tea nonchalantly and speaking in that infernal matter-of-fact tone of his. “It is possible that he doesn’t hate you, you know.”

I shook my head dismissively. “Ino and Sakura both said that he has no idea what happened,” I retorted, crushing the little sprigs of hope that tried to bloom through the cracks of my buried feelings. “There’s no way he doesn’t hate me.”
“I don’t suppose that would have made it any easier for him,” he said, recognizing that no amount of discussion on his part would make me feel any better about what happened. “Maybe being roommates will be a good thing for you, then,” he added suddenly. “You can finally tell him everything.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “If Ino and Sakura are any indication, I should not be roommates with the person I’m in love with,” I replied, my tone snarkier than I intended. “Those guys are always at each others’ throats.”

“Oh, that?” he said with a chuckle. “It’s all the pent-up resentment, no big deal.” He winked at me, and I knew he was speaking from his own experience. He and Deidara weren’t exactly a happy couple either; all that time on the lam together wasn’t nearly as romantic as TV shows liked to imply. “So, things might be a little hard with Naruto at first.”

Ino took that moment to knock, the ajar door doing nothing to dampen the murmurs of our conversation. She looked between us quickly, then down at the floor. “I heard you talking about me,” she mumbled.

I stared at her, still uneasy in her presence.

Itachi offered her a faint smile. “We didn’t mean to wake you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she replied, steadfast. “It’s not your fault. I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“It would seem that the universe has your same ulterior motives, Ino,” he told her.

“What do you mean?” She stepped inside, casting a hesitant glance my way before leaning back against the dresser.

I wasn’t angry with her anymore, but I’d be lying if I said things weren’t strained.

“His roommate happens to be Mr. Uzumaki.” Itachi raised his eyebrows in subtle bemusement, and Ino’s jaw dropped.

“No way,” she gasped. “You and Naruto are going to be living together?”

I groaned. “Seems like it.”

“We were discussing the problems of living with someone you have feelings for,” Itachi explained. “Thus, your name came up.”

Ino nodded, a half-hearted smile gracing her lips. “Makes sense. I wouldn’t want to be in my position either. Being in love with someone who doesn’t love you back is hard enough on its own. Living with that person? Nightmare.”

“You’re not making me feel any better about this,” I told her.

Ino tested out a grin on me. “Don’t worry, as your best friend, I’ll be there to mitigate the damage, like you do for me.”

“I thought Sakura was your best friend,” I retorted. Neither of us were sure if I was jesting in good humor or being snarky.

“Don’t make me laugh,” she griped. “She’s treated me differently ever since I told her how I felt, and I know you can tell. It’s not like I thought she’d love me back, you know. I just didn’t
“expect… this.” She shrugged, sighing complacently.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “She treats you like an unwanted child.”

Ino laughed, but the sound was empty and her eyes were sad. “That’s a surprisingly accurate analogy. All stern reprimands and a constant air of annoyance, as if my very existence is an inconvenience for her.” She smiled; a dismal sort of smile that seemed to fit naturally on her face, as if it had been there so often it made a home out of her mouth.

“Far be it from me to step beyond the bounds of the older-brother figure by offering unsolicited advice, but perhaps it would be best for both you and Sakura if you paused your friendship for the time being, in an effort to give her the space she needs to process things.” Itachi settled his gaze on Ino, who faltered under the weight.

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said.

Ino stared at me a moment, her eyes like ice. She relaxed a bit, tension leaking from her muscles, and said, “Maybe you’re right, Itachi. Not until after her birthday party, though. I’m planning something huge. Can’t help it, being in love with her and all.”

“You’re still seeing Karin, though, aren’t you?” I asked. “Does she have a problem with your, uh, grand gestures?”

“Karin and I aren’t serious,” Ino said, apparently oblivious to the way that Karin looked at her. “We just hang out and hook up. She doesn’t even know who Sakura is since she went back home for the summer.”

“You and your hookups,” I commented, shaking my head.

“It’s actually pronounced coping mechanisms, jerk,” she joked, taking another sip of tea with a grin on her face.

“Yeah, and how’s that working for you? You over Sakura yet?” I shot back.

“No, but at least I don’t wallow in my feelings, emo kid. What year is it again? How old are you now?” She laughed, eyes crinkling in the corners. “You definitely should have grown out of that already.”

“There’s nothing wrong with staying true to yourself,” I retorted.

“Yeah, well, you’re lucky you’re so incredibly good-looking,” Ino replied with a sharp grin. “Or else, you’d be painfully ostracized from society.”

“Mm, you say that,” I argued, “but I think emo is making a comeback. In a few years, it’ll be all the rage again.”

“Keep dreaming,” she jeered.

Things were still weird between us, but I was started to feel like the tension wouldn’t last forever. She stayed up with Itachi and I as we spent the rest of the night talking and watching feel-good movies in the background. Ino ended up mentioning a few things that refused to leave me alone as the night dragged on. After she went back to bed and Itachi fell asleep, I snuck back into the living room with my laptop. I was going to get to the bottom of something, and these thoughts would stop bothering me.
Finding the very beginning of Naruto’s blog was starting to feel impossible. It was as if the thing had existed since the beginning of the universe. *Leafcitysunrise* was a deity, having always existed, outside of time and space. I was thankful that his blog was paginated, as opposed to the endless scroll alternative. It was bit of a guessing game, but after 30 minutes of pure patience, I finally found the beginning. I wanted to know about his life during the time we were apart; I wanted to know for sure that he hated me, that there wasn’t some slim chance of an alternative.

His blog started with personal post after personal post; barely any memes or food pictures. The earliest one was dated for the end of June, four years ago. It was a picture of a gas station—one I recognized. Shisui’s place of employment. The text under the photo said simply, “The search begins.” I felt a pang in my heart as I scoured the next few posts. He had been looking for me.

Frowning and feeling sentimental, I rambled off a stupid message to him at four in the morning, even though I’d told myself to stop talking to him. I read more posts as I waited for him to reply, eagerly following his misadventure despite knowing that it wouldn’t end well. He would intersperse quotes, songs, and somber aesthetic images between his original posts, until rather abruptly, the original posts just stopped. They were instantly replaced by topical jokes, dated memes, clips from TV shows, and all manner of impersonal recycled media. The messenger popped up, letting me know he’d replied. I decided to check out his current message before searching for any further indications of feeling from his blog.

“It’s four o’clock in the morning and your asking me bout my fav people from high school? Are you feeling ok, Moonlight?” he said, adding an emoji with a suspicious expression on its face. I snorted, staring at the glowing screen with a sinking sadness in the pit of my stomach.

“It’s nothing,” I replied, newly immune to his grammatical infractions. “Just ignore me.”

“I had some friends in high school that I really liked, and others that I just spent time with,” he explained, as vague as always. “I don’t really like to think about my high school years, though.” My chest ached, and I found myself incapable of responding. He continued, “There was this one time, though, that my best friends and I all went out for ramen. It was right after I got my tongue pierced the first time, and they made me order all of the food, lisping like an idiot. Good times.”

“That sounds fun.” I felt myself smiling, in spite of the aching.

“Do you have any good high school memories?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied before I could stop myself. “One time, I called this boy that I had a crush on, and he *Fight Club*’d me.”

“He *Fight Club*’d you?” Naruto asked curiously. I shook my head, amused.

“You’ve seen *Fight Club*?” I asked, though I knew he had. “You know that scene where the narrator calls Tyler Durden from a payphone after his apartment blows up? That was how he answered the phone.”

“Haha,” he replied, adding, “Technically, he wouldn’t be answering the phone, then.”

“That’s exactly what I told him,” I wrote.

“You know, something kind of similar happened to me, too,” he said suddenly. “Except I *Fight Club*’d a friend of mine who had called me.”

“Why would you do that to your poor friend?” I wrote, smiling to myself.
“Well, I wasn’t too self-aware at the time, but it turned out that I had a huge crush on him. I had no idea back then, though, and I was so nervous about him calling that I just stared at the phone while it rang.” My heart pounded in my chest, and I chewed my lip, waiting for him to continue. “I didn’t want him to think I was scared. I wanted him to think I was cool. And then, little old 15-year-old me had the bright idea to mimic that scene from _Fight Club_. So embarrassing.”

“Haha, what a coincidence,” I commented, reliving that memory with this new information on the forefront of my mind.

“Yeah,” he said. “Guess you’ve got a type, huh?”

“You mean blondes who think _Fight Club_ is a good movie?” I replied. “Way to call me out.”

“Oh, was he blonde too? Wow, guess we know how you should fill out the Looking For section of your dating profile,” he joked. “Seeking a blonde man with 8-pack whose favorite movie is _Fight Club_. The more you look like Brad Pitt, the better.”

“Hey, my high school crush didn’t have an eight-pack,” I whined. “It was more like…a four-pack?”

“Damn, was he a football player? Most high schoolers aren’t that jacked,” he said.

“He was a quarterback, actually,” I answered. “I know, I know—_trés typique_.”

“Wow, this is getting really weird!” he wrote. “I was a quarterback in high school, and I had a crush on a weird emo kid like you. Haha, believe it or not, that’s why I started following you in the first place—you reminded me of him. Guess I’ve got a type too.”

“Seeking a scrawny emo dude with bangs instead of eyes. The more pretentious you sound, the better,” I replied.

All of this talk of high school reminded me what I was doing in the first place, though, and I told him rather abruptly that I needed to go. I wanted to know if there was anything else, any chance. As much fun as it was to relive the past in a new light, what was aching to be known wasn’t stuff he would be likely to tell me. So, I resumed my investigation of his blog’s beginnings, searching anew for the hint of an answer.

I found it shortly thereafter, and my eyes prickled when I saw the date. The last post was a simple text post from August, years ago. He’d made it on my birthday. I read it, prepared for the aching in my chest to return tenfold. “Finding you would’ve been the perfect present. I promised you we’d still be friends today. You looked so happy when I said that. But, after this… If you’re reading this from wherever you are, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t find you, and I’m sorry I wasn’t enough to keep you here. I hope you’re happy.”

I felt my heart burst, exploding a thick and heavy sadness all over my insides. Everything hurt. Neither Sakura nor Ino wanted me to smoke in the apartment, so I slid open the door and stepped onto the balcony, tapping a cigarette out of the carton. I lit one up and stared into the deep blue of the night sky, my mind filling with images of Naruto smiling, laughing, stuffing his face with ramen. Those happy eyes, so bright and vivid in my memory. He was always so full of light. I missed him, and I missed Gaara. I missed Dealing with the Deceased, and Shizune, and Tsunade, and mint ice cream. More than any of that, though, I missed who I had been. Just a boy with a crush, a sad teenager with amazing friends, a simple kid trying his best.
Looking at myself now, blue bangs and thick-rimmed glasses reflected in the glimmer of the window panes near the door, all I saw was a fractured disappointment. I was an idiot who took pictures of things and spouted off pretentious bullshit; no substance. If it weren’t for Itachi, Ino, and Sakura, I would be completely devoid of life, an empty shell resembling the person I used to be. I stared into my own soulless eyes, cigarette dangling precariously from my lips. I snatched it out of my mouth and whispered, “Something has to change. I want to feel like me again.”

I grabbed my phone and the piece of paper off the bedside table, staring at Naruto’s neatly scribbled contact information in horror. The boy had even drawn a little doodle of a fox on the torn page. It was adorable. I frowned.

On Friday, Naruto had approached me in the hallway. He was alone, and there was nothing I could do to reasonably avoid the boy. I stood, nervous and impatient. Naruto said to me, “Hey, I really need to talk to you. Do you have time after 7th period?” I had shaken my head, not trusting myself to respond. “Okay, well, I’m going to give you my number. Call me.” At the end of the day, Naruto handed over that piece of paper with a smile, and told me he’d be waiting to hear from me.

It was now Sunday night. If Naruto really had been waiting to hear from me, he must be feeling pretty disappointed. Tsunade and Shizune had gone out to eat for the night, leaving me with pizza money that I simply pocketed for my future tattoo savings fund. I was alone in the apartment, and I could easily chat for hours without disturbing anyone. I knew that things would only get worse if I kept putting off this confrontation, too. I sighed, trying to steady my breathing and slow down my heart rate. Nervous, I punched in the numbers and squeezed my eyes shut tight.

It rang… rang… rang… until, click: “You have reached the voicemail box of…”

I hung up and exhaled in relief and disappointment. The butterflies in my stomach began to disperse, and I could feel myself relaxing. Oh well, I had done my part. I felt a little bummed that I wouldn’t be talking to Naruto—I actually kind of missed him—but I would just see him tomorrow. Problem solved.

Except for the part where my phone was ringing.

I answered on instinct, ignoring the softball-sized lump in my throat. “Hello?” I crackled.

“Who’s this?” The voice sounded much gruffer than I’d expected, and I felt confused. Maybe I’d dialed the wrong number.

“Uh, Naruto?” I asked for clarification.

“Yeah, who’s this?” the voice asked again, sounding irritated.

“It’s me…” I fumbled, feeling awkward. “You asked me to call this weekend, remember? So, I’m calling.”

“Oh, yeah,” the voice confirmed.

“I called just a second ago,” I explained.

“I star-sixty-nine’d you. I never pick up my phone. What’s up?” Naruto explained, suppressing a
“Oh. My. God,” I groaned pointedly. “You’re Fight Club-ing me.” The nerves left me, replaced by frustration. “What a fucking loser. Were you practicing that this whole weekend, looking in the mirror to make sure you looked as cool as you thought you sounded?”

“Please,” Naruto sassed. “You wish you answered the phone as cool as me.”

“First off, you didn’t answer the phone. You called me. Secondly, Fight Club is an ancient relic, Naruto. It’s not cool anymore,” I replied. “Not to mention how riddled it is with problematic overtones.”

“What? No way,” the blonde retorted. “Fight Club is so cool.”

The two of us began an intense discussion about the various merits and issues of one of the biggest cult classics in cinematic history. We talked for hours, switching gears to talk about current politics and our respective weekends, as well as agreeing to meet before school again tomorrow. As the conversation drew to a close, Naruto paused, giving me the opportunity to broach the topic I had been avoiding all night long.

“Naruto,” I croaked, trying to muster up enough courage to continue. I wasn't sure I could handle it if Naruto told me that he very explicitly didn’t have feelings for me. “About the other day…”

“No, Naruto, I…” Naruto began, his voice wavering. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for…”

“Yeah,” Naruto replied softly. “I’m cool.”

“Good,” I answered. “See you tomorrow?”

“Bright and early,” the blonde agreed. “Bye, Sasuke!”

“Bye,” I replied before hanging up. I found myself sitting in the dark with a smile on my face, the glow of my cell phone illuminating my expression. I clambered under the covers and laid down, facing the ceiling with the smile still in place. I fell asleep thinking about seeing Naruto in the morning, and awoke several hours later to the blaring wail of my alarm clock.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, you caught me! I love writing dialogue. Fuck. It's just fun. So the Fight Club phone call scene was a part of a larger prompt that didn't make the cut for the BEFORE section. Basically, Naruto and Sasuke are hanging out before school one morning and they get into an argument that leads to them wrestling. Assuming that you've all read fanfiction before, I'm sure you can guess what happened. The boys are super awkward about it, especially because it happens pretty early on in their dynamic. So that's what they're trying to apologize for on the phone.

The only reason I thought I should include the Fight Club call scene for y'all is because I think it's funny. I'm probably the only one who thinks it's funny, but that's okay too. I know that the two of them being roommates is so incredibly cliche that at least one of
y'all reading this groaned, but at the same time, I'm so ready to write some happy fluffy gay sns college roomies stuff. Like just let me have this. Don't hate. Hope y'all enjoyed it! I'll have the next chapter up for ya in about a week. It's longer and it's sadder! Get ready for some fuckin' angst, y'all. Whoops.
Chapter Summary

The beautiful sunshine boy gets some catharsis, after giving everyone a boner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto arrived at work a little more disgruntled than usual. It had only been a week since Moonlight bailed on him, but the eccentric loner hadn’t talked to him much since. Naruto was filled with restless doubt, wondering what could’ve caused Moonlight to react so poorly to their prospective meeting. On the surface, he knew it had nothing to do with him. It was clearly a personal problem for the man he’d gotten so close to. No matter how much he told himself that, though, it was hard to shake the feeling that he was to blame. There’d been a few nights already where he’d laid awake, staring at the ceiling and fretting over what he’d managed to do wrong this time. It seemed like fucking up was a labyrinth he’d never escape—every time he thought he was out, he was free, he’d finally started doing things right, the charade would crumble and he’d find himself still stuck inside the walls of the maze. Lately, all Moonlight did was ask invasive questions and spend days in between responses. Things just got weird between them, and today was no different.

Moonlight messaged him in the late afternoon, and though Naruto had told himself not to reply, self-control had never been his strong suit. He told Naruto that he wanted to know what made him decide to go to grad school so far from home, as if Naruto hadn’t been slaving away at the old gin joint for years saving up to make his escape. He’d faltered, rereading the message a few times and thinking to himself, I just don’t know how to talk to him anymore. Moonlight didn’t reply after Naruto referenced all the effort he had put in thus far, so the blonde wound up going in to work in a crappy mood, which is generally not how anyone wants to start a shift as a stripper. He’d arrived early and started drinking when the boss showed up beside him, looking like he had something to say.

“Hey, Naruto, buddy,” the man greeted as he walked up. “I’ve got some good news for ya. You’re booked for the VIP room this whole evening.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised. Naruto knew he was good at what he did, but he’d only started working at this establishment a week or so ago. He’d hadn’t had the time to forge a connection with any customers, and he didn’t know anyone who’d be willing to pay for a whole night of private dances for a random male stripper.

“Yeah. A girl came in yesterday, paid upfront. She said it was for a party,” he explained.

“The VIP room isn’t big enough for a party, though,” Naruto interjected, downing the last of his cocktail with a satisfying swig.

“Well, she said it’s just three people. Some party, huh?” the boss replied. “I know we
usually just have one guest in the room, but I figured it’d be alright since she paid for all three of
them.” He grinned, waggling his eyebrows at Naruto as he handed over a large wad of cash.

“All three of them? She paid $3000 for them to have a private session with me all night?”

Naruto asked incredulously. “What, do I know her or something?”

“Well, she didn’t ask for you by name, kiddo,” he said. “She wanted the most entertaining
and fun stripper here, and I’ll be damned if that ain’t you.”

Naruto gaped in surprise. He’d expect that sort of comment from his old manager, but to
have made such a strong impression on this boss in the short time he’d been working was more than
a little shocking. The other male performer must not have a lot going for him, Naruto figured. They
had yet to meet, but the more he heard, the more it seemed like the dancer was a token male staff
member for an otherwise female-dominated club.

“Shit, thanks,” he said. “When do they come in?”

“It looks like they just arrived, actually,” he replied, peering over the rails of the second
story bar area precariously. With the open, spacious feel of the club, it wasn’t the least bit surprising
for anyone that it used to be a warehouse. “Y’see ‘em?”

He pointed to a tall, leaderly blonde woman with her hair in a high ponytail. She was arm-
in-arm with a curvy girl who had been blindfolded, and her choppy, short peach-pink hair was just
long enough to have gotten tangled in the knot. They were dressed to the nines, all high-heels and
makeup. The pair looked familiar, but Naruto didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

“Okay,” he said. “Where’s the third?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, a man came into view. In gray joggers and a Panic!
At the Disco band t-shirt, he was strikingly less enthusiastically dressed than his counterparts. Most
of his hair was short and wild, jet black, but he had long bands that framed his face in layers. The
cool blue of the bangs complimented his pale skin. From that distance, Naruto could see that he had
vaguely sharp features, though nothing was truly discernable. He had the arrogant strut of someone
who knew he was handsome, though, and his arms were decorated with tattoos. If he narrowed his
eyes, Naruto could just make out a series of shiny silver nape piercings under the freshly buzzed
hairline. With a regular Jacob’s Ladder on the back of the boy’s neck, Naruto couldn’t help but
wonder if he had anything else pierced.

“Psh, what’s he supposed to be, the boyfriend?” Naruto joked, making the boss giggle.
“I’m gonna have some fun with him.”

Naruto walked off to the dressing rooms to get ready, heart already racing. Tall blonde
woman, clinging to a girl with pink hair? Followed by a tall emo dude? It couldn’t be... could it? He
told himself to calm down, that no matter what he had to be a professional. That $3000 would be
huge for his savings. School was more important. Still, he could feel himself panicking. Naruto
stared in the mirror of the dressing room, taking in his disheveled appearance with some dismay.
Frowning, he realized he looked like an alcoholic who hadn’t slept in days. The scruffy facial hair
was atrocious, and his long golden locks hadn’t been washed in three days. Even his abs were
looking a little less showy than normal, thanks to last night’s Taco Bell dinner. If he was even
slightly worried that might be who he thought he could be out there, he wasn’t about to face him like
this.

Without giving it another thought, Naruto grabbed the scissors from the counter and
hacked away at his hair until it was just bright blonde roots. Going from twenty inches to three
inches was a bit dramatic of a change, but he didn’t slow down to process. He immediately grabbed the razor by the sink and went to work shaving the mess off of his face, avoiding his scars with a practiced hand. Naruto went ahead and stripped naked, shaving the rest of his body as quickly as possible. There was a knock at the door, and the attendant shouted for him to be ready in 15. He still needed to warmup and pick the set list, not to mention prep the room for outfit changes. This was a nightmare.

Though Naruto was nervous, standing on the other side of the thick black curtain that separated the changing room from the VIP room, he felt a certain satisfactory arrogance creeping through him. On the other side of that curtain, he would become someone else—a strong, attractive twenty-something with abs of steel and a penchant for dance-based entertainment. These people, whoever they might be, had no idea what was coming to them. If there’s one thing Naruto knew, it was how to put on a show. And so, when the trio was ushered through the door into the dark velvet-covered room and seated in a curved, plush booth on one side of a large table that housed a pole in its middle, a grin broke out on Naruto's face. He could hear them, soft through the curtain. They spoke to each other in hushed whispers—an “ow” when the blindfold came off, pulling on the one girl’s hair—and Naruto waited patiently, listening for the sheer curtain to drop in a circle and envelop the table. When it did, the lights went out, and he snuck into the room, quietly getting into position atop the table. He heard them shushing each other, but everyone fell silent as the bright light at the top of the pole lit up, casting his shadow onto the sheer curtain.

Naughty Girl by Beyoncé began blasting through the speakers in the walls, and Naruto’s routine officially started. He dragged his hand seductively down his torso until he could reach the pole, at which point he yanked himself up and spun around, popping out his posterior as he stood up straight. He heard the trio gasp, and the curtain parted to reveal his casually sexy ensemble, perfectly oriented to the set. Tight jeans, a black V-neck, and a blue flannel he’d kept since high school comprised the first layer. If it really was Sasuke, he’d know that was his flannel, but Naruto didn’t stop to look. As the song progressed, he shouldered down the blue shirt and showed off the long-sleeved fishnet bodysuit underneath the v-neck. It made his muscles look huge, and he tried to use it in every set. As Beyoncé came to an end, Naruto finally made eye contact with the trio. His heart stopped as he stared into the surprised face of one Sasuke Uchiha. And then, the curtain closed for the next song.

Naughty Girl by Beyoncé began blasting through the speakers in the walls, and Naruto’s routine officially started. He dragged his hand seductively down his torso until he could reach the pole, at which point he yanked himself up and spun around, popping out his posterior as he stood up straight. He heard the trio gasp, and the curtain parted to reveal his casually sexy ensemble, perfectly oriented to the set. Tight jeans, a black V-neck, and a blue flannel he’d kept since high school comprised the first layer. If it really was Sasuke, he’d know that was his flannel, but Naruto didn’t stop to look. As the song progressed, he shouldered down the blue shirt and showed off the long-sleeved fishnet bodysuit underneath the v-neck. It made his muscles look huge, and he tried to use it in every set. As Beyoncé came to an end, Naruto finally made eye contact with the trio. His heart stopped as he stared into the surprised face of one Sasuke Uchiha. And then, the curtain closed for the next song.

Naruto quickly grabbed the top hat he’d placed behind the curtain as Britney Spears’ Circus started up. This time, he climbed up the pole as the curtain slowly descended. He reveled in the gasps from the audience as he gripped the pole with his thighs, bending backwards until he was hanging upside down, staring at them as the curtain glided back up. Naruto dropped down to the table and began to ease off his jeans, silhouetted by the curtain. The curtain parted just as he got them off, showcasing the faux-leather shorts that had always been quite the crowd-pleaser. They certainly did not let him down tonight, as one of the girls let out an “ow ow” and whistled as Naruto finished up the song.

The curtain closed, and he got in place, laying on the table with his legs wrapped around the pole and his face pointed toward his audience. As Victorious by Panic! At the Disco began, a bucket of room temperature water tipped over and splashed him. Naruto shot up in time with the music, making sure everyone got a good look at the wet t-shirt clinging to his body before he tugged it off. He wriggled and writhed, grabbing the pole and standing at an angle, grinding his hips in a circular motion. Naruto stood before them in his fishnet top and faux-leather boy shorts, shaking his ass. They were all transfixed.

This time the curtain didn’t close as the next song began. Instead, Naruto walked slowly to the edge of the table, hopping off to sit in Ino’s lap. He faced the stage, using the position to roll his ass in her face in time with the music. He rubbed his body against hers, softly singing along to
Mariah Carey’s “Touch My Body” until the chorus, at which point he stood and gyrated, dragging his hands up and down his body. Then, Naruto plopped into Sakura’s lap, grinding rhythmically. As the chorus approached, he grabbed one of Ino’s hands and put in on his bare thigh, eliciting a squeal. Then he reached over without looking and grabbed Sasuke’s hand, gently pressing it to his chest and lightly dragging it down his abs. Naruto glanced over, eating up the startled expression on the man’s face, and he winked with a broad grin before hopping over into Sasuke’s lap. Instead of sitting on him the way he had the other two, Naruto faced him and wrapped his legs around his waist, grinding into him. To his surprise, not only did Naruto place both of Sasuke’s hands on his sides, but he also stared seductively into his eyes, tucking his bangs behind his ears as the song came to an end.

Naruto stood up, prepared to take his designated ten minute break in between sets, when he heard Sasuke say, “I’m sorry, Ino. I can’t do this.” He got up and walked out, purposefully avoiding Naruto’s gaze. Naruto looked at Ino and said, “Sorry, no refunds,” as he went back into the changing room to eavesdrop. He felt wildly powerful—who doesn’t dream about vindictively getting back at an ex with a strip-tease—as he chugged a bottle of water. While he changed back into his casual wear, assuming that the party was over, he listened to the girls chat with each other.

“Did you know?” one of them demanded, evidently upset.

“No, of course not! You think I would have booked him if I knew?” the other one exclaimed.

“Kind of, yeah,” the first retorted. “I mean, you’re always on him about moving on. I wish you would just leave him alone.”

“You’re just saying that because you’ve still got the hots for him, even though you know he doesn’t care about you like that! I might want him to move on, but I would never try to hurt him. He’s my best friend,” the girl said defensively.

“I thought I was your best friend?” the other girl said, confused.

“Sakura, we haven’t been best friends in years,” Ino answered. “I was in love with you, and you rejected me, and you haven’t treated me the same since. So don’t act like—”

Naruto poked his head out of the large curtain and startled them, saying, “So, y’all just gonna sit here and fight while he’s outside having a panic attack?”

The girls glanced at each other then back at him. “Maybe,” they replied in unison. “If you care so much, why don’t you go check on him?” Ino added.

“Alright,” Naruto said musically. “But don’t get mad at me if that makes it worse.”

Naruto grabbed Sasuke’s flannel from the floor and headed outside. He spotted him across the street, sitting on the curb under a streetlight. He was smoking, and his face was devoid of emotion. Shrugging away the nerves and letting the anger seep through him, Naruto walked up and sat down beside the man everyone had thought was dead. He handed him the crumpled flannel and said, “This is yours, by the way.” He nodded, taking the shirt from the blonde slowly as he looked up at his face. Naruto smiled at him, though inside he was fuming.

“You’re mad,” he said blankly.

“You bet,” Naruto replied sweetly, fists clenched at his sides. “What have you been up to for the past, oh, I don’t know, six years, three months, and two days, Sasuke?”

“Don’t call me that,” he said softly, his eyes wide. “Please.”
“What should I call you, then? Teme?” Naruto snapped. “Fine, teme. What the hell? Where did you go?” Naruto felt his eyes prickle with impending tears, and he bit his lip to fend them off.

“Here,” he muttered. “I’ve been here.”

Naruto couldn’t believe his ears. “Here?” he shouted. “You’ve been here?”

Sasuke nodded, face solemn. “I moved around a lot at first, but I went to undergrad here.”

“What?” he asked, disbelief on his face. “You’ve just been living a normal life here, all this time?”

Sasuke stared at Naruto, his lower lip trembling slightly. “Yes, Naruto.”

“No!” he yelled, shaking from anger. “No, you don’t get to say my name.”

“Sorry,” he murmured, “Usuratonkachi.”

“Listen,” Naruto spat. “I don’t care anymore, okay? I don’t care why you left me alone, and I don’t care what you’ve been up to! Fuck you! If I ever see you again, we’re strangers. I don’t know you, and you damn sure don’t know me.” Naruto stood up and stormed off, tears falling down his face.

He patted his pocket where the 3k sat, and he stalked off down the street, ambling back to his hotel room, thoroughly stressed and disoriented. He sobbed as he walked, hoping to reach a catharsis soon. His heart ached, his eyes burned. Every time he calmed down enough to stop crying, the pain would surge up again, bringing him to tears once more.

Still distraught after a quick shower, he reached out to the one person who had been his comfort since Gaara left to travel the world with his band.

“Hey, Moonlight, I’m sure you’re busy, and I know it’s been a while since we spoke on the phone last, but I really need to talk to someone right now.” Naruto stared at the message on his screen pitifully, hoping against all hope for a positive response.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Haha,” he laughed in disbelief, “what the fuck does that even mean?” He wiped the sleeves of his favorite hoodie against his damp cheeks. “How did I even get here, begging strangers on the internet to help me feel better?” He shook his head and looked around the room for a deus ex machina. When he couldn’t find one, he simply typed, “Please.”

A few minutes later, his phone began to ring. Clearing his throat and wiping his eyes again, Naruto hesitantly picked up. “Hey,” he choked out.

“Hey,” Moonlight answered, voice tense. Clearly, Naruto wasn’t the only one having a bad day.

“Thank you, for, uh, talking to me,” he stammered. “I know things have been weird with us lately, and I just really appreciate it.”

“Yeah,” he replied quietly. “So, what can I help you with?”

“Damn, Moonlight, you don’t have to sound like a retail worker,” Naruto scoffed. “We’re
friends.”

“We’re not,” he replied shortly. “We’re two people who talk to each other on the internet.”

Naruto paused, uncomfortable with where the conversation was currently headed. He sucked it up, though, and decided that the relationship he had with Moonlight was worth fighting for.

“Okay… I guess we’re gonna do this first, then,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Look, I don’t know what happened to you, Moonlight. I liked you. I thought we were friends. I wanted to meet you, to try to be something more with you. I thought you wanted the same thing, but that didn’t happen. Even so, I still wanted you to be a part of my life. So, please, just tell me what I did wrong.”

“I’m… not a good person,” Moonlight sighed. “You wouldn’t want to even be acquaintances if you met me.” He sounded sad, angry, hurt. “I liked you too, a lot. I’m sorry. For everything.” It sounded like he was crying, and hearing those soft, muffled noises brought a fresh batch of tears to Naruto’s eyes.

“Can we be friends again?” Naruto asked, his voice cracking.

“I’d like that,” he answered. “You can talk to me about what’s bothering you, if you’d like.”

“Okay,” he said, sighing. “You’re not going to believe what happened to me today.”

Naruto told him the whole story, starting with how he’d met Sasuke Uchiha in the 10th grade and proceeded to spend the year falling in love with him. He told Moonlight that Sasuke was the only person he’d ever cared for romantically, that he’d been bouncing from hookup to hookup ever since he’d left, never to be seen again. Naruto told him about his shaky relationship with Hinata, finally admitting aloud the real reasons he’d allowed it to persist. No matter what Naruto did, nothing ever brought him further away from the pain and intensity of the heartbreak he’d suffered at the hands of Sasuke Uchiha, and now he was doomed to inflict that pain on others. Moonlight listened to him cry as he railed about how Sasuke had just shown up out of nowhere today, still as gorgeous and infuriating as ever.

“Do you… Are you still in love with him?” Moonlight asked quietly, his voice solemn but not bitter.

Naruto sniffed, hesitant to speak his answer aloud. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his heartbeat and clear the clouds from his mind.

“I have this playlist,” he began, searching for a way to explain how he felt. “It’s only got eight songs: Going to Georgia by the Mountain Goats, Despite What You’ve Been Told by Two Gallants, Take It Easy by Bright Eyes, Eight Letters by Paul Baribeau, What’s Up by 4 Non Blondes, 9/10 by Jeff Rosenstock, Breathless on DVD by Anarctigo Vespucci, and Love You So Bad by Ezra Furman. Sometimes, I’d go out driving with that playlist on repeat until I hit the ocean. I’d park my car and walk along the shore. I’d talk to him sometimes, as if he fucking died,” Naruto said, blinking back tears. “I don’t think I’ll ever not be in love with him.”

“What if…?” he trailed off for a moment. “What if you found out that he felt the same way? What would you tell him?”

“Piss off,” Naruto said immediately, voice full of energy. “I’d tell him to fuck himself.” He could feel it, his sadness was turning into anger again, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “Did you miss the part about him fucking me, getting kidnapped, and then literally leaving
before I’d even woken up or what?”

“You’re right. He’s…unforgivable,” Moonlight replied, his voice dismal.

“I just…what kind of excuse could he even have, you know? Who just… leaves? Everything? Everyone?” Naruto muttered.

“Maybe things are more complicated than you know,” Moonlight suggested, trying to make him feel better.

“Then why was he hanging out with people he was friends with in high school?” Naruto retorted. “Friends who assuredly weren’t me, the person he said he was in love with?”

Moonlight was silent.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“So, you don’t even want to hear his explanation?” he asked.

Naruto hesitated. “I don’t want to listen to him, because I know I’d forgive him. I’m not ready for that.” He felt himself starting to leak tears again as he said, “Shit, I’d probably forgive him if I just stared into his eyes for too long.”

“And that’s…bad?”

“I deserve to be angry about what he did, don’t I?” he asked. “It was shitty. Really shitty. If I forgive him, what am I supposed to do with all of this anger?”

“That’s a good point,” Moonlight reconciled.

“Yeah,” Naruto replied. “Hey man, thanks again. I feel like this whole conversation has really helped. I noticed you sound kind of down, too. Wanna talk about it?”

“What, and ruin the decent mood I got you in with my own bullshit? No, thanks. I’ll pass,” he said. “I’ll come to you with the next set of problems, how about that?”

“Sounds good to me, pal,” Naruto answered, grinning slightly. “Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Moonlight replied. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

You too can get real bummed out by Naruto's sadness playlist, because it's totally on my spotify. If you wanna give it a listen, it's called "naruto in his feelings" because I'm nothing if not predictable. It will actually give you a good frame of reference for the mindset I'm writing this from, but it will also make you sad. So. Oh, and it's all kind of hipster indie sounding music, if that's your thing.

I know this update is waaaay earlier than y'all were expecting, so first off, you're welcome. Second off, I've got a whole lot of visa stuff to sort through in the next week or so, and that might take a big dip out of my writing/editing time. So I can't say for sure
when the next update will be. Hopefully before the end of this month. If not, you can expect regular updates starting again in March. Aka when I've safely fled the country and moved back home. Yoof.

Also, I know that some stuff is out of canon, in terms of like birthdays. I actually have no idea when Sakura's birthday is, and I know for a fact that my frame of reference for Naruto's birthday is not in line with his actual birthday. I know I got the astrology sign right for Sasuke's birthday, but the date itself is off. I just kind of see Naruto as a Taurus, and I see Sakura as a Cancer. I see Ino as an Aquarius, and ofc I see Sasuke as a Leo. So that's kind of where I'm at with their birthdays. Sorry if that bothers anybody.
"But oh, I know, I wouldn't think about me too, but the smallest things make me remember you. And it's so hard when I know we were such good friends. And it's hard when I know that we can never be friends."

The dreaded day had finally arrived. I’d spent hours agonizing over the best way to play it, how to approach the reality of Naruto as my roommate, but nothing felt right. Any moment now, he’d come bursting through the door, expecting to lay eyes on one Daisuke Nakasaki—the pseudonym I’d been using since I applied for undergrad. Knowing Naruto, he’d probably been imagining becoming fast-friends with his new roommate. I could picture him hoping for a tour, eager to spend the afternoon bonding. It was bad enough that his friend Moonlight didn’t want to have an in-person relationship with him—he’d be devastated to find out his roommate wasn’t best friend material either.

Tired of pacing around the small dorm room like an anxiety-themed catwalk, I headed into the bathroom to take a quick shower and try to relax. My nerves were nearly impossible to diminish, but the heat of the water helped to cleanse me of my more ridiculous worries. I wrapped the towel around my waist and stepped back into the room, my outfit at the ready atop my bed. Just as I took a step toward my side of the room, a slight knock caught my attention. The tension in my gut expanded, pressing up to my throat and rooting me to the spot. True to form, Naruto opened the door after a split second, barging in with little concern. I watched his cheeks flush in slow motion—it hadn’t hit him yet, just who he was looking at. His tie-dye tank top and green shorts amplified his sunny summer disposition, but as I pushed my wet hair out of my face and turned to face him, his awkward smile fell into a grim frown.

"Can you wait outside so I can put clothes on? Unless you’d prefer to watch," I said.

No part of me wanted him to speak first, to hear the awful things he surely had in store for me. The raise of my eyebrow was instinctive, but it seemed to startle him out of the paralysis he’d been mired in. He fled the room without a word.

It only took me a minute to toss on the black-and-gray cut-up t-shirt over a pair of ratty jeans, but it was another two before I finally opened the door. I stood there, staring at the handle for an eternity, terrified. Naruto had his back against the wall in the hallway, eyes on the ceiling, and he barely even glanced at me as he reentered the dorm room. I walked to the back, slipping on my black tennis shoes and ignoring the tremble of my hands. I could feel Naruto’s eyes on me, assessing and evaluating. My minimalist style hadn’t changed since high school, but I doubted that he even noticed the aesthetics. After giving myself a terse once-over in the mirror hanging off my closet door and mussing up my slow-drying hair, I took a deep breath and bit the bullet.
“Hi, Naruto. I’m Daisuke Nakisaka. Please call me that, as opposed to, oh, I don’t know, Josh or Eric or Sasuke or something.” I extended a hand. He stared at me as if I’d slapped him.

“Hey, Daisuke,” he said. “I’m going to see if I can change rooms now. Have a nice day.”

As he turned to leave, I grabbed his arm and tugged him back around. “You can file a formal roommate change request in two weeks, as per school policy. I knew you’d want to know, so I asked already. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

He jerked out of my grasp. “Don’t talk to me. Don’t even look at me. In two weeks, I’m out of here. You’ll never see me again.”

I nodded curtly and left the room as he began to unpack.

I’m not proud of the way I used Moonlight to my advantage. The truth is, I was an addict. As long as I’d gone without Naruto, having him back in my life meant I’d cling to him without an ounce of shame—the world would have to pry him from my cold, dead hands. I knew he hated me, but he didn’t hate Moonlight, and for the time being, that was enough. Without missing a beat, I called him up as I headed for the Daily Grind to see Ino during her shift.

“Well hey! Look who it is,” Naruto answered after a ring or two. “Moonlight, what’s good?”

“Hey, Sunshine. How’s your first day coming along?”

“How could you not tell me that this campus is stunning? Today has been amazing, thanks. It’s so beautiful here. You sure you don’t want to give me a tour?” The grin in his voice made my heart skip a beat.

“It is a pretty nice campus, I guess,” I said. “Did you meet your new roommate yet?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he answered.

Though he rambled for another ten minutes about nothing in particular, I still felt winded by the statement. He was so shaken by the circumstance that he didn’t even want to talk to one of his closest friends about it. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts as we hung up and I entered the coffee shop. Ino spotted me instantly, offering a reassuring smile as she finished taking a customer’s order.

She’d grown to detest her job here, feeling the pressure of adulthood heavy on her shoulders. Despite her impressive degree and countless skills, she had yet to find work in her field. The Daily Grind was old faithful, a steady job she could depend on, but it was far from fulfilling.

I stood in line, waiting as the man in front of me wasted time flirting with her. She was polite, but firm—and yet, he refused to listen. She was running out nice ways to turn him down, and I was running out of patience. With a roll of my eyes, I stepped in between them and settled an easy glare on the man.

“Stop hitting on my girlfriend,” I told him.

He obligingly headed to the end of the counter to wait on his drink, and Ino gave me a high five.

“Thanks,” she said.

“No problem. Your lunch is coming up, right?”

“Yeah, T minus ten minutes. Something happen?” She scribbled the specifications of my drink
preferences onto a plastic cup from memory, passing it down the line without a second thought.

“It’s more like something not happening,” I answered.

She found me sitting in the back corner once her lunch had started. Things had gotten back to normal with us for the most part, though her relationship with Sakura was still on shaky ground. Those two couldn’t find harmony if it punched them both in the face. Usually her sage advice helped me gain perspective, but as I listened to her input on my disastrous Naruto situation, it occurred to me that she was the one in need of perspective.

“The thing is,” she was saying, “you have to decide whether or not you want him to leave in two weeks. If you want him to stay, you’ve gotta make him want it.”

“Is that the game you’re playing with Sakura?” I asked.

“Sakura made up her mind. She’s moving out when the lease is up. That’s that.”

“And what, you’re just gonna let her leave?”

“Well, yeah. What else am I supposed to do?” She took a sip of water and gave me an even stare. For once, I didn’t see sadness in her eyes. She looked resolute.

“You’re really not going to fight this?”

Ino sighed. “I’m tired. Of all of this. I’m tired of chasing someone who doesn’t want me. I’m tired of working the same dead-end job. I’m tired of this city, of this life. Something’s gotta give, man. I can’t keep doing this.”

“Hn,” I muttered. “I just thought it was the four of us, y’know. You and Sakura, me and Naruto. It’s silly, but if you and Sakura don’t end up together, maybe Naruto and I won’t either.”

“Would that really be such a bad thing?”

The lights were off, but I wasn’t asleep. I’d had Naruto’s dumb little playlist on repeat, soft in my headphones, as Ino’s words echoed throughout my mind. They bounced off the walls of my skull, ricocheting from the back to the forefront of my thoughts inconsistently. I was laying on my bed with a pillow clutched to my chest, facing the wall, when I heard the door slam shut. I bolted upright and turned to see Naruto stumbling in, evidently intoxicated.

He didn’t even look at me, tossing himself onto the bare mattress without a word. He laid his head on his arm and closed his eyes. I stared at him, at the wasteland he was using as a bed, and I pulled off my headphones as I got up, beelining for my closet. The soft warble of music pried Naruto’s eyes open, and he squinted in the direction of the sound. His frown deepened as he realized what song was playing, but his eyes were full of surprise. I walked up to the edge of his bed, startling him out of his reverie.

“You need sheets,” I said blankly. I handed him the spare set I’d grabbed out of my closet, setting them atop his outstretched legs without hesitation. When I returned to my bed, I chunked a pillow at his face and added, “Here.”

I put back on my headphones and faced the wall, ignoring him as he fumbled with the bedclothes. He stubbed his toe, tripped over the clothes he’d discarded, and knocked over a glass of water, but eventually he managed to make the bed and fall asleep.
“Oh, fuck you,” Naruto shouted, laughing and smiling in the middle of the Student Life building. He was playing some game with a man I didn’t recognize, and I watched the blonde get his ass kicked while I waited in line for coffee. Smirking, I sent him a text as Moonlight, teasing him for not studying when he had just expressed concern over an upcoming exam. He hadn’t really said much to me since the first day, but he and Moonlight’s communication had somehow increased, maintaining fair consistency. I put my phone away just in time, watching him look around wildly for his online compatriot. My phone buzzed, and I snuck a glance. “How did you know it was me?” He added far too many suspicious-face emojis.

“I didn’t, but now I do,” I texted back while I peered at the coffee board menu. My cell phone was archaic, but having one at all made a lot of things easier. I put my phone on silent just in time; it was easy to anticipate his moves with a face that easy to read. He called, but I ignored it. I wrote back, “C’mon, you didn’t think it’d be that easy, did you?”

Coffee in one hand and phone in the other, I slipped out of the building, only making eye contact with Naruto once. I took a sip and read his text: “FYI, stalking is bad and I’m going to the library now, so don’t follow me.” He added a row of emojis with their tongues stuck out, and I rolled my eyes. I told him to have fun as I walked back to the dorm, my baggy gray sweater blowing in the breeze. It was still just a little too hot for a regular sweater, but I woke up this morning with a strong desire to feel cozy, if a little nerdy. Working off of my rectangular spectacles, I paired a short-sleeved button up with the free-flowing, thin sweater and some basic blue jeans. I spent the rest of my cozy Sunday afternoon in the dorm room, lounging around on my bed and bingeing the newest season of the X Files. Naruto came back earlier than I anticipated, a grumpy look on his face.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked, trying to sound disinterested.

He looked up from his phone and muttered, “Some people are idiots.”

“That’s fair,” I responded, thoughtfully wondering who had upset him. I hadn’t received any texts from him, so I was fairly certain it hadn’t been me… or Moonlight, rather.

“Can we just watch Teen Wolf? I need to decompress,” he said with a whiney sigh.

“By watching half-naked men run around like idiots?” I asked.

“That’s the best way to decompress! And you know that if—” He stopped, averting his eyes.

“If what?” I inquired slowly, staring at him from across the room.

“If,” he began loudly, “you were gay.”

“Is my sexual preference somehow of interest to you, Naruto?” I raised my eyebrows, and a blush splashed across his cheeks.

“No!” he said, on the defensive. “I was arguing with Sakura in the library, and she thinks you’re gay.”

“Didn’t we have this conversation before?” I sat up, looking at him curiously.

He hesitated, his eyes uncertain. His words tripped all over themselves as they stumbled out of his mouth. “I’m bi, and I was arguing with her about whether or not you were gay, just because you—”

His cheeks were crimson, and I found myself smirking. “I’m not gay,” I said flatly. “But I don’t
expect Sakura to understand the difference.”

He looked at me, with a curious expression on his face; he opened his mouth to respond, but he was stopped in his tracks when the door to our room was flung open, crashing against the wall with a more than noticeable bang. In the doorway stood an out-of-breath Ino with fire in her eyes. Her face was the epitome of rage, and she stormed inside, slamming the door behind her. I immediately stood, heading toward her with the caution one might have when approaching a bull. Eyes wide, nostrils flared, and jaw clenched, she rushed at Naruto, who was cowering on his bed. I watched in horror as she pried her jaw open, ready to unleash a torrent of wrath so profound it would give a god a run for their money.

“You!” she shouted, pointing him with quivering digits. “You slimy, filthy, no-good, stupid piece of garbage!”

As Naruto squirmed, pressing himself against the wall, I walked over and stood in front of him, blocking Ino’s venom. She glared at me as I said calmly, “Ino, tell me what’s going on.”

“Oh, he knows what’s going,” she declared, peering angrily at Naruto around my shoulder. “He knows exactly what’s going on, that two-timing whore.”

“Two-timing?” Naruto yelled in surprise. “I may be promiscuous, but I’ve never two-timed anyone.”

“Oh yeah?” she shouted back. All of a sudden, I felt a looming sense of danger, and my gut told me to get Ino out of my dorm room as soon as possible. “Then why are you dating Sakura when you’re still with Hinata?”

“Ino, let’s go get a drink,” I said quickly. Naruto muttered a cranky, “None of your business,” under his breath, and I frowned at the two of them.

“Don’t you even pretend like you’re innocent in this,” she said, turning to face me. Naruto looked at her in surprise, but I just stared at her evenly, daring her to expose my charade to him. “You’re supposed to know these things, to mitigate this shit!” She shoved me backwards, and I stumbled into the bed. The next thing I knew, Naruto was on his feet in front of her, his arm extended protectively in front of me.

“Hey!” he shouted, eyes narrowed. “You can’t blame this on him just because I didn’t talk to him about it. He’s my roommate, not my friend.”

My face fell, but luckily Naruto wasn’t looking at me, couldn’t see how much his words hurt me. Ino saw, though, and her words caught in her throat. She closed her mouth abruptly, glancing between Naruto and I in time with her internal conflict. Finally, she said, “That’s what you think now, but you’ll see.” It sounded like a threat.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the blonde boy asked, looking from my blank face to Ino’s grim one in confusion. I ignored him, pushing his still-extended arm out of the way.

“I’m out of here,” Ino declared, flipping her bangs out of her eyes as she turned toward the door.

“Wait, Ino,” I said as she left. I quickly stepped into my slip-on shoes and turned to Naruto, who still looked confused. I sighed and shook my head, then hurried out the door after my friend. I caught up to her as she headed down the sidewalk, beelining for the bar. “Hey,” I called out. “First round’s on me!” I was hoping she would stop. She didn’t, though she did pause her stride just long enough for me to gain some ground. As I fell in-step with her quick, long steps, she side-eyed me.

“I’m not apologizing,” she announced defensively. “To you, or to him.”
“That’s okay,” I replied. “I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

After two drinks, Ino was apologizing profusely for her behavior. She was shouting at me from the bar, trying to talk over the ongoing karaoke. “I just can’t believe he and Sakura are dating. It made me so mad.”

“What happened?” I asked, taking a swig of the rum and coke I ordered. It was still my first drink, but I’d long-since learned my lesson about going toe-to-toe with Ino.

“I was hoping you could tell me!” she replied, finishing off her martini with a gulp. “Sakura said he asked her out when they ran into each other in the library.”

“That’s weird,” I commented, thinking about the nature of the conversation I had been having with Naruto before Ino arrived.


I downed the rest of my beverage in preparation for the new one, and I glanced at Ino. “Man, I’m sorry. Finding out from Sakura must have been rough.”

She sighed and ordered us another round of drinks with a wave and some well-placed pointing. “Yeah, Sakura and I got into a huge fight. I almost kicked her out early.”

“Wow,” I said. The bartender gave us our refills with a smile. I waved in acknowledgment, and the man paused, turning to us.

“You know,” he said, “you get a free drink if you do karaoke.”

“Ooh, sounds fun,” the already drunk Ino exclaimed, waggling her thin eyebrows at me. “C’mon, let’s do a song or two.” I groaned, but the bartender handed her a book of songs to choose from. I knew I was about to be dragged into something awful, so I ordered a shot and glanced at the selection. “Hmm, let’s do one together, and then do one each!” she suggested. “Oh, oh! Let’s pick them out for each other.”

“I’m not drunk enough for this,” I muttered, ordering another shot.

“Oh my god!” she shouted. “We should do Baby Got Back!”

“Or,” I said, looking at the portfolio again and taking a large gulp of my drink, “we could do I’m Not Okay.”

“Okay, okay, let’s rock-paper-scissors for it.” She held out a poorly clenched fist, and I shrugged. I won, and she groaned, but seconds later we were on stage, belting out the lyrics to one of MCR’s most famous song. She decided that I should go next, since we had performed my suggestion together. I shrugged; this was for her, anyway. All of a sudden, Paris Hilton’s Nothing in This World came blaring through the speakers, and I wanted to murder her in cold blood.

The song didn’t end fast enough. Mortified and seeking vengeance, I told the bartended to line up My Neck My Back, and I sat back, watching her make a fool out of herself on the stage. Unfortunately, this attack was too strong a rebuttal, and she declared an all-out war. The bartender eventually kicked us out, even though we were drinking just as much as we were singing. Perhaps that was why he removed us from the facility. Either way, we ended up stumbling back to the dorms on campus, with Ino calling up one of the girls she’d been seeing off and on who lived on campus. I couldn’t blame her for trying to distract herself with meaningless sex, especially when the alternative was driving drunk back to an angry Sakura. I wished things could be different for her, but there was
It took me longer to get inside of the building and stumble to my door than I expected; drunk me was a vulnerable, clumsy idiot who couldn’t stay in control of his actions, expressions, or speech to save his life. I came in the room, looking up to see Naruto watching Jay And Silent Bob Strike Back on the television. He paused it as I entered, and I turned to lock the door, causing him to giggle profusely at my inept, drunken struggle.

“Don’t laugh at me, usuratonkachi,” I whined, trying my best to sound menacing. I spun around a little too quickly after I finished, stumbling against the bed in a teetering wobble. Irritated with myself, I slumped atop the mattress, face-first, muttering in the blankets, “It’s not my fault. She made me.”

Naruto burst out laughing and ruffled my hair, saying, “Aww, poor baby. So drunk.”

I crawled onto the bed and sat up, cross-legged, next to him. I pouted involuntarily, and he chuckled softly. “I am so drunk,” I confirmed, watching the room sway around me. “She made me sing karaoke. It was horrible.”

Naruto grinned. “That’s rough, buddy.”

“Buddy?” I asked, staring at him with a stupid expression on my face.

“It’s a term of endearment used for friends,” he replied smugly. “Damn, alcohol killed your brain cells quick.”

“But you said,” I stumbled over my words. “You said we weren’t friends.”

“Yeah, well, Ino seemed to think otherwise. What was that about, anyway?” the blonde asked curiously.

I stared at his kind face with its round, emphatic features, and I couldn’t stop thinking about kissing him. His soft sweet lips curled into a smile, and his striped cheeks dimpled. His wide, shining blue eyes, so vibrant and full of sincerity, made my heart skip a beat. He just looked so happy, sitting next to me in that swaying dorm room.

“Uh, hello? Earth to teme?”

“Hello, Earth,” I answered. “How are you?”

He stared at me in surprise, still grinning, and shrugged. “Drunk Sasuke always was my favorite.”

I told him, “Stop calling me that,” but he just rolled his eyes.

“You’re watching this movie with me, right here, right now,” he announced.

“Right here?” I asked. “But I can’t see the movie. All I can see is your dumb face.” I took a page from his book and stuck my tongue out, letting the alcohol take the blame for my serendipity.

“Wow, what a view,” he exclaimed with mock enthusiasm. “You’ve got the best seat in the house.”

“Psh, second only to yours, usuratonkachi,” I retorted.

“Oh, yeah, because you’re sooo attractive,” Naruto teased. “With that permanent scowl of yours.”

“And you’re so much better, with your goofy grin?”
“No, of course not,” he replied. “I’m so much better because of these.”

He yanked at the end of his shirt, exposing his torso to the lamplight. He pulled his shirt the rest of the way off and tossed it in a heap on the floor.

“Oh, here we go again. You’re not the only one with abs, you know. Why is that any time your masculinity is threatened, you feel the need to strip?”

“Shut up, teme,” he muttered, shoving my shoulder playfully.

“Make me, dobe.”

“Mm, I like usuratonkachi better,” he said, closer to my face than he had been just seconds before. I could feel his breath on my lips.

Naruto was so close, and so exposed, and his voice sounded so soft. I leaned closer, just by a centimeter or two, staring into his eyes. He followed suit, inching forward ever so slightly, our eyes locked. The intensity of the stare coupled with our proximity made my heart pound in my chest. Nervously, I moved forward again, yearning to be as close to him as possible. My nose bumped against his own, lightly brushing the tip, and the spell was broken. He sat up quickly, face flushed and eyes wide. He glanced from me to the television, and pressed play.

“We should, uh, really get this started,” he declared, his voice tight and uncomfortable.

Disappointed, I popped my shoes off and swung my legs up on the bed, rolling onto my stomach and propping my head up on my hands. At some point, I must have fallen asleep, because I awoke with my head in Naruto’s lap. The credits were rolling on the TV, and it looked as if the blonde had fallen asleep, sitting propped up against the wall. Still quite drunk and more than a little impulsive, I sat up and tugged him down until we were laying side by side on the narrow mattress. He was just awake enough to wrench the covers on top of us and scoot backwards into me. With the cold wall at my back, I relaxed into the pillow.

Naruto was staring at me, I could feel it. I hadn’t opened my eyes yet, hadn’t made the decision to commit to waking up yet. I was still sleepy, and I was more than a little bit hungover. His eyes were on me, though, and I felt him scanning my face intently.

Annoyed, I muttered, “Stop staring at me, usuratonkachi.”

He tensed, and I cracked open my eyes. His cheeks were scarlet, and his blue eyes were wide. With his messy hair and bare chest, he was quite the sight to wake up to.

“What is it?” I asked, maintaining my irritation to prevent a blush of my own.

“N-nothing,” he stammered, averting his eyes from my narrowed gaze. “I just woke up. I’m gonna go shower now.”

“Oh,” I replied casually, watching with a raised eyebrow as he stumbled out of bed and raced toward the bathroom, barely avoiding disaster with all of the clothes he’d left out on the floor. “Dobe.”

I got up and took my shirt the rest of the way off, lamenting its now hazardously wrinkled exterior. I made a mental note to do laundry as I set it atop the bin, and with a sigh, I checked out my disheveled appearance in the mirror, fiddling with my hair to no avail. It stuck out all over the place,
truly defying gravity with sheer force of will. I glanced up as my phone buzzed and walked over to my desk to check it. Flipping the ancient model open, I saw that I had a text from Naruto. *Is he texting me from the shower right now?* I read the message with furrowed brows.

“EMERGENCY!” it said plainly, though decidedly vague.

When I replied with a series of question marks, he said, “Can I call you in 10?” I rolled my eyes and walked over to the bathroom door, knocking loudly and shouting at him to hurry up while I wrote out a response, suggesting 15 minutes in lieu of 10.

Naruto walked out of the bathroom moments later, enveloped by a world of steam. His damp hair dripped down his face, but he was otherwise ready to go. He had donned a black hoodie with the sleeves cut off, showcasing his excessively brawny arms, as well as a pair of distressed jeans that had gaping holes all the way up to the thighs. Perhaps due to the unexpected intimacy of the night before, my eyes and thoughts were drawn to his sultry face—his full lips and innocent eyes, the curve of his jawline and the shape of his cheeks. Now more than ever I felt overcome with the desire to kiss him. I beat down my urges with a stick and pried my eyes off of him, taking a last lingering look as he towed off his hair.

He shouted, “I’m off, D. I’ll see you later,” as he headed out the door, leaving his wet towel on the floor.

I found myself smirking as he exited; he only ever used odd nicknames when he was flustered or embarrassed. It wasn’t long before he was calling, trying to get in touch with Moonlight about his “emergency.” I let it ring for a moment, thinking briefly about how uncomfortable it would be to tell him that I was the mysterious friend. He would be angry, feel betrayed—or maybe he’d laugh? Maybe finding out I was his best friend would show him how genuinely connected and compatible we are. *Who am I kidding?* I asked myself. *He’s gonna be pissed.*

“Hello?” I finally answered, pushing aside the minor guilt I was feeling.

“Oh, thank god! I don’t know what to do,” Naruto cried out desperately into the phone. *Uh, break up with your girlfriends and date me instead, duh?* I thought with a roll of my eyes.

“About what, exactly?” I replied coolly, taking a sip of water and slouching backwards in my desk chair.

“I think…” he said, sounding tense. “I think I’m in love with Sasuke.”

I nearly spit the water out of my mouth in surprise. My elation at the confession was practically palpable, despite the fact that I was now dribbling water down my chin.

“What do you mean?” I coughed. “I thought you were still mad at him. Did he explain why he left yet?”

“No, I…” he paused, seemingly unsure. “I think he wants me to bring it up? It feels like he wants to tell me, but he doesn’t want to cause a rift or piss me off by instigating anything.”

I hesitated, then asked, “Are you going to talk to him about it?”

“No,” he said quickly. “Maybe. I don’t know.” He sighed into the phone. “The thing is, Moonlight, I think you might’ve been right about the whole thing. And even though I don’t really know what happened, I think I already forgive him.” He laughed awkwardly and exhaled. “Is that crazy?”

“Wow,” I murmured, my heart beating like a drum in my chest. “That’s kind of a big deal.”
“Yeah, there are a couple of problems, though,” he began, sounding worried. “First off, what if he doesn’t feel the same way? I mean, you know, what if I tell him I’ve been hopelessly pining after him for all these years, and he just looks at me, with that stupid arrogant face of his, all smirking and haughty. Then I’d just be embarrassed and erect, which is not a common combo for me.” He laughed, trying to quell some of the fear-driven discomfort.

“From what you’ve told me about him,” I said, trying to stay in character, “I doubt you are alone in your feelings.”

“That’s easy for you to say! It’s not you whose shitty fragile heart is on the line here,” Naruto complained, his voice indicative of a pout. “Plus, uh, there’s another problem that has to be dealt with before I can even try to tell him.”

“What’s that?” I asked, thinking, Sakura.

“So I’m kind of involved, romantically,” Naruto answered sheepishly.

“Right, with Hinata,” I said.

“Uh, well, that’s, um…It’s kind of a funny story.” He sighed. “I’m kind of dating someone else, now, too.”

“Sunshine,” I interjected. The tone of my voice said everything.

“It’s not a real relationship! It’s just this girl I know. She basically said I wasn’t real, because bisexuality is fake, and that I should just accept that I’m gay, point blank period.”

“She sounds like a real catch,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

“Tell me about it. Anyway, you know how I get sometimes, all riled up about proving shit.” He chuckled hesitantly, as if embarrassed by his own nature. “Basically, I bet her that I could convince her I wasn’t gay or straight by the end of the week. She’s the one who came up with the terms, though.”

“What’s the issue, then? If you don’t want to be with her, then just back out of the bet,” I replied. “Her opinion on your sexuality isn’t of value.”

“It’s not that simple,” he whined. “If I lose the bet, then I have to help her win over her one true love.”

“Okay, hear me out here,” I stated. “What if you just don’t do that?”

I knew his response before he said it; I was already rolling my eyes. I could see small, slender 15-year-old Naruto with that determined gleam in his eye, shouting in unison in my head with his adult counterpart.

“I never go back on my word!” he cried out, sounding for all the world like an obnoxious superhero.

“Why are you like this?” I sighed. It wasn’t a question, not really. It was an exasperated comment on the way his ideals influenced his decisions. I shook my head, both impressed and not at all surprised.

“Because,” he answered, “that’s my ninja way.”

“You’re a twenty-some-odd-year-old college student in America,” I reminded him.

“Don’t be a party pooper, Sa—” he stopped, then laughed sheepishly. “That was weird. I almost
called you Sasuke. Sorry, Moonlight. I guess I’m thinking about this too much!”

“Yeah, maybe you should orient your focus toward class instead. Don’t you have that sociology class you like so much in, like, five minutes?” I asked.

“Oh, shit!” Naruto shouted. “I gotta go, bye!”

It was Friday by the time Naruto finally said he had something he wanted to talk to me about, and I had become a nervous wreck in the meantime. Every time he looked at me a little too long, I panicked, pretending to be so consumed by what I was doing that I couldn’t possibly make eye contact. I kept ending up over at Ino’s apartment, emotionally exhausted from all of the worrying. I let her know immediately about the bet, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She had at least stopped drinking about it, though.

Friday morning, Naruto stopped me on my way out of the dorm by grabbing my hand as I passed his bed. He was sitting up, reading a textbook with his glasses perched on his nose. He had on a white button-down underneath a fitted green sweater, thanks to the recent cold snap, and his dark-wash jeans that fit snugly cuffed over his worn brown boots. His hair fell in his eyes, curling and waving like an undulating river of gold. As his warm, soft hand closed around mine, my heart thudded like a bass drum, reverberating throughout my body. He looked up at me with those sweet, bright eyes, and his lips parted, hesitant, before he said, “Hey, I need to talk to you later. You doing anything tonight?” I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. He smiled, saying, “Okay, good!” before letting go of my hand.

It was now approaching Friday evening, and I had been on the phone with Ino for an hour, picking out an outfit and trying to calm my nerves. She’d suggested my royal blue v-neck, hardly ever worn, over a pair of black skinny jeans. I added my favorite gray cardigan to the ensemble, and truth be told, even with my dorky glasses, I looked good. We were making jokes back and forth, when suddenly there was a ruckus in the background and she had to go. Confused but not too worried, I shrugged off the commotion and checked my texts. Naruto had sent an “SOS” roughly five minutes ago, so I called him, concerned.

“Hey, Moonlight, uh, I think I made things worse.”

“What did you do?” I inquired.

“I broke up with Sakura…” he said.

“That was what you were supposed to do.”

“Yeah, but, uh,” he stammered, taking a deep breath. “It didn’t exactly go well.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to imagine what could have happened during the course of a week-long relationship to make a breakup challenging.

“She told me she loved me.” That’ll do it. “After I, uh, proved to her that I wasn’t gay,” he explained.

“Did you…?” I hesitated, not sure I wanted to hear the answer to my question. Luckily, Naruto filled in what I left out.

“No!” he shouted dramatically. “No way! I mean, she’s a very nice-looking girl, but the idea of sleeping with someone as a part of a bet just does not sit well with me.”
“It would been a bit disingenuous for you,” I agreed. “But what do you mean, then? How did you prove you weren’t gay to her?”

The blonde cleared his throat and spoke in a gruff, menacing voice. “I have a very particular set of skills—skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a… well, a daydream, really, for people like Sakura,” he answered with an audible grin.

“Alright, Liam Neesom, can you please just tell me what happened?” I asked with a sigh. The kid sure knew how to beat around a bush.

“Okay, okay,” Naruto laughed. “So, I did some, uh, pretty magical things with my mouth,” he explained with a surprisingly cocky tone in his voice. “Which, y’know, isn’t just magical for women, by the way.”

“Are you hitting on me right now?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Why? Do you want me to be?” he replied. I could practically feel the shit-eating grin all around me, an inescapable aura of charm mired in contemptable arrogance.

“Hmm,” I answered thoughtfully. “Aren’t you supposed to be in love with someone else right now?”


“Why’s that?” I snapped, unintentionally.

“Well, I just left Sakura’s apartment, and I’m 100% certain that Ino is going to come to my dorm room to kick my ass,” he answered. “You know, for breaking her heart or whatever.”

“Because Sakura thinks she’s in love with you,” I sighed. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” he said shortly.

“Damn it, Naruto,” I commented, somewhat exasperated. I was going to have to mediate between him and Ino, which would likely involve another round of all-night drunken karaoke at the very least.

He was oddly silent for a moment, but then he asked curiously, “What did you just call me?”

“Uh,” I said blankly, a newfound anxiety rushing through me. “Your name?” *Stupid, stupid, stupid. I am so fucking stupid.*

“Sure, sure,” he replied quickly. “Which you knew because…?”

“Um,” I stammered, trying to come up with something plausible. “Last week, when you were playing video games in the student life building, the guy who beat you shouted your name during the match. Remember?”

He was still on the line, breathing quietly. “Say it again,” he suggested calmly.

“What?”

“Say my name again. I need…” he paused. “Just, say my name again.”

I crossed my fingers and took a deep breath before I tensely murmured, “Naruto.” He was silent again. “There,” I said. “You happy?”
“What’s your name?” he asked softly. I felt my heartbeat quicken. “You don’t want to tell me, do you?” He scoffed. “You know what’s funny? I didn’t pay attention to it at first, but your voice sounds so familiar. So fucking familiar.” I stayed quiet, not sure how to dig myself out of this hole. “Is that why you don’t want to tell me? Is that it?”

“I—” I stammered, still not sure what to say.

“What’s your name?” he asked softly. I felt my heartbeat quicken. “You don’t want to tell me, do you?” He scoffed. “You know what’s funny? I didn’t pay attention to it at first, but your voice sounds so familiar. So fucking familiar.” I stayed quiet, not sure how to dig myself out of this hole. “Is that why you don’t want to tell me? Is that it?”

“I—” I stammered, still not sure what to say.

“Say my name again, just one more time.” I held my breath; he was livid. “Say it.”

“I don’t want to,” I replied quietly. “I think I should go.”

“Call me by my name right now,” he growled.

My voice shook as I whispered into the receiver. “Naruto.” I sighed as he began to laugh, a dark grim chuckle colored with sad desperation and surprise.

“Wow, I mean, what did you think?” he barked out. “You really think you can just say my name like that and I won’t know it’s you, Sasuke?”

“Naruto,” I pleaded.

“How long have you known? The whole time?” He laughed again. “At least a month, that’s for sure.”

“May 6th,” I answered, clenching my jaw.

He choked, saying in disbelief, “You saw me. At the park.”

I said nothing, feeling my heart throb in my chest. I pushed the pain down.

“You saw me, and you said nothing!” He was shouting now, screaming into the phone with a sick aching in his voice. “You saw me, and you didn’t even get out of the fucking car. Unbelievable.”

The phone clicked as he hung up.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

I had been planning on telling him tonight, after I explained what happened all those years ago. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I had thought that maybe, in context, he would be able to understand. That hope launched itself out the window, and my chest ached with despair. I laid down on my bed, letting it hurt. Soon, Ino would barge into my room, ready to beat Naruto up, and all she would find would be this empty, broken shell of a person. And what of Naruto? Would he show back up here, face to face with the monster? Or would he disappear for the night? The week? Forever? Exactly how much damage had I done?

I’m not sure how long I laid there, staring miserably at the ceiling, before the door finally opened. It didn’t slam against the wall, and it clicked softly as it shut. Someone sniffled quietly, and I sat up, eyes landing on a crumbling Ino. She saw me staring at her and fell to her knees, crying silently. Without a word, I stood and went to her, my hand on her shoulder. She wrapped her slender arms around my leg, clinging to my black skinny jeans and sobbing fretfully. I patter her head awkwardly; in all of the time I’d known her, I had never seen her like this.

“It’s over,” she muttered softly, slowly releasing my leg from captivity. “It’s really over.”

I squatted down next to her, taking in her sad and disheveled appearance with a frown. She had on a
bright yellow dress, loose and flowing with thin straps on the shoulders. One of her heels was missing, broken off from the shoe. “Do you want to talk about it?” I asked, staring at her makeup-smeared face with a great deal of compassion.

Her voice was soft, quiet; she spoke, not meeting my gaze until the last second. “Are we the bad guys?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know, Ino. I really don’t know.”

I listened silently as she told me how she’d comforted the distressed, boy-crazy Sakura. The girl had suddenly decided that who she really loved was Naruto, had somehow been Naruto all along, and his rejection deeply wounded her, despite their entire week-long relationship being a farce in the first place. Ino had been startled when the boy knocked on their door minutes later, demanding to speak with Sakura. He had apparently come to regret his hasty decision, and he wanted to know if Sakura would take him back.

Ino had pulled the girl aside and told her flatly, “If you get back together with him, that’s it. We’re not friends, we’re not roommates, we’re not anything anymore.” Sakura only hesitated for a moment before throwing herself at Naruto. The pair left for drinks afterward, and Ino drove here immediately, trying to keep herself from collapsing by herself.

She looked at me as she finished her story and whispered, “I know that means things didn’t go well for you, either. What happened?”

“Oh, you know,” I replied. “Just the usual. He wanted to be with me, and I ruined everything.”

She patted my knee, the sadness in her eyes matching my own. I made us some tea, and we sat, cuddled together on my bed and watching Gilmore Girls. It had gotten rather late, though neither of us wanted to check the time. We were both afraid of acknowledging how long it had been since the two went for drinks, afraid of being forced to recognize that they were likely in each other’s arms at this very moment. I was in the middle of responding to Ino’s comment—she had said, “I’m surprised you had a crush on Jess, since he’s so much like you,”—when the door flew open. Silhouetted by the hallway lights streaming in around them, Naruto and Sakura stood, clawing at each other and sucking face like a couple of disgusting teenagers. Shocked, I glanced over at Ino, who was staring helplessly at the scene before her. As her eyes filled with tears, I stood, suddenly angry. Whether I was a bad guy or not, whether I deserved this or not, I knew for a fact that Ino didn’t. Naruto could be as mean, as spiteful, as awful to me as he liked, but this was too far. He would have to leave Ino out of it. My stride was quick and lengthy as I crossed the room, arm already outstretched as I came upon him.

Without hesitation, I grabbed him by the neck and yanked him off of Sakura, shoving him hard against the wall. He laughed at me in wheezy gasps, clearly far more intoxicated than he should be. I glared at him and opened the door with my free hand.

“Let’s talk about this outside,” I growled, my voice far more guttural than he’d ever heard it. I dropped my hand from his neck and left; he stumbled along behind me, shouting incomprehensibly as we stalked down the hall.

As soon as we emerged into the crisp night air, I shoved him. He stumbled backwards into the railing on the stairs.

“Woo, looks like I got you all rialed up,” he slurried, laughing again.

“Listen, dickhead,” I began sternly.
“Oh, he’s throwing out the English insults! That’s how you know he’s really angry,” Naruto shouted, stumbling back into a standing position.

“You can be as angry with me as you want,” I continued, stepping toward him. “But Ino hasn’t done a damn thing to you.”

“Oh this? This was Sakura’s idea,” he said with a grin. I paused, surprised by this revelation. He looked up into my eyes and added, “But I liked it, Sasuke.”

I punched him. Hard. My fist flew before I could think about it.

“I already told you,” I muttered through gritted teeth. “Don’t call me that.”

He lunged at me, finally letting his anger through. I side-stepped him, and he landed on the concrete. I skipped down the stairs, calling out, “You seriously haven’t learned anything in the past few years? Get some new moves, idiot.”

Naruto followed me down the stairs, full of rage. He swung at me as soon as he got to the bottom, but I dodged it easily.

“We were gonna fuck,” he antagonized. “Right in front of you and Ino.”

I felt myself be consumed by anger, jealousy, and malice; I grabbed him by the sweater, shoving him against a nearby tree.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snarled, my face inches from his.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replied evenly, staring at me with more hurt-fueled anger in his eyes than I had ever seen.

“I’ve only ever done what I thought was best for other people,” I defended. “I’ve never tried to hurt somebody the way you just did.”

“Bullshit,” he jeered. “I call bullshit!”

“It’s not bullshit,” I snapped. “I left to protect you. I didn’t talk to you at the park because I didn’t want to take away someone else that you cared about.”

“Because we all know lying to someone for months is way more saintly,” I heard him say, but my mind went black.

I was suddenly so angry with him for being mad at me, for holding such a grudge against me for so many years, when all I ever wanted to do was keep him safe. I let go of his stupid sweater and threw my fist at him, not even aiming anywhere in particular.

He swung back, finally landing a hit. A sharp pain bolted through me from above my eye, and I jumped on him, knocking him to the ground. I hit him hard in the face, but he flipped me with surprising ease. As he punched me, again and again, I felt something wet on my face. I looked up through the haze, expecting to see blood dripping from Naruto’s busted lip. Instead, my eyes met his, filled with tears.

He hit me again, saying, “I loved you, goddamnit. All you ever did was hurt me.”

My arms went slack. No longer was my body tense and primed for a struggle; I felt the anger evaporate into the night sky. After a few more blows, he stopped, finally just breaking down into a
sob. He laid on top of me, his body limp and exhausted. He sobbed pitifully into my neck, and tentatively, I eased my arms around his shaking shoulders. I stared into the branches of the tree above me, spying the sliver of moon peeking out from the blackness. Naruto passed out on top of me, and I sat up, letting him slump into my arms. I carried him up the stairs and back to the dorm room, laying him down on my bed while Ino and Sakura watched from their seated position on his. Gilmore Girls played softly in the background.

Sakura glanced at the motionless body on my bed. “Did you knock him out?”

“No,” I answered. “He passed out. He was far too drunk.”

“I’m sorry. This was all my idea, and he tried to stop me. I made him do it. Please, don’t be mad at him.”

I didn’t respond, ignoring her in favor of coming up to Ino. I looked into her eyes and asked, “Are you okay?” She sighed, glancing at Sakura, and nodded.

“I should go,” Sakura said quietly, staring at the floor. Ino watched her leave, saying nothing. I looked at her, eyebrow raised, as the door closed.

She shrugged at me, saying, “Let’s get you two cleaned up, huh?”

“Are you sleeping here tonight?” I asked as she wet a washcloth in the bathroom sink.

She emerged and began dabbing gently at my bleeding wounds. “If that’s alright with you,” she answered, applying a bandage to the cut above my eye. “You two sure did a number on each other.”

“Yeah,” I said with a wry smile. “It’s all the pent-up resentment.”

She let out a laugh, surprised, and smacked me with the washcloth. She walked over to Naruto and started to clean of his injuries, looking from me to him with intrigue. “Weird how he managed to do more damage to you, since he was drunk and you’ve been kickboxing for years.”

“I got what was coming to me,” I said quietly, not looking at her. “You can sleep on his bed. I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Thanks,” she replied, standing. “Could I borrow some clothes? I’d like to take a shower.”

“Sure,” I answered, handing her a basic black top from my dresser along with a pair of gray joggers.

As she disappeared into the bathroom, I stripped down to my boxer briefs and grabbed an extra pillow and comforter from the wardrobe. I set them down temporarily, wrenching the cover out from underneath Naruto as gently as I could. I laid it on top of him, staring at his battered face with a sharp pain in my heart. Before I could get bogged down by my sadness, though, I arranged my temporarily sleeping space on the floor next to my bed. I adjusted the pillow and comforter as best I could, knowing that napping on the floor would be uncomfortable no matter what. Suddenly, I felt something land on top of me. It was a pair of jeans, soon followed by a sweater and a button up shirt. I grabbed the clothes and stood, irritated, but Naruto seemed to have passed out again, the blanket tucked under his chin.

I picked up his clothes from the floor and placed them in a pile on his side of the room. As I came back, ready to submit myself to the torture of resting on the cold tile, something touched my arm. I glanced over, meeting Naruto’s gaze.

“I’ll scoot over,” he muttered. “You don’t have to sleep on the floor.” I stared at him, confused and
suspicious. He blushed, frowning and holding open the blanket for me. Averting his eyes, he stammered, “Please, Sasuke.”

“Okay,” I said, climbing into the bed next to him.

I was trying my hardest not to bump or brush up against him, but as I eased my head down on the pillow, I felt his arm snake around my abdomen. He pressed his face into the back of my neck, breathing deeply. My whole body tensed, waiting for the next movement, but I soon realized that the boy had fallen asleep again. Letting my body melt into Naruto’s sleepy, drunken embrace, I closed my eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Would you believe me if I told you that the first time I wrote this, I thought to myself, “Wow, it’s way too early for them to get together!” at 110k+ words and 20 chapters. Yoof. If it took me this long to get together with someone IRL, I’d already have abandoned that ship.
It wasn’t until Ino mentioned it that I finally acknowledged the demon of truth lurking in the recesses of my mind. I’d been nervously ignoring it as it drew closer, pretending I didn’t see it in my periphery. When she named it, I could hide from the truth no longer.

“I’ve never seen you look at him like that,” she told me, after we’d left the dorm that morning.

 Barely ten words, and yet they were my undoing.

 We walked along the cobblestone pathway through the heart of campus, with the floral trees arching above us. It felt ironically romantic, the two of us strolling along in quiet contemplation beneath the blossoms. Anyone watching might’ve attached datelike connotations to our excursion, but internally Ino and I were playing host to our own private emotional revolutions. I rolled her declaration around in the pit of my stomach like play-doh, afraid of what shape it would take. We weren’t walking around with a destination in mind, but we wound up at a strip mall off of Main Street. We ducked into a used records store, absently scanning the stacks for anything eye-catching. Neither of us said a word; our minds were elsewhere, mulling over what had brought us here. The protests of Ino’s stomach finally took us out of ourselves and into a nearby café for brunch.

 Sitting across from her in the booth, I took a deep breath and vocalized the dissent that had been creeping up on me since the night before.

 “I don’t want to say this out loud,” I admitted. As if staring at the demon in the corner would make it real. As if ignoring the battle in my gut would make it go away.

 “Bottling it up won’t help,” she said.

 I sighed. “The Naruto I knew wouldn’t do something like that. That’s not… That’s not him. I don’t know that person. The Naruto I loved—he’s gone.”

 Everything felt surreal, detached somehow. The words were a spell: by saying it aloud, I’d made them true. Admitting it to myself thrust me into the dawn of a new reality—cold and gray but simultaneously fresh and pure. I looked down at my hands, at my long fingers and slender thumbs. They were foreign, not a part of me. Unrecognizable. I grabbed the tea I’d ordered—Earl Grey, not green—and took a sip to prove to myself that I was really here, that this was really me.

 “Naruto’s dead, and I killed him.”
“It’s not your fault. People change,” she said softly.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say.” I averted my gaze, trying to put my revelation into words. “I had choice to make. Naruto or my brother. When I left with Itachi, I killed the possibility of that Naruto and that me ever being together. I killed him. I killed myself. I killed that future. That Naruto is as dead as that me, and it’s because of that choice.”

Ino hesitated, her eyes invading mine to suss out the truth. I could tell what she was thinking, that I was blaming myself, beating myself up, but I didn’t feel guilty or anguished. I barely felt anything. The truth had numbed me—he wasn’t the same person, he would never be that person again. Neither would I. And I knew that if I was ever given the chance to change it, to make the other choice, to pick a different answer… I wouldn’t.

“The past is in the past, stuck where it is with what it has, just like you and me,” she finally said.

“We can’t go back, only forward.”

Ino nodded. “Only forward.”

I didn’t know who I was anymore, but it didn’t matter. I let it go, I let it all go. Only forward.

Naruto woke up to find his roommate staring at him, a scowl betraying the attempted stoicism. Gaara’s displeasure with the college sophomore he called a best friend radiated off of him, and as Naruto sheepishly crawled out of bed, he accidentally woke up the boy sleeping next to him. He’d been the latest in Naruto’s string of hookups; the blonde bid him goodbye as he departed, conscious of Gaara’s unwavering glare.

“Who are you?” Gaara demanded. He looked Naruto up and down, unmoved by the boy’s pout. “When did you get so apathetic?”

“Apathetic? I’m the most caring person I know,” he retorted.

“You used to be the most caring person I knew, but not anymore. You’re practically devoid of empathy,” Gaara told him.

Naruto’s initial shock faded into outrage. “I’m totally empathetic. You wish you could be half as compassionate as me.”

“When’s the last time you did anything even resembling compassionate, Naruto?”

“I took that stray cat to the humane society last week,” he protested.

“For a person,” Gaara clarified.

“Well, I was pretty giving last night, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Naruto. That guy you slept with? He’s married.”

“He flirted with me first. I didn’t go out of my way to sleep with a cheater.”

“You still slept with him.” Gaara’s exasperation was palpable.

“Well yeah, but not because I wanted to hurt anyone.”
“Naruto, your actions have consequences. You hurt people, whether you wanted to or not. Can you imagine how devastated that man’s husband is going to be when he finds out?” Gaara stared at him, expecting a response, but something had managed to stop Naruto in his tracks.

“I can’t,” he whispered. The truth was dawning on him, and he shook his head to dissuade the light, eager to return to the comforting ignorance of night.

“What?”

Naruto sounded panicked. “I can’t imagine it. I just tried. I tried to feel guilty, to care, to feel something for their relationship.”

“And?”

“And I can’t, Gaara. Don’t you get it? I don’t care. I can’t care.” Naruto’s breaths were coming out in wheezing gasps. “I don’t feel anything. I can’t feel anything.”

He felt like he was searching for something that he’d assumed would always be there only to find that it had been stolen out from under him. He struggled to find even an ounce of compassion inside him, but he was coming up empty handed. Where had it gone? He used to have so much. It couldn’t have all disappeared, could it? Naruto fell back on his bed, horrified by the loss.

Gaara switched gears. “That’s okay, Naruto. You know it wasn’t a nice thing to do, right? Even though you can’t feel for the guy, you still understand that what you did will make him feel bad, right?”

He could feel the tension in Naruto from across the room. His self-unaware friend was seconds away from completely unraveling.

Naruto nodded slowly, still searching. How long had it been gone? Why hadn’t he noticed sooner? Had he hurt anyone else while it was missing? He thought about the people he’d slept with without question, the people he’d enticed to dump their partners for him, the people he’d romanced and never called again. He cringed. There was no guilt, no remorse. Only recognition that his behavior had hurt people.

“It doesn’t matter if you feel bad or not. What matters is how you act in the future,” Gaara told him. “You can choose to do the right thing, even if you can’t empathize.”

Gaara’s reassurances placated him for a little while, quelling the panic that had been threatening to undo him. He didn’t know what he’d do without Gaara now that his empathy was missing. He had to think critically about the most compassionate course of action, and even when he fell short, Gaara was there to guide him in the right direction. He’d gotten better at objectively recognizing patterns of impulsive behavior, but he wasn’t much better at denying himself temptation.

It never occurred to Naruto that his dependence on Gaara could be hurting him. He didn’t see it as selfish. Never would he have guessed that there’d be a day when Gaara couldn’t help him anymore.

It wasn’t until Naruto slept with Gaara’s advisor that Gaara threw up his hands in frustration.

“I quit,” he declared. “You were there for me when all I felt was cynicism and angst. You helped me heal. You helped me become the person that I am today. I wanted to be there for you during this, whatever phase this is, but I can’t keep it up. It’s unhealthy. I’m so invested in your life choices that I can’t take care of myself. I can’t make your decisions for you, Naruto. I can’t keep getting upset when you do things that I don’t like. I’m sorry, Naruto. I don’t know how to be friends with you anymore.”
Maybe it surprised Naruto that I’d moved out. Maybe it annoyed him, maybe it relieved him. Maybe he couldn’t find it in himself to care. I don’t know. He wasn’t there when I packed up my things. I pulled up to Ino’s apartment with Black Me Out by Against Me blaring through the speaker slung round my neck. From the looks of things, Sakura hadn’t been home when Ino had gotten there either; all of her belongings were neatly boxed and stacked atop her car. Together, Ino and I moved all of Sakura’s grandmotherly furnishings out to the dumpster. Her tacky décor was no more. After she called a locksmith to guarantee the message would be received loud and clear, Ino drove us downtown for the beginnings of a thrift store home-makeover.

It felt good, picking out a new life with Ino. I purused the bedroom section with a casually critical eye, finally settling on a black bedframe and a new mattress. Ino selected a sleek coffee table, a new couch, and a functional TV stand—she’d let Sakura call the shots when they’d moved in, but now it was her time to shine. I watched her ogle a geometric-print rug for a moment, an ephemeral hint of happiness brisking through me. At least we were doing this together.

I drove Ino’s car back while she commandeered the rental truck. I’d been riding a motorcycle for so long, driving anything bigger than a sedan was just asking for trouble. I arrived first, pleasantly surprised to find Sakura’s car absent from the parking lot. Ino didn’t mention it, though her eyes flickered to the spot as we hauled in the new furniture. We helped each other, shelving books alphabetically and hanging up tapestries and tacking up fairy lights and fengshui-ing the furniture. By the time we’d finished, it was practically a brand new apartment.

Flashing me a smile as she finished cracking open a bottle of beer with her teeth, Ino said, “We did good today, but there’s one last thing that needs to be done. And I can’t do it by myself.”

I took the beer she was offering. Apple-flavored. “What do you need from me?”

She took a deep breath and exhaled, leveling her gaze. “I need you to shave my head.”

I choked on the beer, spilling it all over my t-shirt. “You what?”

She took the buzzer out of the back pocket of her jeans and held it out ceremoniously. “Shave my head, dude. Do it.”

“Uh. Let’s go to the bathroom to do this,” I told her.

“Sure thing.” She chugged the entire bottle, wiped her hand across her mouth, and marched down the hall.

She’d laid out a towel on the floor. I set my beer on the counter and grimaced at her all-too-enthusiastic grin. “Are you sure about this?” I asked her, just once. She nodded, all power and poise. If there was anyone I could count on to mean it when they said something, it was Ino. Wordlessly, I switched the buzzer on and began.

Gaara’s band wasn’t popular enough to warrant a national tour, but he orchestrated one anyway, dropping out and leaving the city within a week. He wanted to focus on his music, clear his head, get away from the stress. Get away from Naruto. He left him there to wallow in self-pity and resentment. Naruto was the one who solidified the end of their friendship, angrily telling him to get bent if he didn’t like the person Naruto had become. Gaara didn’t trust him to make good decisions with his life? Well fine, he’d show Gaara what bad decisions really looked like.
Naruto spent the summer after Gaara left in a state of unbridled chaos. He didn’t bother learning people’s names before sleeping with them, let alone whether or not they were monogamous. He spent most nights with his coworkers, partying until dawn. He experimented with anything and everything, spitefully determined to make his past indiscretions seem better by comparison. He was the only one who couldn’t see that he’d gone from one-step-at-a-time to careening face-first into disaster.

He didn’t know what had happened until a few days afterward, when one of his coworkers showed him the video. Tenten had always been kind to him, so when she tearfully pulled him aside during his shift, he hugged her and told her everything would be alright. It wasn’t until she pressed play that he realized her tears weren’t for herself.

He’d been really f**ked up at the party on Thursday. It hadn’t been his first time blacking out, but it would be his last.

It was disorienting, watching his limp body do things he had no memory of.

He made it a minute in before rushing to the bathroom and emptying his stomach.

He’d taken the next semester off, both from school and from work, opting instead for therapy. Kakashi and Iruka supported him as best they could, happy to see him climbing out of the hole he’d been digging. He didn’t tell them what happened. He didn’t tell anyone what happened.

He returned to school better but not good. He felt as though he’d clawed himself up to neutral, to zero—no longer in the negatives, but not yet in the realm of the positives. He was still lacking.

He’d started dating Hinata at everyone’s behest. Kakashi, Iruka, Jaraiya—they all wanted Naruto to experience a healthy relationship for once. It wasn’t their fault he just wasn’t ready, and it was no one’s fault but his own that he found himself voiceless in the relationship. Hinata wasn’t bossy or strong-willed, but somehow that just made it harder for Naruto to be open about his feelings.

She’d pleaded for an open-relationship when he tried to break-up with her. Between finding out that his roommate was Sasuke Uchiha and mending things with his pseudo-friend, Moonlight, he discovered that he didn’t have the emotional capacity their relationship required. Trying to explain that to the soft-spoken girl on the other end of the phone call wasn’t easy, though. He wanted to tell her that she deserved better, but he was afraid she’d just dismiss it as solely self-deprecating. She’d begged and bartered, heartbroken by his attempt to end things, and he found himself just as voiceless as always. He couldn’t say no, even though polygamy wasn’t going to fix anything. He hadn’t expected to act on it.

The thing with Sakura had been a fluke. He hadn’t intended for that to happen, hadn’t wanted anyone to get hurt. Not at first. His emotions had been all over the place with Sasuke’s reappearance, and taking Sakura up on her bet seemed the most convenient distraction on the table. He didn’t want to deal with the tumultuous surge of renewed feelings twisting around in his intestines. Finding out that Sasuke had lied to him, though, shifted his perspective.

For the first time, he wanted to intentionally hurt someone.

_____________________________________________________________________________________

We went out for Taco Bell, having completed the foundation for our new lives just before midnight. Ino flirted with the cashier and managed to get us two extra tacos for free.

As I ate, I thought aloud, “Now that I’ve got an apartment, I should get a job.”
“Don’t you get like a stipend or whatever?” Ino asked.

“Yeah, but I put it toward on-campus housing. I have to wait until next semester to change it.”

“That’s stupid,” she replied. “I could get you a job at the Grind, if you want.”

“I doubt my social skills are up to the task of customer service in the coffee industry,” I told her.

“You’re right. I could just see you dumping hot coffee on someone for complaining about their order.”

“That’s not far-fetched,” I said.

“Oh, what about Sarutobi Memorial? Karin’s the librarian there. I’m sure she’d give you a chance.”

“Yeah, I really want to work in a haunted library. No thanks.” I wadded up my trash and waited on Ino to finish.

“It’s not haunted. Plus, even if it is, that just means fewer humans for you to interact with.” She grinned.

“I’m an introvert, not a ghost-hunter,” I snapped.

“You’re two traumas away from being a serial killer, that’s what you are.”

Takes one to know one.

She crumped her taco wrapper and threw it at me. I dodged the attack, only to retaliate with my own trash. We were still laughing when the cashier came over to sweep up the mess, side-eyeing us with disdain. We offered to clean up after ourselves, and once we’d finished we went back to our apartment together.

Sakura answered the door with a frown. “Naruto, hello,” she said in surprise. “Uh, come in.”

Ino had been an unforeseen casualty. If he’d bothered thinking of someone besides himself, he might’ve seen it coming, but it had been so long since he’d been in tune with others’ emotions. He wasn’t expecting her to still have feelings for Sakura, not after all these years.

He walked in and sat on the couch, and Sakura took a seat in the armchair, giving him a cautious glance. In her pajamas, hair askew, she hardly looked the part of an evil mastermind. Naruto looked at her, unwavering. “You’re not a good person.”

“I kind of figured that out already.” She stared at him, curious. “Are you here to commiserate our malevolence?”

“I’m not malevolent,” Naruto scoffed. “I’m misguided.”

She crumped her taco wrapper and threw it at me. I dodged the attack, only to retaliate with my own trash. We were still laughing when the cashier came over to sweep up the mess, side-eyeing us with disdain. We offered to clean up after ourselves, and once we’d finished we went back to our apartment together.

Sakura laughed.

“I didn’t mean to hurt Ino.” Naruto faltered, an ache in his chest as he recalled the callous, empty stare Sasuke had given him. The anger. The disgust. The absolute disbelief. Those onyx eyes used to look at him like he was a starry night sky, full of magic and wonder, and now they recoiled from him like he was a monster. He could feel it in the tension of Sasuke’s back as they’d laid together, and he could sense it in the silence that followed. Sasuke had shut himself off; Naruto had no one but
himself to blame.

“Hurting Ino is like, one of the only ways to hurt Daisuke,” Sakura said.

“She’s supposed to be your best friend. Why would you suggest something that would hurt her?” Naruto’s anger had already begun subsiding, replaced with confusion and regret.

It felt stupid to admit, but he didn’t realize how much he’d hurt Ino until he saw the detached disdain in Sasuke’s eyes, emphasized by the bruises he’d given him. Naruto’d said nothing when he left the dorm that morning, feeling light in the wake of the severance. He sat in the tree behind the student recreation center, lost in thought, wishing he had someone to help put things into perspective for him. Gaara had always filled that role, but there was no going back. He was alone, and he alone could deal with the repercussions of his actions.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Sakura said. She crossed her arms, defensive, and frowned. “You don’t know what it’s like to be second-best your whole life.”

“Ino loves you.” He couldn’t wrap his mind around her choices. It hadn’t bothered him before, but the reality was settling into him like a parasite.

“Yeah, and everyone loves Ino!” She was gripping her forearms, nails biting into the flesh. “Ino’s so perfect. Perfect hair, perfect skin, perfect body, perfect grades. Even my parents liked her more than me. No matter what I did, I couldn’t escape her shadow.”

Naruto paused. “You’ve resented her the whole time?”

“Yes! Is that so hard to understand? She’s always been everything I’m not, and no matter what I do, she won’t leave me alone.” Sakura exhaled, trying to banish some of the anger that had begun to overflow. “When she told me she was gay, I thought that I would finally be preferred. By my parents, by Sasuke, by our friends. Nope. That only made her more compelling.”

“Sakura…”

“No, fuck your pity, Naruto. I don’t need it.” She stood. “Ino told me she was in love with me when we were in undergrad. Can you just, for one second, try to imagine what that was like? This girl had everything. Friends, lovers, success. She was perfect. Could you imagine dating someone like that? Someone so fucking perfect you don’t even feel comfortable getting naked in front of her because all you’ll do is compare yourself to her and fall short? What did she even see in me?”

“Wait, her being love with you made you hate her even more?”

“No, that’s not… Ino told me she was in love with me, and all I could think was, why? Why would she want to be with me? Why would anyone? What do I have to offer? And I realized, the answer is nothing. I’m worthless, Naruto. I have absolutely no value.” Sakura sat back down in a huff. She looked over at her guest with a slight frown. “I’m sure you think I’m pathetic now, if you didn’t already.”

His eyes were wide. He sat frozen for a moment, before slowly shaking his head. “No, Sakura, I don’t think that.”

“My self-esteem is so bad I don’t think it’s possible for anyone to love me, and you don’t think that’s pathetic?” She snorted. “God, you’re dumb.”

“I’m the same.”
“What?”

“I don’t… I don’t know what I have to offer anyone, except for sex. That’s what everyone wants, right? I don’t know what else I could possibly give them in exchange.” Naruto sighed. “I haven’t made any new friends since I started dating Hinata, because I don’t know how to convince people I’m worth their time without sleeping with them.”

Sakura stared at him, weighing his words. “What makes you feel like you’re not good enough? You were the football captain. You had more friends than anyone. You put yourself through college. You moved across the country for grad school. My mom asks me about you every time I visit. You’re the poster boy of Konoha success.”

Naruto let out a bitter laugh. It sounded strange, coming from him, but he’d long ago abandoned the golden boy image. “I’m not good at anything. I have no hobbies, no skills, no interests. I mean, who am I, even?”

“Am I really the person you want to be talking to about this? Should you be calling Gaara or something?” Sakura interjected.

“We’re not friends anymore.”

“Oh.”

“I lost myself somewhere, I think. I don’t know what to do with myself anymore.”

“Me neither.”

Sarutobi Memorial was haunted—it always had been. At least, that’s what everyone believed. With its rundown exterior and dated fixtures, it certainly seemed that way. The ivy-coated bricks, rusted letters, and boarded windows didn’t help. Occasionally a malcontent youth would spraypaint the doors or toss rocks at vulnerable points, but even without their negative action, the library was on its last legs. The majority of the populace, both students and townsfolk alike, preferred the campus library.

Though I’d only ever seen Karin in passing, she had no qualms about hiring me as a favor for Ino. It surprised me that she and Ino were still on good terms in spite of everything, but once I met her I began to understand why.

“Ooh, you’re cuter than I remember,” Karin lauded as I walked in.

I rolled my eyes as I approached the circulation desk. She stood next to a cart of returns, smirking at me.

“Ino warned me you’d be asocial, but that’s okay. Here, go reshelf these, looking all mysterious and brooding. We’ll turn this place around yet.” Karin had a determined glint in her eyes as she shoved the rolling cart toward me.

As I meandered through the bookcases, putting away the assortment of odd titles, I felt someone staring at me. The sensation of being watched made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up; I tried to quell the discomfort, to remain focused on my task. My muscles tensed at the soft lurch of footsteps behind me, and I spun around, fists clenched. Standing a few inches taller than me and good bit broader, a man I’d never seen before stared at me with subtle surprise. He took a step back, noticing my hostility, and ran his fingers through his orange hair.
“I wasn’t trying to scare you,” he said.

“You didn’t.” I scowled at him, annoyed by the gentleness of his eyes and the softness of his voice.

“You remind me of someone. Someone I haven’t seen in a long time,” he told me.

“Go to talk to them, then. Not me,” I retorted.

“I can’t. He’s dead,” the man replied.

I paused, then shrugged. “Have you tried necromancy?”

A slight smile tugged at his lips, but somehow it didn’t seem patronizing or antagonistic. It felt genuine. He cleared his throat. “I’m Jugo, the other library assistant. Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

I managed to settle into a routine, class and work and hobbies expertly juggled. Jugo was my favorite coworker, but Karin and Suigetsu got on my nerves incessantly. A week went by, then a month. When I was startled out of my reverie by a loud knock on the apartment door, I expected to find Naruto standing there, apology spewing from his lips. I erased the image from my mind, and it left without protest as I walked to the door.

“Sasuke,” Itachi panted, slumping forward against the doorframe.

“What’s wrong?”

He mumbled, his words coming out in gasps, and he fell into me, fainting as he whispered, “Shisui.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a really hard time with this chapter, especially in the midst of the chaos that is my life right now, but I hope you guys like it. I'll be moving back to the United States this Saturday, so hopefully my updates will return to some semblance of a schedule in the near future. In the meantime, enjoy this cliffhanger!
AFTER they say an end can be a start (part 1)

Chapter Summary

WARNING: there's a lot of really serious mental health stuff mentioned in this chapter. If that makes you uncomfortable, please skip to the end for a brief summary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER they say an end can be a start (part 1)

Naruto stared at his reflection in the titled mirror above the sink. His eyes looked pale, empty, and his cheekbones seemed to jut out underneath. He should’ve at least shaved beforehand, but instead he’d jumped in, all action and no hesitation. Sasuke would’ve shaved, he was sure of it. No way Sasuke would be caught dead looking anything other than immaculate. His grip on the porcelain tightened at the thought, whitening his knuckles under the harsh glare of the fluorescents.

“Almost done in there?” a voice called out from behind the door.

“Just a minute,” Naruto answered. His throat was raspy, worn ragged by the shouting he’d been doing earlier.

“Okay then,” the voice replied. Retreating footsteps, barely audible through the heavy door.

He sighed, exhaling as much tension as he could muster. Eyeing the blue paper scrubs, three sizes too big, as they draped across the unfamiliar outline of his body, Naruto nodded to his reflection and tried to smile. It was comical, really—he was practically an alien, with bug eyes and jaunty limbs. His smile looked more like a grimace, so he gritted his teeth and stepped outside. It was time to meet the others.

The remarkably good-looking orderly had taken everything from him. His cell phone, his clothes, his shoe laces. That was what he got for being a bona fide crazy person, surrounded by even crazier people.

It wasn’t like he’d started the day with suicide in mind. Things had finally settled down once Sasuke moved out, and it had been an ordinary morning. He’d woken up late, skipped his first class, and binged on cereal straight out of the box. The usual. It wasn’t until he’d ventured out to the library that things began to escalate.

His thoughts always seemed to drift somewhere unpleasant when he was left under-stimulated, and try as he might, he wasn’t getting anything done. He leaned back in the chair, no closer to finishing his homework than he had been an hour ago. It wasn’t boring, exactly—he just had a hard time focusing. The semester was nearly halfway over, and what did he have to show for it? Two classes teetering towards failure, one pathetic excuse for a friend, zero motivation to improve his circumstances, negative one romantic prospects, negative two girlfriends, and countless sleepless nights.
There were times—more often lately—where he considered quitting. He could do it, just give up and go home. Iruka would welcome him with open arms. The town would eat that up, wouldn’t they? Konoha’s golden boy, the self-made bootstrap prodigy, slinking back with his tail between his legs. He couldn’t stomach the obtrusive stench of failure, the biting bile of shame.

His job wasn’t working out as well as he’d hoped. He missed making his own hours. None of his coworkers seemed to like him, except for Sai, who seemed to like him too much.

His classes weren’t much more challenging, but they did require more attention than he’d been giving them. His grades were slipping, and soon the damage would be irreparable.

He’d broken Hinata’s heart, and hearing her cry had made his chest ache for all the wrong reasons. He missed being the kind of person who cared that he’d made someone cry. The reminder of his declination hurt more than the sound of her sorrow.

The only person who didn’t hate his guts had left town. He’d helped Sakura load her car when she found all of her belongings stacked outside her apartment. To his surprise, she fully embraced the situation, going on an impromptu roadtrip. She kept in touch, sending memes and selfies here and there, but it wasn’t quite the friendship he’d had in mind after their heart-to-heart.

He hadn’t seen Sasuke since that day, but Ino was unavoidable. The Daily Grind was supposed to be a respite, but it had quickly become a game of Russian roulette. The first time he’d seen her there behind the counter, he’d turned on heel and ducked back out the door. When he finally worked up the courage to face her, she pretended she didn’t know him. Naruto apologized to her, complimented her haircut, and ordered the least complicated drink on the menu, only for her to flash him a plastic smile and ask what name she should write on the cup. He felt a spark of guilt every time he looked her in the eyes.

Naruto didn’t know what he’d do if he ever saw Sasuke again. Especially if he pulled the same stunt as Ino. He couldn’t imagine Sasuke treating him like a stranger, like nothing had ever happened between them. The mere thought sent fear coiling in his spine.

The soft ahem of the orderly brought him back to the present; he shifted under the scrutiny of pallid faces.

“This is the common area. You’ll get your breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks here. To your right is the nurses’ station, and just beyond that are the rooms. You’re in….” He checked the clipboard. “236. If you have any questions, I’m sure someone around here has answers.”

And that was it. The orderly left, abandoning Naruto to the ghostly figures at the tables before him. Hesitant, he stepped into the room and looked around. Most people had switched their gaze back to the buzzing television set, but one girl was smiling softly and waving him over. Accepting her kindness without a thought, Naruto sat down at her table and offered her an equally uneasy smile.

There was a certain reluctance, an air of disquiet shame, hanging over everyone.

“So,” Naruto began, eager to break through the fog. “What’re ya in for?”

Perhaps it was his smile or the way he waggled his eyebrows, but the girl relaxed and let out a slight chuckle. “I heard you’re not supposed to ask that around here.”

“Who’m I gonna tell? My imaginary friends?”

She laughed, then cut herself short. Her eyes widened, and Naruto shook his head.

“No, no, that was just a joke. Sorry. I’m here because of this,” he clarified, flashing his bandaged
wrist.

Her smile reminded him of Hinata’s. Weak, a mere whisper of pleasure.

“I’m here for ECT.” She didn’t meet his eyes.

“Oh, what’s that?” he asked.

“Um, electro-convulsive therapy.”

“Like…shock therapy? They still do that?” He tried to look less horrified than he felt, but judging by her expression, it hadn’t worked.

“No, no. Not exactly. Um. When medicine doesn’t work, sometimes your doctor will recommend ECTs. They, um, well. It’s like turning a computer off and on again. It can reset your brain.” She shifted in her chair.

“Oh, that’s cool,” he replied. “Does it hurt?”

“No, they put you to sleep. It does impact your memory though.”

“Neat. Huh, maybe I should give those a try.” He grinned at her, and she gave him a soft smile back.

“You’re a little young for ECTs, aren’t ya?” a man at a neighboring table asked, glancing over with a frown.

“There’s an age limit?” Naruto interjected.

“They don’t usually like to do it to young folks. How old are ya, kid? Twenty-something, I reckon.” She blushed. “I’m 27.”

“Still,” the man said. “That’s extreme.”

“No, it’s not,” she muttered.

“Can’t believe they’d let a kid do that. Risky procedure, if you ask me. No guarantees.”

Naruto looked from the girl to the man with a confused frown. He wasn’t sure whose side to take. He bit his lip, remaining silent.

“You have no idea,” she mumbled, voice trembling.

“What’s that now?”

“You have no idea! No idea what it’s like to be me! You don’t know what I’m going through, what I deal with. You can’t say what’s best for me. I’m an adult. I’m in charge of my life. I’m trying to get help. Don’t tell me what’s right for me. You don’t know!”

She stood and left, back to her room for the night. The man glanced from her retreating figure to Naruto’s concerned expression and scoffed. “Must be that time of month, eh?”

“No, I’m pretty sure you were being an asshole,” Naruto snapped.

The man huffed and turned away, leaving Naruto to his thoughts. In his experience, if someone was upset enough to shout in a public space, then you were the asshole, not them. No one really wants to
be the lunatic making a scene, after all. The last time someone had yelled at him like that, he’d
deserved it.

His phone had buzzed on the desk in the library, and he knew it had to be one of two people. Sakura
or Sai, pick your poison. He frowned but picked it up anyway, seeing Sakura’s name on the
lockscreen. Sighing, he opened it to find that his pink-haired compatriot had sent him a selfie, posing
next to a familiar face. She’d said, “Guess who I just saw on tour!”

“Haha, no way,” he wrote back.

“Gaara says hi,” she said.

Naruto put his phone away, packing up his things in silence. He would fail yet another assignment,
he’d resigned himself to it. His mind was reeling as he left the library, wandering back to his dorm
with a frown.

“Hi?” he muttered under his breath. “Who does he think he is?”

Eyes on the uneven bricks in the sidewalk, he failed to see the impending collision. Without
flinching, he barreled into two people, one of whom let out a yelp as they fell to the ground. He
immediately extended his hand, but the glare Ino gave him withered his reach. She allowed her
companion to help her to her feet instead.

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” Naruto said. His eyes flitted between her and the redheaded woman beside her.

“Watch where you’re going next time,” Ino snapped.

She turned to walk away, but Naruto grabbed her arm on impulse. “Wait, Ino, I never meant to—”
he spat out, but she cut him off.

“Save it for someone who cares. Karin and I are busy.”

“But you don’t understand. It wasn’t about you. It was about Sas—”

“Daisuke lied to you, boohoo. You know what adults do when someone hurts them? They talk about
it.”

Naruto fumbled. “He didn’t just lie. He—”

“He what? He left you? Just like everyone else in your life? Grow up.” Her tone was meaner than
he’d ever heard it. “Yeah, he left, and it nearly tore him apart. Newsflash, asshole. He didn’t just
leave you. He left his friends, his home, his life. He left his moms. Can you for one second just try to
imagine the weight of that choice for a sixteen-year-old?”

“The last time I saw him, he was being dragged out of our hotel room by a stranger, who knocked
me out cold and left me for dead on the floor. Next time I know, Tsunade and the police are hovering
over me, bombarding me with questions. They didn’t believe a word I’d said. Missing, presumed
dead. Psycho killer on the loose. That’s the story they ran with. Not me. I went to the only person
who could get me closer to the truth.”

Ino nodded, though her scowl never faltered. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. For her,
Sasuke had only been gone for two years. He’d had time to fill her in on the details, and her bitter
heart hadn’t been too steeped in resentment for the sweet truth by the time he got to her.

“Shisui helped Itachi break into Danzo’s hideout. He knew their mission was a success, but that
wasn’t good enough for me. I needed to know…that he was alright…that he… I thought, maybe, if I found him, he’d…”

“Oh my god,” Ino cut in. “You wanted to go with him. You thought you could track down a notorious gang, be reunited with your high school sweetheart, and go on the adventure of a lifetime? What is this, a YA novel? Get real.”

“I just wanted to be with him. He would’ve understood.”

He and Shisui had spent months following the clues, even after the trail went cold. Naruto daydreamed about life on the road with Sasuke so often he’d perfected the tale in his mind. He naively believed that if he wanted something badly enough, it would happen. He knew better now.

“Look, I’m so sorry that your childish romantic fantasy never panned out, but that’s not an excuse for the pathetic, heartless loser you’ve become.”

Naruto felt his eyes beginning to water. “He didn’t even let me know he was okay. He could’ve left a note, or mailed a letter. Called from a payphone.”

Ino scoffed. “A message for you, but not me, or Tsunade, or anyone else? We all mattered to him, Naruto. What makes you think you deserved that more than the rest of us?”

“I… He… We…” His blush gave him away.

“Ha, wow. Listen, you overemotional baby. Sex doesn’t make you special. It didn’t with him, and it won’t with anyone else.”

With that, she left, and he let her. He stood for a minute, watching the two of them walk away and whisper to each other in the glow of the streetlights. He let it sink in, then headed to his room.

It should’ve been fine. He didn’t have a roommate anymore, so no one would be able to reach him in time. Everything he needed was right there, within arm’s reach.

It wasn’t the notion that he’d overestimated his own importance, or that he thought he was special because of the intimacy he and Sasuke had shared. It was a culmination of things, building and building until the pressure was undeniable. All the bad thing she’d ever experienced exploded within, demanding to be felt. He didn’t see any way forward, only out. Really, what Ino had said to him had been a blessing cloaked in animosity—it snuffed out the last part of him clinging to the notion that maybe there was more to him than met the eye. Sasuke hadn’t seen something magical in him. He’d just been some dumb kid with a crush. Naruto had been a fool for thinking otherwise for so long. It was true, what he’d said to Sakura. He didn’t have anything to offer anyone. He never had.

The blade didn’t sting so much as it burned, a fire scorching across his tender skin. The jaunting thud as his body hit the floor would leave a bruise, but he wouldn’t be alive to suffer through it. The darkness was a warm embrace, enveloping him in peace.

It should’ve been fine. That should’ve been it. RIP. Here Lies Naruto Uzumaki. He Tried. End of Story.

Except for the stupid fire drill.

Campus police found him. Into the ambulance he went, saying farewell to any hope of success in his morbid endeavor.
Naruto sighed, looking around at his hospitalized companions with a frown. His wrist ached, and his hand felt numb. He’d done quite a number on himself, according to the surgeon who’d stitched him back together. Nicked the artery. His hand had been saved, but he’d damaged the nerves irreparably. His fingers felt indelibly cold, the tips like ice. No one else here had visible damaged, apart from a man in a wheelchair, and who was to say that his condition was the result of a suicide attempt. He was more alone than ever, surrounded by people who had the potential to understand him without any follow-through.

Chapter End Notes

Naruto tried to kill himself, and he would've gotten away with it too, if it weren't for those meddling kids! No, but seriously, he slit his wrists, nicked the arteries, and has nerve damage in his hands. Yoof.

okay i promise i'm not torturing naruto i love him he's my sunshine baby. this chapter was originally like a bazillion words, so i'm splitting it into three parts. part two will be out next sunday. which means, WE'RE BACK, BABY! you're welcome. regular schedule returned.

things are really starting to come to a head, so this work has maybe about ten more installations before it's officially Over. brace yourselves.

also also, if you want updates, pls follow my sns tumblr. it's narutoandsasukeweregayashell. ily.
Gaara frowned at the text message on his screen. He hadn’t expected Sakura to actually use the number he’d given her—it had been a courtesy, the sort of thing one does upon unexpectedly running into someone from high school, not a genuine attempt at rekindling an unimpressive friendship—but the content was more alarming than the concept itself.

“Have you heard from Naruto? His phone is dead, and I haven’t talked to him in days. No one on campus has seen him around, either. Call me paranoid, but I’m worried.”

She was overreacting. She had to be. He knew—or used to know—Naruto better than anyone. Sometimes the extroverted blonde would take a day or two for himself, falling off the radar. Still, he was surprised that Naruto hadn’t told Sakura of the brunt damage their friendship had taken; that she would even assume his reaching out was a possibility spoke volumes of her own fragile relationship with him. Still, he supposed he ought to call her and calm her down.

Sakura answered on the third ring, sounding out of breath. “Hello? Gaara?”

“Hello there, Ms. Haruno.”

“Thank goodness you called! I’m worried sick about Naruto. I’ve already turned around and started driving back to campus to check on him.”

“Please, calm down. He does this from time to time, distancing himself from others. Likely he just needed time to himself.” Gaara leaned back against the doorframe of the deserted Super 8, lit cigarette in hand.

“I don’t know… He sent me this really dismal text, and I haven’t been able to get ahold of him since.” He could hear her shuffling, the rattle of her engine growing louder as she placed him on speaker phone.

“What did his message say?”

“It’s a picture of a note, or a letter, I guess, in an envelope on his desk.” She paused. “It’s addressed to everyone, which is a bit vague, but then he said, ‘Tell them I’m sorry.’ And that’s what’s got me worried.”

Gaara frowned. He didn’t like to jump to conclusions, but the circumstances were reminiscent of a prior disaster—one he felt no inclination to relive. With a burning unease in his gut, he decided to
investigate Sakura’s insinuations. It didn’t take long for Iruka to answer, sounding flustered if not distressed.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mr. Umino-Hatake. It’s Gaara. How’s it going?”

“Oh, Gaara! Goodness. I really don’t have time to talk right now. Kakashi and I are on the way to the airport. I don’t suppose we’ll see you there?”

“At… the airport?”

“No, the hospital.” He waited for a moment, perhaps anticipating some sort of affirmation, but the heaviness that had blossomed in Gaara’s gut prevented him from getting any words out. “Oh, oh no. You don’t know. I thought, out of everyone, he’d… Gaara, Naruto’s in the hospital. The school called. He tried to… well, maybe it’d be better for him to tell you. You’ll come, won’t you?”

Gaara couldn’t speak. He felt the phone slip from his hand, heard it splinter on the cement and tumble down the nearby stairs. He didn’t need to hear what had happened. He could feel it in his chest. His heart knew the truth. Without a word, he hailed a cab and disappeared into the night.

It wasn’t until he was actually on the plane that he realized he had to inform Sakura of the situation. Her fears were confirmed, and he had to prepare her for the truth before she reached the city. Phoneless and agitated, he ran through everything he could’ve done different, how he could’ve prevented this tragedy, the ways he’d contributed to this outcome. If he’d tried harder, if he’d been softer, if he’d felt stronger. Naruto had kept him sane, grounded him when he’d needed it the most. And where had he been when his best friend needed him?

He bought a new phone when he landed, popping in the SIM card and powering the device up as he headed toward the exit. He’d arrived before Naruto’s guardians, and as of yet he hadn’t a clue where he was going. He shot off a text to Iruka, expecting a delayed response. Then he called Sakura.

“He’s in the hospital,” he said once the line connected. “He tried to…”

Sakura’s breath hitched, and she let out a shaky squeak. “No. He didn’t. He wouldn’t. He’s Naruto.”

“I know.”

“He’s such an optimist it’s sickening.”

“I know.”

“There’s no way he would do something like…”

He sighed. “I know.”

“And I. I just. I left him there, all by himself. Even though I knew what he was dealing with. I just never thought. He’s so strong. Naruto, of all people. God.”

“I’m on my way to a hotel downtown.”

“I’m thirty minutes out.”

“See you when you get here.”

Gaara leaned back in the seat of the cab, resting his head against the faux-leather with a pained
frown. What good was anything he’d done if he’d failed one of the only people to ever see the good in him? He closed his eyes, letting the thrum of the vehicle drown out his thoughts.

Sakura felt herself clinging, but it was an involuntary reaction. She didn’t mean to, and yet, she couldn’t will herself to stop. Gaara had tensed at her touch, or maybe at the news. Everything seemed all the more dramatic in the waiting room of a hospital, after all. Then again, she and Gaara had never been the best of friends, and the circumstances of their newfound closeness were tenuous. It was just as likely that her overbearing familiarity had caused his discomfort. She forced herself to let go of his arm, balling her hands into fists instead.

“We can’t see him, not yet,” Iruka was saying. He’s started a new sentence already, but Sakura found herself interjecting as her brain struggled to keep up.

“Why not? If he made it through the surgery okay, we ought to be able to see him.” Kakashi smirked at her outburst, but Iruka just gave her a kind smile. She could see in his eyes that he was barely holding it together, and she bit her lip to keep from saying anything more.

“The doctor said that he’s fine. The surgery was a success. He’s gonna be alright.” Iruka sighed, but his jaw stayed clenched. “They can’t tell us where he is, though.”

“What?” It was Gaara this time. He was doing a better job than her at concealing his emotions, but anyone could hear the fear in his voice. “Was he discharged? Did he leave?”

Kakashi put his arm around Iruka, pulling him into a protective embrace. He took the floor, giving his husband a chance to quietly process. “He hasn’t been discharged. He’s here. The thing is, the staff is not permitted to disclose any information about patients in the psych ward. With an attempt as obvious and brutal as Naruto’s, that’s where he’ll be. Involuntarily committed.”

Sakura felt her jaw drop. Naruto didn’t deserve to be in there with those crazies. He was just having a hard time. She closed her mouth as soon as it had opened, catching herself before she inadvertently made anyone feel worse with her words. She glanced over at Gaara, who seemed to be flickering in the fluorescents. Nearly imperceptible—he was shaking, trembling, on the verge of tears. She turned away, only to see Iruka hiding his face in Kakashi’s shoulder. Feeling suddenly responsible for keeping everyone afloat, Sakura cleared her throat and stared at Kakashi.

“So, what can we do for him? How can we help him?” She stood firm, trying to radiate strength.

Gaara let out a sharp exhale. “Yes, certainly there’s something we can do. Clothes, perhaps, or books. We can drop things off for him, right?”

“We can.” Kakashi squeezed Iruka’s arm. “We’ll go by his dorm, grab some clothes. Why don’t you two go by the library, or the bookstore, or something?”

“Sure.” Gaara nodded.

“Um, while you’re at his dorm, see if you can find the letter he left. It should be on his desk. He sent me a picture,” Sakura said.

“Oh, you know, he always liked those instructive journals. See if you two can’t get him something like that while you’re out.”

“Right. I know just the place.” Sakura grabbed Gaara by the arm and led him outside, glancing back as the husbands waited on a cab in the shadow of the building.
And then it was just her and Gaara on the back of the motorcycle he’d bought off Craigslist without a second thought. Ino had told her all about the line of journals the Daily Grind had come out with, back when they were still friends. Planners, diaries, and themed journals, with matching labels and washi tape. It’d be easier than trying to navigate the Plaza on a nice afternoon, with its array of boutiques and outlet shops. As long as they avoided the campus-adjacent location, the whole plan ought to go smoothly.

That’s what Sakura had hoped, at least, but she felt Ino’s presence before she even laid eyes on her. It was always like that, as if the air around her shifted and hummed. She heard the melodious laugh, the snippets of chatter. She gulped. “If we’re quick and quiet, we can make it in without—”

“Ms. Yamanaka, long time no see,” Gaara called out.

He didn’t know better.

“Nice haircut,” he added.

She was turning, she was smiling, she was glowing. Sakura felt herself shrink, willing herself to disappear. She wasn’t ready, it wasn’t time, things weren’t supposed to happen like this. Ino hadn’t even glanced at her. She was talking to Gaara, her eyes fixed on his. Small talk mostly. “How’s the tour,” “I downloaded your new album on Spotify,” “What brings you to town.” Gaara had just begun, his lips closing around the end of, “Oh, you hadn’t heard?”

“No!” Sakura shrieked. All eyes were on her. “Gaara, get what we came here for. Don’t tell her anything. She doesn’t need to know. She’d only make it worse.”

Gaara looked from her to Ino with a frown, but shrugged and walked inside the shop without a word.

“You sure I’m the one who’s gonna make things worse? Last time I checked that was you.” Ino was looking at her now, her eyes empty.

“You, or Daisuke, one.” Sakura clenched her fists. “God knows it’s probably partially your fault in the first place.”

“If that was supposed to make sense to me, it didn’t.” Ino glared. “How long have you been back?”

“Not long. A few days.”

“Where are you staying?” She crossed her arms over her chest, shifting weight from one leg to the other.

“Why do you care?”

“I need to know what area of town to avoid. How long are you staying?”

“Depends.”

Ino let out a harsh chuckle. “Figures. Of course you’d show up after D left.”

“Daisuke’s gone?”

“Not forever. Just for now.”

Sakura hesitated. In spite of her bitter tone and caustic expressions, Ino was worried. She could tell, she could always tell. She sighed. “I’m sure he’ll be okay. He always is.”
Ino’s frown deepened. “I don’t need your placid reassurances, Sakura. What the hell are you doing here anyway? And with Gaara, of all people?”

“You’re smart enough to know that there’s only one thing that could bring both of us here.” She dropped her gaze, stuffed her hands into the pockets of her sweatpants.

“What, is Naruto throwing himself a pity party?”

“Have you seen him lately?”

“Not since he ran into me and Karin last week, but I’d be avoiding me too if I were him.” She smirked. “You know, I don’t think anyone’s ever been honest with him before.”

Sakura’s breath caught in her throat. She knew what Ino’s honesty looked like, how she weaponized it at any perceived slight. She’d been there to pick up the pieces of the girls Ino’d sent sobbing to the bathroom, quell the anger of every boy Ino’d chewed up and spit out, apply a social salve to every person who’d ever done the wrong thing in the presence of the wrathful goddess herself. Temari, Lee, Haku, Hinata, Kiba, Shino, Shikamaru—she couldn’t think of a single person Ino hadn’t wrecked with her words. She shuddered to think what Ino had unleashed on Naruto, given how deeply he’d managed to hurt her.

“Ino, he’s… He’s in the hospital.” She’d been holding it together so well, but running into Ino had been one stressor too many. She felt herself crumpling, hot tears on her cheeks. Squatting on the sidewalk, hugging her knees to her chest, she took breath after shaky breath.

“What happened?” Ino asked. “Is he alright?”

“I don’t know,” she choked. “They won’t let us see him.”

She could feel the chaotic tension emanating out of Ino, her indecision. She squatted down next to Sakura, unsure of what to do with her hands.

“He’s gonna be okay. He’s strong. Resilient.”

“He’s a human being, Ino. He’s a person. He makes mistakes. Just like me. Just like you.” Sakura hadn’t intended to sound so venomous, but it wasn’t easy, holding all of it in.

“Yeah.” She stared at her thumbs. “I know.”

“We’re allowed to make mistakes. We’re allowed to fuck up.” She wasn’t sure who she was talking to anymore, Ino or herself.

“If you see Naruto, tell him… Tell him his friend, Shisui, is in trouble. Okay?” Ino stood up.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. D left with his brother, but I haven’t heard from them in days.” Ino offered her hand, and Sakura took it, pulling herself up to stand. “Tell Naruto, um, tell him I’m sorry, too.”

Sakura nodded, letting Ino return to her friends without another word. She couldn’t stop the tears as they streaked down her face, but she tried to clean herself up a bit as Gaara came out. He handed her a plastic shopping bag, and they climbed onto his bike, speeding off into the horizon.

Iruka and Kakashi stared at the dorm room in horror. Was no one going to clean up the scene: mop
up the blood, dispose of the razor? Did they expect him to do it once he’d returned? Iruka blanched. The sight of the dried blood on the bathroom tile made him nauseous. He looked to his husband, who simply nodded—Kakashi understood what Iruka wanted without words. He wanted the same.

Naruto wasn’t the cleanest person. He never had been. But the state of the room screamed depression, even without the bloodied razor. A blanket bunched up at the head of the bed, serving as a pillow. A single sheet, tossed haphazardly across the bare mattress. Clothes piled up everywhere—the chair, the floor, the dresser. Take out boxes littered the tiny room, everything from pizza to Chinese. Only the other side, his old roommate’s side, remained immaculate, if dusty.

“Do you think he’ll stay here?” Iruka asked, sorting the laundry.

“I’m surprised you’re asking. I thought for sure you’d knock him unconscious and drag him back to Konoha.” Kakashi had finished in the bathroom. He was gathering the trash, eyeing Iruka curiously.

“Naruto knows he’ll always have a home with us. He’s an adult now, though. He’s gotta make his own decisions.”

Kakashi set the box of decrepit fried rice down. “I think the current circumstances make it clear that eh can’t handle that responsibility.”

“Sure, we could take him back, kicking and screaming, but you know as well as I do that he won’t get better unless he chooses to.”

Iruka held up the shirt he’d found, stuffed under the mattress. The blue flannel had been his favorite when he was in high school, so soft and thin. He remembered how Naruto would wear it to bed, though he’d hardly ever seen him wear it out. Surely Naruto would want something comforting now, in this dark hour. He added the shirt to the pile of clothes he’d be taking.

“Was it school, do you think?” Iruka asked, eyeing the notebooks splattered on the floor.

“Probably a lot of things. You remember last time,” Kakashi answered. “Things like this are never cut and dry.”

“Last time, it made sense. I mean, as much as these things can make sense. We’d been expecting… some kind of reaction, at least. His best friend died. That would make anyone do something drastic.” He looked at the mounds of sorted clothes around him, glimpsing for a brief moment what kind of overwhelmed Naruto might’ve been feeling. Even something as simple as doing laundry could become emotionally laborious under the right conditions.

“It makes sense now, too. I love him, but that kid has problems. Moving away from his support network, starting at such an elite school. It’s a tough adjustment,” Kakashi said.

“He was doing so well. Therapy, that sweet little girlfriend of his. He’d quit all the drinking and drugging. He was… God, he was doing so much better.” More than anything in the world, he wished he could hold Naruto in his arms, tell him that it would all be okay.

Kakashi sighed, leaning against the bedframe near his husband. “I think there’s a lot Naruto hasn’t told us. Maybe he doesn’t want to disappoint us, or maybe we’ve made him feel like it’s better for him to keep quiet. I don’t know.”

Iruka sighed, shaking his head. “I hope he gives us the chance to be better for him.”

Chapter End Notes
If you read the last chapter and it said "hands/wrists" as in plural as in both appendages are damaged, I'm sorry, that's an error, and I corrected it. It's just one hand...wrist...arm....thing. Yeah. Anyway.

Hope y'all enjoy this update! As well as my re-found consistency.
AFTER they say an end can be a start (part 3)

Chapter Summary

Naruto struggles with his identity and trauma, but he's not the only one being held involuntarily.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How many days has it been? I've lost count. Itachi would know, but Itachi isn't here. I hope he made it out okay.

Naruto jolted upright in bed, vaguely aware of the shadowy presence of his psychiatrist enveloped by the curtain. He'd gotten used to her arriving in the wee hours, waking him with gentle pressure on his shoulder. She'd put him on Celexa about a week ago, and he wasn't sure it'd done him any good. He'd argued with her at first--no one had ever diagnosed him with anything, so there was no reason to medicate him. She'd told him that neurotypical people don't have multiple suicide attempts on their docket.

"How are you today, Uzumaki?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Alright, I guess. I don't think this medicine is working, though. I don't feel any different." His fingers twitched, the involuntary movement causing him to tense in response. The tightening of his muscles made his wrist ache.

"Give it time. Antidepressants aren't magical happy pills. They're trying to correct a distribution error." She made notes on her clipboard, glancing up at him as she finished.

"What if...what if I don't want to be on meds? What if I just want to feel better?" Naruto asked.

"Honey, if that's how it worked, wouldn't you've just done that already?" She offered him a tight smile, professional concern. "If you could stop being depressed, wouldn't you? You didn't choose to feel this way. Your brain just isn't getting what it needs to make you feel better."

Naruto sighed. "Yeah, okay."

"It's not your fault, but it is--"

"My responsibility. I know. Thanks, doc. See you tomorrow," he said.

That was all anyone said around here. His psychiatrist, his therapists, the nurses, the patients. Even
Kurotsuchi, the woman getting ECTs, had reiterated the phrase once or twice. "It's not your fault, but it is your responsibility," had become the "it is what it is," "que sera sera," "c'est la vie," of Ground. At first, it had been moving, powerful—an inspiration call to arms. At this point, though, he was growing tired of hearing about his responsibilities.

It wasn't his fault that his parents died, but it was his responsibility to deal with his grief. It wasn't his fault Mother had abused him, but it was his responsibility to reparent himself. It wasn't his fault he was like this, but he was the only one in a position to do something about it. He groaned into the pillow, annoyed with the weight of it all.

_There's no light down here. Sometimes the guard will light a candle, I think, because it flickers, but the darkness is constant. It's easy to lose track of time in a place like this. Easy to lose track of sanity, too._

He laid awake, staring at the wall, until Mei came knocking. She led the group therapy sessions, and she was the one who'd done his intake paperwork. Usually he met with her for individual counselling, but she'd been busy lately. She was the only one he felt certain could really help him, though, so he resigned himself to waiting. For now, that meant attending the morning meeting.

Mornings always started the same around here. Something about routine benefiting those with more neurodivergent proclivities. Mei would come knocking down the hall, and the patients would traipse off to the common area. Mei would lead everyone in meditation and yoga, and then the patients would play a game. The game mechanics would switch every so often, but the purpose stayed the same. A patient needed to regurgitate a rule—no smoking, for instance—and an affirmation—"I am strong," or the like—upon their turn. Initially, Naruto had sucked at the game, not understanding what constituted an affirmation. He'd say things like, "I'm empathetic," or "I'm likable;" Mei explained on more than one occasion that the statements shouldn't be oriented around others, but he struggled with finding anything positive to say about himself.

After the game came breakfast, then art and occupational therapy. Lunch followed, causing Naruto no end of problems. Breakfast was usually a simple, one-handed ordeal, but lunch and dinner were more complex endeavors. He wasn't a fan of the afternoon group therapy, but the days always ended with his favorite—somatic movement therapy. It was almost enjoyable enough to keep him from having a breakdown during dinner. His fingers refused to close around the plasticware, which meant he couldn't rely on himself to do basic tasks. The orderlies had already threatened to put him on a liquid diet if his consumption didn't improve. Naruto was determined not to show weakness, though, and he tried to make it through each meal in spite of his bum hand.

_It could be worse. There's a mattress on the floor, and something akin to a bathroom in the corner. The jagged cement walls and barred ceiling are a constant reminder of my predicament, though. Perhaps this place used to be a well. I don't know._

"Let's talk about your history of suicide attempts, if you're comfortable with that," Mei began, taking a seat next to Naruto in the courtyard.

He stared at the small pond in the center, not bothering to acknowledge her. "It was just the one other
"What happened, Naruto?"

"Oh, you know. Bad stuff piled up. Existence became overwhelming. I didn't feel like I could do it anymore." He shrugged.

"Do what, exactly?"

He glanced at her, frowning. "Live. Under those conditions."

"Tell me about the conditions."

Mei always tried to cut to the chase. Part of working in this type of environment, he supposed. She wanted answers. That's how she helped people.

"Everybody thinks it's because Sasuke disappeared. I was in love with him, so I guess it makes sense for them to think that. But I didn't try to kill myself over Sasuke... over a boy. That's not who I am. It was just, everything, y'know? I wasn't doing well in school, I'd lost touch with my friends... Every day I just felt more and more like another unlovable fucked up kid with dead parents. I don't know. I had to replace the windshield on my car. My replacement dad started dating someone and didn't have time to deal with my teen angst like he used to. I lost my cell phone. It was all this small stuff, on top of all the big stuff. It just felt like too much."

Mei nodded, taking notes. "Have you heard of Zeno's paradox?" She waited, continuing once he'd shook his head. "Let's say you shoot an arrow at a target. We can both agree that before the arrow makes it to the target, it has to make it halfway, right? And before it can make it halfway, it has to make it a quarter. And an eighth. And so on, infinitely. People with depression often find the simplest of tasks, of situations, of experiences to be overwhelming. Like taking a shower. Before you can go to the bathroom, you've got to get out of bed. Before you get out of bed, you have to remove the covers. And so on. Zeno was talking about mathematics, but he may as well have been explaining depression."

"So you're saying I got overwhelmed by all that stuff because I'm mentally fucked up?" Naruto laughed.

"Neurologically, but more or less. One thing I noticed, though, was how much you downplayed your friend's disappearance. I understand that you feel like that experience's contribution to your depressive episode wasn't any more or less than the other things you were dealing with, but it sounds to me like you blame yourself." Mei stared at him, unwavering.

"I used to think that maybe if I had been... different, maybe he would've stayed. I know better now. I was never enough for anybody. Wasn't even close."

"I think you've got a lot of resentment built up, Naruto. And you're trying to pass it off as self-loathing, but deep down I think you know better." She shifted next to him, clearing her throat. "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to write a letter from Sasuke to you. I won't be here this weekend, but come Monday I expect you to have finished. Okay?"

"What, you're giving me homework now?" he whined. "What good is dwelling on the past going to do me anyway?"

"The first step to healing is being honest with yourself." Mei's smile was cold, practiced, but her eyes were kind. "Have a nice weekend, Naruto."
"Yeah, you too."

*They're not going to kill me. I know how this works. I've been bait before.*

"Dear Naruto," he wrote, then scratched it out.

"No, no, no. That's not how Sasuke would do it at all," he muttered.

Naruto sat crosslegged in the grass, notebook and marker balanced in his lap. No pens allowed, not here. It felt good to be wearing his own clothes again, even if it reminded him to feel guilty. He could call Iruka, Kakashi, everyone, if he chose to. At the very least he could add them to the approved incoming call list at the nurses' station. It had been jarring, receiving a bundle of clothes and books from his family; the whole thing was a flashing neon countdown clock, telling him that the world hadn't stopped for him and he wasn't nearly as removed from it as he felt. Talking to them seemed out of the question, an immediate re-immersion into the real world. He needed the peace of this place a little longer.

He'd put on the blue flannel over his X Files t-shirt, hoping it would help him with his homework assignment, but so far he'd covered the page in meaningless scribbles. Naruto pulled his gaze from the sky overhead and forced himself to focus on the fabric. He tried to recall that night, the arcade, his Jeep, Sasuke's crumpled shirt lying abandoned in the passenger seat. He wanted to put himself inside Sasuke, to parse through the boy's feelings, but every attempt to humanize him just made Naruto step closer to a barrier he'd erected within himself, one made of anger and hate. He'd written things like, "None of it was real," and "I could barely tolerate you," only to cross them out. Maybe he just didn't want to understand Sasuke; maybe the anger he felt had come to define him.

*At least Itachi got away. I can be thankful for that. Shisui had to drag him, I'm sure, but they're safe. They have to be. It's the only thing that gives me peace of mind.*

Mei held the paper in her hands, eyes scanning the lines. She'd asked him to read it aloud, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not yet. She cleared her throat and said, "Put yourself in his shoes. Be him. Be Sasuke. Feel how he felt."

Naruto took a deep breath, grabbing the paper from her outstretched hand. "Naruto," he said. Sasuke would never use a paltry greeting. "I know what you're expecting me to say. That none of it mattered, that the feelings between us weren't real. You want to be angry with me, to make me the bad guy, because you think it'll put distance between you and the hurt you feel. But I won't lie to you just to help you hate me. The truth is, running from you was easy. I have a litany of excuses--I wanted to keep my family safe, I missed my brother, I'd been living someone else's lie for too long. And while none of those excuses are false, they only tell a portion of the truth. I ran because I was scared. I hope some day you can forgive me, but that desire is selfish. I want to see myself as a good person, as someone who'd done the right thing, but I know I can't begin to make up for the pain I've caused. My friends, my family, you. How many people had to get caught in the crossfire before I realized the damage I'd wrought? I told myself I was picking the lesser of two evils, but I have no way of knowing that's true. Maybe I am the bad guy after all."
Things aren't black and white. Good, bad--what's the use of such indiscriminate labels? Everything is gray, a mixture of right and wrong, scaled according to intent and damage. Danzo orchestrating the murder of my parents? Dark gray. His clean water initiative for the city of Konoha? Light gray. People aren't good or bad. It's the choices.

Naruto took a cab back to his dorm. Two weeks he'd spent recovering, isolated from the world. He didn't feel ready to be back, to jump in where he'd left off, but he needed to move forward. He couldn't stay stuck in the same place, not anymore. He'd go back to Konoha, live with Iruka and Kakashi. Assuming they forgave him for not calling. He'd need to see a physical therapist for his hand, a psychiatrist for his head, and a behavioral therapist for his heart. It wouldn't be easy, but if he didn't repair the damage, no one else would.

Naruto was surprised to find his room tidy, though the shock was quickly replaced with guilt. As he looked around the spotless organization of his belongings, Naruto withdrew his phone from the pocket of his sweatpants and finally turned it back on. A few texts, some missed calls, and social media notifications lit up his screen, but it was hardly the overwhelming onslaught he'd been fearing. With a sigh, he dialed Iruka.

He wants to kill us both, to finish what he started. That's his goal, I'm sure of it. As long as Itachi stays away, he can't win.

Chapter End Notes

insert me screaming endlessly in excitement about the impending chapters here
AFTER a truth so loud you can’t ignore

Chapter Summary

Naruto does something stupid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER a truth so loud you can’t ignore

Bad Moon Rising blared through the speakers of his Jeep as Naruto pulled out of the parking lot. He pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose with the back of his hand and took a sip of the slushie he’d purchased at the gas station. He’d bought a pack of menthols on impulse, a belated apology of sorts. He had no intention of seeing Sasuke or giving him the cigarettes, but when he saw them hanging above the clerk’s head in the display, he couldn’t stop himself. He felt like he needed them; he didn’t ruminate on it, just letting things happen as they did.

The sun set behind him—he glanced at it in the rearview mirror before pulling into the driveway. Naruto grabbed the bag of goodies and headed inside, beelining for his bedroom. It wasn’t that he wanted to avoid his dads, not really. It was just that they had become so enthusiastic since he got out of the hospital, and their incessant validation felt less than genuine, though he knew they were just trying to be supportive.

“Oh, Naruto, you’re back!” Iruka called out, peering at him from the kitchen doorway.

“So close,” Naruto muttered. He turned on the stairs and gave the man an awkward smile. “Uh, yeah. Just pulled in.”

“Did you have a good time?” Iruka didn’t seem to notice his discomfort.

“At the gas station? Sure, it was fine,” he replied.

“What did you get?”

“Just some snacks, new aux cable. Nothing much.” He turned, ready to go back up to his room.

“Kakashi and I are going out to a late dinner with Shizune and her wife tonight, if you want to come. I know they’d love to see you.”

Naruto blanched. The last people he should see right now were Tsunade and Shizune. They were even more out of the loop than his dads. He shook his head, saying, “No thanks, I’ve got plans with Sakura.”

“Oh.” Iruka paused, raising his eyebrows. “Are you two…”?

“Ew, no. She’s just a friend.”
“I’m just asking! Have a nice time,” Iruka said.

“Yeah, you too.”

Naruto disappeared into his room, trying to fend off the rise of annoyance he felt. He knew Iruka just wanted to be there for him. He just didn’t know how to deal with that anymore. He sent a quick “what’s up” text to Sakura and sat on his bed, pulling up Animal Crossing on his Wii. It was the only thing he could play one-handed without getting stressed out.

Sakura called him, like he knew she would. She wasn’t much for texting. “Hey,” he answered, squeezing the phone to his ear with his shoulder.

“Hi, Naruto. How’s it going?” she greeted.

“Eh, kind of bored. Father Iruka invited me to get dinner with Sasuke’s moms, so I told him we had plans,” he said.

“Didn’t wanna tell him about your big night of video gaming and binge-eating?” She snickered.

“Rude. Anyway, you wanna hit the diner and grab some dinner?”

“Sure, let me just get out of dress-shopping with my mom,” she replied. Muffling the phone, she said, “Hey, Mom, I’m going to dinner with Naruto—just get me whatever. No, I don’t care. She’s not my sister. I’m only going because you told me I had to. No, I’m not worried about looking fat, Mom. Jeez.”

“Wedding or funeral?” Naruto asked.

“Wedding. My aunt. I’m considering showing up in sweatpants and a t-shirt,” she grumbled. Then, “No, Mom, I won’t really wear sweatpants. It was just a joke. I’m leaving now, bye!”

“Sounds like your mom hasn’t changed a bit,” he commented.

“Yeah, she’s just as negative as always. Sakura, you’ve gained weight. Sakura, I don’t like that haircut on you. Sakura, stop standing like a lesbian.” She sighed. “It’s times like this where I miss Ino. At least she never lowered my self-esteem on purpose.”

“Yeah, fuck moms,” he said. “Dads, too. Fuck parents.”

“Fucking parents got us here in the first place,” she laughed. “Want me to pick you up?”

“On that pink monstrosity? No thank you. I’ll swing by yours in a few.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like my mom. Sakura, I don’t understand why you would waste your paycheck on a motorcycle, blah blah blah,” she said.

“That thing barely counts as a motorcycle and you know it,” he retorted. “See you soon.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said.

He pulled into her driveway right after she did, and she hopped off her electric bike in a flash. Sakura climbed in and took the aux out of his phone. The diner wasn’t far from her home, just a song and a half away, and the parking lot was relatively deserted when they arrived. The two of them made their way to a booth in the back, ordering their usual fare.

“How’ve you been lately? Adjusting okay?” Sakura asked.
“For the most part. The dadly duo is getting on my nerves, though,” he replied. “I guess I forgot how to be around people who give a shit about me.”

She chuckled a bit, shrugging as she said, “Yeah, well, sign me up for those problems. If I have to endure another one of my mom’s attempts at caring, I think I’ll blow my brains out.” She choked on the words, too late to stop them from falling out of her mouth. “Sorry, that was insensitive.”

Naruto shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Expecting you to not stick your foot in your mouth is a losing battle.”

“I’m getting better, thank you very much.” She flipped him off. “Speaking of getting better, your hand is looking… Functional.”

The stitching attracted a lot of unwanted attention now that the gauze was gone. He rolled his eyes and tried to close his fist, but his fingers wouldn’t curl correctly. “Functional? Not so much.”

“Just give it time,” she said.

“Easy for you to say. Do you know how hard it is to shower one-handed? Or put on clothes? Or eat, for fuck’s sake? The only thing worse than trying to cut a steak is having Iruka do it for me like I’m a child.” Naruto’s words had barely any bite in them; even though he was frustrated by his circumstance, he was no longer storing up anger to unleash on impulse.

“Okay, but would you really rather not eat the steak? I mean, what’s more childish—accepting help from your parents or having a hissy fit because you can’t get your way?” She smirked over her glass of water.

“Pick a side, Sakura! Are you wise or are you a dumbass? You can’t keep hopping the fence like this.”

“I like to think of myself as a high-functioning dumbass,” she answered.

Naruto smiled, shaking his head. He finished off the milkshake he’d ordered, eyeing Sakura across the booth. Perhaps it was the impact of his jump-started recovery process, or maybe it was the way she’d shown up for him in his time of need, but he was genuinely proud of her. In the time since she’d left Ino, Sakura had reevaluated every aspect of herself, intent on repairing the things that she didn’t like. The first thing to go had been the makeup; for someone who had been so obsessed with her physical appearance, quitting a hobby that had become so toxic for her was huge. She’d abandoned contacts in favor of basic glasses, and her hair was always pulled out of her face nowadays. The most amazing part was how much happier and more at ease she seemed.

“I like your hair that way,” he said.

“It’s literally just a headband, but okay. Thanks,” she replied. “I like the douchebag fuckboy look you’ve got going on.”

“What about my hand doesn’t work and I can’t put on clothes with buttons anymore do you not understand?”

“Oh yeah, because the sunglasses and the ten-dollar fade weren’t aesthetic choices you consciously made.”

He rolled his eyes. “Touche. Let’s get out of here—it’s getting late.”

“Do you wanna go up to the overpass? I don’t really wanna go home and deal with my mom,”
Sakura asked as they left the diner.

“Sure, it’s not like I have anything better to do,” he said.

Naruto parked on the side of the road near the overpass, taking the sunglasses off the top of his head and setting them in the glove box. He went to close it, but Sakura stopped him, grabbing the pack of cigarettes from the compartment. He could feel the question before she’d even asked, his cheeks burning.

“Since when do you smoke?”

“I don’t,” he said, not looking at her.

“Menthols, huh? Don’t tell me—”

“Then don’t ask.”

“Naruto,” she whined. “Are you serious?”

He sighed. “I wasn’t going to actually, like, give them to him or anything.”

“That’s even worse! You just bought them because they reminded you of him? Because he likes them?”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know, Sakura. I feel like shit about everything, and sometimes I just do things that I know are going to make me sad. Like buy a pack of menthols or stay up all night listening to garbage music. Leave me alone.” He snatched the box out of her hands, putting it and the note he’d slipped inside of it in the chest pocket of his tank top.

“Don’t dwell on the past, dude. If you get the chance to apologize for what happened, you should, but dwelling on it won’t make things any better,” she said.

“When I was in the hospital, I…” He paused, eyeing her uneasily. “I realized that I’d built this wall, you know, between me and my feelings, and now that I’ve put the fire out, all I’m left with is what’s real.”

“Can you, like, not mix metaphors?”

“Nope. Look, what I’m trying to say is, I’m still in love with him. Fuck.” He sighed. “I buried that shit. I put all this hatred and anger between me and those feelings, and my therapist in the hospital, like, doused me in stop-being-a-dumb-bitch juice. I don’t know.”

“I’m glad you’re not, like, entirely composed of barely concealed rage anymore and all, but are you sure you’re not just mistaking what you’re feeling?”

“I don’t know anything for sure, dude, but I’m like 95% certain that my garbage heart is filled with real, genuine love for Sasuke fuckin Uchiha,” Naruto said. “And I definitely fucked that up beyond repair, so. Does it even matter, really? Just let me do dumb stuff like buy menthols and cry over my mistakes.”

Sakura sighed. “I mean, I feel that. Just, you know, don’t do what I did. Last time I saw Ino, I just had a mental breakdown on the sidewalk. I didn’t even apologize. I just sat there crying like an idiot.”

“When was that?” he asked. Sakura hardly ever talked about Ino or how she felt about all that had transpired between them.
“I ran into her when Gaara and I were getting you those books and stuff.” She hesitated, eyes widening. “Uh, actually, she wanted me to tell you something.”

“Ino did? Tall, lesbian, blonde Ino? The one who went to the same high school as us? That Ino? Had something to say to me?” he retorted. “What was it, oh by the way, tell Naruto if he comes near Sasuke again I’ll castrate him myself?”

“Not quite,” Sakura said. “She wanted me to tell you she’s sorry, uh, that you got hurt. I guess. Or maybe for being a bitch to you. She didn’t clarify.”

“That’s…weird.”

“Yeah, and that’s not all. She said that Sasuke and Itachi vanished a while ago because someone named… uh, Shisui? Was in trouble. They’re completely off the grid now, I guess.” She shrugged.

Naruto’s heart plummeted to his stomach. If Shisui was in trouble, there was only one person who could be responsible. And if Sasuke had gone on a rescue mission, all of the Uchihas might really be dead. “How long?” he demanded. “How long have they been gone?”

“Jeez, that was like… nearly a month ago? I think,” Sakura replied, shifting in the seat. “How do you even know Shisui, anyway?”

“He and I looked for them together, after they escaped Danzo.” Naruto started the car, ignoring her protests. He continued, “Shisui understood what I was going through more than anyone. He’s got it bad for Itachi, man. I thought I was a lovestruck fool, but that guy? He’d rather die than see something bad happen to Itachi.” He was rambling now, drowning out Sakura’s queries about where they were going and why with his own voice. “I’ve never met him. Itachi, I mean. But to hear the way Shisui talks about him, it’s like he doesn’t even mind being blind because he’d gotten to spend the first like twenty years of his life looking at Itachi. I mean, could you imagine feeling something so pure? The guy makes me look like a fucking incubus, preying on Itachi’s younger brother.”

Sakura got out when they arrived at her house, a puzzled expression on her face. She bid him goodnight, and he waited until she closed the front door behind her to drive off.

He had a knack for making impulsive decisions, that much had always been true, and maybe he’d regret what he was about to do, but he doubted it. Naruto knew there was only one place he’d find answers, only one way for him to help, and only one person to blame. He parked a few blocks away, pulling his favorite orange hoodie out of the backseat. As far as he was concerned, it was lucky, and he needed all the luck he could get. After all, Danzo might have him killed on the spot for breaking into his house.

Chapter End Notes

okay i think i said there would be like five more chapters in after and then that'd be it but i lied i’m a liar i can't help it i just keep coming up with more shit for this story lmao
AFTER the bad guy (duh)

Chapter Summary

Naruto might not be the savior Sasuke wanted, but he’s definitely effective.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER the bad guy (duh)

It was the shouting that woke me. A cacophonous clatter echoed throughout the room above me, and I bolted upright on the mattress. Dazed from sleep, I tried to focus on the sounds, to make out the words, but before anything could register in my mind, the bars of the ceiling opened.

“Get in there, you brat,” one of the guards barked. He shoved someone over the edge.

Quick as I could, I rolled off the mattress. Odds were, that’s where they’d land. There wasn’t a lot of space in the hole. It wasn’t a long fall, but I wouldn’t want them to break something landing wrong. I’d been unconscious when they dumped me in, but this guy wasn’t so lucky. He landed with a thud on the mattress, arms outstretched as if grasping for an invisible hold. The landing knocked the wind out of him, and he laid there grasping for breath as the flickering candlelight disappeared.

My sight adjusted before his, but he spoke first. My words were caught in my throat, tangled amid the vocal cords. He sat up, staring at me with a furrowed brow. My mind was screaming, “No, no, not him, not him. He can’t be here.”

“You’re not Shisui,” he said quietly, the way someone might murmur “oops, wrong way,” while trying to find directions as they walked along.

“He and Itachi escaped,” I replied.

Tension hung in the air, immobilizing us.

“Bullshit. They wouldn’t leave you behind,” he said, standing up and examining his meager surroundings. His gaze rested on me, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

I couldn’t move. He was here, really here. Fuck. Any part of me that was glad to see the familiar face was quashed by the abundant fear—Danzo would kill him. “Why are you here?” I snapped.

“Did you miss the part where that guard threw me down this hole or what?”

“No, Naruto. Why are you here? This isn’t your fight,” I told him. I’d spent my time down here mostly devoid of emotion, but he always knew how to draw my feelings out.

“Figured I ought to prevent the genocide of a family,” he retorted. “Shisui was my friend, anyway. He was there for me when you vanished. I wanted to help.”
I could tell he was parsing his words, biting his tongue. There was more he wanted to say, more he felt, but he stayed silent. Shrugging, I replied, “Too little, too late. You’re stuck here with me instead.”

“It’s always you, isn’t it?” He chuckled, but I got the feeling that nothing was really funny.

Fists clenched at my sides, I scowled and asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

For a moment, I was certain he would take a swing at me. Unresolved conflicts bubbling to the surface; there was no hiding from the feelings anymore, not here. Instead, though, he leaned back against the wall and slid down into a lackadaisical squat. He laughed to himself, boisterous and genuine. I approached him with caution, but my heart stopped when he looked up at me with a grin I hadn’t seen in years.

“It’s just, I mean, of course it’s you. I wind up sharing a DIY jail cell with Sasuke Uchiha. Go figure. The universe has some sense of humor.” He shook his head in bemusement and patted the space next to him. “Sit on down, teme. We’re gonna be here a while.”

Against my better judgement, I did as I was told. Sitting next to him, in his orange hoodie and dark sweatpants, I got the strangest itch of déjà vu. I could almost see it, him and me, side by side, as the night sky stretched out above us. I’d dreamt about him, exclusively, while I’d been here. Just flashes, really—his golden hair glimmering in the sun, the brightness of his eyes—but it’d made me uneasy. I felt it now, that same discomfort rising to the surface. He could feel me stiffen beside him, my tense retreat clear. He turned to face me, shifting his torso and toppling a knee to get comfy.

“I figured some things out, I think,” he said. “But maybe you can clear some stuff up for me.”

“Hn,” I grunted. I considered asking what made him think I owed him any clarity at all, but I wasn’t interested in fighting with him. Not again, not ever.

Naruto stood up, pulling his hoodie overhead before sitting back down. His body was smaller than I remembered, seemingly shrunken and diminished. He’d lost weight, lost muscle, lost himself recently—and he’d found something too. A series of zigzag stitches formed a line down his left wrist. The injury was fresh, barely a few weeks old. He paid no attention to my cursory inspection as he dug something out of the pocket of his tank top with his unscarred hand. He held out a cigarette box with a slip of folded paper sticking out.

I moved to my knees, glancing from him to the note. He expected me to take it from him, to open and read it, to respond to whatever queries it posited. Instead, I grabbed his other hand, twisting myself toward him to prevent any pain. A whine escaped his throat, but I ignored it, studying the wound with a critical eye. Old habits die hard, it seemed.

“Oh, yeah. That. I would’ve come sooner, but I was a bit preoccupied.” He was embarrassed. I could feel the heat coming off of him.

“Did you think you’d be more useful to Shisui as a ghost?” I was scowling, I couldn’t help it.

“Actually, I thought I’d more useful to everybody if I was dead.” Naruto shrugged, pulling his arm from my slackened grip. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sasuke. It’d been a long time since I’d felt happy. Normal, even. And everything just kept piling up—”

“And you kept refusing to sort it.”

He smiled, quick and small. “I didn’t know how, I think. To sort it. It was piling up faster than I could learn.”
“Not that you’ve ever been an especially fast learner anyway,” I muttered.

“Fuckin’ teme,” he laughed, giving me a playful shove. “Here, take it.”

Frowning, I took the cigarettes from him. Had he bought me a pack of smokes? For what purpose?

“You didn’t even bring a lighter,” I said, pulling the folded paper out of the carton.

“To be fair,” he said as I unraveled the letter, “I didn’t think you’d be lighterless and in captivity.”

His sloppy scrawl was only legible because of how big the letters were. My eyes strained to make out the words; if they hadn’t been penned in marker, I doubt I would’ve been able to see them at all.

“What is this?” I asked, mumbling the words under my breath as I read along. I had been anticipating an apology letter, or a suicide note, but leave it to Naruto to subvert my expectations. “I didn’t write this.”

“No, you didn’t. I did. It was a homework assignment from my therapist while I was hospitalized.”

He hesitated, then barged on, the words falling from his lips like a torrent of rain. “I guess what I want to know, really, is if I was right. At all. I mean, is any of that true?”

If I had been asked that morning what I least expected to happen during my imprisonment today, the answer would’ve surely been this exact situation, plus or minus an alien invasion. I scanned the page again, thinking about his question. “I probably would’ve said antagonist or villain, as opposed to bad guy.”

He stared at me blankly for a moment before breaking into a grin. “Litany was on point though, right? I remembered it from one of those poems you liked.”

I rolled my eyes, suppressing a smile. “I had no idea you were a mind-reader. But there is something I would’ve made clear, had I written such a note.” And I had, written such notes. Many of them. Never delivered.

“Oh, what’s that?” he asked.

His face, shrouded in darkness, leaned in toward mine, eyes searching. I bit my lip, trying to be cautious with my words. I said, “What scared me was seeing you get hurt because of me. I couldn’t let that happen again, no matter what.”

If this were a movie, perhaps here is where our better-looking actors would kiss. I could feel it, in the intensity of his stare and the pounding of my heart. My life is anything but a movie, though. Naruto let out a wry chuckle, more sardonic and bitter than his prior peals. His smile felt weary.

“I guess it would’ve been too much to ask of you, protecting me from myself.” He laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Who needs a serial killing mayor when you’ve got major depressive disorder?”

I watched him yawn and sit on the bed, looking around the sparse cell with a slight smile. Sighing, I leaned against the wall and said, “You’re exhausted. You’ve been through a lot. Get some rest, and I’ll wake you in a few hours to trade places.”

“Sounds good,” he replied. He tugged off his pants and shoes, bundling up his hoodie to use as a pillow. Naruto curled up on his side, knees to chest, and fell asleep.

There were too many thoughts bouncing around in my head for me to sleep. Lately, I’d been thinking that maybe the Naruto I’d loved so dearly was one I’d made myself, crafted from bits and
pieces of memories. Perhaps he’d never been the beacon of light and goodness I’d seen in him. Seeing him here, now, like this, though, I doubted that resolve. He was an idiot, and obnoxious, too, but the Naruto I’d been in love with had seen so much evil only to come out so kind. He’d overcome so much—he’d been hurt time and again, but he never let that turn him cold or cruel. That was real, that happened; it wasn’t a fantastic misremembrance. I knew it to be true. Somewhere along the way, though, I suppose he stopped knowing how to take the good out of the bad. He lost his magic, and with it, his sense of self. I wondered what had taken it from him—what had been so awful that he started reflecting the bad he’d gotten?—and I hoped it hadn’t been me.

It wasn’t the first time I’d wondered if leaving had been the right decision. Was Naruto right for suggesting that the amount of pain I’d caused made me the bad guy, not just for him but for everyone I cared about? How would they feel, knowing I was still alive? Knowing that I’d lied to them? If Naruto wanted so badly to hate me, what was stopping anyone else? They would all hate me for what I’d done, for hurting them. I had no one but myself to blame.

I went to wake him after what I could only guess had been a few hours. I needed sleep to quiet my restless mind, having had my fill of reflective self-punishment. Naruto wasn’t budging—he groaned and swatted my hand away before rolling over. Annoyed, I crawled onto the mattress beside him, facing the wall. I’d be damned if I was going to let him take my sleep from me by virtue of being a brat.

Naruto was a cuddler. I knew he was a cuddler, and yet I still laid down beside him. I had done this to myself, I realized, as I awoke to find his body lazily strewn atop mine with his head on my chest. It took me a moment to react: I was having a hard time processing the weight of him against me, the smell of his hair under my nose, the feel of his skin on my fingers. Cursing under my breath, I made for the makeshift bathroom. Perhaps a cold shower would cure me of my lingering affinity.

The translucent shower curtain and tub of soap weren’t exactly homey, but they were better than nothing. There were many provisions that the cell did not come provisioned with, like pillows or towels, and I no longer had it in me to feel contempt for what little I did have. I stood behind the curtain, allowing my skin to dry before I put back on my clothes. I washed them in the shower every couple of days, but they weren’t made to withstand such continuous use. I’d just pulled my pants up when I heard Naruto stirring. Without looking, I called out, “Shower’s free if you want it.”

I should’ve known he’d scream when he got in. The cold water was an adjustment he’d have to make, but far be it from him to anticipate the discomforts of being held prisoner. Cold water, one meal a day, constant darkness. That was life now.

“Sasuke! It’s cold!” Naruto cried. “You used all the hot water.”

Sighing as I approached the curtain, I could just make out his shivering figure on the other side. “No, dobe. There’s no hot water. It’s just cold.”

He grumbled to himself, then shut off the spray. “Uh, could you hand me a towel, maybe?”

“What do you think this is, a hotel? There aren’t any towels.” I could see him glaring at me through the curtain, but quick as it had arrived his pout disappeared.

“Ugh, good thing we’re escaping today, then. I couldn’t take much more of that. It’s torture,” he said.

“And how do you propose we do that?” I retorted.
He flung open the shower curtain. “I’ve got a plan! Don’t worry about it.”

Without a care in the world, he waltzed over to where he’d dumped his clothes. Droplets of water still speckled his back and arms, and his hair dripped inconsistently on his shoulders. His bold display of impenetrable ease made me uncomfortable—I felt myself gawking and worse, blushing. It wasn’t like I’d never seen a naked body before. I just hadn’t seen someone so comfortable with their own nudity, so at home in their own skin. This more than anything perturbed and intrigued me: it was powerful, his self-assurance.

“Aw, you’re blushing!” he cooed, turning and catching me in the act. “Does my immodesty embarrass you?”

“Fuck you, pervert,” I snapped.

“In your dreams, virgin,” he retorted.

The look on my face said more than I would’ve liked. I tried to recover, but it was too late. He’d seen it. He knew.

“Holy shit,” he said. “You really are a virgin.”

“Fuck off.”

“That’s so cute!”

“Don’t patronize me.” I wasn’t ashamed—people looked at me and expected promiscuity. The truth never bothered anyone close enough to know it.

“I’m not! It really is cute. Sweet, even. Makes you seem a little less abrasive,” he said as he got dressed.

“Don’t use words you can’t spell.”

“Ouch! The virgin is caustic.” He stuck his tongue out at me.

“Keep using big unfamiliar words and see what happens,” I warned.

“Do you have something bigger to put in my mouth?” he asked. It was the wink that did it. I bristled at the innuendo, embarrassment evident on my cheeks.

I hated feeling so powerless, so ignorant around him. He was pushing my buttons, just like he used to, and I wanted to strangle him for still knowing how. Scowling, I said, “With lines like that, it’s no wonder you were able to convince Sakura to sleep with you.”

His face fell. “It was her idea, not mine. But she wanted to hurt Ino as bad as I wanted to hurt you.”

“Why would Sakura want to hurt Ino? They were best friends.”

Naruto sighed, and I watched him lay on the mattress, staring up at the bars. “She’s like me. She sees herself as fucked up and unlovable. She was constantly comparing herself to Ino and everyone else, and she felt like she fell short. That’s not the kind of resentment most people can just will away.” He paused. “Plus, Ino is kind of judgmental. It’d be hard to be with someone who was so keenly aware of another person’s faults.”

“They’ve always befuddled me. It seems like Sakura needs Ino’s attention, but can’t stand it when she has it.” I shrugged. “I doubt Ino’s ever critiqued her before.”
He looked amused. “That’s how their friendship started, from what I understand. Ino said some hurtful things to her on the playground, and from then on Sakura had been determined to win her over. She needed that validation. The thing about basing your self-worth on the opinions of others is, it’s never enough. So every time Ino tries to validate her, she pulls some self-sabotage lunacy.”

I could imagine it, a little-kid Sakura following around a small queen-bee Ino and demanding to be seen. “Acknowledge me! Validate me! Love me!” Sakura’s actions seemed to shout. If not the one who’d originally hurt her, then someone similar. It explained why she’d latched onto me, at least. If she could prove to herself that she was worthy, then she could evaluate her feelings for Ino in a healthier light.

“It’s too bad they’re not stuck in a prison together. Then they might be able to figure this out for themselves,” I remarked.

“Even if they were, I doubt they’d talk about their own problems. I can guarantee they’d’ve resolved ours in the first five minutes, though,” he joked.

“Our problems don’t have resolutions,” I told him.

He looked taken aback for a moment, but it passed. “Maybe, maybe not,” he replied. “Won’t know til we try!”

I rolled my eyes. His enthusiasm and humor were staunchly refreshing. I’d missed this—I’d missed him. The real him, not the shell-like imposter I’d shared a dorm with. “Tell me about your escape plan,” I ventured, not wanting to lose the ease of our conversation to the tension of our recent past.

Naruto practically glowed as he explained his plan, bright eyes and mischievous smile lighting the room. My animosity didn’t faze him in the slightest, even though parts of his plan were so unbelievably stupid that I nearly had an aneurism.

“You’re not lifting me,” I told him flat out.

“The hell I’m not. I’m the stripper, remember? I have experience lifting people.”

I was starting to feel relieved that I hadn’t put my shirt on yet. With a self-satisfied smirk, I flexed, saying, “I’ve had nothing to do in here but workout. You, on the other hand, look like a fasting monk.”

He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. “We’ll arm wrestle for it.”

“Fine by me.”

We waited until after the food had been lowered and we’d eaten our scraps to do the honors. Laying on the mattress, facing each other, we locked hands. Naruto held out as long as he could, but he soon realized the extent of his muscular atrophy. With a cheeky grin, he conceded, saying, “Well, I guess if you don’t use it you lose it.”

The middle of the next shift was when we planned to act. The guard on night shift would be more likely to get bored and nod off, he reasoned. It didn’t matter to me, because his plan hinged on something so unbelievable I couldn’t take it seriously. Of course, if he wanted to make a fool of himself, he could count on my support. I could always use a laugh.

I listened to the quiet hum of our breathing as we stared up at the bars, waiting. He was laying in the
opposite direction, our heads next to each other. I could feel him peering at me, those eyes burning into my soul.

“I wish you had told me you were Moonlight,” he said to me, quiet and tentative.

“You would’ve had the same reaction. Anger, distrust,” I retorted.

“Not if you had met up with me like we planned. Then we both would’ve been surprised.”

“Yeah, but I was supposed to be dead. You would’ve still been angry about that.” I turned to look at him, the outline of his face as he watched the flickering candlelight cast shadows up above us.

He snorted. “I never once thought you were dead. I thought you were being selfish, yeah, but you? Dead? No way.”

“You’re proving my point here,” I said.

“Okay, sure, I would’ve been angry.” He was looking at me now, eye to eye. “I was using anger to put a buffer between me and my hurt feelings. And the more hurt feelings I got, the angrier I became. I wound up quarantining my ability to feel behind a barricade of anger. I lost touch with myself.”

“And you think I should’ve come back from the alleged dead claiming to be your internet friend? Yeah, sounds like a great idea.”

“Because it was so much better finding out for myself and realizing you’d known the whole time,” he replied.

“Things didn’t go according to plan,” I said.

“What plan was that? Crossing your fingers and hoping I’d never find out?”

“No. I was going to tell you. That night, actually. It was one of two things on my list.” I couldn’t look away, but I knew I was turning pink.

“Oh great, there’s something else you’ve been keeping from me? You’re lucky I did so well in therapy, or else I’d kick your ass just for having another secret,” he said with a grin. “So, what is it? You knocked up my identical twin sister I never knew I had? You cut the brake lines in my parents’ car as an evil baby? Oh no, I got it! You’re a super-wealthy vigilante, and your life of fighting crime puts the people you love in mortal peril.”

“The truth is…” I sighed, not knowing if I was truly ready to lay it all bare. But those eyes of his made me want to profess everything, right then and there. “I was going to tell you—”

“Hold that thought. The shift’s changing,” he interjected.

We listened in tense silence as the guards made small talk. I knew that the guards changed quarterly, giving us roughly six hours before the next would show up. The moment passed and along with it, the compulsion I’d felt to expose myself to him. As the quiet grew around us, I murmured, “Do you want to take a nap?”

He sat up, staring at the wall. “If I fall asleep, only god can wake me. You should get some rest, though. I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

He looked so serious, with such a severe frown on his face—his somberness didn’t suit him. Acting on impulse, I wrapped my arm around his chest and yanked him back down on the mattress. He
gasped in surprise, and I pinned him down, careful not to get too close to his wound.

“Hey, what did the farmer say when his tractor when missing?” It was one of his favorite jokes, if memory served.

A grin blossomed on his lips. “Where’s my tractor?” he answered, rolling his eyes. I had just begun moving off of him when he let out a shaky sigh. “Jesus, I thought you were gonna kiss me,” he laughed.

I’d been trying to shock him out of his melodramatic reverie, not sexually harass him. “Why would I do something like that?”

“I dunno, maybe dumbasses with depression are your type,” he said.

“I don’t have a type,” I retorted.

“Hm, I distinctly recall you having a thing for blondes, actually,” Naruto teased. “Is my messy hair doing it for you, Sasuke?”

It wasn’t. Not the hair, anyway. Hearing him say my name like that, within the confines of a come-on, all pseudo-sexy, though? It had an unexpected impact on my thoughts. I immediately imagined him trying to seduce me, and the notion filled me with fear. I jerked away from him, sequestering myself to the end of the mattress. Within seconds, I felt his hand on my back, heard his voice in my ear.

“Aw, sorry, guess I ought to know better than to tease a virgin,” he said. “But in my defense, it’s a lot of fun.”

He was too close, too familiar, and the feel of his breath on my ear sent shivers down my spine. My agitation had built—he couldn’t treat me like this, couldn’t say these things to me. In an instant, I was on top of him, gripping his face with one hand and forcing him to look at me. “I’m a virgin, not a naïve and easily flustered prude. Stop acting like it.”

I got off of him as quickly as I’d gotten on, and he sat up next to me, evidently more startled than I’d anticipated. He shook his head, turning to grin at me. Hand on my knee, he said, “You’re going to make someone very happy someday.”

All I really wanted to do was show him that he wasn’t the only one who could be overtly sexual for kicks, but something about his eyes suggested I’d done more than turn the tables on him. I’d hit a nerve, perhaps, because the grin on his face didn’t match the sadness in his eyes. I supposed it was only a matter of time before I reverted back to being the antagonist of his story rather than the protagonist of my own. He got up, heading for the makeshift bathroom, and I laid in bed, trying to get comfortable.

He sat down at the head of the mattress, staring off into space with a forlorn expression. I closed my eyes, pretending not to notice and all too aware of his proximity. As if sensing my thoughts, he spoke softly, asking, “Are you having trouble falling asleep?”

“A bit,” I admitted.

“You can use my hoodie like a pillow if you want,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me.

“Fine.”

I bunched up his hoodie and gingerly rested my head on it, but it smelled far too much like him for
me to find comfort. I think he thought I was asleep when he put his hand on my arm, a gentle rub of his cold fingers against my skin.

“I’m sorry,” I heard him whisper. “I hope you can forgive me.”

I hadn’t expected to actually fall asleep, and yet I awoke to Naruto shaking me with tentative urgency. He was bent down, leaning over me as he gripped my arm. I felt his breath against my ear as he tried to rouse me, voice hushed. “Sasuke. Sasuke! It’s time. Get up.”

“Say it again,” I mumbled. “Nobody calls me that anymore.”

“Sasuke, I’ll say your name as many times as you want later. Just get up and help me escape.”

I groaned, forcing myself into consciousness. “Okay, okay, let’s do this.”

Naruto’s plan was fairly straightforward, if moronic. The worst part was that the whole thing depended on him correctly remembering his journey down to this cell in the first place. Step one involved him standing on my shoulders to reach the edge of the opening. He wobbled atop me, standing as swiftly as he felt able. He swore under his breath when he came up short. Rolling my eyes, I took my hands from his ankles.

“Naruto, I need you to trust me,” I said firmly. “Step onto my hands.”

To his credit, he nodded curtly and took a hesitant step forward. Grunting under the strain, I pushed him up. His head brushed against the bars. Peering out, he said, “The guard’s asleep! Perfect timing.”

Step two was easier said than done. Naruto had sworn up and down that the barred ceiling was nothing more than a glorified metal carpet—no locks, no hinges. A veritable scarecrow. As he pushed on it, testing his theory, my heart hammered in my chest. It budged. He only moved it enough to pull himself out, but the sight of his feet disappearing over the edge did nothing to calm my nerves.

Naruto managed step three all by himself, in spite of his injury. He subdued the guard, feasibly by tying them up; I heard a muffled shout before things got eerily quiet. I held my breath, waiting for some sign. A moment later, Naruto appeared at the edge, grinning.

“Here,” he said, lowering a table. “Let’s get you out of there.”

I followed through on my half of step four, climbing atop the table and reaching for Naruto’s outstretched hands. He grabbed ahold of me the best he could, and I took a tilted step up the wall. Without warning, his grip slackened—his hand refused to cooperate. Apologies fluttered from his lips, but I dismissed them. I used both hands to grab his good arm and scrambled up the wall, coming to rest beside him. So far, so good.

“I can’t believe your plan is actually working,” I said.

He punched me in the arm. “Shut up or you’ll jinx it, teme.”

We climbed the stairs in the corner, next to the strategically bound and gagged guard glaring daggers at us. It was time for the final and least-premeditated facet of the plan—step five. He cracked the door at the top, eyeing the hallway. On his signal, we crept out, making as little noise as possible. The hallway opened into a parlor, though which lay the front door. We couldn’t see any guards, but there were far too many places for them to be lurking out of sight. We waited in tense silence for a
moment, watching and listening; then we made for the door, running like hell.

I yanked the door open, ushering Naruto out and right into the arms of Danzo himself. Naruto stood frozen—for all his bravado, facing the villain was far worse than he’d been expecting. I knew all too well how he felt. Danzo’s lips curled into a smile, and his eyes shifted from Naruto to me.

“How nice of you two to join me tonight,” he said. I didn’t like the way his fingers were digging into Naruto’s arms. “I was just coming to dispose of this insignificant Uchiha here when I heard you’d volunteered to join him, Naruto. How unexpected.”

“You murdered my parents,” Naruto declared. “And then you murdered Sasuke’s parents before they could charge you with the crime.”

I wondered how he’d found out. Who had told him? Shisui? Itachi didn’t tell me the details for a while after we’d left, perhaps to protect my feelings. He knew how inclined I’d be to go back if I thought Naruto would be in danger, though.

“I hope you haven’t told anyone about your theory. That would be very bad for you,” Danzo replied. “We have enough evidence to put you away for good,” Naruto said.

“In that case, I’ll have to keep you here. At least until you turn 25, then I can kill you.”

“The hell you will,” I growled.

He opened his mouth, likely to add some villainous retort, but I’d heard enough out of him. I reared back and punched him as hard as I could, hoping the blow would be enough to knock him out. Unfortunately, all Danzo did was stumble backward, but as he released Naruto, the two of us plowed forward and knocked him to the ground as we ran for it. Racing across the lawn, we made it a few feet from the sidewalk when the shot rang out.

I heard it and I didn’t even think—I just pushed Naruto to the ground, shielding him from the bullet. It tore into my shoulder, but there was no time for pain. Adrenaline coursing through me, I got to my feet and yanked my coconspirator up alongside me. Our feet hit the pavement, Naruto leading the way. We didn’t stop until we reached his Jeep, and he bled on his worn fabric interior. He turned those intense eyes on me, fear and confusion written all over his face.

“It was gonna hit me,” he said. “He was aiming for me.”

“If he was aiming for me, he’s a pretty shit shot,” I grumbled.

“Why did you do that? Why did you save me?” He swallowed nervously, eyeing my shoulder for a moment before pinning me down with that same stare.

“Eyes on the road, usuratonkachi,” I muttered. I felt dizzy, and the burn in my shoulder was starting to surface.

“Sasuke!” he shouted. My eyes blinked open, trying to concentrate on him. “Why? Why did you save me?”

I wanted to shrug, but something wouldn’t let me. Instead, I reached toward his face, twinklingly tear-streaked in the glimmer of the streetlights. “My body just moved on its own,” I mumbled, slumping back without warning as the blackness finally overtook me.
it's my birthday, so this is a special update for you guys! love you, see you on sunday~
Ino sat at the bar, impatient. She wasn’t a fidgeter, didn’t feel like she needed to fill the passage of
time with tapping her foot or twiddling her thumbs, but the restlessness in her eyes was obvious to
anyone who looked. Even in a seedy dive bar, she half-expected Sakura to step out of the shadows.
Her eyes ventured to the door every few seconds, but so far, no one she recognized had come in.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?”

She spun around, surprised to find him standing there. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Back entrance,” he said, taking a seat beside her. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“Yeah, okay, but why here? In Konoha, of all places.” She eyed the door again. “If you hadn’t paid
for the plane ticket, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I invited you because I think it’s about time we caught up, don’t you?” He gave her a tight smile.

“If you wanted to catch up so bad, why didn’t you just meet me in VOTE?”

He smirked. “I’ll trade you, question for a question. Deal?”

“Oh, that old game. Fine, Gaara, what do you want to know?” Ino downed a shot of whiskey and
settled her gaze on him.

“I heard a rumor about a mutual friend of ours…”

Sakura answered the phone against her better judgement, momentarily irked by her commitment to
being a better person. She wanted to be the kind of friend who answered those three a.m. phone
calls, she really did, but at what cost? Even though she’d barely even gotten in bed, thanks to the
heinous hours of her job, she still felt grouchy. With a sigh, she rolled over and picked up her phone,
speaking quietly to avoid rousing her parents.

“He’s shot—oh my god, there’s so much blood. Please, you have to help,” Naruto cried into the
receiver.

“No! You can’t! We can’t go to a hospital, Sakura. That’s the first place he’ll look for us,” he shouted. “Please, please help.”

She sighed, getting out of bed. “I’m an EMT, Naruto. Not a surgeon. The most I can do is evaluate the damage.”

“He can’t die, Sakura. Not for me. I won’t let that happen,” he whispered. “Anything you can do. Anything. Please.”

She frowned. “Like I said, I’m not really qualified for GSWs, Naruto. But maybe I do know someone sketchy enough to help. Where are you?”

“In your driveway,” he said.

Sakura was outside a moment later, hopping in the Jeep with all of the medical supplies she could manage. “Jesus Christ, he looks like shit. You gotta hightail it, buddy. The Shukaku’s place. Don’t ask, just drive.”

The phone rang, nearly going to voicemail before Temari answered.

“Well, well,” she said. “Took you long enough to call. Here I thought you’d forgotten all about me.”

“I’m not calling for that,” Sakura snapped. “Last week, your friend was involved in a shooting. EMTs were dispatched, but when we arrived—”

“He was already stitched up. Yeah, what about it?”

“Was it you?” Sakura demanded. “It was, wasn’t it?”

“Depends who’s asking,” she replied. “Why, did someone shoot you?”

“No, not me. A friend.” Sakura eyed Sasuke’s colorless face with worry. “How much? For your services?”

“You sure you don’t want to take them to—”

“Temari, there’s no time! Will you help me or not?”

“You’ll owe me one,” Temari answered.

Ino scoffed. “He did not. He’s Naruto, for god’s sake.”

“Everyone has a limit, you know. Just because he’s Naruto doesn’t mean he’s impervious,” Gaara retorted.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “I never would’ve thought…”

“Yeah, well, it makes more sense to me now. Sasuke coming back from the dead would send him over the edge,” he said. “His feelings for that asshole were never casual.”

“Whoa, hey. This whole suicide attempt thing was not Sasuke’s fault. He never did anything but love Naruto completely.”

“He lost the right to love him when he left,” Gaara snapped. He slumped forward, sullen. “As did I.”
Ino smiled softly, nostalgia taking over. “Man, I always thought you two were inseparable. Back in the day, I was worried Sasuke might have to learn how to share.”

“He still might. I wasn’t there for Naruto when he needed me, but I’ll make things right.”

“Planning a confession, eh Gaara?” She winked at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Not like that, Ms. Yamanaka. You should know better.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but his phone began to ring. He held up a hand, indicating she should wait. Ino sighed and sipped her whiskey, vaguely listening as he asked his sister what had prompted her call. Ino couldn’t hear what Temari said, but she could guess from the look on his face that it wasn’t good.

Gaara stood abruptly. “I’m on my way now,” he said, before turning to Ino and adding, “It’s Sasuke. He’s been shot.”

Naruto watched as Temari worked alongside Sakura to stitch up Sasuke’s shoulder. The bullet had gone through clean, but there was more blood than he thought there should be. Or maybe there was too little blood. He didn’t feel qualified to answer if someone asked, but he was worried it was too much blood. He’d broken down on the way over, telling Sakura everything. It was his fault, it was all his fault. His eyes never left the makeshift operating table, his fear evident.

Temari’s phone rang, and she grumbled, “Talk to this idiot, would ya? I’m a bit busy.”

He took her phone and answered, voice shaking. “Hello? Sorry, Temari is doing something right now.”

“Naruto! Oh thank god. What happened?” Gaara asked. In the background, he heard someone ask, “What? Why is Naruto there? Did he get shot too?”

“Is that Ino?” he asked.

Both Temari and Sakura looked up, scowling. “It had better not be,” Temari said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Gaara answered. “Are you alright?”

Naruto felt his larynx tighten. “No, not really. This is because of me.”

“He didn’t,” the man gasped. “That absolute jackass stepped in front of a bullet for you?”

“Yes,” Naruto sobbed. “Who the fuck does that?”

“An Uchiha, apparently. Listen, we’re almost there. Just sit tight, okay?”

“Okay,” he sniffed, hanging up the phone.

“Seriously, Naruto, stop being such a baby. He’s gonna be fine,” Temari scolded.

He nodded, setting her phone back down. It wasn’t his fault he was so emotional—having someone risk their life to save his wasn’t an every day occurrence for him. He didn’t know how he was supposed to feel, but his heart was a flurry of emotions. Sadness, anger, fear, love. They were waging war inside of him, and all he could do was try not to spend every second crying.
“There, all done,” she announced. “Entry and exit wounds taken care of. I expect he’ll wake up soon. It really was a minor wound, all things considered. No reason to get all weepy.”

“He was shot. With a gun. Because of me,” he responded.

“And now he’ll be fine. If a little sore. Because of you,” Temari said. “Help us move him to the bed.”

The three of them gingerly lifted the body from the blood-stained table to the bed in Temari’s room, setting him down with care. Naruto grabbed a throw blanket, trying to make his unconscious friend as comfortable as possible. If Sasuke had felt half as worried and a quarter as guilty when that intruder had attacked Naruto himself all those years ago, he finally understood why Sasuke thought it was best to leave. Sakura and Temari went down to the kitchen, lost in their own conversation, and for a moment, it was just him and Sasuke, so pale he looked dead. Naruto’s eyes began to water at the thought, and he nearly missed the dazed stare Sasuke was giving him as he blinked back the tears.

“Usuratonkachi,” he murmured. “Don’t cry.”

“But you got shot,” Naruto said.

“So why are you crying? I should be the one crying,” he retorted.

“You’re so stupid, pushing me out of the way like that. What were you thinking?” Naruto let out a choked laugh. “How am I ever supposed to convince you to forgive me now that I’ve gotten you shot?”

Sasuke smirked. “I don’t need convincing.”

“Oh, is he awake already?” Sakura asked, coming inside. “Temari’s hashing it out with Ino downstairs. Gaara should be along any minute.”

“I knew I was shot, but nobody told me I’d gone to hell. Why are we having a high school reunion, exactly?” Sasuke tried to sit up, but winced at the pain.

“I thought you liked Ino,” Sakura said.

“And I thought you two weren’t friends anymore,” Sasuke retorted. “Forgive me if I’m not feeling up to the emotional demands of reconciliations.”

“Don’t worry, you don’t have to do anything. Just rest. We’ll take care of everything,” Naruto said softly.

“Yeah, and what happens if I hemorrhage while Sakura is off fistfighting her nemesis and you’re having a heart to heart with your ex-best friend?”

Naruto rolled his eyes. “As if I’d leave you alone, teme. It won’t be that easy to get rid of me.”

Sasuke grimaced. “Can I get some ice? Or ibuprofen? Something?”

“Yeah, allow me,” Sakura interjected. She dug some pills out of her medpack and handed them over. “Can you dry-swallow?”

“Whatever,” he answered, chucking them back. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” Sakura said. “Um, by the way, I’m sorry. For hurting you, and Ino, too. I hope you can
forgive me, y’know, someday. I mean, I just saved your life, but no pressure.”

“Honestly, Sakura, I’m not the one you should apologize to, but you already know that. Thanks for the medical support. I’d say we’re even,” he told her.

“Right. Speaking of, guess I’d better head down. I’ll be back to check on you in a few.”

“Wait, Sakura,” Naruto said, standing up. He wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you.”

She smiled at him. “Any time, Naruto.”

Tsunade frowned at the man. He’d called her with a tip, but she wasn’t sure he truly had any information of value. She wasn’t currently working any cases involving high-crime situations, and yet the CI she used for her more nefariously inclined work-related circumstances had called her out of the blue. It wasn’t until he’d said, “It’s about your son,” that she’d agreed to meet with him.

“You’re sure they were talking about Sasuke?” she asked. She’d never lost hope in finding him, dead or alive, but none of her leads ever turned up anything promising.

The CI nodded, explaining the conversation he’d overheard. “Yeah, positive. It was this tall blonde girl and a scary redheaded guy. Sitting right over there. Said your kid had been shot.”

Tsunade’s expression betrayed her surprise. “Wait, who was talking about my son?”

“Blonde girl, real tall and pretty. A little rough around the edges, though. And, uh, this scary guy with red hair and tattoos. Real Satanist type, if you ask me. I think she called him Gaara.”

She nodded, already lost in planning her next move. She’d stopped waking Shizune every time she got a call about Sasuke a year or so in, but for the first time in a long time, she felt like she might finally get somewhere. “Thanks for the tip,” she said. “I’ll pay you, if and only if it pans out.”

Tsunade turned to leave, but he stopped her. “One more thing. Don’t know if it’ll mean anything to you, but they spent a lot of time talking about this Naruto kid.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, that helps.”

Gaara stood outside the door, hand hovering above the knob. The last time he saw Naruto, there’d been yelling and anguish. He’d bailed out before he could see Naruto when he got out of the hospital, terrified that his presence would be unwelcome. Here he was again, so close and so paralyzed with fear. He didn’t care about people easily, and Naruto meant the world to him. He was worried not that Naruto wouldn’t forgive his transgressions but that he wouldn’t deserve to be forgiven. He was being stupid, he knew it, but he couldn’t stop it. He sighed and made himself open the door.

“Gaara! It’s you,” Naruto exclaimed. He’d already crossed the room and thrown his arms around him. Gaara reluctantly returned the embrace.

“How’s he doing?” Gaara asked, glancing at the body on the bed.

“Sakura gave him some meds, and he passed out, but he’s alright,” the blonde replied, sitting down on the floor nearby.
“I’m glad he’s doing okay. Though I have heard that you’ve gotta shoot a zombie in the head for it to have any lasting effect,” he joked.

“I think he’s part feline, dude. He should’ve died at least three times now,” Naruto said. His eyes were on Sasuke’s still face, but he tore them away and offered Gaara a smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Seems like you’re feeling better?”

“I’m stable for now. Still overwhelmed though.” He sighed. “I’ve done some bad things, Gaara. I don’t… I should be the one with the bullet wound, not Sasuke.”

“Yeah, I heard about your coup with Sakura. It seems like you finally made a breakthrough, though.” He sat down beside his friend, back against the bedframe.

“At what cost, man?”

“People make mistakes, Naruto. They hurt other people, and they hurt themselves. Doesn’t mean they deserve to get shot.” He looked away. “God knows I’ve made my fair share of mistakes.”

“Pft, name one,” Naruto retorted.

“Leaving you.”

“No, I get that. Now more than ever. I’m sorry I put you in that position,” he replied.

“Naruto, you were my best friend. I love you more than anyone—”

“I love you too! That’s why it’s so shitty that I made our friendship so toxic,” Naruto interjected.

Gaara shook his head and put his hand on top of Naruto’s, squeezing gently. “I never should have abandoned you when all you needed was a friend.”

“You did what was best for you, Gaara, and I don’t fault you for that, not anymore. Please don’t beat yourself up over the choices I’ve made.”

Gaara brought Naruto’s hand to his face, pressing a soft kiss to the boy’s knuckles. “You’re too kind-hearted, Naruto.”

“Oh would you two just get a room already?” Sasuke groaned. “If I have to listen to one more second of this cheesy romance, I’ll shoot myself.”

“Romance?” Naruto sputtered. “Gaara’s not—”

“I’m really not, Sasuke. I’m aromantic,” Gaara said. “My feelings for Naruto are strong, but they’re utterly platonic. Which is convenient, because I’d hate to be your competition. Sounds far too life-threatening.”

Sasuke glared down at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The redhead looked back and forth between them. “Really? You two are still doing this? Really? I’m not touching it, nope. No way.” He paused. “It’s just, you took a bullet for him. You’re twenty-four years old. You’re really just gonna act like you’re still in high school?”

“Shut up,” Sasuke demanded.

“Okay, that’s cool. I’m leaving,” Gaara said, heading toward the door. “You’re an amazing person,
Naruto. He sees it.”

Naruto frowned. “What?”

“I’m just saying, you don’t take a bullet for just anyone—” He ducked out the door as Sasuke threw a shoe at him. “Dumbasses,” he muttered to himself.

Iruka opened the door, bleary-eyed and hardly clothed. “Tsunade? Is everything alright?”

“Where’s Naruto?” she demanded.

Shizune shouldered past her wife with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, for disturbing you so late. We just need to ask Naruto a few questions. Is he home?”

“Um, Naruto… No, no, he’s at Sakura’s, I think. I tried calling him, but he didn’t answer. Is everything okay? What’s going on?” Iruka asked.

“We hate to bother you, but could we come in? I think we might all benefit from a cup of chamomile,” Shizune said.

“Sure, come on in. I’ll go wake Kakashi,” he answered.

Minutes later, they were seated around the dining table, cups in hand. Tsunade cleared her throat, willing herself to be strong enough to ask for help. These men were her friends. And if her CI was any indications, their adopted son was in danger, too. “Have you noticed Naruto hanging out with Ino Yamanaka or Gaara Shukaku lately?”

“No,” Kakashi answered. “We haven’t seen Gaara since Naruto was released from the hospital, and Ino…”

“I can’t think of the last time we saw her. Not since Naruto graduated from high school, I’d say,” Iruka finished. “What’s this about?”

“My CI told me he overheard those two talking about Naruto. They’re conversation ended when Gaara got a phone call claiming someone had been shot. It’s not clear who the victim was, but given the circumstances, we’re obviously worried,” Tsunade told them. She wasn’t going to mention Sasuke, not until she knew for sure.

“Oh my god, you don’t think…” Iruka broke off.

“I hope not. But whatever is happening, I think Naruto is involved. Is there any way you can find out where he is?”

“He’s got a GPS locator app on his phone. We can track that,” Kakashi said, pulling out his cell phone. “That kid is always losing the damn thing.”

“Wait, wouldn’t he be at the hospital? If he was shot?” Iruka asked. “Shouldn’t we check, in case his phone has been misplaced?”

Shizune shook her head. “We called all the hospitals in Konoha, and we phoned both Ino’s and Gaara’s parents. The Shukakus are away on business, but Ino’s mother said she had no idea her daughter was even in town. Unless Naruto is in a hospital outside of the city, his phone is the only hope we have of finding him before things escalate any further.”
“We’ll try Sakura and the Harunos as we drive, just in case, but his phone really is our best bet right now,” Tsunade added, standing.

Naruto had built himself a little sleeping area, padded with blankets and pillows, right beside the bed. Sure, he and Sasuke had slept on the same mattress when they were in Danzo’s basement, but he wasn’t going to assume that meant Sasuke wanted him to sleep beside him here. For all he knew, Sasuke could resent him for the pain he was in, or at the very least still be uncomfortable with Naruto’s obnoxious familiarity. Instead, he’d settled in on the floor, fending off the fear that Danzo’s men might come to finish them off. He woke up to the feeling of someone stepping on him. “Ow, fuck dude! Where are you going?”

“I was going to the bathroom, but I suppose tripping over you and falling to my death is just as well.” Sasuke stifled a yawn. “What are you doing on the floor, anyway?”

“Uh, last time you were kidnapped by Danzo, you disappeared for six years.” He sat up, resting his elbows on his knees and glancing up at the shadowy figure. “Plus, y’know, you got shot saving me. Keeping an eye on you is the least I could do.”

Sasuke reached out, then winced. Naruto got up and sat beside him, hand coming to rest on the boy’s thigh. Sasuke grunted that familiar “hn,” and put his hand on top of Naruto’s. Glancing over at the blonde, he said, “Gaara kissed you earlier.”

“Just my fingers! He’s always been affectionate like that,” Naruto replied, flustered.

“He’s never kissed my hand before,” he countered.

“Probably because you look like you’d murder someone for thinking of showing you affection,” Naruto retorted.

“Never stopped you,” Sasuke said.

He brought Sasuke’s hand up to his lips, but instead of planting a kiss on the boy’s knuckles, he pressed his mouth against Sasuke’s wrist. “I’m drawn to danger, what can I say,” he whispered.

Sasuke put his hand to Naruto’s cheek, then slid it down and around the boy’s neck, arm over his shoulders. He pulled Naruto against him and said, “It’s good to have you back, dobe.”

Naruto wanted to say a lot of things, but he kept his mouth shut as Sasuke headed for the bathroom. Maybe things should’ve been strained, weird, disconnected—but they weren’t. Being together, with nowhere to hide or run, they had managed to slip back into their old routine; almost as if nothing had changed. Part of him wanted to fight that, to resist the ease with which it happened, but mostly he found comfort in it, even if he didn’t deserve it. Knowing that despite how much each of them had been through, how much they’d changed, there was a fundamental part of them that just clicked.

Sasuke returned, sitting beside him and drawing him out of himself. He leaned against Naruto with his good shoulder, and Naruto revealed in their closeness. A darkness spread through his gut, though, and he found he couldn’t just leave well enough alone. He had to say something.

“I’m not back,” Naruto muttered.

“What?”

“I mean, I’m getting better. I feel more like myself than I have in years. But there’s a lot I haven’t
dealt with yet, and recovery isn’t linear, and—"

“Naruto."

“Yes?” he squeaked.

“C’mere,” Sasuke commanded, gripping Naruto’s arm and guiding him down. Sasuke laid out on his back, and Naruto rested on his side with his head on Sasuke’s chest.

“What are you doing?” he heard himself ask, hating how scared he sounded.

“Thought you said you wanted to keep an eye on me, make sure I don’t disappear again.” His voice was low and rough, a gravelly sort of sleepy.

“Yeah, I do,” he agreed, allowing himself to relax against Sasuke. He fell asleep soon after, his subconscious forgetting whatever reservations he’d had.

Sakura sat across from Ino, slouching back in the kitchen chair. Temari stood at her side, frowning at the girls.

“Look, like I already said, I didn’t come here for you. Either of you,” Ino said.

“Then what exactly did you come here for?” Temari snapped. “Last I checked, you never wanted to see me again.”

“Okay, okay, guys. We can obviously agree that Ino is a notorious heartbreaker, and you’re more than welcome to be pissed at her, Temari, but can I have a moment alone with her, please?” Sakura interjected.

Temari looked from Ino to Sakura, a devilish grin on her face. She leaned over, hand on Sakura’s shoulder, and whispered, “Don’t forget about my favor.” Then she walked off, saying, “Be careful, dear. Ino can be nasty.”

Ino watched her leave, then gave Sakura a wild-eyed stare. “You slept with Temari?” she shouted.

“It was like, one time,” Sakura said dismissively.

“Twice. And counting,” Temari called from the doorway.

“Okay, Temari. That’s enough,” Sakura exclaimed.

“What—when—how—”

Sakura sighed. “I ran into her after one of Gaara’s band’s shows, like a month ago. I texted her when I got back into town. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal? Sakura, you stopped being my friend because I was gay. You and I had a huge fight because I told you I was in love with you. And now you’re just fooling around with another girl? Casually?” Ino shook her head in disbelief. “I mean, who are you?”

“That’s… well, that’s what I’ve been trying to figure out,” Sakura replied. “When you kicked me out, I realized something that feels more monumental than it sounds: I didn’t like myself. I’m not that person anymore, because I don’t want to be her.”
“That’s convenient. You decided to be a better person after ripping my heart out and stomping on it,” she said dryly.

“I—” Sakura paused. “I’m sorry. I should’ve been more considerate of your feelings. I shouldn’t’ve reacted the way I did.”

“Oh, I think you were plenty considerate—you considered how best to hurt me, and you acted on it.” Ino let out an empty laugh. “And now you’re sleeping with my ex.”

“Well it’s not like I could’ve experimented with you,” Sakura snapped. “You’re like, some kind of lesbian sex goddess, and you said you were in love with me, which is way too much pressure.”

“I’m failing to see how either of those are bad things. First off, you’re guaranteed to have a good time, and secondly, nothing you did would be wrong or bad, because you’d be with someone who loves you.”

Sakura laughed at that, and Ino raised an eyebrow. “Ino, you’re literally the most judgmental person I’ve ever met. If we were dating, the moment I did something you didn’t like, I can just imagine you taking out my self-esteem with a killshot like some kind of verbal sniper.”

Ino sat, pensive for a moment, then spoke. “You’re right,” she said solemnly. “I mean, you’re wrong, but I can see that I’ve given you no reason to feel otherwise. And for that, I’m sorry. Sakura, the truth is, I’ve loved you since I made fun of your forehead on the playground. That’s what it is for me to love someone—to see their faults and adore them. And you’ve never seen me love someone, because I hid my feelings from you for so long.”

The ringing of the doorbell saved her from having to respond. She didn’t know how to feel about what Ino had said, and she was still grappling with her self-concept. She stood up, giving Ino a look that said “hold that thought.” Hesitantly, Sakura made her way into the foyer, where Temari was moments away from opening the door.

“Wait!” Sakura hissed. “It might be the asshole who shot Sasuke.”

Temari eyed Ino as she hovered precariously close behind Sakura, and said, “As if I’m not packing.” She flashed the gun holstered to her waist, obscured by the bomber jacket she wore. “Plus, I somehow doubt that the gay squad outside shot up their kids.” With that, she opened the door.

Something jolted Naruto out of his sleep, but as he sat up, he realized that whatever it had been, it hadn’t woken Sasuke. Either he’d had a fitful dream, or Sasuke was so far gone he couldn’t be bothered with waking up just yet. He cautiously climbed out from Sasuke’s grip, trying not to wake him. He could hear voices downstairs, but the night sky was still visible through the curtains. Perhaps he hadn’t slept as long as he’d thought. Hunger struck him, though, and he headed downstairs for a quick snack, hoping to avoid whatever conflict had arisen. When he popped his head into the kitchen, peering around the entryway corner, his jaw dropped.

Ino had sequested Tsunade and Shizune to one said of the kitchen, and it seemed as though she was struggling to explain to them what had happened to Sasuke. She kept saying, “No, Itachi isn’t dangerous,” and, “Yes, Danzo is the one who shot Sasuke.” On the other side of the room, Sakura had taken Iruka and Kakashi to inform them of Naruto’s adventures. She told them again and again, “Yes, Danzo, as in Mayor Danzo.” He didn’t envy her, or Ino for that matter. He was going to slip back upstairs when Sakura caught his eye, silently pleading for rescue. With a sheepish smile, he stepped inside.
“When can I see my son?” Tsunade demanded of Ino.

“Now,” Naruto interjected. “If you promise to be quiet. He’s sleeping.”

“Naruto! Oh thank goodness you’re alright,” Iruka exclaimed, leaping from the chair to envelop him in a hug. Kakashi straightened up from where he was leaning against the wall and joined the embrace.

“C’mon, guys. I’m fine,” he whined.

Iruka and Kakashi relinquished their hold on him, but they continued to stand nearby. Tsunade approached him with a grim, reserved expression, face like stone. She took his hand in both of hers and whispered, “Take me to him. Please.”

Naruto led the way upstairs, taking Tsunade to Temari’s room. Iruka followed along, unwilling to let Naruto out of his sight just yet. The blonde opened the door slowly, peering in. “Try not to wake him, okay?” he murmured, letting them inside.

Tsunade let out a gasp, quiet and quick, as her eyes fell upon the sleeping boy. She gripped Naruto’s shoulder, her knuckles going white. “Naruto,” she choked out, doing her best not to wake him. “I’m so sorry. If I had only listened to you…”

Iruka leaned in, pulling her into a hug. He cast an apologetic look at his pseudo-son and said, “We didn’t believe you when it mattered. It’s no wonder you didn’t trust us with the truth after that.”

“You guys were just doing what you thought was best,” Naruto said quietly.

“Still, we’re sorry. All of us, but especially me, Naruto,” Iruka continued. “I can’t change the past, but I can do better in the future.”

Naruto added himself to their embrace as Sakura knocked softly on the door. “Hey, give these to him when he wakes up,” she said, handing him some pills. She paused, glancing at the disheveled Tsunade. “You know, I bet he’ll be really hungry when he wakes up. Why don’t we go make some breakfast?”

She let out a little laugh. “I have six years of birthday meals to make up for,” she muttered to herself. Looking at Naruto, she said, “Stay with him. Call me as soon as he wakes up. I mean it.”

“Aye aye, captain,” he said, giving her a salute as she exited.

Iruka looked from Nartuo to the unconscious figure on the couch, smiling to himself. “How long have you known?”

“I always knew he was alive, but he didn’t tell me until a few months ago,” Naruto replied. “He was my roommate.”

“That’s rough,” he said. “Was that… Did it have anything to do with…”

“With this?” Naruto held up his hand, lacerations on display. “Kind of, but only because I wasn’t dealing with things the right way.”

Iruka nodded, then ruffled the boy’s hair. “I ought to give them a hand in the kitchen—wouldn’t want Tsunade to burn the house down.”

“Be careful,” Naruto chuckled.
“Oh, by the way, Naruto. Are you still in love with him?” He gestured to Sasuke.


“Thought so.”

Naruto shut the door behind Iruka and set the pills Sakura had given him on the bloodstained table. He sat down on the edge of the bed, gazing at his slumbering companion. Musset hair, soft frown—so solemn, even in the midst of dreaming. He wondered what Sasuke dreamed about, if he ever had dreams about Naruto himself. He dreamt of Sasuke, sometimes every night for a week straight. There was so much beauty and mystery in that face. Naruto reached over and tucked the boy’s hair behind his ear, leaving his hand gently at Sasuke’s neck. He looked so perfect, laying there without his walls up, so vulnerable and open. A sigh escaped Naruto’s lips as he drew his hand away.

Sasuke reached out and grabbed it, saying, “Stop staring at me, dobe.”

Startled, Naruto fell off the bed, onto his knees. Sasuke was staring at him, a soft and easy gaze, and he couldn’t help but stare back, mesmerized by those dark eyes.

“All I see is a reckless jerk,” Naruto answered, sticking out his tongue.

“Next time I’ll be the hero, saving you from certain doom,” he said. “Then you’ll have to love me forever.”

“Is that what you want?” Sasuke’s gaze never wavered. “Is that how you feel now?”

“What?” Naruto forced out a laugh. “No, of course not. I was just making a joke.”

“Right,” Sasuke said. “I believe that.”

A knock at the door interrupted their bickering. Kakashi poked his head in, surprised to see Sasuke awake. He glanced back and forth at the two of them, drawing conclusions from their precarious positions. He cleared his throat and said, “Uh, Naruto, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course,” he answered, standing hastily.

“And I’ll send Tsunade up,” Kakashi added, shooting a glance Sasuke.

Naruto could see the fear and guilt in his eyes, the tension in his limbs, the scowl on his face. He leaned in and whispered, “It’s okay. She loves you. She’s just happy you’re alive.”

Sasuke froze, then nodded. Kakashi called out for Tsunade, and Naruto joined the man outside in the hallway. He didn’t envy Sasuke the interrogation he was liable to undergo, but he knew that more than anything else, Sasuke needed to have this reunion. Else he’d feel haunted by the past forever.

“We’ve come up with a plan,” Kakashi stated. “But we’d like your input.”

“Okay,” Naruto said. “You should know that I’m not leaving Sasuke. That bullet he took was meant for me, and I can’t… I won’t…”
Kakashi put his hands on Naruto’s shoulders. “I’m not asking you to. Look, we’ve got some options here. Ultimately, our goal is to keep you two safe. To do that long-term, we need to put Danzo behind bars. For now, though, I’d settle for him not abducting or killing anyone I care about in the next 24 to 48 hours.”

“Sasuke and I aren’t the only ones who know about Danzo. Itachi and Shisui, they collected evidence. They were going to give it to Sasuke’s dad before…” He faltered. “I don’t know if they still have it, but they could at least point you guys in the right direction.”

“That’s something we’ll deal with later,” Kakashi said gently. “Look, Iruka and I bought three plane tickets back to VOTE, to throw Danzo off our scent. We’re going home to pack up some things. Then we’re all going to hideout in Tsunade’s apartment. Do you want us to get you anything while we’re at the house? Clothes or something?”

Naruto hesitated, frowning. “Call me cliché, but I feel like we should all stick together. I mean, when groups split up in horror movies, everyone dies.”

“That’s because it makes it easier for writers to kill them off,” he replied. “This isn’t a horror movie.”

“No, but it’d still be easier for Danzo to get to you and Iruka if you go off on your own. Can we please just do this together?”

Kakashi sighed, looking pensive. “We can’t fit everybody in one vehicle, Naruto. I know you don’t want us to split up, but I believe it’d be more suspicious if we take multiple cars back to our house.”

“How about this,” Tsunade interjected, exiting Temari’s room with Sasuke in tow. “You three and Iruka will go back to your home to retrieve the items you need and make arrangements for throwing off Danzo. Meanwhile, Shizune and I will take the girls back to their respective homes. We can pick you all up and head over to the apartment afterwards.”

Kakashi smirked. “You’re really going to let this one out of your sight? I’m surprised.”

She smiled at him and said, “Sasuke knows that if he disappears again, I’ll hunt him down and kill him myself.”

Sasuke nodded. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said, looking at Naruto.

“But first, breakfast,” Tsunade declared.

The first thing he did when he walked through the front door was beeline for the shower. Naruto hadn’t been able to bathe since the nightmarish cold shower mishap in Danzo’s creepy torture basement, and though he’d had the opportunity at Gaara’s, what he really wanted was the comfort and familiarity of home. His shampoo and conditioner, his loofa, his deodorant and toothpaste and hairgel. His own clothes. Sasuke was tasked with helping Naruto’s dads beguile Danzo, making the falsified trip seem legitimate, so Naruto was able to relax and unwind, if only for a few minutes. The burn of the hot water on his skin, the scent of citrus and tea tree around him—as the steam engulfed him, he felt a moment of peace.

Naruto wrapped a towel around his waist and wandered into his bedroom, surprised to find Sasuke sifting through his closet. He froze in the doorway, but Sasuke paid him no mind. “Do you remember,” the boy began, “when you had to shower and borrow my clothes because you were a big sweaty football player?”
Naruto relaxed a bit, heading to his dresser. “Football captain. And yeah, of course I remember. That was your birthday.” He grabbed a pair of boxers and some sweatpants, pulling them on without much thought.

“Do you still have the clothes I lent you?”

“No,” he retorted. “I’m not some creep who collects your clothes, teme.”

“Then what am I supposed to change into when I shower? Everything in your wardrobe burns my eyeballs,” he griped. “Why are all of your clothes so bright?”

Naruto came up next to him, peering into the closet. “Here, this is black.”

“And orange. No thank you,” Sasuke snapped.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” he said.

“Where’s my blue flannel?” His eyebrows raised at Naruto’s startled expression. “Yeah, Mr. I Don’t Collect Your Clothes, I know you still have it. Don’t play dumb with me.”

Naruto walked over to his bedside table and pulled it from the drawer. “Here. Make sure you keep it this time.”

“Then what would I have to wear next time I shower at your place?”

He ignored the implication, not sure what to make of it. “You want some pants and underwear too, or is this supposed to be more of a bussy-out look?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “I’ll take the clothes, thanks.”

While the man showered, Naruto laid back on his bed and willed himself to focus on anything other than his modicum of feelings for Sasuke. Here he was, in one of the most dangerous and terrifying situations he’d ever experienced, hiding from the deranged monster who’d had his poor father and mother killed, and while he should be feeling panicked or fearful or at the very least anxious about how his immediate future would be impacted, instead he was caught up in romantic aspirations he’d kept buried for years. He was one tragic explosion or death threat away from just giving in and kissing Sasuke. It was bad enough that they’d so seamlessly slipped back into their rapport—the antagonistic flirting only made things worse.

He looked up as the door opened, watching as a frustrated Sasuke struggled to get his arm in the sleeve of the flannel without hurting himself. Ignoring the caustic glare cast in his direction, Naruto got up and approached with the intention of aiding the man. He got the sleeve situation rectified, but he couldn’t button the shirt no matter how hard he tried. Sasuke watched him struggle to grasp the cloth with his injured hand, concern evident on his face. Naruto didn’t want to see the pity in Sasuke’s eyes, to feel the overbearing weight of his judgmental stare. Without a word, he grabbed the duffle bag out of his closet and began packing. Sweatpants, gym shorts, tank tops, t-shirts, and hoodies. He’d need to grab some toiletries from the bathroom, and maybe some snacks from the kitchen, but the duffle was full. He struggled to zip it, finally giving up and sitting beside it on the bed with a frown.

“How long?” Sasuke asked quietly, eyeing Naruto from his casual stance near the dresser.

He looked at him in confusion. “Until?”

“Until your hand heals.”
He paused, discomfited by the query. Sasuke stood up straight and walked over, closing the duffle bag with ease. Naruto smiled faintly, not meeting the boy’s intense stare. “It’ll always be kind of fucked up,” he said. “I’ll do physical therapy to regain fine motor control, but it’ll never function the way it used to.”

Sasuke took a step forward, wedging himself between Naruto’s knees. He put his hands on either side of the blonde, leaning in until they were face to face. “Stop hurting yourself,” he commanded. “No promises.”

The tension between them had become palpable, but neither one was backing down. Sasuke pushed him back on the bed, but when he went to grab Naruto’s arm to pin him down, the boy interlaced their fingers with a wicked grin.

“If I work really hard for at least six months, I might be able to do that with the other hand,” he told him.

“Good thing for you I’m sticking around for a while,” Sasuke said. “Since I’m apparently your practice dummy.”

Naruto shot him a curious stare. “You don’t have to stay here once we’ve dealt with Danzo. Not for me. I’m sure I could find someone else to practice on.”

“Right, I took a bullet for you because I hate you and I never want to see you again,” Sasuke retorted. “Find someone else to hold hands with. Usuratonkachi.”

It was foolish and more than a little juvenile, but Naruto couldn’t help it. He threw his arms around Sasuke and yanked him down into a hug. He held the boy tight, nuzzling his face into his neck. “Are you sure? I mean, after everything—”

“Do you want to watch a movie? Together.”

Naruto paused for a moment, wishing he could look in Sasuke’s eyes and read his intent. “Yeah, of course. When we get to your mom’s?”

“Tonight, yeah.”

Naruto smiled against Sasuke’s neck. “It’s a date.”

Chapter End Notes

ugh you guys have no idea how MUCH this chapter took. i rewrote it at least five times by hand before i found it satisfactory enough to publish for y’all. and still everyone is “exclaiming” or “struggling” or “retorting.” it’s not my best, but i promise it’s the best i can give you. and ugh i tried so hard with that gaara scene to make it seem less romantic but nothing i did seemed to capture the essence of their relationship correctly, so fuck me i guess. and ino and sakura? fuck that whole conversation alone i rewrote god knows how many times. i hope you guys like it, because i’m legit not looking at it again. it’s done, it’s finished, it’s over, oh my god. next week, though!!!! omg!!! it’s what you’ve all been waiting for, some bona fide SNS content. yay!!!!
It shouldn’t have surprised me that Tsunade and Shizune relocated after my alleged death. The new apartment was nicer, had more room; the complex itself came with a pool and a gym. It felt weird, though, seeing how they’d moved on in my absence. I wondered how my parents would feel if they could see how I’d moved on without them. The new place had a guest bedroom and an office with a pullout couch, though I doubted they’d often had occasion for slumber parties. Then again, a lot can change in six years.

Tsunade had kept most of my stuff, boxed up and hidden away. She couldn’t bring herself to do anything with it, though I’m certain Shizune told her time and again to honor my memory instead of burying it. Still, I was thankful to have anything, under the circumstances. The storm had arrived without warning, drenching everything in its path. By the time Naruto, his dads, and I reunited with my moms, everyone had been soaked. Naruto had offered me a change of clothes, but when Tsunade showed me my old belongings stowed away in the closet in the office, I couldn’t help but go through them.

Old clothes, journals, knickknacks—all the boxes were labelled, and I wondered if any of it would even suit me anymore. The person I’d become. It was a comforting sort of disorienting, having the remnants of my old life categorically arranged. I could hear Naruto stripping off his dampened clothes behind me—they’d given us the office, while his dads took the guest room. Figuring I ought to get out of my wet clothes before I caught a cold or inadvertently infected my wounded shoulder, I took out a t-shirt and some cloth shorts from the box. The jeans would never fit me, nor would any of the fitted shirts, but some of the clothes might be worth keeping. I would have to go through everything more thoroughly later. I removed my shirt and pants without issue, but I hesitated at my underwear. They were damp and uncomfortable, but I didn’t have Naruto’s ease or obliviousness when it came to nudity. Knowing he was naked behind me didn’t settle my nerves at all. Taking a deep breath, I yanked them off, only to hear an audible gasp.

“You have a tattoo on your ass?” Naruto exclaimed.

I cringed. Of course he’d be looking at the right time to catch such a thing. The tattoo had been a lost bet, one I preferred to forget. Ino had picked it out, as stipulated by the agreement we’d made.

“Is that a bowl of ramen?”

Ino thought it was a hilarious testament to my unending adoration for a certain ramen-enthusiast, but I didn’t. My tattoos were mired in aesthetics; they were works of art. Having a bowl of ramen on my
ass wasn’t exactly highbrow. I jumped when I felt Naruto’s fingertips brush over the tattoo, and he laughed.

“Is it because your ass is a snack?” he asked.

“What,” I deadpanned, turning slightly to glare at him.

“I mean, like, I have a spaceship. On my ass. Because it’s out of this world,” he intoned.

“What.”

“Seriously! Look,” he said, pulling down the dark-colored boxer-briefs just enough for me to see his tattoo.

I looked from his exposed ass to his face and back, muttering, “I lost a bet.”

He pestered me with questions as I finished changing, demanding to know the story behind my embarrassing tattoo. I tuned him out, focusing instead on the tasks I’d left unfinished in the time after I’d been shot. The most important thing would be getting word to Itachi—he needed to know I’d escaped, I was okay, everything was fine. And I needed to know that he was alright. Naruto disappeared, saying something about lunch, so I took a seat at the desk and pulled up Craigslist on the computer.

Itachi and I had a code, a system we’d established should we ever be separated with no way to get ahold of one another. First, I checked the postings for any lost pets. I saw one of interest, but the ad was a week old already. Instead of replying on the off chance it hadn’t been Itachi, I decided to make my own. “Lost. Black cat. Answers to Jagged T Cup.” The cyphertext was actually JAGTCO, but Itachi knew what to look for. The cypher itself wasn’t especially complicated, but the system was enough to let us go undetected by others.

“Who’s Jagged T Cup?” Naruto asked. How long he’d been hovering over my shoulder, I hadn’t the foggiest. “Ooh, is that for Itachi?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be eating?” I snapped. I was a little annoyed that he’d so easily come to the right conclusion.

He held up the glass he’d been quietly drinking from. “Protein shake. I made you one too. Plus I brought snacks, for the movie.”

Mumbling as I published the post, I asked him, “How are the parents?”

“Dude, it’s a ghost town out there. I’m pretty sure they all conked out after staying up all night,” he said. “So, am I right? Is that a secret message for your brother?”

Rolling my eyes, I nodded. “He needs to know I’m safe, and where to find me. I don’t want him to worry.”

“Such a good little brother,” he teased, ruffling my hair. I glared at him, but he seemed unperturbed. “So,” he ventured, blushing a little, “do you want to watch that movie now?”

“It’s barely noon,” I protested.

“Yeah, but what else are we gonna do? Plus, this way we could even do a double feature, if you wanted.”
“Fine, let’s do it,” I said, standing up.

He moved away from me, glancing around the room. “You go make the popcorn, and I’ll… Pick the movie.”

I got a glass of water as the bag of popcorn grew in the microwave, trying to stop myself from wondering for the umpteenth time if this was a good idea. I wanted it to be a good idea, I wanted it to happen, I wanted to be with him—and maybe that would be enough. I poured the popcorn into a dish and headed back to the office. When I stepped inside, though, I nearly dropped the bowl in astonishment. Naruto had changed everything. He’d extended the pullout and moved the monitor, added pillows and arranged the confections. He took the bowl from me, adding it to the line of snacks he’d procured. Naruto grinned at me, clearly pleased with his ensemble.

“Something scary alright with you?” he asked. I nodded blankly, still started by the set-up. “Cool, I’ll be right back. Bathroom break.”

He walked out, and I laid down on the bed, placing a pillow over my face. I’d intended this as a date, and part of me had been worried that Naruto might not pick up on my romantic overtures. Now it seemed my date had been turned into his—he was putting in so much effort to make this ordeal special. It only made me realize the extent of my inexperience. I had no idea how to behave, what to do or say on a date. I was surely going to make an ass of myself.

Naruto returned, and I sat up as he slid into bed beside me, pressing play on the film. As it started, I wondered what he was expecting of me. Would it be forward of me to initiate affection? Or would that be untoward, given our history and the newness of this romantic proximity? I wasn’t even paying attention to the movie when Naruto jumped and latched onto my arm. He rested his head on my shoulder, his body pressed into mine with gentle ease. Wordlessly, he intertwined his hand with mine. I envied the natural way he interacted with me, seemingly feeling no hesitation or fear when it came to such simple intimacy.

“How do you do that,” I murmured, not expecting an answer.

“Do what?” he asked, looking up at me.

“Touch,” I said.

He stiffened next to me, pausing the movie. “Have I made you uncomfortable?”

“No,” I answered, awkwardly putting my arm around his shoulders to keep him from leaving my side. “I’m quite comfortable. Nevermind, forget I said anything.”

Naruto frowned and scooted away from me, looking me in the eye. He grabbed my hand, placing it firmly on his thigh. He moved it to his shoulder, only to pick it up again and press it to his cheek. He stared at me, a familiar determination on his face. “You’re more comfortable touching someone when it comes from a place of aggression,” he observed. “But there’s more to you than that.”

I pulled my hand away and snapped, “Sorry intimacy doesn’t come naturally to me.”

He gave me a curious look, then said, “Choke me.”

“What? Naruto, no.”

He rolled his eyes as if I’d said something stupid or naïve. “Just do it. I’m trying to prove a point here,” he coaxed.
“Fine. Just don’t let me hurt you.”

He sat up straight, eyes on me, and I did as he requested. Fingers around his throat, squeezing. He grinned at me.

“See?” he wheezed. “This is easy for you.”

I released him, hating that he wasn’t wrong. It was less nerve-wracking for me to choke him than for me to hold his hand. I’d never thought too much about it, and I suppose part of me had assumed it’d be the same for anyone. Clearly that wasn’t the case.

“Now I want you to put your hand on my leg,” he instructed. I raised my eyebrows but complied, placing my hand lightly and stiffly on his knee. He smirked and shook his head, letting out a small laugh. “I can literally feel how nervous you are in your hand. Try it like this,” he said. He casually rested his hand on my thigh. I tried to mimic his placement and pressure, but he started giggling.

“Don’t squeeze like that, it tickles!”

I groaned and laid back on the bed with a huff. “Forget I asked,” I told him again.

“Aw, Sasuke, don’t be like that,” Naruto said, laying beside me. “Look, it’s not complicated. Just do what feels good.”

He rested his head in the crook of my shoulder, then placed his hand on my torso. He looked up at me, gauging my reaction, so I wrapped my arm around him. He slid his leg across mine, and I put my other hand on his thigh. He nuzzled against me.

“You’re getting the hang of it!” Naruto cheered, soft and sweet.

“I think I’d rather be choking you,” I retorted.

I felt him shiver against me, burying his face in my shirt. I nudged him, and he lifted his head, staring at me as he bit his lip. He slid his hand up my abdomen, leaning closer to my face. I dragged my hand from his shoulder and nestled my fingers in his hair, watching his expression for any hint of unease. I saw his eyes flicker from mine to my lips, and I felt desire take hold. In a heartbeat I closed the distance between us, taking his lips with mine. He was on top of me in a second, mouth moving with a palpable need. My other hand slid up his leg to his lower back, gripping tightly as he rocked against my hips.

We broke apart for a moment, gasping for breath, and he put my hand on his throat. “Choke me, Sasuke,” he whimpered. “Please.”

The sound of his voice went straight to my cock, and as I wrapped my fingers around his throat, I began thrusting against him. He let out a distorted moan, then gripped my face with his good hand. He bent down to kiss me, and I tugged at the hem of his shirt, eager to feel his skin on mine. He pulled it overhead and rolled off me, sliding off his gym shorts in bed beside me. I had my own shirt off in no time, angling myself atop him. I could see the outline of his dick pressed against his underwear; possessed by passion, I yanked them off. My breath hitched in my throat. I ran my tongue up in, flicking it over the head. He let out a groan and threaded his fingers through my hair.

“Please, Sasuke—” he muttered, gasping when I took him in my mouth.

I slid to the base and gagged, the spasm of my throat eliciting a heady moan. I bobbed up and down, taking him as deep as I could. I felt his grip tighten, and he urged me off of him, pushing me to my back on the bed.
“Your turn,” he whispered. It felt like a command. His mouth was at my hip; after a slew of kisses, he took my shorts between his teeth and pulled them down with the help of his hand. He paused, staring at me feverishly before engulfing my cock.

Naruto licked and sucked every inch of me before burying his face in my balls. He grabbed at my hips, nuzzling my cock with his cheek as his tongue danced over my skin. Then, with the voice of an angel, he told me to roll over. I did as he said, my ass on display for him. He bent down and bit my cheek playfully, then spread me open for him to devour. He dove in, face first, kissing and licking and rocking against me. He buried his face in my ass, pulling on my hips like he couldn’t get close enough. He was fucking me with his tongue, rhythmic and tantalizing.

He paused, and I felt a different pressure against my hole. “Sasuke, can I finger you?” he asked softly.

Face in the pillow, I mumbled, “Be gentle.”

Suddenly, I felt him urging me to flip over, and I complied, looking up at him. He bent down so that we were face to face, with his hand still between my legs. He stared at me, his piercing eyes boring into my soul, and said, “I will never hurt you.”


Naruto leaned in and kissed me while his masterful finger pressed inside me. I gasped in his mouth as he slowly pulled out and pressed in again. It was amazing, the feeling of him fucking me with his hand. He bit and sucked on my neck, gradually inserting another finger. He twisted and moved, stretching me out. I wanted more—I wanted him inside me, all of him.

“I want you to fuck me, Naruto,” I gasped. “Please fuck me.”

His eyes went wide, but the lust was quickly replaced with genuine concern. “Sasuke, are you sure? You want me to be your first?”

“It’s you or no one,” I answered.

He blushed as if he was embarrassed, as if anything could embarrass him, and then he pressed his dick against me. “This isn’t just sex for me,” he said softly. “Sasuke, I… You need to know that I love you. I still love you. I never stopped, I swear. I—”

“Can we talk about this after you fuck my brains out? Please?” I whined.

He chuckled to himself, then flashed me a brilliant grin. “Aye aye, captain,” he replied with a wink.

Naruto pushed into me, slow and steady. I let out a whimper, feeling every inch of him as he entered. It stung a little, but I was struck by how good it felt to be filled up with him. He began to move back, and I winced at the encroaching absence.


I willed myself to surrender, to let him control the situation, to give in. I let myself relax. He pushed back in, a little faster, and I moaned. “Faster,” I gasped. “You can go faster.”

“You’re my wish is my command,” he said, kissing me.

Naruto thrusted faster into me, then harder. He was slamming into me with everything he had, each push bringing me closer and closer. I could feel the sensation building as he rammed inside me over
and over; my hand went to my cock, and I stroked myself as he thrusted. I was amazed at how feeling him, so deep and so full within, could be so stimulating. I tightened around him experimentally, delighting in the intensified pleasure as well as the look of surprise on Naruto’s face.

“Fuck, Sasuke, if you do that I’m gonna—”

I felt him erupt inside me, and the twitching of his cock sent me over the edge. I came all over us, my own cum smearing across his torso and dripping down onto my abdomen. Oblivious, he collapsed on top of me, a sweaty mess.

“Holy fuck,” he breathed. “That was perfect.”

“I’ve never cum so hard in my life,” I said.

He lifted his head, grinning at me. “Glad I could help.”

I kissed him, quick and soft.

“Hey, look, you even learned something,” he teased.

I looked at him for a moment, studying his face. His bright eyes, impossibly round and stunningly beautiful. His taunting grin, all teeth. The way some of his hair was plastered to his forehead from sweat while the rest of it stuck up at strange angles. He was everything I’d ever wanted, and the weight of him on top of me felt like home. Smirking, I said, “Hn. Were you only affectionate because you were horny?”

“No!” he exclaimed in mock-horror. “How could you accuse me, a literal cuddle monster, of something so malicious?”

“Spell—”

“M-A-L-I-shut the fuck up,” he interjected. He rolled off of me, grabbing something out of a backpack near the bed. “Baby wipes,” he explained at my curious stare. He leaned over, trying to clean me off first.

I snatched the wipe out of his hand. “I can do that myself, dobe.”

“Oh, sorry, I almost forgot about your deep-rooted fear of intimacy for a minute there,” Naruto retorted.

“Fuck you,” I snapped.

“Promise?” He feigned a pout, and I threw my shorts at his face. He laughed, falling back on the bed beside me. “I don’t think you understand how much I’ve missed you.”

“Why? I’m the only person who mocks you? I find that hard to believe,” I said dryly.

“No, it’s just… I dunno. This,” he answered, holding my shorts to his chest. “I can’t do this with anyone else.”

“You’re telling me that out of all the hundreds of thousands of people you’ve slept with, I’m the only one who’s ever thrown something at you? That’s even more unbelievable.”

Naruto laughed and snuggled up next to me. It was nice, feeling his head on my chest and his hand around my waist. He sighed sweetly against me, a smile stretching across his face. “I meant what I said, you know. About loving you this whole time. Even when I hated you, I still loved you.”
“I literally took a bullet for you, so I think I win.”

“You’re about to take another bullet if you don’t shut up and let me confess my feelings, teme.” He looked at me expectantly, but I stayed quiet. “Good. I just wanted you to know that… I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry for what I did, for how I handled everything. I was angry and hurt, and that’s not an excuse—”

“Naruto, listen to me,” I said softly. “I get it. You think you’re the only person to ever lose sight of who they are because of trauma and pain? I know you wanted to hurt me, and you did. But not in the way you thought. What hurt me was knowing that I’d made things worse for you, that I’d contributed to the pain you felt. What hurt was seeing your pain turn you into someone else, knowing that I’d brought you to that point.”

“You didn’t… It wasn’t just you. There was so much I hadn’t dealt with.”

“I know,” I told him.

“Sasuke, I just needed to tell you that. I want you to believe me when I say I love you, with every part of me, and I will never hurt you again.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Never ever,” he confirmed.

“Then could you get off my shoulder? You know, the one that got injured when I protected you, saved you from certain death—”

He kissed me, and it shut me up.

Chapter End Notes

*psa: always practice safe sex and use condoms! and lube! this is a work of fiction! and having anal without lube, especially your first time, is inadvisable. that being said, if there ain’t lube, the least your partner can do is eat the booty like groceries. okay they finally fucked y’all yay!!!!*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!